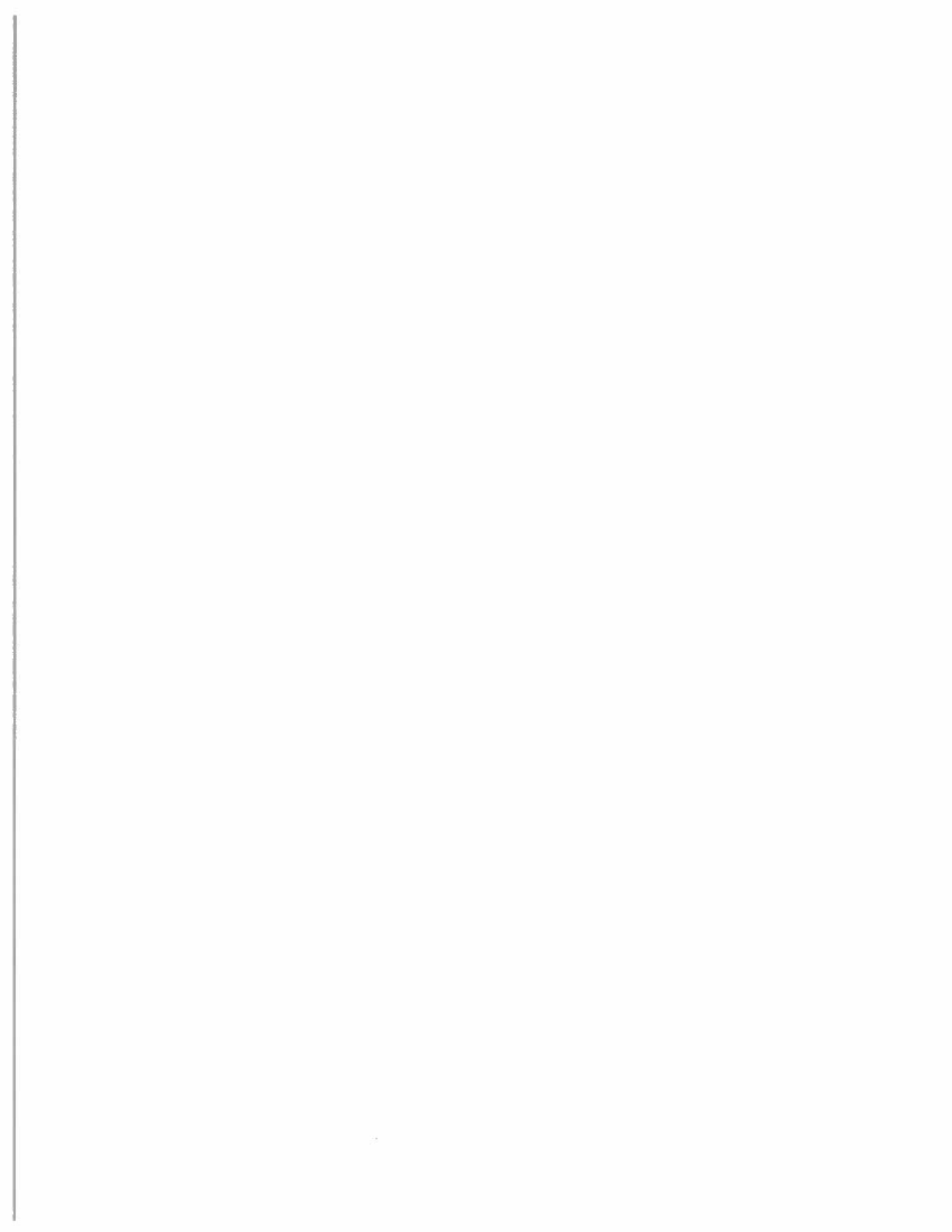


**The Routledge Queer
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Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

QUEER AND NOW

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was a pioneering voice in the field of queer theory whose influential publications include *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and *Tendencies* (1993), from which this chapter is taken. Additionally, Sedgwick published works of creative nonfiction and poetry: *Fat Art, Thin Art* (1994) and *A Dialogue on Love* (1999). Prior to her death in 2009, she taught graduate courses in English as Distinguished Professor at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

In "Queer and Now," Sedgwick vigorously argues against monolithic understandings of sexuality that presume sexual identity as a static identity category. In doing so, she offers several definitions of "queer," the first of which works to destabilize "common sense" approaches to sexual identity. Additionally, she notes that queer can refer to work that is not subsumed solely under gender and sexuality and explores intersectional uses of the term that acknowledge ethnicity, race and postcolonial nationalisms in relation to gender and sexual identity. Further, in a turn toward the autobiographical, Sedgwick recounts her experience with breast cancer in relation to the AIDS crisis in the early 1990s. Sedgwick asserts that both breast cancer and AIDS share a similar "discursive epistemology" in regards to discourses of "outness," which can lead to a transformative politics that draws attention to illnesses marked by gender and/or sexuality within public health discourse.

A motive

I THINK EVERYONE WHO does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents. To us, the hard statistics come easily: that queer teenagers are two to three times likelier to attempt suicide, and to accomplish it, than others; that up to 30 percent of teen suicides are likely to be gay or lesbian; that a third of lesbian and gay teenagers say they have attempted suicide; that minority queer adolescents are at even more extreme risk.¹

The knowledge is indelible, but not astonishing, to anyone with a reason to be attuned to the profligate way this culture has of denying and despoiling queer energies and lives.

