Introduction

WHEN THE MUSIC STOPS

It is true: we have another way of not knowing ourselves, and we speak more freely of our emotional complexes than of our material condition or of our socio-professional milieu; we prefer to ask ourselves about the homosexual component of our characters than about the history which has made us and which we have made. We too are victims and accomplices of alienation, reification, mystification. We too stagger beneath “the weight of things said and done,” of lies accepted and transmitted without belief. But we have no wish to know it. We are like sleepwalkers treading in a gutter, dreaming of our genitals rather than looking at our feet.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, Between Existentialism and Marxism

Zona Rosa, Mexico City, sometime around 2006: It is the wee hours of the morning, and my ears are ringing after a night of revelry in crowded bars and dance clubs. Ambling down narrow sidewalks, I have a flash of giddy optimism which I take for insight: The gay scene has arrived. This problematic notion of a sudden “arrival” is a recurring idea in cities of the global south, where gay scenes often developed under dictatorships or repressive conditions—as did Mexico’s—and are invariably compared, often unfavorably, to those of the global north.1

The gay scene in the Zona Rosa has “arrived” in the sense that it now outshines its rivals; it is more jubilant, more carefree, gayer, than any of the comparably staid and claustrophobic scenes in the United States or Northern Europe. It is certainly younger, in a country where the median age is twenty-five (compared to thirty-six in the United States and
forty-three in Germany at the time). Buoyed by urban density and youthful exuberance, the Zona Rosa (the “Pink Zone”) far surpasses the scale and intensity—the buzz—of Castro Street or Greenwich Village in their 1970s heydays. And unlike earlier versions of the gay scene on the same site—I had been visiting the Zona frequently since the mid-1990s—there is nothing discreet or subdued about it. “Gay Disneyland,” I call it, an expansive participatory spectacle spread out over a dozen or so compact city blocks in three dense clusters, as though the city itself, its layout and architecture, had been designed for our amusement and happiness. And even if you have no money for admission to clubs or beer in the bars, the sidewalks themselves are dappled rivers of humanity, vibrant happenings in their own right: places to chat with friends, dance, cruise, and have a lively night out.

I gush not altogether coherently to my Chilango (a slang demonym for residents of Mexico City) companion, who tries to douse my unchecked enthusiasm with some insiderly cynicism. “But what happens when the music stops?” he asks me. “You realize that virtually all these kids will go back now to sleep in their parents’ houses, right? That by day they work for low wages in call centers or offices or department stores? That this, what you see tonight, is their reprieve? Within five years, half of them will succumb to family pressures to be married.”

I express skepticism at his final surmise, which dates the speaker (just as my invocation of the Castro and Village scenes date me). There was a time when substantial numbers of Mexican men allowed themselves the indulgence of a gay youth, to be followed by a staid, publicly heterosexual adulthood. This life cycle still exists, of course, perhaps especially in conservative small towns, but it has long been viewed as “backward,” especially in big cities across Mexico where one encounters in abundance all the varieties of lifelong “modern” homosexuality (and I place both terms in eyebrow-raising quotation marks for the time being): stable middle-aged same-sex couples; durable circles of gay and lesbian friends who host parties and organize outings; clubbers, bartenders, and men who dedicate their free time to cruising in bathhouses or public places or on social media; and so on. More convincing is my interlocutor’s sense that spectacular scenes of nocturnal entertainment serve as temporary reprieves—aplastamientos, postponements. This strikes me as both sober and true.
His invocation of humdrum workaday routines at anemic wages is indisputable, and his observation about young gays’ submission to parental authority rings at least partly true.

So much for my unbridled enthusiasm for “gay [or queer] worldmaking,” a recurrent trope of the period’s LGBT studies. This bullish phrase was often applied, implausibly, to fleeting scenes, staged performances, or evanescent happenings in nightlife industries. So much, too, for my Disneyland metaphor, which works against me and my upbeat intentions—and not only because it refers to a distinctly North American consumer spectacle but also because what, after all, is Disneyland, if not an elaborate postponement, a suspension, a deferral?

