FOREWORD

T TIMES

At the 1992 gay pride parade in New York City, there was a handsome, intensely muscular man in full leather regalia, sporting on his distended chest a T-shirt that read, KEEP YOUR LAWS OFF OF MY UTERUS.

The two popular READ MY LIPS T-shirts marketed by ACT UP were also in evidence, and by the thousands. But for the first time it was largely gay men who were wearing the version of the shirt that features two turn-of-the-century-looking women in a passionate clinch. Most of the people wearing the version with the osculating male sailors, on the other hand, were lesbians. FAGGOT and BIG FAG were the T-shirt legends self-applied by many, many women; DYKE and the more topical LICK BUSH by many, many men.

(In a 1992 pre-Christmas ad for a popular gay T-shirt maker, the DYKE shirt is modeled by a man. The FAG HAG shirt is modeled by a man in drag.)

And everywhere at the march, on women and on men, there were T-shirts that said simply: QUEER.

It was a QUEER time.

It feels queer, and good—I'm sure I wasn't the only one at the march to have this sensation—when the wave of a broadly based public movement somehow overtakes and seems to amplify (amplifies by drowning it out?) the little, stubborn current of an individual narrative or obsession, an individual wellspring of narrow, desiring cathexis and cognition. On the scene of national gay/lesbian activism, in the Village Voice, in the 'zines, on the streets and even in some class-
rooms, I suppose this must be called the moment of Queer. (Though it’s other moments, too. Right now: the moment just before the inauguration of an ostentatiously heterosexual president who makes an audible, persistent claim to support lesbian and gay rights. Long moment of a deathly silence that means the AIDS drugs we’ve been struggling to hold on for are just not in the pipeline. When Melvin Dixon and Tom Yingling disappear from us, and André Lorde. When, for the first time, the New York pride march has massive participation by African Americans and Latinos. When people organize around claiming the label bisexual; or the right to be lesbian and gay soldiers; or the right to have their children not protected against HIV transmission.)

In the short-shelf-life American marketplace of images, maybe the queer moment, if it’s here today, will for that very reason be gone tomorrow. But I mean the essays collected in this book to make, cumulatively, stubbornly, a countermovement against that obsolescence: a claim that something about queer is inextinguishable. Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, troubiant. The word “queer” itself means across—it comes from the Indo-European root *quer-*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *lateralis* (to twist), English *athwart*. Titles and subtitles that at various times I’ve attached to the essays in *Tendencies* tend toward “across” formulations: across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across *perversions.* (The book itself would have had an “across” subtitle, but I just couldn’t choose.) The queer of these essays is transitive—multiply transitive. The unmemorial current that queer represents is antiseparatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange.

Most of these essays were concurrent with my work on another book, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). *Epistemology* made two hypotheses about the transitivity of sexual identities, but it was really organized around only one of them: the other is the concern of most of the *Tendencies* essays. I hypothesized in *Epistemology of the Closet* that modern homo/heterosexual definition has become soextracted a cultural site because of an enduring incoherence about whether it is to be thought of as an issue only for a minority of (distinctly lesbian or gay) individuals, or instead as an issue that cuts across every locus of agency and subjectivity in the culture. The other hypothesis professed in *Epistemology*, though, but not much explored there, is that modern sexual identities are also structured by a double-binding but immensely productive incoherence about gender. Specifically, I suggest in *Epistemology* that current “common sense” about homosexuality involves two contradictory gender models: forms of the in-

version trope (in which a gay man represents “a woman’s soul trapped in a man’s body,” and so on) that see queer people as uniquely situated between genders, and forms of the trope of gender separatism, under which it seems only common sense that people of the same gender, people grouped together under the single most determinate diacritical mark of social organization, people whose economic, institutional, emotional, physical needs and knowledges may have so much in common, should bond together also on the axis of sexual desire. . . . Gender-separatist models would thus place the woman-loving woman and the man-loving man each at the “natural” defining center of their own gender, again in contrast to inversion models that locate gay people—whether biologically or culturally—at the threshold between genders.1

Like *Epistemology of the Closet*, the essays in *Tendencies* do not aim to adjudicate these conflictual dispensations. But by various means a lot of the essays attempt to find new ways to think about lesbian, gay, and other sexually dissident lives and identities in a complex social ecology where the presence of different genders, different identities and identifications, will be taken as a given. I have no use at all for the trope of homosexuality-as-gender inversion, with its heterosexist presumption that only a self that is somehow “really a man” could be attracted to a woman, or vice versa. Yet the T-shirt carnival of cross-reference at last summer’s pride parade also evokes a history of moments to which the gender separatist models just won’t answer.

