introduction

Queer Dinners

While access to college has become more egalitarian, *where* a student attends college and *what* she or he studies have become increasingly tied to social background and gender. —Ann Mullen, *Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education*

What does [the] massive redistribution of wealth and widening of [the] class divide have to do with queer studies? It just happens to be the twenty-year moment when a gay rights movement and the field of queer studies have both emerged. There's no inherent reason why queer studies and gay politics would not reproduce the racialized class inequality and confusion that structure the larger society. But unfortunately, we can't enjoy the luxury of standing on the sidelines as innocent bystanders. We have been implicated. —Allan Bérubé, keynote address for "Constructing Queer Cultures," a conference sponsored by the Program in Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Studies at Cornell University, February 1995

People in forgotten places also act within the institutional and individualized constraints defined by racialization, gender hierarchy, and nationality, and the complex potential mix of these possibilities has produced its own academic specialties old and new. . . . *Constraints* does not mean "insurmountable barriers." However, it does suggest that people use what is available to make a place in the world. —Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning"

Bloomsbury Community College

"One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well," writes Virginia Woolf in her touchstone 1929 study of gender, class, and genius, *A Room of One's Own*. The fictional context for Woolf's maxim about the intellect and the gut is a comparison of two meals, a lunch at a fantastically resource-rich men's college, "Oxbridge," and a dinner at "Fernham,"

a meagerly funded, upstart women's college. The stringy beef and watery prunes served to the young women of Fernham stand up poorly against the partridges in cream and the meringue-crested desserts served to the young men of Oxbridge, where mountains of gold and silver have for centuries been poured into lawns and libraries to produce the educated gentlemen of the empire. The men's food does not only look and taste better; the Oxbridge meal also lights a little fire in the spine (there is wine, I should mention), the glow of which travels anatomically upward toward its greater purpose: powering the famously, androgynously, incandescent mind. The food and wine, it turns out, are not sufficient in themselves to create genius, but they prepare the way. To the contrary, among the women at Fernham, with base hunger abated but the palate and mind dulled by those prunes, the evening conversation flags. A clear-eyed, unsatisfied guest, Woolf hesitates only a moment before writing of the women's college, "The dinner was not good."[1]

Another dinner scene . . . a vending machine stands half empty, adding insult to dietary injury. Dinner waits behind glass, unspoilable. The new slot for credit cards blinks. It is nearing 6:30 p.m., and this is night school. Students enter my Black Queer Studies classroom, sit, unwrap their candy bars, and wrestle open their bags of chips. They've come from work or directly from another class that ended at 6:20 p.m. We will be in class until 9:50 p.m. We'll get hungry. During our ten-minute break at 8 p.m. the vending machine pushes more cookies, the occasional sticky bun, off its shelves. It's hard to smoke, call home, and get through the vending machine line all in ten minutes. Stragglers apologize. We turn back to Lorde or Baldwin, Nella Larsen or John Keene. One of the students is so pregnant she must periodically excuse herself to walk off her discomfort. In fact the evening's text is Barry Jenkins's Oscar-winning film *Moonlight*.[2] I turn on the projector. It doesn't work. The always-helpful tech person answers, comes quickly, fixes the problem, and leaves. The projector stops working again. One of my students stands up unasked: "I'll find another room." She returns and tells the class the number of the empty room. We pack up and file out, forty of us. We turn the corner and see another class entering our intended destination. Their projector was broken too, and they beat us to the new room. Eventually we watch *Moonlight* in a third classroom. The projector works, but the sound is screwed up, a mere whisper. We watch breathlessly, not daring to crinkle the candy wrappers, not daring to eat our dinner.[3] No time now for discussion. Class dismissed. This is the College of Staten Island (CSI) at the City University of New York (CUNY), a deeply underfunded urban university system committed to serving "the children of the whole people."[4] And

this is perhaps the queerest school I know, the school at which I came to understand the need for Poor Queer Studies.[5]

In this book I take up the question of the relationship between Queer Studies and the material conditions under which Queer Studies is done in the contemporary academy, a question dramatized above in my reworking of Woolf's historical connection between thinking and dining in the university. How and where are meals turned into androgynously—I'll say queerly—incandescent minds in higher education today? If Queer Studies has over the past thirty years successfully argued, elbowed, and snuck its way into the academy so that its courses can be found in both likely and unlikely places—not only at our Oxbridges and Fernhams but at our Bloomsbury Community Colleges—we might shift attention, à la Woolf, to the question of the resources with and without which queer students and professors teach and learn and write across academic work sites. What does Queer Studies have to say about class sorting within the academy? What is the role of the field within the processes of stratification that can be said to divide the field from itself along the lines of class and institutional status? How might queer collaboration across peer and nonpeer institutions offer a model for the redistribution of intellectual and material resources, and how can that positively impact attendant racial disparities in higher education? How might Poor Queer Studies galvanize interclass, cross-institutional queer formations that do not rely on a unidirectional, aspirational model of progress? And most fundamentally, how can rethinking the work of Queer Studies in the context of students' relative material need and raced/gendered precarity, academics' professional liminality, and underclass institutional identity inform and potentially enrich the field, its pedagogies and theories, and the academy beyond it?

I begin by locating Queer Studies within the broader context of higher education, arguing that the field cannot be separated from the large-scale institutional production of racialized class stratification. As students are sorted on the basis of socioeconomic class by colleges that are themselves increasingly stratified by wealth-based rankings, Queer Studies also ruptures across its disparate sites of material production—that is, at schools high and low. I trace the ramifications of that overlooked queer self-difference and argue for a reorientation of the field away from its prestigious and well-known institutions and toward working-poor and working-class people, places, and pedagogies. I examine the ways Queer Studies has been a vector for upward professional mobility for faculty in the Rich Queer Studies pipeline, and I contrast such traditional, elitist mechanisms of academic advancement with

a competing idea about queer professionalization: that, working against the grain of nearly all queer critiques of the neoliberal academy, Queer Studies professors might cultivate a vocational Queer Studies that trains students to become not only better queer theorists but better queer workers. For workers our students already are, if one teaches at all but a relative handful of selective colleges and universities. Centering Poor Queer Studies mothers, I connect academic life not only to work life but to students' home lives as well, exploring the ways that commuter students—who live at home with their parents, who are themselves mothers, who are first-generation immigrants, who are black and brown and ethnic white—become student teachers of Queer Studies within their homes and home communities (and thus create poor queer familial pedagogies very much in contrast to the bourgeois pedagogy of helicopter parenting that has been so loudly critiqued at high-status institutions). Taking John Keene's work of black queer experimental literature, *Counternarratives*, as my critical object, I telescope out from the Poor Queer Studies classroom to argue that within higher education there exists a widespread state of queer illiteracy that necessitates a reinvestment by Queer Studies in antielitist general education, a shift that might complement more privileged modes of queer-race interdisciplinary inquiry. Ultimately, I propose a model of queer ferrying between resource-rich and -poor institutions as a way of restructuring queer knowledge production in the academy. I begin, however, by naming the hyperstratified state of affairs that must, at present, define Queer Studies in the university.