Every nightlife has its opposite, a day life, for which it serves as reprieve. It is not the one thing or the other but rather the relation between them that might count as a “world.”

Here, then, are some stories, observations, and notes about how some of us live, love, work, and try to imagine our lives under prevailing conditions. I am drawing on four decades of visits and returns to a number of Mexican cities, stretched out over a period of recurrent economic crises and the country’s slow, halting, and uneven transition from dictatorship to democracy, culminating in a fifteen-year period of intermittent participant-observation fieldwork in Puebla.

I relate not just any old accounts of any old “us.” I am trying to understand how men who have sex with men live in a globally connected world that is not as brutally hostile as it was in the past but that can scarcely be deemed accepting or supportive. I am especially interested in how such men come to inhabit a gay identity—or not—and how they build networks and communities of various sorts—or not—and how they might join their lives together—or not—but I am also interested in more than that. I want to understand better what this sense of identity, community, and connection might mean for us, and how it corresponds to or clashes with other parts of our lives. With a few notable exceptions, LGBT studies has for too long edited these other parts of our lives—work, debt, economic inequality and precariousness—out of the picture, producing idealized, reified, and ultimately false versions of identity and empty narratives about sexual citizenship.
Now, I cannot help but feel that I am going against three strong currents here.

First, my use of words like *us*, *we*, and *our* will signal something of my approach from the outset. It is a gesture of coidentification that departs from standard ethnographic conventions (including theoretical frameworks I have used in the past⁵), and also from the usual rules of contemporary identity politics, which has progressively narrowed the scope of the “we,” fragmenting “us” into ever smaller intersectional blocs. The prevailing protocols respond to important truths about the lived experience of race, gender, sexuality, postcolonial condition, and so on, categories that variously “intersect” in a person’s life, no doubt, and have helped produce important insights. But they have become rigidified in academic studies, hardening into complacent assertions about one’s own tribe and its supposedly unique perspective, fast-freezing into rituals of deference about other people’s cultural property.⁶ More often than not, these rituals of recognition reduce *speech* (an individual act) to *discourse* (a fragment of ideology) to *identity* (membership in a socially defined group): “I” can only ever speak *my* identity; identity expresses itself through my words and actions. Cleaving the world into “distinct, stable territories”⁷ of *us* and *them*, these proprietary conventions tend to make us turn away from our commonalities—in this case, shared sexual, emotional, and political interests. They draw our attention to exceptional, spectacularized suffering (the holy grail of both identitarian specificity and liberal charitability) while ignoring all the ways we might share experiences, make points of contact, forge relationships, or build tacit alliances across ethnic, cultural, or class divides. We shrink the circle of the “we,” the scope of fellow feeling, down to the smallest possible triply or quadruply intersectional communities—when the times cry out for an expansive, all-peoples solidarity based on shared concerns. Or else, as gawking spectators, we reify the exquisite unfathomable alterity of the Other, imbuing it with a sacral aura, when, if anything, we ought to attend to the everydayness of others and the dialogical conversations through which we all negotiate our conjoined and overlapping meanings.

In this book, I take my cue from the way my Mexican friends and subjects typically include *me* within the circle of the “we” when we talk about gay life (“we gays,” “us homosexuals”)—although I also note, dialectically,
that they do sometimes draw a hard line against my perspectives (as an outsider, a North American, a middle-class person with comparably more resources). I try to track both of these propositions in the pages that follow. As against prevailing trends in ethnographic rubbernecking, I try to relate my friends’ and subjects’ mostly unspectacular, unexceptional suffering. To be sure, it sometimes seems that catastrophe is waiting around every corner: Some die young from the combination of grinding poverty and toxic intolerance. Others despair of ever having a decent life, stop taking their antiretrovirals, and wait for AIDS to take them. A few have been uprooted, displaced, or “disappeared” in the narcoviolence that has engulfed large portions of the country since 2006 and even now shows no sign of abating. But mostly, the people about whom I write—like most people in most places at most times—trudge on in the face of indifference and violence, managing and making do and sometimes even doing well.

