

Unqueering America

An Introduction

Southbound on Interstate 71 in the early morning hours of December 28, 2014, a slender youth walked several miles from a small-town Ohio home and decided to step into oncoming traffic. It was a tractor-trailer, so death was certain. Later in the evening a suicide note appeared explaining the decision, posted by delayed command on the social network Tumblr. "My death needs to mean something," Leelah Alcorn had written. "My death needs to be counted in the number of transgender people who commit suicide this year. I want someone to look at that number and say 'that's fucked up' and fix it. Fix society. Please." This anguished plea, accompanied by another post titled "sorry," was the last communication from Leelah, whose parents had sent her to Christian conversion therapy at age sixteen, pulled her out of public school, enrolled her in an online academy, and prohibited her from using social media for several months. It appears that Leelah had learned these punitive lessons of isolation so well that, even on the edge of a road that could lead to so many places away from southern Ohio and her parents, she chose death by interstate.

Interstate 71 was one of two streams available to Leelah. The other was the Internet, which her parents prohibited her from using lest she learn the wrong things, "inappropriate" things. Social media and web research had been resources for Leelah. Internet served as a queer information highway, a means of mobility in situ, of action in the stasis of her repressively religious home. The interstate was a wave of pavement connecting one place to the next, a continuous flow

of commodities, bodies, and ideas. At age seventeen, Leelah did not go on the road, did not hitchhike, did not wander far, did not enter the stream of commuters, traveling salesmen, truckers, tramps, and runaways. Leelah did not run or roadtrip. She posted.

The post had legs. "Forty-eight hours after the first note was posted on Tumblr, it had 82,272 views."¹ Worldwide, the news broke out of the digital and into print and broadcast media. Activists and artists voiced their outrage at Leelah's death. It wasn't long before an international petition calling for a ban on so-called conversion therapy circulated. The fight for this ban, dubbed "Leelah's Law," began.

Less than two weeks after Leelah's suicide, a representative of the state of Oklahoma proposed a bill, the first of its kind, to ensure parents the right to send their children to conversion therapy. Deemed so ineffectual that even some of the staunchest of antigay Christians who had once built businesses around it ceased promoting it, conversion or "reparative" therapy has been declared a hazard to the mental health of its clients. Professional medical and psychology associations agree that such attempts to "cure" queers and "pray the gay away" are harmful. A direct response to laws in California, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C., which prohibited "licensed therapists from subjecting minors to such treatment," the Oklahoma bill 1598 was also seen as "statutory backlash" against recent progress for GLBTQ folks.² In October 2014, the Supreme Court of the United States refused to take up an appeal by the state of Oklahoma meant to reinstate a ban against gay marriage, thereby allowing gay Oklahomans to wed legally. Facing this defeat, Christian conservative politicians in Oklahoma launched four antigay bills in January 2015, including bill 1598, the "Freedom to Obtain Conversion Therapy Act." On the heels of Alcorn's death, along with the murder of five transwomen of color in the first five weeks of the year—namely, Lamia Beard, Taja DeJesus, Penny Proud, Yazmin Vash Payne, and Ty Underwood—the bill from Oklahoma seemed almost a direct response to the international push for "Leelah's Law" and nationwide calls for justice amid rampant racialized violence.

The sponsor of "The Freedom to Obtain Conversion Therapy Act" was state representative Sally Kern, who also proposed two additional bills: The Preservation and Sovereignty of Marriage Act and The Business Protection Act. Within weeks, Kern withdrew the latter bill, which would have allowed businesses to refuse service to anyone in the GLBTQ community. The other bill she couched in terms of an emergency so it would not be subject to countermeasures and would go immediately into effect if passed. She said, "It being immediately necessary for the preservation of the public peace, health and

safety, an emergency is hereby declared to exist, by reason whereof this act shall take effect and be in full force from and after its passage and approval.”³ This is a tactic for which Kern is known, as is her unrelenting opposition to homosexuality, which first received notable attention in 2008.

In 2008, Kern’s infamous remarks went viral on YouTube: “Studies show that no society that has totally embraced homosexuality has lasted more than, you know, a few decades. So it’s the death knell for this country. I honestly think it’s the biggest threat even that our nation has, even more so than terrorism or Islam, which I think is a big threat, Okay.”⁴ These words were part of a longer discussion she held with a group of supporters. The audience included someone who did not share Kern’s views and who recorded the talk. These words shocked many people who no doubt felt the message Kern conveyed was absurd, baseless, and out of the blue. But these words have a history.

This book traces the history of Kern’s association of terrorism with homosexuality back to the McCarthy era of the 1950s by featuring portraits of four Oklahomans whose lives represent paradigmatic confrontations with conservatives. *Oklahomo* demonstrates how Kern’s ideas are derived from antigay crusader Anita Bryant, whose ideas in turn were influenced by the gospel of free enterprise exemplified by the anticommunist Reverend Billy James Hargis, whose own queer demise was prefigured by the expulsion of queer teachers such as architecture professor Bruce Goff. Each chapter situates one of these lives in the contexts of Oklahoma’s shifting political, economic, and cultural realities, which reflected and shaped national and global trends throughout the twentieth century.