I look at my adult friends and colleagues doing lesbian and gay work, and I feel that the survival of each one is a miracle. Everyone who survived has stories about how it was done

—an outgrown anguish
 Remembered, as the Mile
 Our panting Ankle barely passed—
 When Night devoured the Road—
 But we—stood whispering in the House—
 And all we said—was "Saved"!

(as Dickinson has it).² How to tell kids who are supposed never to learn this, that, farther along, the road widens and the air brightens; that in the big world there are worlds where it's plausible, our demand to *get used to it*.

Epistemologies

I've heard of many people who claim they'd as soon their children were dead as gay. What it took me a long time to believe is that these people are saying no more than the truth. They even speak for others too delicate to use the cruel words. For there is all the evidence. The preponderance of school systems, public and parochial, where teachers are fired, routinely, for so much as intimating the right to existence of queer people, desires, activities, children. The routine denial to sexually active adolescents, straight *and* gay, of the things they need—intelligible information, support and respect, condoms—to protect themselves from HIV transmission. (As a policy aimed at punishing young gay people with death, this one is working in San Francisco for instance, as many as 34 percent of the gay men under twenty-five being tested—and 54 percent of the young black gay men—are now HIV infected.)³ The systematic separation of children from queer adults; their systematic segregation from the truth about the lives, culture, and sustaining relations of adults they know who may be queer. The complicity of parents, of teachers, of clergy, even of the mental health professions in invalidating and hounding kids who show gender-dissident tastes, behavior, body language. In one survey 26 percent of young gay men had been forced to leave home because of conflicts with parents over their sexual identity;⁴ another report concludes that young gays and lesbians, many of them throwaways, comprise as many as a quarter of all homeless youth in the United States.⁵ And adults' systematic denial of these truths to ourselves. The statistics on the triple incidence of suicide among lesbian and gay adolescents come from a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 1989; under congressional pressure, recommendations based on this section of the report were never released. Under the threat of congressional pressure, support for all research on sexuality suddenly (in the fall of 1991) dries up. Seemingly, this society wants its children to know nothing; wants its queer children to conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die; and wants not to know that it is getting what it wants.

Fromising, smuggling, reading, overreading

This history makes its mark on what, individually, we are and do. One set of effects turns up in the irreducible multilayeredness and multiphaseness of what queer survival means—since being a survivor on this scene is a matter of surviving *into* threat, stigma, the spiraling violence of gay- and lesbian-bashing, and (in the AIDS emergency) the omnipresence of

somatic fear and wrenching loss. It is also to have survived into a moment of unprecedented cultural richness, cohesion, and assertiveness for many lesbian and gay adults. Survivors' guilt, survivors' glee, even survivors' responsibility: powerfully as these are experienced, they are also more than complicated by how permeable the identity "survivor" must be to the undiminishing currents of risk, illness, mourning, and defiance.

Thus I'm uncomfortable generalizing about people who do queer writing and teaching, even within literature; but some effects do seem widespread. I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged.

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love. This can't help coloring the adult relation to cultural texts and objects; in fact, it's almost hard for me to imagine another way of coming to care enough about literature to give a lifetime to it. The demands on both the text and the reader from so intent an attachment can be multiple, even paradoxical. For me, a kind of formalism, a visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for, at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme, was one way of trying to appropriate what seemed the numinous and resistant power of the chosen objects. Education made it easy to accumulate tools for this particular formalist project, because the texts that magnetized me happened to be novels and poems; it's impressed me deeply the way others of my generation and since seem to have invented for themselves, in the spontaneity of great need, the tools for a formalist apprehension of other less prestigious, more ubiquitous kinds of text: genre movies, advertising, comic strips.

For me, this strong formalist investment didn't imply (as formalism is generally taken to imply) an evacuation of interest from the passionate, the imagistic, the ethical dimensions of the texts, but quite the contrary: the need I brought to books and poems was hardly to be circumscribed, and I felt I knew I would have to struggle to wrest from them sustaining news of the world, ideas, myself, and (in various senses) my kind. The reading practice founded on such basic demands and intuitions had necessarily to run against the grain of the most patent available formulae for young people's reading and life—against the grain, often, of the most accessible voices even in the texts themselves. At any rate, becoming a perverse reader was never a matter of my condescension to texts, rather of the surplus charge of my trust in them to remain powerful, refractory, and exemplary. And this doesn't seem an unusual way for ardent reading to function in relation to queer experience.

White nights

The first lesbian and gay studies class I taught was in the English Department at Amherst College in 1986. I thought I knew which five or six students (mostly queer) would show up, and I designed the course, with them in mind, as a seminar that would meet one evening a week, at my house. The first evening sixty-five students showed up—a majority of them, straight-identified.

Having taught a number of these courses by now, I know enough to expect to lose plenty of sleep over each of them. The level of accumulated urgency, the immediacy of the demand

that students bring to them, is jolting. In most of their courses students have, unfortunately, learned to relinquish the expectation that the course material will address them where they live and with material they can hold palpably accountable: in gay/lesbian courses, though, such expectations seem to rebound, clamorous and unchastened, in all their rawness. Especially considering the history of denegation that most queer students bring with them to college, the vitality of their demand is a precious resource. Most often during a semester everyone will spend some time angry at everybody else. It doesn't surprise me when straight and gay students, or women and men students, or religious and nonreligious students have bones to pick with each other or with me. What has surprised me more is how divisive issues of methodology and disciplinary are: the single most controversial thing in several undergraduate classes has been that *they were literature courses*, that the path to every issue we discussed simply had to take the arduous detour through textual interpretation.