In conveying my subjects’ stories, I acknowledge their creative strategies, their deep comprehension of their experiential worlds (which includes an acute awareness of tragic outcomes). At the same time, I try to reveal what still too often goes missing in ethnographic work, even after the dialogical turn in cultural theory (which construed knowledge as a give-and-take, a dynamic conversation): the conditions under which our meandering conversations took place. These were usually conditions of camaraderie, amity, affinity. The settings were typically places of “contact” (to borrow a term from Samuel R. Delany) which throw together people from different social and economic walks of life: the Zona Rosa’s sidewalks, public squares in city centers, bars, cafés, bathhouses, discotheques. Sometimes, I listen as my friends vent their frustrations over beer. Sometimes, one of us is trying to convince the other of something. I try to show these dynamics as much as possible. I try to plant my own arguments in friendship, solidarity, and accompaniment. I try to take up my dwelling in this text as I tried to make my home in Mexico over many years—mindful of differences but within the abode of commonalities.

Second, for the past thirty years, scholarly works often have eschewed use of the word “gay,” making it recede behind once-edgier labels—“queer”—or demoting it to a single grapheme in the ever-expanding acronym that it once broadly connoted: LGBTQIA+. No doubt these successive
rebrandings seemed warranted at the time, as activists and intellectuals strove for inclusiveness and sought to outrun the conformism and consumerism that threatened to overwhelm gay life, especially in its urban, middle-class sectors. The unintended result, however, has been new forms of conformism and consumerism, which apparently are not impeded by terminological innovation.

Today, queers on college campuses and in tolerant cities strike social and political poses based on resistance, nonassimilation, and an antinormative aesthetic, never quite seeing how far these outsiderly gestures are from our own middle-class experiences—or how they serve as badges of status distinction in new hierarchies based on sensibility. We gentrify long-standing commonplace sexual practices, rechristening vernacular terms with ever-more-specific hipster sexological typologies (which are often visibly marked by neoliberal sensibilities, perhaps especially references to flexibility and fluidity: “heteroflexible,” “gender-fluid”). Meanwhile, however, “gay” still remains the default aspirational signifier for large numbers of gay men, lesbians, and trans people, especially those who live outside the educated, upper-middle-class cosmopolis. Their needs and desires are not easily mapped onto the standard assimilationist–anti-assimilationist spectrum. (Working-class gays are, as often as not, puzzled by or indifferent to the distinctions parsed and arguments hatched by educated, affluent, up-to-date queers. And they do encounter the new classificatory schema; how could they not? It’s an online world everywhere, after all. But to encounter is not necessarily to assimilate.)

I will mostly use the term “gay” in preference to “queer,” in deference to my subjects’ everyday usages. I will also use de ambiente, a complex and ubiquitous term that predates local use of “gay” and, up to a certain point, has a parallel history with that term. Educated Mexican speakers, especially academics and activists, sometimes use the word “queer” in English (occasionally transcribed as cuir), though the Spanish raro might serve as a workable translation. When it comes up, I cannot help but hear the term enclosed in quotation marks, designating what the Bakhtin school calls an alien word (an elite alien word at that) not yet assimilated into everyday speech. This is no longer the case with the word “gay,” which also was imported from English but which, like “nice,” “sandwich,” “coach,” “open-minded,” and other terms, long ago settled into vernacular Spanish.
(Perhaps someday “queer” will follow suit, the quotation marks around it fading into forgetfulness. This has not yet happened.)

Third, and over a somewhat longer stretch of time, a wider spectrum of scholarship and political writing has repeatedly (and with increasing urgency) denounced the specter of something called class reductionism and implored readers not to focus exclusively (or even at all) on social class. These critiques once packed a wallop, as New Left social movements sought to shake themselves loose from Old Left orthodoxies—which were often, let us be clear, harrowingly homophobic and sometimes, yes, reductionist. This scholarly trend was most obviously associated with British cultural studies from the 1970s onward and with various American schools of writing on race, gender, and sexuality, although it also swept the academic shores of many non-Anglophone countries.