These chapters look backward in reverse chronological order, beginning with the current period and ending with the 1950s. In this way we begin with a vantage point most familiar to the youngest of scholarly audiences and concerned citizens. This structure invites readers to recognize in the words around them a historical legacy. Understanding that antigay attitudes have a history, and tracing the ideas and language that legitimate such attitudes, helps people to see that those attitudes are not natural, immutable, or inevitable. Thus, this book has the simple pedagogical aim of teaching readers how unqueering America works—how homogenizing, queer-denying, and antigay ideas are manufactured so that they achieve particular economic, racial, colonial, and gendered goals.

Chapter 2, “Sally Kern: The Queer Terrorist in Middle America,” and chapter 3, “Anita Bryant: Oklahoma Roots and National Fruits,” feature women whose words and work have characterized antigay

campaigns and rhetoric since the 1970s. Since her notorious 2008 remarks that claimed homosexuality was a greater threat than terrorism or Islam were broadcast on YouTube, Oklahoma Representative Sally Kern has been seen as a modern-day Anita Bryant.⁵ Each of these women deployed a maternal rhetoric in arguing against homosexuality, asserting that quashing gay rights was necessary to “save our children” and it was therefore their right as mothers to pass laws allowing discrimination against gays and lesbians. In these chapters, I explore how, in both cases, this maternal-rights rhetoric deflected racism and reinforced colonialist attitudes that have always been a part of Oklahoma, the statehood of which was predicated on dispossessing Native Americans and whitening the multicultural, multiracial populace of Indian Territory.

Sally Kern’s formulation of homosexuality as a worse threat than terrorism or Islam corresponds with a trend of depicting terrorists as sexual deviants as well as racialized enemies and depicting queers, in turn, as threats to national security. Throughout the early 2000s, popular culture, reportage, and social media portrayed the country’s enemies in the war on terror in sexual terms as kinky deviants, sodomites, fellates, androgens, and cross-dressers; in short, as “monster/terrorist/fags.”⁶ This trend, described in detail by Jasbir Puar, posits a “queer terrorist” at the historical moment when “gay marriage” elicits celebrations of state-sanctioned sexual relationships.⁷ Stigmatization of any queer individuals not conforming to court-codified gay marriage proliferates still, as Kern’s remarks attest. Her insistence that homosexuality surpasses “terrorism or Islam” as a danger to the nation is especially worthy of examination because it de-emphasizes the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, thereby obfuscating homegrown white supremacist domestic terrorism.

As much as Kern’s remarks reflect and perpetuate a contemporary idea of the queer terrorist, they also were derived from Anita Bryant’s fight against “militant homosexuality,” a campaign waged in Dade County, Florida, in 1977. Bryant’s antigay work had national impact, inspiring concomitant campaigns, most notably in California. But Middle America has lots to teach us about Bryant and the burgeoning conservatism she symbolized. At a time in which Christian businesses and Cold War apocalypticism were sweeping through Bryant’s home state of Oklahoma, she emerged as a moral entrepreneur who embodied the wholesomeness of white femininity that connoted the American heartland and exemplified the national ideal of womanhood. It was this unspoken norm of whiteness that undergirded fighting for “our” children. It was this projected purity that a newly nationalized

gay activism sought to sully, most famously with a banana cream pie thrown in Bryant's face. Theories of the abject, histories of colonialist agribusiness, and homespun humor merge in chapter 3, the heretofore untold story of Bryant's rise and fall in Middle America. Understanding where Anita Bryant's views came from requires also understanding the economic, political, and educational landscape of Oklahoma in the 1950s. This landscape, as we see in subsequent chapters, featured a lot of anticommunism and some rather queer architecture.

Chapter 4, "Billy James Hargis: Sinister, Satanic Sex," and chapter 5, "Bruce Goff: How to Stop Enjoying and Learn to Fear Queer Art," present two men simultaneously living in Oklahoma whose separate stories illustrate the two major ways that Cold War homophobia manifested in the Sooner state as well as in larger U.S. society. The lives of Billy James Hargis and Bruce Goff, two men accused of homosexuality and thereby ousted from positions in higher education, illustrate how homosexuality was seen either as "sinister sex," particular behaviors that were symptoms of ungodly Communism infiltrating the United States, or as "perverts," individual people considered security risks (if not outright subversives) and therefore threats to national safety. Examining first Hargis, then Goff, reveals how what came to be known as "the lavender scare" descended in Middle America a little later than on the East Coast. Fueled by Tulsa-based Hargis, a leading anticommunist of his time who founded a nationally influential organization called Christian Crusade in 1950 and, as an outgrowth of Christian Crusade, the American Christian College in 1970, Oklahomans began seeking out so-called subversives and removing them from public office or state employment around 1950. The quiet accommodation of queer eccentrics that had characterized many Oklahoma locales gave way to overt state repression of homosexuality much as it did in Mississippi, as documented by John Howard, though a bit earlier.⁸ Ironically, Hargis became victim of the very antisubversion discourses he had been generating when *Time* magazine reported that he had been caught sleeping with students from his college, both men and women. Consequently, his articulation of "sinister sex" was one manifestation of Cold War attitudes toward sexuality that later faded.