These essays are about passionate queer things that happen across the lines that divide genders, discourses, and “perversions.” What does it mean that Denis Diderot, in *The Nun*, makes lesbian knowledge the synecdoche for all knowledge? That Willa Cather refracts lesbian desires through gay male identities? That for Henry James the crucial term “ironic” seems to have been an epithet that referred to lesbian sexuality? That John Waters’s movies insistently stage the condensation of fat women with gay men? Or that Sense and Sensibility originates a modern novelistic subjectivity in the space between a masturbing girl and the women and men who love her?

These are essays in a variety of modes, but several of them also have an experimental ambition in common. I’ve wanted to transfigure—denude or somehow transfigure—the energies of some received

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forms of writing that were important to me: the autobiographical narrative, the performance piece, the atrocity story, the polemic, the prose essay that quotes poetry, the obituary. There's a lot of first person singular in this book (and some people hate that), and it's there for different reasons in different essays; to begin with, though, I'd find it mutilating and discontinuous to disallow a grammatical form that marks the site of such dense, accessible effects of knowledge, history, revision, authority, and pleasure. Perhaps it would be useful to say that the first person throughout represents neither the sense of a simple, settled congratulatory "I," on the one hand, nor on the other a fragmented postmodernist postindividual—never mind an unreliable narrator. No, "I" is a heuristic; maybe a powerful one.

Tendencies ought to make sense to people who haven't read Epistemology of the Closet; but the intimate adhesion between the books meant that I couldn't afford to be too embarrassed about some few pages of overlap. Changes from previously published versions of these essays have mostly been to eliminate places where two essays cover the same ground. I've indulged myself by smoothing out some prose that was already setting my teeth on edge, too; but I haven't tried to override the individual essay structure of these pieces, nor to make them sound as if they were all written out of a single moment or impulse or analysis.

Two of these essays were written while I was a Rockefeller Fellow at the National Humanities Center. I wish the rest of the world were as solicitously arranged to help people accomplish the work that's important to them! Like most universities, Duke isn't quite but it has been supporting in this inquiry, and Tendencies owes a great deal to both Duke's generosity and that of Amherst College.

I suppose there's something a bit louche about it, the way the acknowledgment convention lets one savor the pride of being indebted to wonderful friends. Next book, I tell myself, I'll shut up about the mishmash. But why? These paragraphs are about pleasure, not propriety.

The writing of Tendencies was almost contemporaneous with that of Epistemology of the Closet—with a couple of extra years added on to the end—so the acknowledgments to that book can also stand, with big second helpings of love to the same patient creditors, as the acknowledgments to this. It's said to be a commonplace among people who have been seriously ill that you never come out of an episode of illness with the same friends you went into it with. My experience over the past two years has been different from that: there have been treasured new friends, but then most sustainingly there have been all the treasured old ones. I've especially looked forward to saying here how much I depended, during the first stages of a cancer diagnosis and a pretty draining half-year of chemotherapy, on the energy, cheer, and love brought to North Carolina in visits from Henry Abelove, Mary Campbell, Robert Dawidoff, Joe Gordon, Janet Halley, Andy Parker, Cindy Patton, Libby Potter, Mary Russo, Nancy Waring, and Carolyn Williams. Tim Gould offered the very finest in long-distance counseling. Judy Frank, Sasha Torres, Richard Fung, Margie Waller, David Robinson, Michele Aina Barale, Judith Butler helped in some inimitable ways.

It didn't require this firsthand experience of illness to sharpen my sense of privilege in the friendship of a variety of men and women constrained by debility or love to deal closely with HIV—in their own bodies, as caregivers, as activists. But my illness has strengthened and, for me, qualitatively changed many of these relationships. Simon Watney, to let one such friend stand for many, is a challenge as he is an inspiration, his accomplishment representable only in the silent calculus of lives untold.