Class Stratification in Higher Education

It is difficult to find an institution in the United States that sorts people by socioeconomic class as effectively as higher education, even as the university simultaneously proclaims and often fulfills its democratizing promise. In *Degrees of Inequality: Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education*, Ann L. Mullen charts this bipolarity in higher ed: "At the same time that more young adults than ever before enter higher education, the college experience has become more disparate, ranging from living in plush campus dormitories and studying the liberal arts at prestigious universities to commuting from home to the local college to earn a preprofessional degree. While access to college has become more egalitarian, *where* a student attends college and *what* she or he studies have become increasingly tied to social background and gender."[6] Dissecting general democratizing trends in college attendance, Mullen argues that "because of the hierarchical nature

of the U.S. higher educational system and the disparities in the rewards that it offers, it is no longer enough to simply look at who goes to college and who does not. To fully evaluate the promise expressed by the expansion of postsecondary education, one needs to examine the opportunities students of different backgrounds have to attend the various institutions within that system. In other words, we need to look not just at *who* goes to college, but at who goes *where* to college."[7] Of special importance for my project is the further point that where one goes to school overwhelmingly predicts both what one will study and whether one will continue that education. This pattern is borne out by Mullen's case study comparison of Yale University and Southern Connecticut State University. Students with high socioeconomic status tend to enroll at highly selective institutions like Yale, typically study fields in the liberal arts, and are more likely to continue on to PhD programs, while those with low socioeconomic status attend less selective institutions like Southern, choose preprofessional majors, and are less likely to enter graduate programs. On this last point, Mullen finds that "the differences are even more pronounced in relation to enrollment in PhD programs; nearly eight times as many liberal arts graduates enroll in PhD programs as do preprofessional graduates."[8]

As Mullen's work and a wealth of educational data have made clear, the tiered or ranked U.S. educational system does not merely reflect class disparities; it actively reproduces them by rewarding the most affluent students with admission to the most prestigious colleges and by channeling our poorest students and students of color into two-year and unranked four-year schools and, even more insidiously, into exploitative for-profit colleges.[9] Admission to two-year and lower-tier colleges, as opposed to higher-tier schools, dramatically reduces student graduation rates even as it increases student debt. Of course, most of our poorest high school students are excluded from higher education altogether: "In 2012, 82 percent of 18 to 24 year olds from the top family income quartile participated in college, compared with just 45 percent of those in the bottom quartile."[10] Young black men from low-income families are at particular risk of being excluded by systems of higher education.[11] Their relative absence from selective colleges starkly reveals for Kiese Laymon that "no matter how conscientious, radically curious, or politically active I encouraged [them] to be, teaching wealthy white boys . . . [at Vassar] meant that I was being paid to really fortify [their] power."[12] Laymon makes operations of power visible, naming the ways demographic and institutional data ought to be translated as support of white supremacist, classist university culture.[13] The material

conditions of racism—literally, the material absence of black male student bodies—shape the possibilities for what counts as the good work of education. Laymon now teaches at the University of Mississippi.

The failure of academia to increase enrollments of black students at the top one hundred colleges and universities has dramatic ripple effects.[14] Brittney Cooper traces the repercussions of institutional racism to the ranks of university faculty, where racist and sexist—and classist—hiring practices further disenfranchise people of color. Cooper writes,

> Today, when I travel to give lectures at universities across the country, it is not uncommon for Black faculty, particularly Black women faculty, to pull me aside and whisper that their working conditions feel unsafe, that their colleagues are passive-aggressive, that they are saddled with extra committee work, that they are called to mentor *all* the students of color who come through the department, and are subject to all manner of slights and indignities from colleagues and students alike. Meanwhile, on many occasions they note that there are today far less Black faculty on campus than there were in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. When I began my first academic job in 2009 . . . at a flagship state university, I noted that I was the only Black person hired by the entire college of arts and sciences and one of only three Black faculty members that had been hired in the entire university that year.[15]

In the absence of blackness among her institutional cohort, Cooper looks back to *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, for which she wrote the afterword to the volume's 2015 reissue and from which the above quote is drawn. As the academy produces the isolation of black faculty ("I was the only") and the overwork of black faculty ("saddled with extra committee work"), one response by black faculty has been "whispering," or creating fugitive, transitory communities in the midst of conditions hostile to sustained and generative in-person "blackademic" communities.[16] To the extent that the fugitive practices Cooper describes result from race-based exclusions from the top of the class-based, disproportionately white academic hierarchy—and precisely because *But Some of Us Are Brave* reminds us that black lesbian scholarship provided an early intersectional critique of the academy's race-class-gender-sexuality exclusions—I explicitly want to nominate Poor Queer Studies as simultaneously and necessarily a Poor Black Queer Studies knowledge project.

Returning to the case of undergraduate education, we see that the mechanisms of rich white fortification and poor and black exclusion are elaborate

and the statistics staggering. One study puts this state of affairs succinctly in its title, "White Flight Goes to College": "The tracking of white students into the top-tier colleges perpetuates greater rates of white college completion, especially at elite colleges."[17] Prestigious schools actively cater to wealthy students and their families, ones who can pay for SAT preparation courses, tutors, tuition, and, so the logic goes, alumni donations. Legacy admissions provide a further boost, a form of affirmative action for the historically monied classes whom university administrators literally, if privately, line up to embrace. Admissions officers at top schools recruit from well-known feeder high schools, many of them private, expensive, and staffed with knowledgeable college counselors. The result, to cite only a few representative statistics, is that at the most selective institutions there are twenty-four times as many high-income students as low-income students.[18] The Ivy-Plus colleges enroll more students from the top 1 percent than from the bottom 50 percent of the income distribution.[19] While nearly 40 percent of college students receive Pell Grants (used by researchers as a proxy for low-income status, with 73 percent of all Pell Grant recipients coming from families making under $30,000 per year), at certain types of colleges only between 5 and 20 percent of students receive Pell Grants.[20] Not surprisingly, the most selective postsecondary institutions in the United States admit the fewest Pell Grant recipients. Though different studies use slightly different definitions of low-income students and selective colleges, there is widespread evidence that top-tier colleges amplify rather than redress the problem of class stratification.[21] As a general rule, in higher education, riches harm the poor.