Bruce Goff's story illustrates what did not fade, what remained embedded in American antigay discourses and evolved into the idea of the queer terrorist that characterized Sally Kern's remarks. Chapter 5 historicizes the conservative concern with gay teachers by examining the forced resignation of Goff from the faculty of University of Oklahoma in 1955. Born in Kansas, Goff was an iconoclastic architect

whose designs can be seen in commercial and residential buildings in fifteen states. Chief among his works is Tulsa's 1926 Boston Avenue Church, an Art Deco masterpiece featuring huge missionary circuit riders on horseback around its edifice. To this day, the church denies that Goff was the key architect, crediting the design instead to his high school art teacher, Adah Robinson. This chapter thus accumulates themes from previous chapters—the white heterosexual Christian women who are positioned as the natural opposite of queers, the presumed conservative regionalism of Middle America, the outrage over teacher/student homosexual relationships—and situates them in the contexts of Billy James Hargis's local anticommunism and the rise of Joseph McCarthy, whose purges of "perverts" were intimately bound up with national red baiting. In Goff's ouster, which preceded Hargis's, we see the notion of the queer terrorist in its early articulation as a subversive international network of gay artists. Called the "homintern," this mythical network was the queer counterpart to another (often only imagined) conspiracy, the communist international, or "comintern." Thus, chapter 5 examines the edifices on which homophobic Cold War "security risks" evolved into post-9/11 demands for homeland security and the emergence of the queer terrorist. It also demonstrates how local citizens were taught to spot a queer and to reject rather than celebrate the rustic glam of queer spaces in noncosmopolitan places.

Without understanding Oklahomans' contributions to the evolving antigay sentiment since the 1950s, we cannot fully appreciate the emergence and impact of the Christian free market, that family-values inflected, unregulated form of entrepreneurship that led to U.S.-based multinational corporations. Chapter 6, "Queer Times in Wal-Mart Country," offers some queer reflections on national belonging in a time and place where, in Bethany Moreton's words, "globalization got its twang."⁹ Born in Kingfisher, Oklahoma, Sam Walton started a "retail revolution" that reconfigured Americans' sense of shopping, working, and providing for loved ones.¹⁰ Turning Oklahoma and the Ozark Plateau into "Wal-Mart Country," he created an easily replicated imaginary community that exemplifies the transnational economic and cultural phenomenon of globalization. The ubiquity of Wal-Mart stores corresponds with a widespread sensibility that reads *country* as signifying small-town, working-class populist identity, despite Wal-Mart's multinational corporatism. In fact, according to Nelson Lichtenstein, Wal-Mart "is today the largest private-sector employer in the world, with nearly 2 million workers, 1.4 million of whom are in the United States. It operates more than six thousand huge stores, doing more

business than Target, Home Depot, Sears Holdings, Safeway, and Kroger combined. It imports more goods from China than either the United Kingdom or Russia. Though Wal-Mart and the other mass retailers seem low-tech, these big-box stores may actually be the most consequential and effective users of computer processing power in our time. Their lofty place on the Fortune 500 thus signals a tectonic power shift within the structure of the economy, both in the United States and around the world."¹¹ Yet the massive enterprise is passed off as locally homespun. This deft marketing is as disingenuous as Sam Walton's story of his Oklahoma upbringing during the Depression, which reflects the duplicity and whitewashing that has allowed the state to move farther right throughout the twentieth century. This conclusive chapter contextualizes Walton's autobiographical account in a discussion of national belonging after 9/11 to demonstrate how queer sexualities and their disavowal go hand in hand in Wal-Mart Country.

In the final analysis, then, *Oklahomo: Lessons in Unqueering America* invites readers to put into transnational perspective the colonialist, Christian, antigay, and Islamophobic discourses articulated by some right-wing Oklahomans. Here I adopt the notion of *transnational* from feminists who compel us not only to see "the global" in "the local" but also to see how "gender, race, class, and nationalism are produced by contemporary cultures in a transnational framework that is linked to earlier histories of colonization."¹² My examination of efforts to unqueen America begins with how Sally Kern's language articulates the perceived threat of homosexuality in relation to a global War on Terror while redeploying colonial and civilizational narratives about white women as victims. Her speeches and book tap into discourses that transcend national boundaries to present terrorists as psychosocial products of failed heterosexuality and associate homosexuality with deviance to posit it as a global threat to family life, conceived as white, Western, patriarchal, reproductive, and heteronormative. Moreover, as we will see, the equation of homosexuality with an "assault on the family," hence the nation, is deployed time and time again in the context of education.¹³ Slandering homosexual teachers as pedophiles and denying them basic rights of equal employment and housing is a theme cohering the intertwined stories of the four Oklahomans featured here. The scandal-filled lives of Sally Kern, Anita Bryant, Billy James Hargis, and Bruce Goff serve as lessons in how conservatives have attempted to unqueen America since the 1950s.

Of course, unqueering America can hardly be attributed to the politics or people of one state. The following sections offer reasons for

focusing on the forty-sixth state of the union, for examining conservatives and “rural” queers, and for choosing such an irreverent title.

Why Oklahoma?

As a lesson in unqueering America, examining Oklahoma provides us with a microcosm of formative politics and shifts in economy and culture that have shaped the nation. I have relied on existing studies of political economies and historical changes as a broad backdrop for my own research, which focuses more on close readings of cultural artifacts, written texts, and archival materials related to the four people whose interrelated stories illuminate how conservatives attempt to unqueue America. Taken together, the studies summarized below validate Oklahoma as a worthy site of investigation into the ways of the nation more generally.