Furthermore, it was instructive to me in that class at Amherst that a great many students, students who defined themselves as nongay, were incensed when (in an interview in the student newspaper) I told the story of the course's genesis. What outraged them was the mere notation that I had designed the course envisioning an enrollment of mostly lesbian and gay students. Their sense of entitlement as straight-defined students was so strong that they considered it an inalienable right to have all kinds of different lives, histories, cultures provided as if anthropologically in formats specially designed—from the ground up—for maximum legibility to themselves: they felt they shouldn't so much as have to slow down the Mercedes to read the historical markers on the battlefield. That it was a field where the actual survival of other people in the class might at the very moment be at stake—where, indeed, in a variety of ways so might their own be—was hard to make notable to them among the permitted assumptions of their liberal arts education. Yet the same education was being used so differently by students who brought to it sharper needs, more supple epistemological frameworks.

Christmas effects

What's "queer"? Here's one train of thought about it. The depressing thing about the Christmas season— isn't it?—is that it's the time when all the institutions are speaking with one voice. The Church says what the Church says. But the State says the same thing: maybe not (in some ways it hardly matters) in the language of theology, but in the language of the State talks: legal holidays, long school hiatus, special postage stamps, and all. And the language of commerce more than chimes in, as consumer purchasing is organized ever more narrowly around the final weeks of the calendar year, the Dow Jones aquiver over Americans' "holiday mood." The media, in turn, fall in triumphally behind the Christmas phalanx: ad-swollen magazines have oozing turkeys on the cover, while for the news industry every question turns into the Christmas question—Will hostages be freed for Christmas? What did that flash flood or mass murder (empty-wump people killed and maimed) do to those families' Christmas? And meanwhile, the pairing "families/Christmas" becomes increasingly tautological, as families more and more constitute themselves according to the schedule, and in the endlessly iterated image, of the holiday itself constituted in the image of "the" family.

The thing hasn't, finally, so much to do with propaganda for Christianity as with propaganda for Christmas itself. They all—religion, state, capital, ideology, domesticity, the discourses of power and legitimacy—line up with each other so nearly once a year, and the monolith so created is a thing one can come to view with unhappy eyes. What if instead there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other? What if the richest junctures weren't the ones where everything means the

same thing? Think of that entity "the family," an impacted social space in which all of the following are meant to line up perfectly with each other:

- a surname
- a sexual dyad
- a legal unit based on state-regulated marriage
- a circuit of blood relationships
- a system of companionship and succor
- a building
- a proscenium between "private" and "public"
- an economic unit of earning and taxation
- the prime site of economic consumption
- the prime site of cultural consumption
- a mechanism to produce, care for, and acculturate children
- a mechanism for accumulating material goods over several generations
- a daily routine
- a unit in a community of worship
- a site of patriotic formation

and of course the list could go on. Looking at my own life, I see that—probably like most people—I have valued and pursued these various elements of family identity to quite differing degrees (e.g., no use at all for worship, much need of companionship). But what's been consistent in this particular life is an interest in *not* letting very many of these dimensions line up directly with each other at one time. I see it's been a ruling intuition for me that the most productive strategy (intellectually, emotionally) might be, whenever possible, to *disarticulate* them one from another, to *disengage* them—the bonds of blood, of law, of habitation, of privacy, of companionship and succor—from the lockstep of their unanimity in the system called "family."

Or think of all the elements that are condensed in the notion of sexual identity, something that the common sense of our time presents as a unitary category. Yet, exerting any pressure at all on "sexual identity," you see that its elements include

- your biological (e.g., chromosomal) sex, male or female;
- your self-perceived gender assignment, male or female (supposed to be the same as your biological sex);
- the preponderance of your traits of personality and appearance, masculine or feminine (supposed to correspond to your sex and gender);
- the biological sex of your preferred partner;
- the gender assignment of your preferred partner (supposed to be the same as her/his biological sex);
- the masculinity or femininity of your preferred partner (supposed to be the opposite⁶ of your own);
- your self-perception as gay or straight (supposed to correspond to whether your preferred partner is your sex or the opposite);
- your preferred partner's self-perception as gay or straight (supposed to be the same as yours);
- your procreative choice (supposed to be yes if straight, no if gay);
- your preferred sexual act(s) (supposed to be insertive if you are male or masculine, receptive if you are female or feminine);
- your most eroticized sexual organs (supposed to correspond to the procreative capabilities of your sex, and to your insertive/receptive assignment);

your sexual fantasies (supposed to be highly congruent with your sexual practice, but stronger in intensity);
your main locus of emotional bonds (supposed to reside in your preferred sexual partner);
your enjoyment of power in sexual relations (supposed to be low if you are female or feminine, high if male or masculine);
the people from whom you learn about your own gender and sex (supposed to correspond to yourself in both respects);
your community of cultural and political identification (supposed to correspond to your own identity);

and—again—many more. Even this list is remarkable for the silent presumptions it has to make about a given person's sexuality, presumptions that are true only to varying degrees, and for many people not true at all: that everyone "has a sexuality," for instance, and that it is implicated with each person's sense of overall identity in similar ways; that each person's most characteristic erotic expression will be oriented toward another person and not autoerotic; that if it is autoerotic, it will be oriented toward a single partner or kind of partner at a time; that its orientation will not change over time. "Normatively, as the parenthetical prescriptions in the list above suggest, it should be possible to deduce anybody's entire set of specs from the initial datum of biological sex alone—if one adds only the normative assumption that "the biological sex of your preferred partner" will be the opposite of one's own. With or without that heterosexual assumption, though, what's striking is the number and *difference* of the dimensions that "sexual identity" is supposed to organize into a seamless and univocal whole. And if it doesn't?