One way to address this problem, at least in part, would be for resource-rich schools to admit more low-income students. Unfortunately, for all their smarts and money, these pillars of American education seem incapable of making such a change, despite years of mouthing their commitment to higher education equity.[22] A 2016 study by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation finds that the "representation of low-income students at selective colleges and universities has not changed in ten years despite selective institutions' well-advertised, increased commitment to 'need-blind admissions' and 'no-loan financial aid' packages. All the while, the value of attending a selective college or university is clear, including higher graduation rates and higher pay for the individual, and greater productivity for the country."[23] That the most selective colleges cannot figure out how to admit smart, qualified, and interesting poor students in far greater numbers while they have proven themselves quite capable of figuring out how, legally, to perform tax wizardry by using offshore investments to achieve lucrative tax breaks on

their enormous endowments, reflects not only ugly elitist values but also an ironic disconnect: schools like Harvard, Duke, Dartmouth, Stanford, Columbia, University of Southern California, and Johns Hopkins could use the riches earned in tax breaks to identify, inform, encourage, and admit the low-income students they refuse to see and to serve.[24] One study of the "hidden supply of high-achieving, low-income students" who do not apply to selective colleges argues that "the number of low-income high achievers is much greater than college admissions staff generally believe. Since admissions staff see only the students who apply, they very reasonably underestimate the number who exist."[25] To my mind, this underestimation is far from very reasonable, especially given the authors' estimate that "there are, in fact, only about 2 high-achieving, high-income students for every high-achieving, low-income student in the population."[26] Though very selective colleges (which are concentrated in metropolitan areas) look far and wide for alumni donations, they don't look far and wide for poor students: "In fact, we know from colleges' own published materials and communications with their authors that many colleges make great efforts to seek out low-income students from their metropolitan areas. These strategies, although probably successful, fall somewhat under the heading of 'searching under the lamppost.' That is, many colleges look for low-income students where the *college* is instead of looking for low-income students where the *students* are."[27] If the two authors of this study (from Stanford and Harvard) could find hidden high-achieving, low-income students and imagine ways to move them into selective colleges, why haven't the top one hundred schools been able to do the same? As recent reporting suggests, the most selective colleges and universities—those schools that own the top of the "Best Colleges" lists, those schools that "very reasonably" cannot see the "hidden" supply of high-achieving, low-income students—are motivated to reinforce rather than interrupt class inequality precisely by their commitment to maintaining their elite ranking.[28] Poor students are hidden by elitist educational institutions, not from them.

"We Have Been Implicated": Rich Queer Studies

The evidence is so overwhelming that we need not argue this case. We must baldly state it: class stratification is an intentional, defining, structural feature of the U.S. academy, one that overlaps with race sorting.[29] The solidity of that knowledge allows for other important interventions. I begin *Poor Queer Studies* with the fact of class stratification in order to give traction to

the rather slippery connection that will be my primary focus here: the role of Queer Studies in the hierarchizing mission of higher education. Although it has long been associated with academic elitism—primarily with reference to its outsized interest in white gay male cultural production, the inaccessibility of its high queer theory, and its perceived postmodern, ivory tower anti-identitarianism that can discredit LGBTQ lived-identity experiences—Queer Studies has less often been understood as a mechanism for producing class inequity within higher education. Queer Studies has, in fact, consistently presented itself otherwise, as an antinormative, disruptive cog within the system rather than a producer of "palace discourses."[30] Queer Studies practitioners, such as myself, have pointed to our silo-busting interdisciplinarity, to our penchant for self-critique, to our embrace of the supposedly nonacademic as viable objects of study within the academy. To which I say, "Yes." We've told the story of our activist beginnings, twining together the birth of queer theory with the activism of Queer Nation, even as we've rewritten that popular but partial origin story by tracing Queer Studies back through earlier activisms and political commitments, including women of color feminism and, as I explore in chapter 3, our very ability to think "gay academic" as a position of leverage.[31] In doing so, Queer Studies has positioned itself as constitutionally against the grain, athwart the academy. Yes. When and where we find ourselves normal and normative, we level often careful and often cutting self-critique. Though higher education may present us with the neoliberal problem of queer radical possibility being incorporated and administered, we have, by making institutional management systems visible objects of critique, allowed ourselves to continue to imagine that a defining feature of the field of Queer Studies is its impulse to fuck up the academy. Admittedly ensconced, we can all the more dramatically position ourselves as subversives, thieves, vandals, committed to egalitarianism.[32] Again yes. But . . .

The problem with our story is that when Robin Hood stole he gave to the poor. And he didn't get paid to do it.

If the disruptive democratization of higher education has been Queer Studies' goal, dating back perhaps to the first conference of the Gay Academic Union in 1973, we have since failed. With notable exceptions, the field of Queer Studies as an academic formation has been and is still defined and propelled by the immense resources of precisely those institutions of higher education that most steadfastly refuse to serve representative numbers of poor students and to hire faculty without high-status academic pedigrees. Though my ultimate interest will be in dramatizing exceptions to this rule and in elaborating

the relationship between exception and rule, I begin by more fully fleshing out the association of the field of Queer Studies with privileged sites of material production of queer knowledge. I will say here—and I will repeat this line throughout as a reminder to myself to follow the undervalued queer methodology of critical compromise—that we both are and are not our institutions. Critical compromise both isolates and dramatizes a problem and promotes a mode of relative questioning. To what extent does academic Queer Studies trade on the value—and therefore the values—of its wealthy institutions, thereby sustaining their commitment to structural inequality? Kristen A. Renn discerns a key tension created by the incorporation of queer methods in higher education research, namely, that "colleges and universities have evolved to tolerate the generation of queer theory from within but have stalwartly resisted the queering of higher education itself." "What is more nonqueer," she asks, "than traditional doctoral education or the tenure stream?"[33]

To compromise: as much as I agree with Renn's formulation, it is not always clear—at least to me—whether Queer Studies plays the protagonist or the antagonist in such a normalizing institutional narrative. We don't have Queer Studies PhD programs, after all, leaving Neville Hoad to wonder whether queer theory ever happened in the academy. "Anecdotally," Hoad notes in a 2007 essay reprinted in the 2011 volume *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory*, "there are now fewer rather than more jobs described using the keywords *sexuality, gender, queer*. Has there ever been a tenure-track position advertised and filled in 'queer theory,' despite a decade of training graduate students in the imagined subfield?"[34] The (apparent) absence of queer tenure-track positions is debilitating to the field, argues Hoad, for "the vitality of a set of intellectual questions cannot rely on the labor of faculty whose primary commitment and institutional responsibility is to something else." Like his fellow contributors, Hoad writes from the rhetorical position of "after sex." But his *when* is also very much a matter of *where*, a matter of having time in a place (University of Texas at Austin, a mega-rich "Public Ivy") that offers the "invigorating intransigence of continuing to work on a set of questions." In this light, the question of whether queer theory happened is interesting not because the field has been impossible to miss but because if queer theory happened it surely did so at precisely those happening locations from which Hoad and his fellow contributors launched their query, *After Sex?*—Austin, Chicago, Berkeley, Toronto, Tufts, Stanford, Santa Cruz, Davis, Emory, Harvard, Penn, NYU, Amherst, Columbia, Bryn Mawr, the CUNY Graduate Center, and Bates. If queer theory happened, it happened at the places that are most notable for

having the resources to hyperinject intellectual vitality into faculty labor and that are, as a result, the only places where queer theory could have been noticed as having happened. And that class-based spectacularity makes all the difference. A Queer Studies tenure-track position at a no-name school—a job that I know to exist because I have that job—has little chance of being noticed, even in order to be criticized for being, in Renn's words, nonqueer. Queer or not, you'd never know it happened.