First, as a state that is predicated on the dispossession and disciplining of indigenous people and African Americans, Oklahoma exemplifies and encapsulates the settler colonialist, racialized rationales for landownership, heteropatriarchy, and class divisions among whites that we find throughout the United States. According to David Chang, Oklahoma’s history “is American history told in fast-forward”¹⁴ because of how quickly white people transformed the homelands of indigenous people—specifically, the Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaws, and Seminoles. Chang’s book, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832–1929*, examines the transformation from Indian Territory to agribusiness, a transition that condenses in a smaller time frame violent changes that resulted in a white-dominated society nationwide.¹⁵ Studying Oklahoma’s history is studying American history writ small.

The transitions of landownership that resulted in racial stratification, which Chang’s research explores, also entailed codifications of sexual, gender, and reproductive norms. Studies such as Mark Rifkin’s *When Did Indians Become Straight?* and Andrea Smith’s “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism” explore these codifications, examining the homogenization of different forms of kinship, spirituality, and sexuality that settler colonialism imposed.¹⁶ Even as scholars recognize that “we can understand indigenous nationhood as already queered”¹⁷ in the sense that it does not conform to heteropatriarchal norms, that does not “mean that traditionally native peoples *were queer*.”¹⁸ Such assumptions can lead to spiritual and cultural appropriation, including positing indigenous peoples as supposedly premodern models for queers or as “foils for

the emergence of . . . queer subjects."¹⁹ Taking into account historical studies such as Chang's and queer analyses such as Smith's and Rikfin's allows us to acknowledge the vast heterogeneity of lives lived in land now known as Oklahoma. With this varied background Oklahoma has variously "been termed an Indian homeland, a black promised land, and a white heartland."²⁰

This last view is most pertinent to my analysis, which examines how white people make claims about belonging to and being the rightful heirs of the nation. Recognizing the construction of whiteness entails considering why people presume they are white and how they assert being white as an unspoken norm. As scholars such as David Roediger have demonstrated, the racial formation of whiteness in the United States is intimately tied up with the history of labor.²¹ Who got to work which jobs and how immigrant workers set themselves apart from others in the midst of industrial exploitation in the nineteenth century were folded into emerging racialized ideas of who deserved to be in and of America. Moreover, if working-class people chose their whiteness as a psychological compensation when wages did not sustain them, as Roediger's field-defining research compellingly argued, they could decline it, too. Critical studies of whiteness emerged, therefore, as an antiracist mode of analysis that teases out how white privilege is conferred or denied. It also encompasses the problem of society deeming some people "not quite white," a situation observable in taunts of "white trash," "hillbilly," "redneck," and "Okie."²² While some may rightly criticize critical studies of whiteness as hampered by academic conundrums, being attentive to whiteness is paramount for studies of U.S. conservatism.²³

Unfortunately, critical attention to whiteness is missing from a lot of histories of conservatism produced in the last twenty years or so. Since the mid-1990s, the study of conservatism has been a growing field within the discipline of history.²⁴ In 1994 Alan Brinkley gave a notable address which historians often cite as the beginning of a new approach to studying conservatism. Earlier pathologizing explanations of conservatism, exemplified by Richard Hofstadter's work in the 1950s and 1960s, considered conservatism an irrational and "paranoid style" of politics.²⁵ The innovations inspired by Brinkley's call established that conservatism was more than a backlash against the 1960s and extended back to at least the late 1940s. Historians began to trace people and organizations that comprised conservatism as a social movement, at first focusing on working-class uprisings (such as anti-busing campaigns) against the racial and sexual politics of the 1960s, and more recently examining anti-New Deal business elites

whose wealth funded social issues campaigns and influenced higher education intended to train new generations for work in an increasingly deregulated market of corporatism. The result of this copious historical work since the mid-1990s has been to view conservatism not as something that emerged triumphantly in the surprising 1980 election of Ronald Reagan and the powerful formation of the Christian Right, but instead as an active movement with much earlier roots.²⁶

However, these descriptive histories of conservatism too often overlook the construction of whiteness that such politics confirm.²⁷ In some cases the trend has returned historians to a pre-1960s focus on researching privileged white men—captains of industry, financiers, military leaders, and political elites—without always or fully interrogating their privilege.²⁸ Consequently, such histories reproduce a triumphalist narrative of conservative nationalism and right-wing ascendancy.

This leads to another reason why Oklahoma is a pertinent place to examine. For those interested in the rise of conservatism, Oklahoma tells us a lot about how politics shifted away from the Left in the twentieth century. From its early days, the state was influenced by leftist populism, including socialism. In the first decades of the twentieth century, socialist representatives were powerful in the state legislature and unionized labor was strong. Studies such as Jim Bissett's *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904–1920*, recognize Oklahoma history as useful for understanding how conservatism ascended.²⁹

As part of the Sunbelt, Oklahoma helps constitute a region that has played an enormous role in shaping contemporary conservatism. Darren Dochuk's *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grass-roots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* demonstrates how evangelists migrated from the southern and south central Bible Belt to the West Coast, moving ideas about God and nation from the margins of American culture to its mainstream.³⁰ The Reverend Billy James Hargis was among these, moving as he did from Tulsa to confer and collaborate with California conservatives. Moral entrepreneurs such as Hargis, who extolled the holy virtues of the free market from the 1940s to the 1970s, fomented the conservative cultural values that successfully conditioned workers to embrace jobs as a cashier, server, manager, host, or greeter when their fathers had worked in oil fields, wheat fields, cattle ranches, and coalmines. Oklahomans such as Hargis were thus key players in forging the symbiotic relationship between cultural values and economic ones that helped Americans imagine themselves in this shifting landscape of labor. Living in Tulsa

in the 1950s, Anita Bryant breathed in the airwaves of Christian free enterprise that Hargis broadcast and that came to characterize the Sunbelt, which in turn influenced the nation. Later, Bryant's explicitly Christian antigay work directly impacted California politics by inspiring the infamous Briggs Initiative in 1978, just as the idea of the Sunbelt was proliferating in political discussions.