The anti–class reductionists, who were originally grounded in socialist aspirations, began by unveiling an important truth: not every form of inequality under capitalism is reducible to class. (Marx himself said as much!\textsuperscript{13}) Over time, this intellectual turn, and those of us who participated in it, strove to give specificity to those other forms of inequality, to distinguish them from class inequality—and even (sometimes) to locate their origins in epochal historical shifts. This was good and right, for who would deny that the changing institutions of race, gender, kinship, and so on demarcate “material conditions”? And what, after all, could be more “material” than sexuality? The problem is that as this decades-long intellectual movement turned into an academic cottage industry, it lost track of the difference between relations of production (which are principally class relations) and institutions of social reproduction (which cut across class lines in various ways and serve to reproduce the social order). We counterposed the least Marxist conception of Worker (understood as a moral figure rather than as a participant in relations of production) with similarly ahistorical and reified notions of Identity. We began every academic soliloquy with the ritual invocation of the standard formula: “race, gender, and sexuality are social constructs”—and then proceeded to write about these identities as though they were more real than reality itself, existing independently of the ebb and flow of social and political-economic developments. The anti-reductionists have long since ended by
contriving all manner of inventive and devious ways to close ranks around an essentially liberal conception of identity and to evade recognition of the central facts of social life under capitalism (which inevitably come down to class distinctions). These are oh-so-convenient elusions if, as now seems apparent, the aim is to build up comfortable enclaves in the neoliberal academic and foundation apparatus, pursuing an accredited and endowed version of social justice whose motto might well be: “Talk about anything except class.”

Today’s social and theoretical problems are of a different order from those of the recent past, a time when robust welfare states still blunted the impact of capitalist business cycles and tempered the ramifications of class in many people’s personal experiences. The newer conditions, which include both widening economic inequalities and waxing toleration of sexual diversity, are dramatically, though not uniquely, on display in Mexico. We live in a social world that has been remade by fifty years of New Left social movements. We understand well enough that LGBT and other identities cannot be reduced to class. Yet we often fail to fully understand that those identities, and the striving for well-being and happiness they encapsulate, are not equally available to everyone who might wish to claim them. The signs and accoutrements of gay life—a certain manner of dress, a fun night out at the clubs, followed by Sunday brunch and banter informed by the sort of cultural capital described in David Halperin’s witty and mischievous How to Be Gay—exceed the reach of many (perhaps most) aspirants, and not only in Mexico. (The phrase “and not only in Mexico” will be a recurring refrain of this book, which concerns global processes and tendencies.)

And this is precisely where class comes back into the picture: we can scarcely understand what brings us joy or pain, what aspirations we take on or shun in the pursuit of happiness, without also taking into account the material conditions of our existence. These material conditions are the ground or purchase for our strivings, which begin with the struggle for our daily bread; they assert a gravitational pull on our lofty aspirations no less than on our basic wants and needs. They principally involve what Marxists call “the class character of society.”

This book is an inquiry into the material foundations of sexual identity.
What we talk about when we talk about class is not always clear. Informally, we use the term “class” loosely, generically, to refer to income, educational level, the possession or not of personal property (such as a house or a small plot of land), and so on. A more disciplined approach emerges if we follow Marx’s understanding of class as one’s relation to productive, profit-making property (such as a factory, business, or corporation). In the Marxist accounting, class is not a status or a state, much less an identity, but a relation; it is nonetheless an objective situation, ineluctably structured by productive and social forces.

More formally, we also talk about overlapping (“intersectional”) identities, or we refer to experiences with conjugated forms of oppression and personal domination. On this point, much of the political and scholarly literature is less disciplined than its authors imagine—as though simply indicating that subaltern women are “doubly in shadow” or pointing to the overlapping forms of oppression that queers of color undeniably face (especially if they also happen to be queers without money) could in itself give us much traction on anything other than the barest of facts. Too often, one imagines an accountant conducting an audit, tallying up identities on an old-style adding machine, with each entry registering a distinct tintinnabulation. It understates matters to say that much of this literature effaces the class character of the experiences it relates. Class appears, if at all, as the least compelling of an intersected subject’s experiences of inequality. And when it does appear, confusions abound over even the most basic points. For instance, when Martin Manalansan IV claims that “class issues . . . are subordinated to the immigrant experience” for his subjects, he seems to treat class as though it were a durable personal trait. But what his own evidence actually shows is that his educated and credentialed middle-class informants have been proletarianized, pushed into menial jobs in the immigrant experience. It is not that migration weighs more than class in the balance of discrete objects of analysis, but that immigration clarifies the salience of class.