But a brief pause: Bates? Where is Bates? I had to ask. It's a small, liberal arts college in Lewiston, Maine. The 2017–18 fee for attending Bates is $66,720, so it's a fancy school—a Rich Queer Studies school, to use my nomenclature. At the same time, Bates does put a slight twist on things. It requires a compromise, for it reminds me to grapple with the question of how to think about even minor institutional exceptions to the rule in my exploration of class and Queer Studies.[35] I am therefore quite thankful to Erica Rand, the professor from Bates who positions her after-sex essay, titled "Queer Theory Here and There," uncomfortably among those of her fellow contributors precisely because of where she is writing from. Up in Maine, away, "there," Rand writes from outside the recognizable centers of Queer Studies, "away from the queer-theory action," as she puts it.[36] Rand knows where the action is. By locating queer theory in the usual places and locating Bates outside those places, Rand's contribution to the collection reminds us to look for queer theory elsewhere, which intersects with one important strand of my argument. At $66,720 per year, Bates remains an unexceptional example of the ways material resources buoy so much queer scholarship. But Rand at least marginally expands the story of queer theory to farther-flung locations than might be expected. We can go further.

A Queer-Class Fix

Class is barely indexed in most Queer Studies scholarship. I mean this literally; one only need look at the index of the books on the queer shelf. Yes, class can go by many indexical names, but surely "class" ought to be one of them, at least as long as it is de rigueur for queer theorists to include class nominally in our list of structures of experience and oppression: gender, sex, race, class, ability. You see that list everywhere, but class manages to slip away in the actual work of queer scholarship. Where class appears centrally, queer often does a disappearing act.

Queer Studies scholars have sometimes attended explicitly to queer-class intersections, with Lisa Henderson's *Love and Money: Queers, Class and*

Cultural Production and work in the areas of queer labor being notable examples.[37] Henderson helps me define class less rigidly than some of the social studies I cite above, since "class categories work in the vernacular and analytic ways to mark a cultural universe."[38] Class is, for Henderson, "the economic and cultural coproduction of social distinction and hierarchy."[39] My use of the term "poor," addressed more fully below, calls to mind not only an economic position or a cultural identity but, perhaps even more meaningfully, a sense of institutionalized disparity that is crucial to understanding my critique of the field of Queer Studies. Because "class" is a relational term, "poor" signifies not only that higher education is being defunded but that in relation to increasingly rich schools at the top of the hierarchy that hoard their money, poor schools are getting poorer.

When Queer Studies scholars have raised class issues around the concept of disparity, we have often situated those issues socioculturally rather than institutionally. In other words, we have conceptualized queer-class studies using an inside versus outside the academy model in important attempts to theorize our queer/raced/gendered (dis)connections. Certainly, organic queer-class work has emerged from university-affiliated thinkers whose class analyses are inseparable from their academic positions. Occasionally queer scholars have collaborated with experts outside academe to consider, as one early and exemplary book on the subject declares, "homo economics."[40] Or the academy has looked to community workers, activists, and artists such as Eli Clare, Samuel Delaney, and Leslie Feinberg to articulate the need for queers to recognize and address queer poverty and class stratification. Less often, queer scholars have navigated class issues methodologically by finding ways to subvert the researcher/researched divide through, for instance, participatory action research in which knowledge making becomes a shared, cross-class endeavor of coinvestigators from inside and outside institutions of higher ed.[41] Each of these approaches has contributed to the articulation of queer-class intersections, and much more bridge-building work needs to be done across the academy/community divide.

Poor Queer Studies differs from other queer-class scholarship, however, in that it frames its inquiry by considering class differences primarily within and oriented around the queer academy. Because higher education is one of the most hierarchical institutions in the U.S., and because Queer Studies has been incorporated—unevenly, to be sure—into curricula and research projects by teachers and scholars at every tier of academe, we have been remiss in failing to interrogate the relationship between Queer Studies done at colleges across class-based institutional tiers. Indeed, we could ask

whether breaking down the borders of the academy/community divide has substituted for and deferred intra-academic interrogations of class structure among the queer professoriate. Institutionality thus threatens to abrogate one of the few reliable principles of queer perversity, tucked away in one of Freud's footnotes to his essay "The Sexual Aberrations": "The highest and the lowest are always closest to each other in the sphere of sexuality."[42] My hunch is that asymmetrical institutional statuses, the high and the low, can make for interesting, necessarily partial starting points for all involved. The situated lessons of *Poor Queer Studies* will, I hope, resonate with instructors and students at schools that have been left out of the story of Queer Studies, as well as with readers throughout queer academe who wish, in queer fashion, to see the field otherwise.

The absence of a Poor Queer Studies paradigm that might counterbalance current state-of-the-field work is particularly curious in light of the fact that concerns about academic elitism within Queer Studies are an undeniable part of the field's history. Perhaps we used to hear those charges rather more often than we do now. Notably, Jeffrey Escoffier in his 1990 essay "Inside the Ivory Closet: The Challenge Facing Lesbian and Gay Studies" posited a split between post-Stonewall scholars who increasingly enjoyed and industriously courted institutional status within the academy and pre-Stonewall writers and activists whose primary commitments were to their communities and to making scholarship accessible beyond the academy. This split was framed between the academy and the community, between accessibility and elitism, and between older and younger thinkers. Though she disagreed with the stark distinctions Escoffier's argument carved out, Lisa Duggan demonstrated an appreciation of Escoffier's critique of what he called "the younger group of scholars . . . , ambitious young teachers and bright graduate students who trained at elite universities and who occupy jobs at more prestigious institutions."[43] Narrating her own version of a Queer Studies split, Duggan initially charted the queer institutional divide along disciplinary lines, arguing that unlike their more employable queer peers in fiction-based English departments, "lesbian and gay *historians* are relatively isolated from two crucial sources of support—the material and institutional support of university history departments, and the intellectual engagement and support of other scholars in the field of lesbian and gay or queer studies. And for both academic and public intellectuals, isolation leads to material as well as to cultural impoverishment and decline. . . . Like any other field, lesbian and gay historians need material support and intellectual and political exchange. For us, isolation equals cultural and professional death."[44]

To what extent such discussions of disciplinary disenfranchisement among scholars at deep-pocketed institutions eclipsed attention to more stark structural disenfranchisements between poor and rich schools will be an ongoing point of interest in this study. In his 1996 review essay, "The Class Politics of Queer Theory," Donald Morton singles out for praise Nicola Field's *Over the Rainbow: Money, Class, and Homophobia* while criticizing a raft of scholars located in upper-class university settings (including Duggan) for "shadow-boxing with a collapsing liberal state."[45] Morton approvingly quotes independent scholar Will Roscoe (from a Queer Studies listserv): "Much of queer theory seems radical only as long as we ignore the class-base of its production and dissemination."[46] Roscoe's voice reminds me that although I am primarily concerned with amplifying the work of Poor Queer Studies inside the academy, research into independent scholars' relationships to Queer Studies would surely open up interesting and varied sight lines onto the field, especially insofar as their work is sometimes adopted by Queer Studies (two examples being the seminal work of Jonathan Ned Katz and the genre-busting writing and editing of Alexis Pauline Gumbs). It is, in fact, an independent scholar without means with whom *Poor Queer Studies* most closely shares its vision.