"The Sunbelt" refers to no absolute listing of states or places; it is, instead, a geographic imaginary similar to "the heartland" or "Middle America." In this way it exemplifies the distinction between "regional concept" and "conceptual region" that Michelle Nickerson and Darren Dochuk make in their collection, *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region*.³¹ Oklahoma's liminal status reflects the indistinct geographic parameters of the Sunbelt. Oklahoma's varied topographies and cultures defy usual definitions of region. Boasting the most diverse terrain of any state in the United States, Oklahoma encompasses eleven ecoregions ranging from Tallgrass prairie and red dirt flatlands to forested mountains and cypress swamps.³² Confounding familiar delineations, Oklahoma is variously considered culturally related to the South Central region, as the amalgam "Texahoma" suggests, but also as Midwestern as its adjacent neighbors to the north, Kansas and Missouri. Even—and perhaps especially—in comprising a part of the Ozark Plateau, Oklahoma contributed to the blended ideology of business and culture that characterized Sunbelt living. If the Sunbelt was a "corporate dreamland" in which residents "internalized the pro-growth, antiregulatory, free market assurances of venture capitalism,"³³ Oklahoma provided the exemplar of that dreamland, Sam Walton, whose corporate populism grew a globalized retail economy that shaped the world.

Finally, Oklahoma is important to study in relation to the rise of free market conservatism and its attempts to unqueen America because it is the site of the aforementioned 1995 bombing, which shaped how Americans came to understand and portray acts of terror at home and abroad in ensuing years. How we talk about or ignore the Oklahoma City bombing is germane to subsequent discussions, policies, and lived experiences during the War on Terror, as existing scholarship shows.³⁴ Omitting or removing the Oklahoma City bombing as a salient reference for understanding terrorism erases a racialized right-wing populism that also fuels the Christian free market responsible for transforming our economy into a loosely regulated transnational corporatism. To single out homosexuality as a worse threat than terrorism in Oklahoma City, as Sally Kern has done, reconstructs local and national memory of the Oklahoma City bombing,

and by extension, of terrorism as something done by Americans. It conjures a specter of queer terrorism to deflect U.S. terrorism at home and abroad.³⁵

Such a perspective may initially seem to validate what might well be expected: that conservative places such as Oklahoma are hotbeds of antigay sentiment, hawkish warmongering, racial intolerance, xenophobic politics, gender oppression, and land-ravaging corporatism. This book, however, aims to examine such assumptions closely, not to presume that some places are naturally or inherently conservative but to seek instead to understand how such places became that way in fact or in reputation.

Some may despair that this critical focus on white conservatives in Oklahoma amounts to white people talking to white people about white people. *Oklahomo* certainly is vulnerable to such a critique. Some disadvantages of these limits are obvious. *Oklahomo* focuses readers on white middle-class people and on America in its most landlockedness. It does not provide a representative sample of various queer lives in Oklahoma or rural America. Other than Bruce Goff's story, I offer no biographical or ethnographic exploration of lived experiences of actually existing lesbians, gays, two-spirit people, transfolk, or bisexuals. (I leave open to interpretation how one might classify Hargis.) Instead, *Oklahomo* attempts to hold white people accountable for our own history and its damaging legacies. Not only do I hope to pressure scholars to be analytical rather than merely descriptive in their accounts of conservatism and right-wing movements or discourse. I also hope to encourage nonscholars to understand better how legacies of racism and colonialism intertwine in antigay campaigns and attitudes, and also in some liberal campaigns for or images of gay rights. This approach may follow the unfortunate trend of women's studies scholarship that, according to Leela Fernandes, ironically and inadvertently figures the transnational as "a national conception."³⁶ But in the case of *Oklahomo* such an orientation is not so ironic or inadvertent. By chapter 6, I arrive at the conclusion that antigay conservatives in the United States construct nationalism through the appeal of a transnational rural. While that conclusion and this introduction, therefore, are clearly meant to situate my study amid scholarly conversations, the four portraits comprising the body of the book are stories that I hope undergraduates and nonacademics can appreciate. If my readership is such that this book does amount to white people talking to white people about white people, let those readers understand that conservatism has a history (shot through with sexism, racism, and colonialism) and that homophobia is learned behavior. Assuming that conservatism and homophobia are somehow natural to any person or

place forecloses opportunities for transformative change and denies alternative views.

Why Queer? Why Rural?

Understanding why *queer* is an appropriate term for this study necessitates some background on sexuality studies. Sexuality studies encompass a broad range of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding human desire, erotic activity, and the social conventions and political debates they inspire. Recent developments in sexuality studies that consider the history of homosexuality in the United States include a reevaluation of the emphasis on coastal urban communities. The newer emphasis on rural sexualities and sexual subcultures in non-coastal regions is important to my project because Oklahoma is often read as rural despite its metropolitan areas. Scholarship examining how space and place affect sexual practices, identities, and communities challenge a longstanding assumption that authentic queer life depends on urban living.