That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. The expertimental, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunts, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or . . . people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.

Again, "queer" can mean something different: a lot of the way I have used it so far in this dossier is to denote, almost simply, same-sex sexual object choice, lesbian or gay, whether or not it is organized around multiple criss-crossings of definitional lines. And given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term's definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself.

At the same time, a lot of the most exciting recent work around "queer" spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes "queer"—I think of an Isaac Julien, a Gloria Anzaldúa, a Richard Fung—are using the leverage of "queer" to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state. Thereby, the gravity (I mean the *gravitas*, the meaning, but also the *center of gravity*) of the term "queer" itself deepens and shifts. Another telling representational effect. A word so fraught as "queer" is—fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement—never can

only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. Anyone's use of "queer" about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else. This is true (as it might also be true of "lesbian" or "gay") because of the violently different connotative evaluations that seem to cluster around the category. But "gay" and "lesbian" still present themselves (however delusively) as objective, empirical categories governed by empirical rules of evidence (however contested). "Queer" seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation. A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which "queer" can signify only *when attached to the first person*. One possible corollary: that what it takes—all it takes—to make the description "queer" a true one is the impulsion *to use it in the first person*.

Current: project 1

The Golden Bowl, J. L. Austin, *Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book*, and Mme de Sévigné are stacked up, open-faced, on the chair opposite me as I write. I've got three projects braiding and unbraiding in my mind; the essays in this book mark, in different ways, their convergent and divergent progress. I see them as an impetus into future work as well.

Project 1—most of the essays in this book [*Tendencies*] embody it—is about desires and identifications that move across gender lines, including the desires of men for women and of women for men. In that sense, self-evidently, heterosexuality is one of the project's subjects. But the essays are queer ones. Their angle of approach is directed, not at reconfirming the self-evidence and "naturalness" of heterosexual identity and desire, but rather at rendering those culturally central, apparently monolithic constructions newly accessible to analysis and interrogation.

The project is difficult partly because of the asymmetries between the speech relations surrounding heterosexuality and homosexuality. As Michel Foucault argues, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe,

Of course, the array of practices and pleasures continued to be referred to [heterosexual monogamy] as their internal standard; but it was spoken of less and less, or in any case with a growing moderation. Efforts to find out its secrets were abandoned; nothing further was demanded of it than to define itself from day to day. The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had a right to more discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps, but quieter

Although not without delay and equivocation, the natural laws of matrimony and the immanent rules of sexuality began to be recorded on two separate registers.⁸

Thus, if we are receptive to Foucault's understanding of modern sexuality as the most intensive site of the demand for, and detection or discursive production of, the Truth of individual identity, it seems as though this silent, normative, uninterrogated "regular" heterosexuality may not function as a sexuality at all. Think of how a culturally central concept like public/private is organized so as to preserve for heterosexuality the unproblematicness, the apparent naturalness, of its *discretionary* choice between display and concealment: "public" names the space where cross-sex couples *may*, whenever they feel like it, display affection freely, while same-sex couples *must* always conceal it; while "privacy," to the degree that it is a right codified in U.S. law, has historically been centered on the protection-from-scrutiny of

the married, cross-sex couple, a scrutiny to which (since the 1986 decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*) same-sex relations on the other hand are unbendingly subject. Thus, heterosexual-ality is consolidated as the *opposite* of the "sex" whose secret, Foucault says, "the obligation to conceal . . . was but another aspect of the duty to admit to."⁹ To the degree that heterosexual-ality does not function as a sexuality, however, there are stubborn barriers to making it accountable, to making it so much as visible, in the framework of projects of historicizing and hence denaturalizing sexuality. The making historically visible of heterosexuality is difficult because, under its institutional pseudonyms such as Inheritance, Marriage, Dynasty, Family, Domesticity, and Population, heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade so fully as History itself—when it has not presented itself as the totality of Romance.

Project 2

Here I'm at a much earlier stage, busy with the negotiations involved in defining a new topic in a usable, heuristically productive way; it is still a series of hunches and overlaps; its working name is Queer Performativity. You can see the preoccupations that fuel the project already at work throughout *Epistemology of the Closet* as well as *Tenderness*, but I expect it to be the work of a next book to arrive at broadly usable formulations about them. Like a lot of theorists right now (Judith Butler and her important book *Gender Trouble* can, perhaps, stand in for a lot of the rest of us), I'm interested in the implications for gender and sexuality of a tradition of philosophical thought concerning certain utterances that do not merely describe, but actually perform the actions they name: "I accuse"; "Be it resolved . . ."; "I thee wed"; "I apologize"; "I dare you." Discussions of linguistic performativity have become a place to reflect on ways in which language really can be said to produce effects: effects of identity, enforcement, seduction, challenge.¹⁰ They also deal with how powerfully language *positions*: does it change the way we understand meaning, for instance, if the semantic force of a word like "queer" is so different in a first-person from what it is in a second- or third-person sentence?