Speaking in 1995 at Cornell University about the role of Queer Studies in the upward redistribution of wealth, working-class independent scholar Allan Bérubé enjoined his academy-based audience to act: "What does [the] massive redistribution of wealth and widening of [the] class divide have to do with queer studies? It just happens to be the twenty-year moment when a gay rights movement and the field of queer studies have both emerged. There's no inherent reason why queer studies and gay politics would not reproduce the racialized class inequality and confusion that structure the larger society. But unfortunately, we can't enjoy the luxury of standing on the sidelines as innocent bystanders. We have been implicated."[47] Queer Studies has been implicated, for it has indelible, field-defining, field-sustaining material and psychic associations with the most elite colleges and universities in the U.S., like the campus at which Bérubé delivered his talk.[48] Indeed, the early 1990s was a flashpoint for this critique, with high-class queer theory becoming largely synonymous with Queer Studies (I use the two somewhat interchangeably here, for instance). In 1994, Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer could already reference Diana Fuss's founding 1991 collection, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, to frame queer theory as "an academic movement—indeed, an elite academic movement centered at least initially in the most prestigious U.S. institutions. . . . Queer theory emerged in the

late 1980s, publicized through a series of academic conferences held at Yale and other Ivy League universities, in which scholars, primarily from history and the humanities, presented their work on lesbian/gay subjects."[49] Stein and Plummer go on to suggest that queer theory, so invigorating and influential in the humanities, could more explicitly inform sociology as well, a field that had invented social constructionism in the first place. Their vision for expanding the disciplinary uses and places of queer theory also implicitly recodes its class locations as, potentially, someplace other than "Yale and other Ivy League universities."[50] That vision, unfortunately, didn't stand a chance. As I explore in chapter 2, disciplinary expansion could not help but secure professional elitism for queer theory, for one of the key functions of disciplinarity is to distinguish between the expert and the novice. Disciplinary expansion and crossover thus quickly subsumed class-based, anti-hierarchical crossover as the dynamic institutional queer move. We need to ask why the rise of interdisciplinarity, so critical of knowledge silos, did not de-stratify higher education in class terms, especially as the supposedly class-attuned framework of intersectionality has been the methodological byword for much interdisciplinary scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. And in the case of Queer Studies specifically, how is it that working across fields, sharing knowledge and knowledge practices, and pressing multiple analytic frameworks into service failed to impede the installation of rigid class taxonomies in the university? Why did queer interdisciplinarity not keep its own class-structured institutional houses more dis-ordered?

In fact, attempts at queer-class disordering of the academy often look like relatively enfranchised LGBTQ scholars studying disenfranchised queer people or cultural forms extrinsic to the academy but with whom and which we feel personal/political connections and intellectual attractions. In her study of interdisciplinary "object lessons," Robyn Wiegman wonders, "Given that subjects of knowledge are never fully commensurate with the objects they seek to authorize, what tactic is on offer from within identity knowledges to handle the contradictions between the educated elite and the subalterns we study and represent?"[51] Cathy Cohen, reflecting on the increasing institutionalization of Black Queer Studies in her foreword to *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson, appreciates that on the one hand the field "extends beyond the classroom into the streets [and] into movements . . . on behalf of and in partnership with black people who may never see the inside of our classrooms."[52] On the other hand, Cohen cautions that "as we descend deeper into the ivory tower we must ask ourselves at what cost. To what degree does incorporation

challenge our relevance to the same communities who find themselves at the heart of our research?"[53]

Heather Love's body of work offers an important intervention into queer-class studies and so provides a touchstone for my thinking here. Like Cohen and Wiegman, Love is attentive to histories of working-class feminism and antielitist queer women of color, and she links those queer-class histories and knowledges to the ongoing ambivalences of Queer Studies toward class difference within its ranks.[54] This becomes clear in a recent discussion in which Love reiterates the value of examining queer-class connections from within Queer Studies as class-based scholars of the field, while noting that queer theoretical conversations about "materialism and crisis" are more likely to be centered around critiques of capital than around individual and collective class histories.[55] But problematically, for scholars for whom "queer studies was a route to upward mobility"—and I join Love in counting myself among this group—the fact of academic elitism in Queer Studies disorients at a level of lived experience that can make a class critique of the field less, rather than more, possible. When speaking about class, it is difficult not to get personal. Yet one doesn't want to pry. Bérubé, a master of dramatizing queer-class connections and to whom I turn more fully in chapter 3 for an exploration of "queer work," can thus ask, "Think about it—take any group of queer scholars—how much do you know about their sexual interests and desires, and how much do you know about their income, wealth, and class background? What's the major taboo operating here—economic or sexual?"[56] We mark ourselves in queer terms as we unmark ourselves in class terms, even as a function of our participation in the field. For this reason alone the collection *Resilience: Queer Professors from the Working Class* stands out among academic narratives.[57] In *Resilience*, queer professors turn back toward their lower-class roots, extending those histories into what for many is an ongoing sense of professional liminality and, though they are now members of the professoriate, economic precarity.[58] Rehistoricizing Queer Studies—and writing a new future for our field—depends on our willingness to tell such class stories not only from below but, overtly, from above and to be implicated in our current institutional positions. *Poor Queer Studies* tethers the cutting-edge, new-new queer ideas that inspire us to the material conditions of our work lives and not only to our most well-resourced, most noticeably fierce intellects.

Love, an English professor at an Ivy League school, turns to deviance studies in sociology to find a language and method by which Queer Studies might understand not only its deviant objects but also the material realities that quietly enable its constitutive claims to deviancy. Specifically,

she reconsiders the uses of objectification, long decried by Queer Studies as normalizing, to perspectivize the institutional positions of self-described "subversive" practitioners of queer theory: "Queer theory was a revolt against scholarly expertise in the name of deviance, yet it resonated in many ways with academic norms. Queer academics might also be activist, organic intellectuals, radical experimenters in their personal, professional, and political lives, but they are also superordinates in the context of the university: professional knowledge workers, teachers, and administrators."[59] Asking, "Whose side are we on?," Love suggests that academicians are always university insiders, no matter what else we are. "Can we hold onto the critical and polemical energy of queer studies as well as its radical experiments in style and thought while acknowledging our implication in systems of power, management, and control?" Love asks. "Will a more explicit avowal of disciplinary affiliations and methods snuff out the utopian energies of a field that sees itself as a radical outsider in the university?"[60] Love's insights about the need to make our queer disciplinary affiliations explicit resonate with the project of *Poor Queer Studies* because they encourage a queer method of professional hair-splitting that might proceed, for example, with descriptive accounts of intra-academy differences among Queer Studies people and places. Or, to begin again, queer dinners. We know, having been told in any number of heartening and disheartening ways, the simple truth that all Queer Studies work is not equal. What we need to know better and reckon with is the structural truth that all Queer Studies working conditions are not equal. What if we connected our queer ideas and pedagogies to the material realities of their production (our research budgets and our college websites, our course loads and our commutes, our embodiments and our built environments, our leave time and our overwork, our library holdings and our bathroom gender policies, our raced work sites and our service work, our salaries and our second jobs) in order to understand those ideas and pedagogies as class- and status-based knowledges that cannot be universalized? What can telling the material histories of Queer Studies do to address the problem of class stratification in higher education? What if by engaging with such questions Queer Studies can fix the academy, not fuck it up?

Why "Poor" Queer Studies?