For example, J. Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* delineates the dichotomous assumptions that have prevented adequate discussion of "the rural queer" in favor of analyzing metropolitan sexuality as a cultural dominant.³⁷ Halberstam attempts to dislodge this "metronormativity" by reviewing how some scholars have theorized "the rural" and shown how "the rural/urban binary reverberates in really productive ways with other defining binaries like tradition/modern, Western/non-Western, natural/cultural, and modern/postmodern."³⁸ By coining and theorizing *metronormativity*, Halberstam provides a keyword that has shaped subsequent studies of the rural queer that use the neologism to articulate the bias of sexuality studies to focus on urban environments, practices, and subjects and extrapolate from those the condition of queers everywhere. *In a Queer Time and Place* also illuminates some problems for other scholars to address more thoroughly, especially around the issues of why some queers do not quit rural living and move to the big city.³⁹

Mary Gray's *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* is one study that takes up the question of why queers in rural spaces stay there.⁴⁰ It provides a contemporary analysis of how young Kentucky queers negotiate their sexual difference and refuse to relinquish their rural homes. A key insight from Gray's work is that sexual difference is often offset by community belonging; one is not a stranger in a rural community if one grew up there, and this familiarity can trump any queerness one

may exhibit. Gray also provides compelling examples of how gay youth in Kentucky often see their church not as an adversary but as a sanctuary, thereby complicating a dichotomous view of queers and fundamentalists. Moreover, she documents how youths deftly create queer spaces on the fly, converting public parks, private churches, and Wal-Mart stores into temporary sites of resistance, community, and celebration. Documenting these cultural practices, Gray's ethnographic study shows why rural places do not deserve to be thought of as America's closets.

But Gray's analysis also raises questions about what counts as rural America. My University of Kentucky students, for instance, incredulously asked about one locale central to Gray's study, "Berea? Berea is a *city*." In the study of the rural queer, therefore, the definition of "rural" is as complicated as the definition of "queer." In *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, Scott Herring examines this problem, noting that "rural" is always defined in contradistinction to "urban," but that neither term has any absolute meaning in terms of demographics or geography. Consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary* and U.S. Census Bureau data, Herring confirms that "when their semantic surfaces are scratched, the terms 'rural' and 'urban' become a definitional roundabout."⁴¹

But in common usage, "the rural" relies on and perpetuates associations that most all of us take for granted. "In national U.S. imaginaries," for example, "the Midwest is often characterized as primarily rural, a framing that explicitly casts the East and West Coasts as urban," despite the fact that we all know there are major cities in the Midwest.⁴² Nevertheless, the reputations of those cities are that they cannot possibly be as *au courant* as cities on either coast. Indeed, we often think that they are retrograde, out of touch, isolated as culturally as they seem to be geographically. Landlocked and backward, the fly-over zone is depicted as something to avoid, somewhere you do not want to get stuck. All of these negative connotations carry with them an implicit temporal assumption about slipping into the past. How did we acquire these regional prejudices that put the present-day rural in the past?

Recent scholarship suggests that Americans were taught to think like this by journalists writing after World War II. As Stacy Denton demonstrates, "rurality as a spatio-temporal past-in-present and one that is aligned with whiteness is portrayed in diverse publications across the postwar period."⁴³ Denton's research shows how depicting the rural as a past-in-present emerged in U.S. media alongside the idea of suburbia. The result of a proliferation of publications was the

idea that “rurality is a space but it is also a time, an interrelationship that also has implications for those people inhabiting rural spaces as well.”⁴⁴ As much as this idea was popularized in the postwar era through journalism, it has roots also in nineteenth-century notions of Appalachia, where “our contemporary ancestors” were said to reside.⁴⁵ So-called local color fiction, as well as travel writings from earlier colonial encounters in North America, are regarded as the geneses of notions about backward mountain folk.⁴⁶ Consequently, the stereotyped hayseeds and hillbillies who live in the middle of the country also appear to be culturally regressed, set apart from modern progress.

As temporally screwy as this “past-in-present” may seem, we somehow attribute the middle of the country not only with rurality but also with the most normal of us. The idea of Middle America, for example, implies some calm center devoid of trends and fashions, mediocre and mild in its tastes and lifestyle—a “static backdrop or bounded space” that belies the fact of all sorts of comings and goings.⁴⁷ Oklahoma is an exemplar of this paradoxical view of Middle America.

With interstates 40, 44, and 35 cutting through its midsection, Oklahoma is literally a crossroads of America. So many highways make the place a point of exchange for licit and illicit dealings. Oil, gas, drugs, and people all travel on the highways or through the pipelines that converge in Oklahoma. The traffic and the trafficking flow forcefully. These actual circulatory systems give Oklahoma, hence America, a pulse—one that becomes increasingly palpable as earthquakes due to hydraulic fracturing of underground gas shoals now shake up Oklahomans’ lives on a daily basis. Yet despite all this activity, the middle of the country is seen as static.