This book affirms a different understanding of class, beginning with its connection to political economy. Exploitation is the central fact of capitalism, which cannot exist and reproduce itself unless it extracts a profit—that is to say, pays laborers less than the value of the commodities they produce. This dynamic—which tears something out of the worker, namely,
effort, attention, activity, time—defines class not as an abstract category or identity but as an antagonism. This means that classes come into existence only in and through their struggles over wages, working conditions, the length of the workday, and so on, as Marx showed. It also means that class is the necessary and ineluctable form of social inequality under capitalism, which progressively resolves the class structure into a small class of owners (or stockholders) who seek profits and a very large class of non-owners who effectively have nothing except their own labor to sell in the marketplace. In countries like Mexico or the United States, the vast majority are workers.

It matters not what kind of industry or private enterprise is involved; waiters, salesclerks, and call center employees are workers no less than factory workers—and sometimes they labor under worse conditions, as the reader will see. Early on, Siegfried Kracauer spotted these truths about the so-called new middle classes in his 1929 ethnography, The Salaried Masses. It matters, but only a little, whether the worker is directly employed or labors on a small farm to give over the sweat of his brow to the real owners of capital: lenders, banks, grain companies. This, too, was clear enough to late-nineteenth-century populist and socialist movements. For their part, the actual middle classes—who derive their incomes from small properties, or from licenses or credentials, or from managing other people's property—are always under pressure from above and below. From above, they are under constant threat of liquidation and proletarianization. From below, they are hard-pressed by the needs and demands of employees.

The sad fact is that class remains the dirty secret of gay life, and it is seldom expressly treated in LGBT studies. This is perhaps especially true of the field's queer theory variants, and this has been by design, not oversight. Opening with the line, “What do queers want?” Michael Warner expressly read class perspectives out of the field in his introduction to the influential collection Fear of a Queer Planet. “Class,” he writes, “is conspicuously useless . . . unintelligible” for queer theorizations of the social. Warner only gave explicit expression to an injunction that others were already implicitly following. And over thirty years, queer theory mostly heeded Warner’s counsel, though a few have sometimes claimed the man-
tle of “materialism” to launch abstract notions that scrupulously avoid the nitty-gritty of economic inequalities.  

“Class is barely indexed in most Queer Studies scholarship,” writes Matt Brim in a timely new book. There have been notable exceptions to this trend, of course. Brim rightly pays homage to the nonacademic community historian Allan Bérubé. Kath Weston always seems to have her eye on social class in the experiences of black, brown, and white LGBT people, and George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* comes prominently to mind, with its close attention to class dynamics in the formation of gay communities. In *Sexual Hegemony*, Christopher Chitty attempted to correlate the regulation of same-sex relations over the long development of the world system with crises of capital accumulation and how these have resonated in class relations. But perhaps a more significant thematic exception to the rule is Didier Eribon’s *Returning to Reims*, an autoethnographic reflection on the author’s early life in a French working-class slum and how his sense of gay pride aligned with a sense of class shame. “It doesn’t seem exaggerated to assert,” Eribon writes, “that my coming out of the sexual closet, my desire to assume and assert my homosexuality, coincided within my personal trajectory with my shutting myself up inside what I might call a class closet.” Édouard Louis covers similar ground in his novel, *The End of Eddy*, an unflinching depiction of class violence that, like Eribon’s *Returning*, also serves as an indictment of the French Socialist Party’s progressive abandonment of the working poor. There are problems with these accounts, which treat class suspiciously like an identity or subculture and pay less attention to political-economic factors than one might hope. But France’s gay intellectuals still care about class, even if their neoliberal governments do not; they understand that being poor, being lower-working-class, exposes you to the most brutal and unrelenting forms of homophobia. Their accounts also remind us that “being working class isn’t just defined in terms of wages and economic indicators: it means that beauty has been stolen from your life,” as Italian novelist Alberto Prunetti eloquently put it.