My argument is not that Queer Studies at rich schools isn't sometimes interesting and sometimes transformative and sometimes aware that its production is, first and foremost, a workplace issue. My argument is not that

Queer Studies happens only at rich schools. Indeed, my half-plagiarized question, What's poor about Queer Studies now?, comes from the opposite impulse: to take into consideration Queer Studies elsewhere and otherwise in the class-stratified academy. That work is being done, as demonstrated by internal university publications such as "'We Could Do That!' A Guide to Diversity Practices in California Community Colleges" and by studies published by academic presses such as the 2015 volume *Expanding the Circle: Creating an Inclusive Environment in Higher Education for LGBTQ Students and Studies*, edited by John C. Hawley.[61] These collections, the content of which cannot be separated from the institutional diversity of their contributors, serve as both counterevidence and evidence for my argument that while LGBTQ programs and curricula dot the educational landscape, the field of Queer Studies comes into view much more narrowly. "'We Could Do That!'" and *Expanding the Circle* mark a shift away from Rich Queer Studies even as they show the difficulty of such a shift. Expanding the circle that delimits the field names the work still to be done. I call that work Poor Queer Studies.

Laden with stigmatizing connotations, "poor" has fallen out of critical use, replaced by powerful analytics such as precarity and "asset-based" frameworks such as resilience.[62] "Poor" therefore seems an improper word to anchor a new Poor Queer Studies knowledge project. But I have several reasons for using the word. Far from flatly derogatory, my terminology, Poor Queer Studies, invokes a complex and contested set of meanings. Uncomfortably, it foregrounds a term associated with an outmoded figuration of socioeconomic hardship: "Of a person or people: having few, or no, material possessions; lacking the means to procure the comforts or necessities of life, or to live at a standard considered comfortable or normal in society; needy, necessitous, indigent, destitute. Sometimes: *spec.* so destitute as to be dependent upon gifts or allowances for subsistence. Opposed to *rich*."[63] Surely many of my students, in their pursuit of a degree that can (so the social mobility narrative goes) confer middle-class status, would reject this descriptor, which becomes sharper in tone as it proceeds until it ends in insulting negativity, "opposed to rich." The term "poor" tethers them too statically to the wrong end of an educational narrative premised on social mobility. I argue, however, that "poor" is far from a static term. Indeed, it accomplishes a good deal of descriptive and conceptual work, especially as it enables Poor Queer Studies to be positively opposed to Rich Queer Studies. As Poor Queer Studies foregrounds the lack of access to material resources that provides one of the most powerfully recurring threads in my

queer classrooms, it also connotes other impoverishments—those holes in the field imaginary where Rich Queer Studies cannot see its own class- and status-based epistemologies. In other words, if we are not used to opposing Poor Queer Studies to Rich Queer Studies, this is because Rich Queer Studies has not conceptualized its poor queer blind spots concretely enough to be opposed to them. The fact that poor queer schools are getting poorer in relation to rich ones enlarges those blind spots, making cross-class relationships and ideas less visible. Actively opposing Rich Queer Studies is not only a way for Poor Queer Studies to be seen but a way to hold the field together in queer-class tension.

With the benefit of institutional distance from the places of Rich Queer Studies, Poor Queer Studies perceives the field's high-class deficits. Poor Queer Studies, in part, fills in those gaps and in the process renames a discipline typically imagined elsewhere that must be reimagined at unrecognizable and unfashionable schools such as the college where I work, the College of Staten Island. I'll begin to lay the groundwork for conceptualizing Poor Queer Studies by briefly sketching CSI's college portrait below. How are we queer, here? Chapter 1 expands that vision by tracing CSI's queer faculty genealogy and arguing for the value of historically based queer case studies of colleges that don't easily appear on the map of the field.

Finally, Poor Queer Studies locates the pedagogical convergence of Queer Studies with my students' socioeconomic as well as socioaffective "histories of arrival."[64] Contextualized by this larger trajectory, "poor" names a dimension of experience that, perhaps more than any other structure of difference *including sexuality*, forms the basis of my queer pedagogy at CSI. I cannot overstate this fundamental point. Though my pedagogical refrain (the explicit course topics, readings, vocabulary) is queerness, the bass notes for my Queer Studies pedagogy at CUNY are the racialized and gendered socioeconomic, material, and psychic realities through which reverberate that freighted meter of class status, "poor." Below, I want to play a few of those queer-class bass notes to set the tone for *Poor Queer Studies*.

Realizing Poor Queer Studies

Understanding the habitus of a Poor Queer Studies school from afar can be difficult. One can begin by looking at the statistics and the marketing that combine to create the college profile. While the broad context for *Poor Queer Studies* is the deeply class-stratified system of higher education in the U.S. within which the academic discipline of Queer Studies has struggled

and grown, the more immediate site for my relocation of queer teaching and research is the deeply underfunded, open-admissions, public college where I work, CSI, as well as the larger university system of which CSI is a part, the working-poor CUNY. The College of Staten Island has a student population of 12,211 undergraduates and 1,036 graduate students, 343 full-time, tenure-track faculty, and 819 non-tenure-track faculty, 722 of whom are adjuncts. More than 70 percent of our first-time freshmen enter as associate degree students. Of the undergraduates, 43.6 percent are white, 26.5 percent Hispanic, 13.9 percent black, and 11.1 percent Asian.[65] More than half are "low-income students," and 15 percent have family incomes under $20,000.[66] Strikingly, CSI students have traditionally had the highest family incomes in the CUNY system due in large part to the particular demographics of the island's population. While CSI's student body overall is less racially diverse than CUNY schools in other boroughs, we have much higher rates of traditionally underserved white ethnic students, primarily Italian Americans, who are a protected class at CUNY.[67] Like their peers across the system, CSI students work, often full time. In one of my recent upper-level Queer Studies classes, students worked for money an average of thirty-two hours per week, in addition to taking care of children and/or parents, with whom most of them still live. Any number of recent headlines that claim to break the story that students are workers too read like old news to these student-workers.

And then there are the qualitative data captured in table I.1, "Realizing Poor Queer Studies." These daily observations and unremarkable interactions are where this project began, long before I poked my nose into the institutional research. Renny Christopher indexes the utility of such mixed methods of research into working-class pedagogy, writing that "to understand the situation of working-class students in higher education, scholars in working-class pedagogy have focused not only on empirical data but on qualitative information as well, both observational and biographical."[68] Mixing methods, my introduction also necessarily breaks form here, as these moments and impressions did not come to me in order or in a coherent research narrative. Working at an institution with a lot of poor and working-class students, you come to understand the incredible drama of class mobility. But, ironically, that drama often registers as boring, if not wholly unremarkable. The reality, the intersectional race-class-gender precarity, is often understood, pieced together, only later. It took me many years at CSI to realize I was teaching Poor Queer Studies.