Aware of this juxtaposition, some queer scholars have been theorizing the Midwest and the rural. They advocate “reconceptualizing a queer critical regionalism from the middle.”⁴⁸ They seek to queer the middle. Inspired by the same intellectual and political ponderings as those they spell out, I want to show how the middle is unqueered, how queer activity and queer lives get erased, disavowed, and undone in the minds and hearts of Americans. In doing so, I will use all of these terms—rural, Middle America, the Midwest—with the understanding that they are related to temporal ideas of backwardness, racial ideas that presume whiteness as a norm, and populist ideas that cherish “small-town” values even in the urban midst of a city. While certainly not interchangeable, these terms have meanings that are contingently defined in relation to one another.

Studying “rural” sexualities and “middle” spaces also highlights the contingent nature of definitions of *queer*. Early in the historiography of rural queer studies, John Howard articulated the polyvalence of the term in his *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, noting that “*queer* holds multiple meanings” that encompass references to “both acts *and* identities, behaviors *and* beings.”⁴⁹ Consequently, *queer* can serve as a synonym for *gay* when referring to someone who identifies as a homosexual or lesbian or encompass a broader range of sexual identities including bisexual, polyamorous, and transgender. In historical studies such as Howard’s, *queer* also refers to activities and desires of people who do not necessarily claim a corresponding identity. While the history of sexuality offered by canonical writers such as Michel Foucault recognizes how a homosexual identity emerged in the nineteenth century and was solidified throughout the twentieth, scholarship on rural sexualities recognizes that this discursive shift from sexual actions to sexual identity was not universal.⁵⁰ The by-now grand narrative of gay American history as a tale of migration from rural agricultural living to urban centers of industrial capitalism where same-sex interactions could flourish has not accounted for the multiplicities of queer desires and lives that do not take the name of homosexual, gay, or lesbian. Howard provides examples of this in his study of mid-twentieth-century Southern men who engage in sex with other men—what Howard refers to as “homosex”—but do not call themselves gay. Howard considers these men and their sexual desires and practices to be “queer.” Despite his limiting his study to men, Howard’s use of the word *queer* presupposes “an expansive definition that goes well beyond *homosex* to encompass all thoughts and expressions of sexuality and gender that are nonnormative or oppositional.”⁵¹

This expansive use of *queer* in the context of examining nonmetropolitan life has resulted in the “rural turn” in sexuality studies, as Colin R. Johnson calls it. His book, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*, examines the heteronormalization of sexuality and gender in the first half of the twentieth century. He explores how sexual discourses ensconced in campaigns for eugenics and sex education introduced to rural America new norms for sexual behavior and gender expression. Such norms resulted in changing attitudes toward queer individuals that people in small towns had earlier embraced as eccentrics who were included and to some extent protected as part of their community. Also, new norms introduced by way of consumer culture that brought ready-made clothes and shopping catalogs to the provinces resulted in derogatory perspective of country women whose poverty, work, or preference precluded them from conforming to an increasingly common look of femininity. Thus emerged the idea that

unfashionable women from Middle America were backward and suspect in terms of sexuality. (How can you tell the difference between a dyke and a farmer's wife? The punch line is: you can't.) Johnson's book also builds on Howard's analysis of *homosex*, providing more evidence that same-sex erotic activity among boys and men in rural America flourished, and that circulation rather than congregation enabled sexual encounters that did not necessitate claiming a sexual identity. Johnson's research shows that for itinerant workers—hoboes and tramps as well as peddlers and traveling businessmen for whom the Eisenhower interstate system opened new avenues of commerce and mobility, same-sex commingling was rather commonplace. Such research is not a nostalgic romanticization that tries to recover some incredibly prettier past and recuperate rural living from its oft-deserved reputation of being places of animosity and violence for queer folks. Johnson's contribution is, rather, to provide "a better sense of how 'rural' Americans have both shaped and been shaped by the proliferating discourse of sexuality over the course of the twentieth century."⁵²

Oklahomo clearly draws from and builds on these analyses of rural sexualities. The national heteronormalization of rural and Middle America, as Johnson shows, began in the first half of the twentieth century and became, my research suggests, an unqueering that by midcentury posited homosexuals as threats to the nation. I adopt Johnson's and Howard's usage of the terms *queer* and *homosex* in this study, even as I recognize and appreciate how other scholars' uses of *queer* have been helpful for their particular discussions. Mary Gray, for example, defines *queer* in relation to her own lived experience as a lesbian becoming politically active in the 1990s.⁵³ *Queer* at that time signified a non-assimilationist viewpoint that maintained a distinction from heterosexual culture and demanded human rights based on eliminating stigma and avoiding hierarchies of shame.⁵⁴ This activist view, which was necessary for claiming dignity and recognition from a dismissive state and hostile public during the AIDS crisis in late twentieth-century America, influenced the emerging academic field of queer theory.⁵⁵ Although queer theory became notoriously heady stuff, it corroborates the political view that nonconformity should not be punished, explores the politics of erotic life, and advocates an ethics devoid of sexual stigma. Recognizing that any sexual identity is historically and socially constructed, queer theory continues to investigate *desire* instead of positing an essential homosexuality that has always existed across cultures and centuries.⁵⁶ In the chapters that follow, then, I never use *queer* as an epithet. I sometimes use it to refer to a political critique of society that is non-assimilationist, and most often use it to describe the nonconforming, nonnormative desires that are felt by or projected onto certain individuals or sexual subcultures.

Why Oklahomo?