Mexicans know this as well and are quite explicit about it. Mexican and binational scholars make frequent recourse to depictions of class conditions and class dynamics in their analyses of gayness—typically in combination with other factors, to be sure, but without making class disappear.
behind the other factors. Thus, for example, Víctor Macías-González keeps a close eye on class dynamics in the development and repression of mid-twentieth-century gay nightlife in Mexico City. In *Pathways of Desire*, Héctor Carrillo shows how his migrant subjects’ understandings of sexuality were shaped in no small part by their “geographic location” and “social class position.” Guillermo Núñez Noriega examines economic inequality in his study of identity and intimacy in rural northern Mexico, suggesting at the outset that the idea of a “gay world” “does not always offer a comfortable fit with class and ethnic experiences.” And in a work that attends to how class placement affects the understandings, experiences, and possibilities of gay existence in Mexico City, Mauricio List Reyes glances at the cruelties of subcultural life in a biting remark: “But we must be realistic: even among gay sectors there is intolerance and rejection, mainly due to social class and age.”

The effects of social class on sexual cultures are not always foregrounded in the Mexican literature; class is not always given its full due. But it is not a dirty secret, either. Americans have largely forgotten all of this, if they ever really knew any of it. Of course, some American scholars on the cultural studies Left do write the word “class” from time to time, typically embedded as an afterthought in a string of references to other forms of social inequality—“race, gender, sexuality, class”—but it’s clear that they don’t really mean it when they say the word and often don’t even understand what it means: they see class basically as an effect of discrimination (“classism,” a term introduced by Audre Lorde early on in the development of identity politics) and not as the form that social relations inevitably take under the inexorable dynamics of capitalist production and circulation. Or else, in typical American style, they conflate class with one of its manifestations, poverty, conceptually aligning the bulk of ordinary working-class people with elites in the moral drama of rich versus poor.

So far I have laid out a straightforward narrative, but I am not naïve about the complexities involved in social class. People experience greater or—more often—lesser forms of social mobility under modern class systems. Any given person’s location in the class system thus might be unstable, transitory, in flux. Inequalities also exist within the working class. Some sectors of the labor force are better remunerated, enjoy more perquisites,
or have more job security than others. This, their success at claiming a bigger chunk of the value they produce and asserting some control over their working conditions, nuances the question of nonownership but does not thereby transform workers into owners.

Then there are what Max Weber called “status” distinctions, which flow from one’s relation to consumption as opposed to production. Through dress, dwelling, and myriad acts, I affect a “style of life”: I display my education, my respectability or lack thereof; I adhere to an ethnic group; I claim higher or lower standing. Gay subcultures have always planted themselves here, more or less, where the circuits of consumption define identity.

But not all inequalities under capitalism are of a strictly economic nature (production, consumption). Gender inequality, as Friedrich Engels realized, predates the capitalist mode of production and is rooted in the institutions of family and kinship, that is, in the mode of social reproduction. This material site is also where homophobia comes into the picture: in modern industrial societies, the prohibition or devaluation of same-sex relationships has played an important role in regulating gender norms, structuring personal life, and consolidating the institutions of social reproduction.

Some inequalities are closely related to but not quite reducible to class; some are “holdovers” from precapitalist relations of production, subsequently assimilated into the capitalist system. Thus, when Marx wrote about the enclosure acts, conquest, colonialism, and slavery, he glossed these varied “takings” under the term “primitive accumulation,” which he contrasted with the usual regime of capitalist accumulation: the former acts of theft and plunder predate or lie outside the economic system of capitalism proper, which extracts wealth as profits in the production and circulation of commodities. But it turns out that what is “primitive” about primitive accumulation is never finished once and for all and consigned to the past; instead, capitalist planners make recourse to looting, plunder, and other forms of brute expropriation whenever the circuits of capital are obstructed, whenever the system is in crisis.