My sense is that, in a span of thought that arches at least from Plato to Foucault, there are some distinctive linkages to be traced between linguistic performativity and histories of same-sex desire. I want to go further with an argument implicit in *Epistemology of the Closet*: that both the act of coming out, and closedness itself, can be taken as dramatizing certain features of linguistic performativity in ways that have broadly applicable implications. Among the striking aspects of considering closedness in this framework, for instance, is that the speech act in question is a series of silences! I'm the more eager to think about performativity, too, because it may offer some ways of describing what *critical* writing can effect (promising? smuggling?): anything that offers to make this genre more acute and expert-mental, less numb to itself, is a welcome prospect.

Project 3

This project involves thinking and writing about something that's actually structured a lot of my daily life over the past year. Early in 1991 I was diagnosed, quite unexpectedly, with a breast cancer that had already spread to my lymph system, and the experiences of diagnosis, surgery, chemotherapy, and so forth, while draining and scary, have also proven just sheeily *interesting* with respect to exactly the issues of gender, sexuality, and identity formation that were already on my docket. (Forget the literal-mindedness of mastectomy, chemically induced menopause, etc.: I would warmly encourage anyone interested in the social construction of

gender to find some way of spending half a year or so as a totally bald woman.) As a general principle, I don't like the idea of "applying" theoretical models to particular situations or texts—it's always more interesting when the pressure of application goes in both directions—but all the same it's hard not to think of this continuing experience as, among other things, an adventure in applied deconstruction.¹¹ How could I have arrived at a more efficient demonstration of the instability of the supposed oppositions that structure an experience of the "self"?—the part and the whole (when cancer so dramatically corrodes that distinction); safety and danger (when fewer than half of the women diagnosed with breast cancer display any of the statistically defined "risk factors" for the disease); fear and hope (when I feel—I've got a quarterly physical coming up—so much less prepared to deal with the news that a lump or rash *isn't* a metastasis than that it is); past and future (when a person anticipating the possibility of death, and the people who care for her, occupy temporalities that more and more radically diverge); thought and act (the words in my head are aswirl with fatalism, but at the gym I'm striding treadmills and lifting weights); or the natural and the technological (what with the exoskeleton of the bone scan machine, the uncanny appendage of the IV drip, the bionic implant of the Port-a cath, all in the service of imaging and recovering my "natural" healthy body in the face of its spontaneous and endogenous threat against itself). Problematics of undecidability present themselves in a new, unfacile way with a disease whose very *best* outcome—since breast cancer doesn't respect the five-year statute of limitations that constitutes cure for some other cancers—will be decades and decades of free-fall interpretive panic.

Part of what I want to see, though, is what's to be learned from turning this experience of dealing with cancer, in all its (and my) marked historical specificity, and with all the uncircumscribability of the turbulence and threat involved, back toward a confrontation with the theoretical models that have helped me make sense of the world so far. The phenomenology of life-threatening illness; the performativity of a life threatened, relatively early on, by illness; the recent crystallization of a politics explicitly oriented around grave illness: exploring these connections *has* (at least for me it has) to mean hurling my energies outward to inhabit the very farthest of the loose ends where representation, identity, gender, sexuality, and the body can't be made to line up neatly together.

It's probably not surprising that gender is so strongly, so multiply valenced in the experience of breast cancer today. Received wisdom has it that being a breast cancer patient, even while it is supposed to pose unique challenges to one's sense of "femininity," nonetheless plunges one into an experience of almost archetypal Femaleness. Judith Frank is the friend whom I like to think of as Betty Ford to my Happy Rockefeller—the friend, that is, whose decision to be public about her own breast cancer diagnosis impelled me to the doctor with my worrisome lump; she and her lover, Sasha Torres, are only two of many women who have made this experience survivable for me: *compañeras*, friends, advisors, visitors, students, lovers, correspondents, relatives, caregivers (these being anything but discrete categories). Some of these are indeed people I have come to love in feminist- and/or lesbian-defined contexts; beyond that, a lot of the knowledge and skills that keep making these women's support so beautifully apropos derive from distinctive feminist, lesbian, and women's histories. (I'd single out, in this connection, the contributions of the women's health movement of the 70s—its trenchant analyses, its grass-roots and antiracist politics, its publications,¹² the attitudes and institutions it built and some of the careers it seems to have inspired.)

At the same time, though, another kind of identification was plaited inextricably across this one—not just for me, but for others of the women I have been close to as well. Probably my own most formative influence from a quite early age has been a viscerally intense, highly speculative (not to say inventive) cross-identification with gay men and gay male cultures as I inferred, imagined, and later came to know them. It wouldn't have required quite so overdetermined a trajectory, though, for almost any forty-year-old facing a protracted,

life-threatening illness in 1991 to realize that the people with whom she had perhaps most in common, and from whom she might well have most to learn, are people living with AIDS. AIDS activists, and others whose lives had been profoundly reorganized by AIDS in the course of the 1980s.