A few more people to mention. For years now I've been peculiarly lucky in the matter of fairy godmothers; they've included Jim Kincaid, Helen Vendler, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Neil Hertz, and Liz Clark, and I thank them for many acts of magic. Songmin Shin has marvelously become one of the Kosofskys whose stimulus and affection are a constant tonic to this work. Ken Wissoker is as good an editor as he is a friend, which is going some; I've had excellent support from previous editors, but working with Ken on Series Q has quite changed my sense of what that relationship can accomplish. (Yes, as a matter of fact this is a plug to prospective series authors.) Shannon Van Wye kindly maintains my head at the proper small size. Rita Kosofsky gives me a motive for these projects, as her teaching has given me means for them. And the ineffably comforting Julian Olive is the only person who generally knows if I'm coming or going.

Either Jonathan Flatley or Gustavus Stadler came up with the title for this book. (I knew Tendencies sounds like a title for Walter Benjamin essays—really it's channeled from Dame Edna Everage). They're among the present and recent Duke graduate students—Jose Munoz, Brian Selisky, Adam Frank, Mary Armstrong, Graham Hammill are only a few of the others—who have created something unusual here: a supported and challenging space for original queer thought. It's been wonderful to have access to it. Kate Kent and Mandy Berry are two whose invaluable contributions to this book (editorial, critical, emotional) have been even more direct.

Finally, there are my dear companions of this time, Jonathan Goldberg, Hal Sedgwick, and Michael Moon. The tenderest care—most incisive
thought—most uncompromising reading: it's hard to say which aspects of Jon's friendship are farthest beyond price. No praise is more validating than his, no severity more instructive, no kindness more penetrating. I've always known about Hal the same quite unlikely thing that, in Proust, the narrator knows about his grandmother: "that everything that was mine, my cares, my wishes, would be... supported upon a desire to save and prolong my life stronger than was my own." Living with Michael is a virtually nonstop Scherazade party. Underlying his brilliance is an outrageus gift of being interested in the whole world and soliciting the cathexis of others for it. His coauthorship of one of the essays in this book, important though it has been to me, can reflect only a small part of the wealth I've experienced in his intimacy.

The simple secret of the plot is just to tell them that I love them a lot.
QUEER

AND

NOW

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.

The knowledge is indelible, but not astonishing, to anyone with a reason to be attuned to the prodigal way this culture has of denying and despoothing 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—soon whispering in the House—
And all we said—was “Saved”?

(as Dickinson has it). 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.

**EPISODES** I've heard of many people who claim they'd as soon their children were dead as gay. What it made me 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, consents—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.) The systematic separation of children from queer adults; their systematic sequestration 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-dissolving 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; 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.

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 congressional pressure, in 1991 a survey of adolescent sexual behavior is defunded. 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.

**PROMISING, 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 multiphasedness 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' guilt, even survivors' responsibility: powerfully as these are experienced, they are also more than complicated by how permeable the identity "survivor" must be to the diminishing 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 from where they are to be so challenged.

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intensely 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 evasion of interest from the personal, 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, clarionous and unfastened, in all their rawness. Especially considering the history of denigration 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 disciplinarity 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 defile 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 unfolded as if anthropologically in formats specifically designed—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 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 rivets 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 free for Christmas? What did that flash flood or mass murder (ump-ump 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 con-
stituted 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—live up
with each other so neatly 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 | Q e e r a n d  N o w |
| 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 genera-
tions |
| 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 one from another, to disengage them—the
bonds of blood, of law, of habituation, of privacy, of companionship and
succor—from the lock-step of their unaniuity in the system called "family."