Capitalism as a social system also makes recourse to forms of coercion that augment and secure class exploitation, some of which derive from conditions of primitive accumulation. Thus, in writing about the Irish
question, Marx observed that it benefits capitalists to maintain that one sector of the working class is inferior to the other, to pay members of that sector less, and to stoke ethnic, racial, and national divisions among the proletariat. He likened the status of the Irish worker in England to that of African Americans in the former slave states of the United States. It goes without saying, then, that the history of conquest, colonialism, and slavery and, with it, the invention of racism and race form an important part of the history of global capitalism and the development of modern institutions. The implications of these histories unfold in different, conflicting, and changing ways at different moments.

All of these and other sorts of complication come into play in Mexico, where everyday insults and ascriptions refer to uncultured taste (a status distinction closely linked to gauges of class privilege), to homosexuality (specifically promiscuous, passive-role, lower-class homosexuality)—and perhaps especially to skin color and rural origins, typically in a condensed manner: having a rural or small-town background is tantamount to indigeneity; having dark skin and indigenous features implies rural roots in manual labor. But if there are good reasons to take into account how the history of colonial conquest and systems of race, caste, or ethnic domination have shaped the making of the Mexican working class, or to take stock of the way society still distinguishes intellectual from manual labor, masculine from feminine actions, light-colored from dark-colored skin, and so on, there are better reasons for distinguishing central from contingent facts of the present-day system—and for taking into account some of the contradictory ways peoples’ lives play out among these intractable facts. The total situation of working-class people today depends on the meshing and crosshatching of all these factors, but the elements are not equally weighted.

This book, then, is a sustained argument about the strong draw of class on gay life in Mexico—and by extension in other places as well. It queries the ongoing antinomies of globalization, especially as these are involved with both a rising tide of economic inequality and the spread of LGBT sexual identity formations. It also asks: How do different modalities of inequality and identity hang together, “articulate,” under changing regimes of modern capitalism?
The work unfolds in two parts. The first part seeks to understand how commonplace crises and predicaments play out in the lives of gay men, specifically around the question of coming out: to be, or not to be, gay? The first chapter provides a quick first immersion in the section’s themes and problems as seen through the experiences of “Erik,” a young working-class man from one of the pueblos (villages, towns) clustered on the outskirts of the city of Puebla. (Names and identifying traits have been changed throughout.) Erik arrives at his “moment of truth” when same-sex desires come into direct conflict with religious beliefs and intense family pressures to marry—at a propitious moment when he and his family are caught up in economic catastrophe. His approach is illustrative of how working-class people often deal with similar climacterics. He neither embraces the public mantle of gay pride nor retreats from gay life, he neither comes out nor remains in the closet. The second chapter is an interlude, not much longer than a title card in a silent film. It sketches an approach to the themes emergent in Erik's life and anticipates ideas to be tracked in subsequent chapters: Identity is essentially a type of story. Specifically, it is a “modern” story, by which we learn to live our lives.

Chapter 3 expands and deepens the themes broached in the first two chapters, giving up-close looks and fleeting glances at some of the ways some (more than a dozen) of my (mostly) working-class gay subjects’ lives have played out over decades up until now. How have they resolved, or not, the inevitable crises of identity? What are some of the ways they have plotted their life stories between the rock of scarcity and the hard place of intolerance? How do storylines about modernity and self-possession work out for people of different upbringings, dispositions, and temperaments from different sections of the working class? If I have done my work in this, the book’s longest chapter, the reader will get a sense of the tension between freedom and constraint, self-possession and privation, in the different paths working-class people take on life’s journey. The fourth chapter briskly sketches some of my own coming-out experiences to suggest that my informants’ life crises are commonplace occurrences in a globalizing world. Chapter 5 then concludes this self-enclosed first part. Contrasting my subjects’ life histories with long-standing sociological models, it shows not that “class explains everything” nor that the working class is simply more culturally conservative than the middle or upper