As, indeed, had been my own life and those of most of the people closest to me. "Why me?" is the cri de coeur that is popularly supposed to represent Everywoman's deepest response to a breast cancer diagnosis—so much so that not only does a popular book on the subject have that title, but the national breast cancer information and support hotline is called Y-MEI Yet "Why me?" was not something it could have occurred to me to ask in a world where so many companions of my own age were already dealing with fear, debilitation, and death. I wonder, too, whether it characterizes the responses of the urban women of color forced by violence, by drugs, by state indifference or hostility, by AIDS and other illnesses, into familiarity with the rhythms of early death. At the time of my diagnosis the most immediate things that were going on in my life were, first, that I was co-teaching (with Michael Moon) a graduate course in queer theory, including such AIDS-related material as Cindy Patton's stunning *Inventing AIDS*. Second, that we and many of the students in the class, students who indeed provided the preponderance of the group's leadership and energy at that time, were intensely wrapped up in the work (demonstrating, organizing, lobbying) of a very new local chapter of the AIDS activist organization ACT UP. And third, that at the distance of far too many miles I was struggling to communicate some comfort or vitality to a beloved friend, Michael Lynch, a pioneer in gay studies and AIDS activism, who seemed to be within days of death from an AIDS-related infection in Toronto.

"White Glasses," the final essay in *Tendrils*, tells more about what it was like to be intimate with this particular friend at this particular time. More generally though, the framework in which I largely experienced my diagnosis—and the framework in which my friends, students, house sharers, life companion, and others made available to me almost overwhelming supplies of emotional, logistical, and cognitive sustenance¹⁴—was very much shaped by AIDS and the critical politics surrounding it, including the politics of homophobia and of queer assertiveness. The AIDS activist movement, in turn, owes much to the women's health movement of the 70s; and in another turn, an activist politics of breast cancer, spearheaded by lesbians, seems in the last year or two to have been emerging based on the model of AIDS activism.¹⁵ The dialectical epistemology of the two diseases, too—the kinds of secret each has constituted; the kinds of *outrages* each has required and inspired—has made an intimate motive for me. As "White Glasses" says,

It's as though there were transformative political work to be done just by being available to be identified with in the very grain of one's illness (which is to say, the grain of one's own intellectual, emotional, bodily self as refracted through illness and as resistant to it)—being available for identification to friends, but as well to people who don't love one; even to people who may not like one at all nor even wish one well.

My war against western civilization

That there were such people—that, indeed, the public discourse of my country was increasingly dominated by them—got harder and harder to ignore during the months of my diagnosis and initial treatment. For the first time, it was becoming routine to find my actual name, and not just the labels of my kind, on those journalistic lists of who was to be considered more dangerous than Saddam Hussein. In some ways, the timing of the diagnosis

couldn't have been better: if I'd needed a reminder I had one that, sure enough, life *is* too short, at least mine is, for going head-to-head with people whose highest approbation, even, would offer no intellectual or moral support in which I could find value. Physically, I was feeling out of it enough that the decision to let this journalism wash over me was hardly a real choice—however I might find myself misspelled, misquoted, mis-paraphrased, or (in one hallucinatory account) married to Stanley Fish. It was the easier to deal psychically with having all these journalists scandalize my name because it was clear most of them wouldn't have been caught dead reading my work: the essay of mine that got the most free publicity, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," did so without having been read by a single one of the people who invoked it: it reached its peak of currency in hack circles months before it was published, and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, which first singled it out for ridicule, seems to have gone to press before the essay was so much as *written*.¹⁵

Not that I imagine a few cozy hours reading *Epistemology of the Closet* would have won me rafts of fans amongst the punditterati. The attacks on me personally were based on such scummy evidential procedures that the most thin-skinned of scholars—so long as her livelihood was secure—could hardly have taken them to heart; the worst of their effects on me at the time was to give an improbable cosmic ratification (yes, actually, everything *is* about me!) to the self-absorption that forms, at best, an unavoidable feature of serious illness. If the journalistic hologram bearing my name seemed a relatively easy thing to disidentify from, though, I couldn't help registering with much greater intimacy a much more lethal damage. I don't know a gentler way to say it than that at a time when I've needed to make especially deep draughts on the reservoir of a desire to live and thrive, that resource has shown the cumulative effects of my culture's wasting depletion of it. It *is* different to experience from the vantage point of one's own bodily illness and need, all the brutality of a society's big and tiny decisions, explicit and encoded ones, about which lives have or have not value. Those decisions carry not only institutional and economic but psychic and, I don't doubt, somatic consequences. A thousand things make it impossible to mistake the verdict on queer lives and on women's lives, as on the lives of those who are poor or are not white. The hecatombs of queer youth; a decade squandered in a killing inaction on AIDS; the rapacious seizure from women of our defense against forced childbirth; tens of millions of adults and children excluded from the health care economy; treatment of homeless people as unsanitary refuse to be dealt with by periodic "sweeps"; refusal of condoms in prisons, persecution of needle exchange programs; denial and trivialization of histories of racism; or merely the pivot of a disavowing pronoun in a newspaper editorial: such things as these are facts, but at the same time they are piercing or murmuring voices in the heads of those of us struggling to marshal "our" resources against illness, dread, and devaluation. They speak to us. They have an amazing clarity.