Table I.1. Realizing Poor Queer Studies

It looks like	*When in reality*
Stasis, a Latina student in her seventh year of school.	She is terrified of graduating and remaining single without the excuse of college to defend her against her parents' heteronormative impatience.
Leaving a meeting with a student group and then bumping into a former student.	You remember that the white student you just bumped into was homeless when they took your course. This fact is brought to mind because one of the Latinx students in the meeting you just came from discussed being, currently, homeless.
A student bringing her four-year-old to class to avoid domestic violence.	The brown child's presence prompts a spontaneous pedagogical innovation. The queer studies students, in solidarity with their distressed peer, organically adapt to the changed classroom space by spelling out all the S-E-X words in our discussion.
Failure, an F paper written, judging by the punctuation, on a cell phone and pasted into Word.	He works two jobs and must use his phone to thumb in his essays during breaks between deliveries. He doesn't own a computer.
A general education class at an open-admissions, two-year and four-year institution.	Being unable to distinguish between students working toward their associate degree and those working toward their bachelor's degree. Being surprised at the frequent disconnect between a student's capabilities and her educational goals.
The Asian American gender-conforming student who never says anything.	They are transgender and need to leave home. But they never tell you, their queer studies professor, either of these things until years later, in an email from across the country.
Tiresome responsibility, a young single black mother.	She makes the decision to study abroad for a semester.
A mixed-race student who comes out as having a close relative who is HIV+.	Though he knows more than any of his peers about living with HIV/AIDS, he thinks Magic Johnson is no longer HIV+ because he is rich enough to afford the cure.
A moment of bonding after class between a white gay professor from the sticks and a white butch working-class lesbian student.	She asks, "Professor, are we going to read any books by white people?," revealing the moment to be one of shared white privilege forged through homosexual class identification.
A three-hour commute from the Bronx.	She is a young black lesbian who is closeted at home, who wanted to go away to school but couldn't afford it, and CSI is the furthest CUNY campus from her neighborhood. No one knows her at CSI.

Each of these examples marks a queer-class connection, intersections made busier by race and gender dynamics. They create the background and, now, the foreground for teaching Poor Queer Studies at my college. Plenty of other data inform these moments, including middle-class and even upper-class messages and meanings. This other data—the noise created nearer the top of the economic ladder that is almost always taken to represent higher education in general—can often drown out the poor queer data, which students and faculty are so incentivized to turn away from already. Even Poor Queer Studies offers such an incentive, if for no other reason than this: a Queer Studies professor inevitably models a direction, a high-status if not high-class queer career. My very presence links queerness to social mobility and superordinate status. Queerness, when it looks like a Queer Studies professor, looks like a way out, a way up, away from poor.

Relative success, judged by one's own lights, becomes a problem in this regard. How can I assert both that CSI is one of the queerest schools I know, a claim I pursue in chapter 1, and that it represents a site of queer marginalization and unknowability? How do I account for my annual salary, at age forty-seven and after thirteen years in this job, of $97,628? (Note: this statistic is public information because I am a public employee. Bringing the question of what that salary means—how it translates into class status in New York City, how it connotes failure or success to my students—is a terrific pedagogical prompt for my Poor Queer Studies classrooms. I wonder, if I taught at a private college, would I so readily disclose how much I make?) More generally, how does my analysis account for the inordinate successes of some of my colleagues, even as I insist on drawing readers' critical gaze back to the material and structural impoverishments of our work? Look at our recent history in the CSI English department alone. My colleague Tyehimba Jess won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and the 2017 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for *Olio*. For her book of poetry, *Incendiary Art*, my colleague Patricia Smith won the 2018 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the 2017 Los Angeles Times Book Prize, the 2018 NAACP Image Award, and was the runner-up for the 2018 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry. Faculty in our creative writing concentration alone include National Book Award finalists and have won three Guggenheims, multiple Fulbrights, two Whiting awards, multiple National Poetry Slam championships, the Library of Congress Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt National Prize, the American Academy of Poets Lenore Marshall Prize, multiple Pushcart Prizes, the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, a Cullman Center Fellowship, multiple Publishing Triangle awards including the Bill Whitehead Award for Lifetime Achievement, the CLAGS Kessler life-

time achievement in LGBTQ Studies award, the MFK Fisher Book Award, the grand prize in documentary at the Nashville International Film Festival, and fellowships and residencies far too numerous to mention.[69] Beyond this faculty snapshot, CSI produced the second most Fulbright Scholars of any master's-level institution in the U.S. in 2016–17. Recently, CUNY was ranked sixth in the nation on CollegeNET's Social Mobility Index, meaning we are good at helping students who start poor rise through socioeconomic strata. And CSI was ranked number 504 on the 2017–18 Forbes list of "America's Top Colleges."[70] Beyond these and other measured successes lie the more persuasive daily experiences of students, faculty, and staff coming together to do good work for which we are proud of each other. I am painfully aware of being perceived by my CSI community as undermining that work by attaching it to "poor," though that would be a misinterpretation of my goals here. On the other hand, I have no worries about being perceived by my colleagues as undermining our work by attaching it to "queer."[71] That contrast helps to set the stakes of this study, for it implies a competing set of institutional attachments—poor versus queer—that I argue ought not compete, not at CSI and not in Queer Studies across the academy.

As this book turns toward an imbrication of queerness and class that schools and scholars turn away from, it wrestles with the question of queer-class research practices. Methodologically, this study confronts the "problem of impossible evidence" that attends queer scholarship, which is characteristically concerned with elucidating the "vagaries of embodied life."[72] Ruth Wilson Gilmore helps me to frame my encounter with the vagaries of queer-class institutional life when she writes that "people in forgotten places also act within the institutional and individualized constraints defined by racialization, gender hierarchy, and nationality, and the complex potential mix of these possibilities has produced its own academic specialties old and new: the various branches of the social sciences, area studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, cultural studies—the latter three dedicated to the study of disabling (in the sense of both debilitating and undoing; see Hart 2002b) constraints. *Constraints* does not mean 'insurmountable barriers.' However, it does suggest that people use what is available to make a place in the world."[73] With slippery issues of class and race and status at the heart of the matter, queer methodological constraints (or queer messes[74]) arise, particularly as I explore embodied pedagogical relations between teacher and student, professional distinctions between high-status and low-status Queer Studies professors, the relationship of scholar to institution, and the articulations of materiality to theory. Much of my queer-class research practice

is grounded by anecdotal evidence and educated guesses about working in spaces of queer precarity in higher education, and I adapt the queer narrative case study model to represent and interpret that evidence. My approach values working people, both students and colleagues, as well as working with people. Student stories, which I typically reanimate here in composite form in order to anonymize them, galvanize the larger story about queer pedagogy and social class that I tell. Institutional spaces, including Queer Studies classrooms, offices, campuses, academic centers, and queer conferences, help to structure and inform those narratives of student and faculty access to and production of queer ideas.

My inquiry is therefore, at least in part, unavoidably parochial, arising from my queer professional positioning at CSI. It must be so, and this assertion opens out onto my larger argument about the ways that Queer Studies must encounter itself at institutions high and low and in between. A special issue of *GLQ*, "Queering the Middle: Race, Region, and a Queer Midwest," frames "the middle" as a new queer vantage, "a troubled, unstable perch buttressed by the dominance of the coasts and the 'South.'"[75] The middle references the Midwest and the idea of region, which become at once geographic locations and discursive formations. The authors position the middle as at once between urban and rural and also shot through by them. One result is that traditional queer mappings, such as urban migration narratives that tend to stabilize a country/city divide, are forced to incorporate a productive confusion of scale. Regionalism pulls extremes of urban and rural toward its powerful, indefinite optic, the middle. Attending to the regional enables dynamic interscalar perspectives at the level of the subnational and global to emerge as well.