So 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, mas-
culine 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 opposite 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 pre-
ferred 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 (sup-
posed to correspond to yourself in both respects);
your community of cultural and political identification (supposed to
correspond to your own identity);

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
denial 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
rationalization is like reason, 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 each other.
and—again—many more. Even this list is remarkable for the silent presuppositions 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 heterosexist assumption, though, what's striking is the number and difference of the dimensions that "sexual identity" is supposed to organize into a seamless and unvocal 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 experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical facies, fantasists, drag, clones, leatherbitch, ladies in tuxedoes, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldoggers, divas, Snap! queens, bitch 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 cross-cuttings 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 cross-cut 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 Pung—are using the leverage of "queer" to do a new kind of justice to the fractural 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 can it only connote; a part of its experimental force is as a speech act 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 inclusively) 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 to future work as well.

Project 1—most of the essays in this book 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 unproblematic-\nalness, 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-scruiny 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, heterosexuality 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 heterosexuality 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 Tendencies, 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 closetedness itself, can be taken as dramatizing certain features of linguistic performativity in ways that have broadly applicable implications. Among the striking aspects of considering closetedness 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 reading effect (promising! smuggling?) anything that offers to make this genre more acute and experimental, less numb to itself, is a welcome prospect.

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).
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 daunting and scary, have also proven just sheerly 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 drastically 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 bump 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 temporali̇ties that move 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: companions, 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 grassroots and antiracist politics, its publications,\(^{12}\) the attitudes and institutions it built and some of the careers it seems to have inspired.)

\(^{11}\) 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 "deconstructionists" not as a group of usable intellectual tools, but as a set of beliefs involving a patently absurd dogma ("nothing really exists"), loosey as Christian Science but as conceptually aggressive as (American journalism would also have unfindable) Islam. Come to my encounter with breast cancer not as a member of a credal sect of "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 \textit{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, antiracist, and lesbian activism; Audre Lorde, \textit{The Cancer Journals}, 2d ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1988) and \textit{A Burst of Light} (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1988).
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 every woman'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-ME! 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 Tendencies, 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 sustenance—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 1970s, 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. The dialectical epistemology of the two diseases, too—the kinds of secret each has constituted; the kinds of outness 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 but 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: it fitted a reminder I had 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 easier to deal psychically.

11. And physical; I can't resist mentioning the infallobly appetite-provoking meals that Jonathan Goldberg, on sabbatical in Durham, planned and cooked every night during many queasy months of my chemotherapy.

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 *Tempered Radicals*, which first singled it out for ridicule, seems to have gone to press before the essay was so much as written.  

Not that I imagine a few coy hours reading *Epistemology of the Closet* would have won me rafts of fans amongst the punditocracy. 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 vasting 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; dental 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 knowledge 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 pogroms, like anti-Semitic 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 teleographic standers. 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 limpidly 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); using titles 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 visibility of any form of oblique or obscure expression; and the flat madmissibility of openly queer articulations.

**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) sought to escape the stultifications of feminist and left anti-intellectualism. The hectoring, would-be-populist derisive 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 willy-nilly conjured their discursive fate with that of heretics 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 contestive, movements under the rubric "politically correct" is a coup of cynical sleight of unmatched since the aristo 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 orb of elitist self-regard. Trying to revoke every available cognitive and institutional affordance for reflection, speculation, experimentation, contradiction, embroidery, daring, 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 set stake their claim as the only inheritors, defenders, and dispensers of a luminous 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 deafeningly populist rhetoric, they advertise the mean pleasures of ranking and gatekeeping as available to all. But the gates that we are invited to inveigle ourselves by cudgeling barbarians at open onto nothing but a Goodbye, Mr. Chips theme park.

What is the scarcity that fuels all this resentment? 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, 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 controversial status economy and our somewhat archaic tangle of traditions and prerogatives, have had, it seems, more inertia resistant 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 deaconian time discipline; that what we produce is described and judged in qualitative as much as quantitative terms; that there is a valued place for effective 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 arc 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 engaging the spectacle of people for whom such possibilities are, to a degree, built into the structure of our regular paid labor. An other way to understand that spectacle, though, would be as one remaining form of insubordination 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 mediative or artistic productions that deal, not always in an effortlessly accessible way, with difficult and painful reali-
ties 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.” In *Alongside*? Read any Sonnets lately? You dip into the *Phaedrus* often?

To invoke the eternally bedroom scene of Chuck Berry’s immortal *aubade*: Roll over, Beethoven, and tell Tchaikovsky the news.


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