A crazy little thing called *ressentiment*

There was something especially devastating about the wave of anti-"PC" journalism in the absolutely open contempt it displayed, and propagated, for *every* tool that has been so painstakingly assembled in the resistance against these devaluations. Through raucously orchestrated, electronically amplified campaigns of mock-incredulous scorn, intellectual and artistic as well as political possibilities, skills, ambitions, and knowledges have been laid waste with a relishing wantonness. No great difficulty in recognizing those aspects of the anti-"PC" craze that are functioning as covers for a rightist ideological putsch; but it has surprised me that so few people seem to view the recent developments as, among other things, part of an overarching history of anti-intellectualism: anti-intellectualism left as well as right. No twentieth-century

political movement, after all, can afford not to play the card of populism, whether or not the popular welfare is what it has mainly at heart (indeed, perhaps especially where it is least so). And anti-intellectual programs, like anti-Semite or queer-bashing ones, are quick, efficient, distracting, and almost universally understood signifiers for a populist solidarity that may boil down to nothing by the time it reaches the soup pot. It takes care and intellectual scrupulosity to forge an egalitarian politics not founded on such telegraphic slanders. Rightists today like to invoke the threatening specter of a propaganda-ridden socialist realism, but both they and the anti-intellectuals of the left might meditate on why the Nazis' campaign against "degenerate art" (Jewish, gay, modernist) was couched, as their own arguments are, in terms of assuring the instant, unmediated, and universal accessibility of all the sign systems of art (Goebbels even banning all art criticism in 1936, on the grounds that art is self-explanatory). It's hard to tell which assumption is more insultingly wrong: that the People (always considered, of course, as a monolithic unit) have no need and no faculty for engaging with work that is untransparent; or that the work most genuinely expressive of the People would be so univocal and so limply vacant as quite to obviate the labors and pleasures of interpretation. Anti-intellectuals today, at any rate, are happy to dispense with the interpretive process and depend instead on appeals to the supposedly self-evident: legislating against "patently offensive" art (no second looks allowed); citing texts as if they were texts; appealing to potted summaries and garbled tropes as if they were variorum editions in the original Aramaic. The most self-evident things, as always, are taken—as if unanswerably—to be the shaming risibility of any form of oblique or obscure expression; and the flat inadmissibility of openly queer articulation.

Thought as privilege

These histories of anti-intellectualism cut across the "political correctness" debate in complicated ways. The term "politically correct" originated, after all, in the mockery by which experimentally and theoretically minded feminists, queers, and leftists (of every color, class, and sexuality) fought back against the stultifications of feminist and left anti-intellectualism. The hectoring, would-be-populist derision that difficult, ambitious, or sexually charged writing today encounters from the right is not always very different from the reception it has already met with from the left. It seems as if many academic feminists and leftists must be grinding their teeth at the way the right has willily-illy conjoined their discursive fate with that of theorists and "deconstructionists"—just as, to be fair, many theorists who have betrayed no previous interest in the politics of class, race, gender, or sexuality may be more than bemused at turning up under the headings of "Marxism" or "multiculturalism." The right's success in grouping so many, so contestable, movements under the rubric "politically correct" is a coup of cynical slovenliness unmatched since the artistic and academic purges of Germany and Russia in the thirties.

What the American intellectual right has added to this hackneyed populist semiotic of *resentment* is an iridescent oislick of elitist self-regard. Trying to revoke every available cognitive and institutional affordance for reflection, speculation, experimentation, contradiction, embroidery, darning, textual aggression, textual delight, double entendre, close reading, free association, wit—the family of creative activities that might, for purposes of brevity, more simply be called *thought*—they yet stake their claim as the only inheritors, defenders, and dispensers of a luscious heritage of thought that most of them would allow to be read only in the dead light of its pieties and its exclusiveness. Through a deaeningly populist rhetoric, they advertise the mean pleasures of ranking and gatekeeping as available to all. But the gates that we are invited to invigorate ourselves by cudgelling barbarians at open onto nothing but a *Goodye, Mr. Chips* theme park.

What is the scarcity that fuels all this *ressentiment*? The leveraged burnout of the eighties certainly took its toll, economically, on universities as well as on other professions and industries. In secretaries' offices, in hospitals and HMOs [Health Maintenance Organizations], in network news bureaus, in Silicon Valley laboratories and beyond, the bottom line has moved much closer to a lot of people's work lives—impinging not just on whether they *have* work, but on what they do when they're there. But academic faculty, in our decentralized institutions, with our relatively diffuse status economy and our somewhat archaic tangle of traditions and prerogatives, have had, it seems, more inertial resistance to offer against the wholesale reorientation of our work practices around the abstractions of profit and the market. For some faculty at some colleges and universities, it is still strikingly true that our labor is divided up by task orientation (we may work on the book till it's done, explain to the student till she understands) rather than by a draconian time discipline; that what we produce is described and judged in qualitative as much as quantitative terms; that there is a valued place for affective expressiveness, and an intellectually productive permeability in the boundaries between public and private; that there are opportunities for collaborative work; and most importantly, that we can expend some substantial part of our paid labor on projects we ourselves have conceived, relating to questions whose urgency and interest make a claim on our own minds, imaginations, and consciences.