Conceptually, the middle is stretchy, and so it can contribute to an analysis of Staten Island and the college named after it, even though Staten Island is certainly not Midwestern and though it is colloquially described as one of New York City's outer boroughs. As a forgotten object of a geographical imagination that privileges the urban/rural binary, Staten Island gestures toward a kind of epistemological middle space that concepts such as region help to elucidate. Region can "illustrate the unruliness of racial, class, and gender dynamics that transgress easy rural or urban organization and signal what escapes both metronormative locales and their alternative spaces."[76] Staten Island is urban in parts, but not compared to neighboring Manhattan or much of Brooklyn. It is located in the deep blue political culture of the East Coast, yet it voted overwhelmingly for President Trump. There are no

lesbian or gay bars on this island of 500,000 residents, yet it is home to one of the queerest of CUNY's twenty-four campuses.

What I like about a theory of the middle is that it doesn't presuppose a perfect fit between critical lens and object of study but rather offers a flexible framework for thinking about place and queerness. Poor Queer Studies requires a similar kind of analytic, if for no other reason than that a study of any institution of higher education preconditionally excludes the study of most poor people because, systematically, most poor people are excluded from college education. In 2013, the nationwide college enrollment rate for "low-income students" (the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes) who had recently graduated high school was just 46 percent.[77] But only about 76 percent of children from poor families graduate high school in the first place.[78] So even if it were possible to define "poor" (as the bottom 20 percent, for instance), my focus on college students and the university spaces and protocols I am calling Poor Queer Studies would still construct a very partial object of analysis. But paradoxically, because "poor" cannot be precisely defined, I am able, within the limited context of the class-stratified academy, to use the term in a much more inclusive way than a strict definition permits. Neither CSI nor CUNY are uniformly or unambiguously poor. Nor are the students. Nor are the faculty. Yet impoverishment sets the conceptual baseline for much that happens here, even down to the finer points of heating and air conditioning as my college institutes cost-saving measures for the physical plant. When I take up concerns of the middle, of the working class, even at times of the upper classes and the rich, I hope to reveal the way that Poor Queer Studies can be more pertinent to those concerns than has been realized.

I propose that "poor," like "Midwest," operates as "both a material space and a discursive construct" within higher education.[79] "Poor" enables me to combine critical regionality with critical disciplinarity to conceptualize Poor Queer Studies through an analysis of queer pedagogy and scholarship at an outer-borough campus of the nation's largest, and by some measures poorest, public urban university. Of course, I also have to convince you that you should care, which is to say that I have to promise you that there will be a payoff for looking with me at and from my college. Siobhan Somerville, one of the coeditors of the "Queering the Middle" issue of *GLQ*, elsewhere provides a vital model of contextualized queer knowledge production within higher education. In "Locating Queer Culture in the Big Ten," Somerville describes her process of designing an undergraduate course around the question, "How . . . might we understand the role of Midwestern public universities

like the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign] in the production of queer culture?"[80] Creating an archive of queer University of Illinois artifacts such as Ann Bannon's lesbian novel *Odd Girl Out* (1957), which is set in a fictionalized "Champlain," helps to rewrite not only specific university histories that have hidden local queer cultural productions but also broad urban-centric histories of sexuality that have hidden suburban, rural, and regional queer data. Working from Somerville's model in chapter 1 especially, I use CSI as a case study for the production of queer knowledge in an overlooked place. My intention isn't to permanently center this particular work site or even to center the intellectual project of Poor Queer Studies to the exclusion of the heady archive of Rich Queer Studies, but to make the field stretchy enough to accommodate and respond to its many class locations.

My History of Arrival

I end this introduction with my history of arrival at CSI. How I came to CSI and how I came to this project are vital contexts for the knowledge produced in/as this book. In the winter of 2006, after three years on the job market in search of a tenure-track position, I received a job interview at the Modern Language Association annual convention (back when CSI could still afford to interview at the unconscionably expensive production that is the MLA) and, subsequently, an invitation for a campus visit for the position of assistant professor of Queer Studies in the English department. The story of my ultimate hire contains several quirky features of plot, setting, and character that I now recognize as fortuitous, for they have made it possible to imagine the narrative of this book. First, I had never heard of CSI, as perhaps the reader has not. I had lived on both coasts, in the Midwest, and in the South, but Staten Island was not on any of my maps. If it had been, I likely would have heard about its status as "the forgotten borough" or, as the title of a book by two of my colleagues has it, *Staten Island: Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City*.[81] But after living thirty-three-plus years in rural America, much of it surrounded by fields and farms and homophobia and racism, and, relatedly, having been closeted through nearly all of my twenties, I knew the most important fact of the job: it was in New York. Recent work in queer rural studies, had I had the benefit of it then, would not have made a dent in my single-minded queer career trajectory. It was gay New York or gay San Francisco or bust. So while I was delighted to be making my way to Staten Island for my campus interview that winter of 2007, I was initially also a bit dumbfounded to find that there was a Queer Studies job at

a school I had never heard of. I had only heard about Queer Studies at places that I'd heard of—a meaningful tautology for this book.

Now, having received tenure and promotion at this job for which (quirky subplot) I came in runner-up, I am anything but surprised by the association of CSI with queer intellectual work. Now it is I who guarantees to disbelieving acquaintances and friends that professor of Queer Studies is a job and that it is a job at CSI, the sole public institution of higher education in the borough. Indeed, and I repeat, CSI is one of the queerest colleges I've known. This statement is perhaps the quirkiest one of all, for I attended Wabash College, an all-male, avowedly not gay undergraduate college, I earned a PhD in English at Indiana University, home to the famous Kinsey Institute (and the only graduate program to which I was accepted), and for the three years prior to beginning my tenure-track job at CSI, I held a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship in the University Writing Program at Duke University, the so-called birthplace of queer theory.[82] In an important way, the story of this book is the story of that career path, especially the first and last steps. The first step was from the farmland of Indiana to college at a place that would pay my way. I didn't fully understand that Wabash was a rich school; I just knew that I couldn't pay and that the college would offer me a substantial scholarship. By the time I took the most recent step, which brought me to CSI, I understood what a rich school was. I was coming from Duke, the Ivy of the South, its architecture Gothic revival, its lawns flat green, its gardens lush. I was going to CSI (no moving expenses, of course), which had settled into the partially renovated facilities of the notoriously abusive Willowbrook State School for children with intellectual disabilities (subject of Geraldo Rivera's 1972 exposé). My impression upon seeing CSI for the first time was that there were fewer trees than one might reasonably expect on a 204-acre campus. At this commuter school, parking lots trump landscaping.[83]

For my teaching talk during my CSI interview, I was asked to prepare a presentation called "What Happens in a Queer Studies Classroom?" My point for the moment is that my future colleagues were not actually asking what happens in a Queer Studies classroom. They were asking how I would teach Queer Studies here, to these students, at this school, in this system. Figuring out the answers to those questions, how to answer them, why they're important, has been my greatest challenge and joy for the past thirteen years. *Poor Queer Studies* tells the story of my reeducation in Queer Studies, here, in a place my field was not supposed, not imagined, to be.

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