The title was a natural choice; the camp quality of “Oklahomo” is irresistible. It calls to mind the infectious tune and lyrics of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s beloved musical, *Oklahoma!* When I moved to the Sooner state in 2006 it took a full six months before I could read “Oklahoma” anywhere—on my driver’s license, on road signs, on university stationery—and not have the four syllables of the state’s name enter my brain as music. O-kla-HOM-a!

An award-winning 1955 film and a Broadway classic that is regularly produced across the nation, *Oklahoma!* is a love story taking place in 1906, a year before statehood. The main romance features Laurey, a farm girl, and Curly, a roaming cowboy who is reluctant to settle down and help with her farm even while his nemesis, poor Jud, is vying for Laurey’s attention. Two other heterosexual subplots intertwine and serve as foils for Laurey and Curly’s eventually triumphant love. One involves Ado Annie and Will Parker; another, Gertie Cummings and Ali Hakim. Except for Ali, a “Persian peddler,” all these characters are—in the film—played as lacking any ethnicity; they appear to be nondescript in their whiteness; they appear unmarked by race. This is a decisive departure from the 1931 play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, from which the musical was adapted, in which the transformation of Indian Territory into the state of Oklahoma entails key mentions of some characters’ “Indian blood.” Thus, as I will elaborate in chapter 2, *Oklahoma!* eclipses the problems of sexual and racial diversity by erasing the impact of settler colonialism from its presentation of land ownership and statehood.

Subverting Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* has its political uses. For instance, changing the last syllable of the title from “a” to “o,” some gay men’s choruses have reveled in the campy fun of queering one of America’s most cherished heterosexual romance stories.⁵⁷ In some ways, you could say this book also encourages a reimagining of Curly and his lover in various combinations of genders, races, sexualities, and nationalities. But such imaginings are not the endpoint of my analysis, only just the beginning. It is the unqueering of Oklahoma, which has not only been imagined but also codified and legislated, that concerns this book.

A second example of subverting *Oklahoma!* for political purposes is the powerful examination of Lynn Riggs’s own theories about what it means to be gay and Indian. Craig Womack presents Riggs’s writings more as “the internal terrain of a closeted gay man than as an actual literal rendering of Oklahoma and its people.”⁵⁸ In doing so, Womack explains how the playwright that gave us the story behind *Oklahoma!* provided ways into understanding the taciturnity of Okla-

homans about queers—and about Indians. According to Bethany Schneider, “Oklahomo theory, Womack suggests, can account for the multiply lost and silenced Indians and queers that both Oklahomas [the play and the state] violently suppress.”⁵⁹ In turn, Schneider builds on this discussion to “articulate how queerness and Indianness form a sort of tag team in their very relationality within colonialist discourse, sometimes operating together in the service of Indian dispossession.”⁶⁰ As we will see, traces of colonialist discourse, with all its historical ties to erasing Indians and queers, are detectable in Kern’s, Bryant’s, and Hargis’s attempts to unqueer Oklahoma.

A third example of queering Oklahoma brings us to a transnational dimension. After the state legislature attempted to ban Sharia law in 2010, one blogger altered the 1950s-era album cover of *Oklahoma!* by replacing the image of Curly’s girlfriend with a burka-clad woman in the iconic horse-drawn surrey.



FIGURE 1.1. “Surrey with a Lunatic Fringe on Top” examines Islamophobia in Oklahoma. Photoshopped image from Wonkette blog. Printed with permission.

The image satirized many fears, chief among them intercultural coupling that could produce supposedly undesirable offspring. Another fear was represented by the veiled woman herself: the idea that allowing Sharia law in Oklahoma courts would eventuate in a society that subordinated women via religious dogma. In a state in which women's rights are curtailed by Christian-inspired laws regarding abortion provision, sex education, and birth control options—a curtailment further demonstrated by some of the highest domestic abuse rates and *the* highest incarceration rate per capita for women *in the world*, this blogger like many residents saw the fear of reducing women's rights through Sharia law as absurdly ironic.⁶¹ The blogger reported on the hefty legal penalties (more than \$300,000) incurred by the effort to ban the Islamic legal system, which was predictably deemed unconstitutional.⁶² The blog post riffed on the lyrics from one of *Oklahoma!*'s songs to suggest that the ban of Sharia law was a legal vehicle for Islamophobic lawmakers to promote widespread suspicion of Muslims; it was a "surrey with a lunatic fringe on top."

Like these political uses of parodying the musical, the choice of *Oklahomo* as a title is not mere lampoon. The title of the book highlights the whitewashing homogenization that happened as Oklahoma became a state and as right-wing forces began to hold sway over state politics throughout the twentieth century. We can look to the Sooner state as, unfortunately, exemplifying the cultural work of erasing radical histories, homogenizing racial and sexual diversity, denying religious freedom, perpetuating Islamophobia, and promoting the gendered dynamics of a globalized labor force under the guises of "family" values and "country" virtues. We can recognize how Oklahoma politics has modeled this cultural work for others while simultaneously forging a mindset that equates homosexuality with terrorism. Conversely, we can also recognize how progressive Oklahoma people are challenging this insistence to quash diversity, demonize queers, and persist in seeing Islamic terrorists instead of white supremacist terrorists. And if we hum a little tune while we tour these attempts to unqueer America, it might connect us along the way to others in queer migration.