Millions of people today struggle to carve out—barely, at great cost to themselves—the time, permission, and resources, “after work” or instead of decently-paying work, for creativity and thought that will not be in the service of corporate profit, nor structured by its rhythms. Many, many more are scarred by the prohibitive difficulty of doing so. No two people, no two groups would make the same use of these resources, furthermore, so that no one can really pretend to be utilizing them “for” another. I see that some must find enraging the spectacle of people for whom such possibilities are, to a degree, built into the structure of our regular paid labor. Another way to understand that spectacle, though, would be as one remaining form of insistence that it is not inevitable—it is not a simple fact of nature—for the facilities of creativity and thought to represent rare or exorbitant *privilege*. Their economy should not and need not be one of scarcity.

The flamboyance with which some critical writers—I'm one of them—like to laminate our most ambitious work derives something, I think, from this situation. Many people doing all kinds of work are able to take pleasure in aspects of their work; but something different happens when the pleasure is not only taken but openly displayed. I like to make that different thing happen. Some readers identify strongly with the possibility of a pleasure so displayed; others disidentify from it with violent repudiations; still others find themselves occupying less stable positions in the circuit of contagion, fun, voyeurism, envy, participation, and stimulation. When the pleasure is attached to meditative or artistic productions that deal, not always in an effortlessly accessible way, with difficult and painful realities among others, then readers' responses become even more complex and dramatic, more productive for the author and for themselves. Little wonder then that sexuality, the locus of so many showy pleasures and untidy identities and of so much bedrock confrontation, opacity, and loss, should bear so much representational weight in arguments about the structure of intellectual work and life. Sexuality in this sense, perhaps, can *only* mean queer sexuality: so many of us have the need for spaces of thought and work where everything doesn't mean the same thing!

So many people of varying sexual practices, too, enjoy incorrigibly absorbing imaginative, artistic, intellectual, and affective lives that have been richly nourished by queer energies—and that are savagely diminished when the queerness of those energies is trashed or disavowed. In the very first of the big “political correctness” scare pieces in the mainstream press, *Newsweek* pontificated that under the reign of multiculturalism in colleges, “it would

not be enough for a student to refrain from insulting homosexuals. . . . He or she would be expected to . . . study their literature and culture alongside that of Plato, Shakespeare, and Locke.¹⁶ *Alongside?* Read any Sonnets lately? You dip into the *Phaedrus* often? To invoke the Utopian bedroom scene of Chuck Berry's immortal *ambade*: Roll over, Beethoven, and tell Tchalokovsky the news.

Notes

- 1 Paul Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide* (Washington, D.C., 1989), vol. 3, pp. 110-42.
- 2 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), poem 325, p. 154.
- 3 T. A. Kelloge et al., "Prevalence of HIV-1 Among Homosexual and Bisexual Men in the San Francisco Bay Area: Evidence of Infection Among Young Gay Men," *Seventh International AIDS Conference Abstract Book*, vol. 2 (Geneva, 1991) (W.C. 3010), p. 298.
- 4 G. Remafedi, "Male Homosexuality: The Adolescent's Perspective," unpublished manuscript, Adolescent Health Program, University of Minnesota, 1985. Cited in Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide."
- 5 Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," pp. 113-15.
- 6 The binary calculus I'm describing here depends on the notion that the male and female sexes are each other's "opposites," but I do want to register a specific demurral against that bit of easy common sense. Under no matter what cultural construction, women and men are more like each other than chalk is like cheese, than radoniation is like raisins, than up is like down, or than 1 is like 0. The biological, psychological, and cognitive attributes of men overlap with those of women by vastly more than they differ from them.
- 7 A related list that amplifies some of the issues raised in this one appears in the introduction to my *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 25-26.
- 8 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), pp. 38-40.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 10 One of the most provocative discussions of performativity in relation to literary criticism is Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); most of the current work being done on performativity in relation to sexuality and gender is much indebted to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
- 11 That deconstruction can offer crucial resources of thought for survival under duress will sound astonishing, I know, to anyone who knows it mostly from the journalism on the subject—journalism that always depicts "deconstructionism," not as a group of usable intellectual tools, but as a set of beliefs involving a patently absurd dogma ("nothing really exists"), loopy as Christian Science but as exotically aggressive as (American) journalism would also have us find (Islam, I came to my encounter with breast cancer not as a member of a creedal sect or "deconstructionists" but as someone who needed all the cognitive skills she could get. I found, as often before, that I had some good and relevant ones from my deconstructive training.
- 12 The work of this movement is most available today through books like the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves: Updated and Expanded for the Nineties* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). An immensely important account of dealing with breast cancer in the context of feminist, anarchist, and lesbian activism is Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1988) and *A Burst of Light* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1988).
- 13 And physical: I can't resist mentioning the infallibly appetite-provoking meals that Jonathan Goldberg, on sabbatical in Durham, planned and cooked every night during many queasy months of my chemotherapy.
- 14 On this, see Alisa Solomon, "The Politics of Breast Cancer," *Village Voice* 14 May 1991, pp. 22-27; Judy Brady, ed., *I in 3: Women with Cancer Confront an Epidemic* (Pittsburgh and San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1991); Midge Stocker, ed., *Cancer as a Women's Issue: Scratching the Surface* (Chicago: Third Side Press, 1991); and Sandra Butler and Barbara Rosenblum, *Cancer in Two Voices* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1991).

- 15 Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 145–46.
- 16 Jerry Adler et al., "Taking Offense: Is This the New Enlightenment on Campus or the New McCarthyism?" *Newsweek*, 24 December 1990, p. 48.

"Queer and Now" was written in 1991. Ken Wissoker thought up the title, and Mark Seltzer cheered me on with it.

