

Introduction: Axiomatic

Epistemology of the Closet proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed, fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century. The book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; and it will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory.

The passage of time, the bestowal of thought and necessary political struggle since the turn of the century have only spread and deepened the long crisis of modern sexual definition, dramatizing, often violently, the internal incoherence and mutual contradiction of each of the forms of discursive and institutional “common sense” on this subject inherited from the architects of our present culture. The contradictions I will be discussing are not in the first place those between prohomosexual and antihomosexual people or ideologies, although the book’s strongest motivation is indeed the gay-affirmative one. Rather, the contradictions that seem most active are the ones internal to all the important twentieth-century understandings of homo/heterosexual definition, both heterosexual and antihomophobic. Their outlines and something of their history are sketched in Chapter 1. Briefly, they are two. The first is the contradiction between seeing homo/heterosexual definition on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it on the other hand as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view). The second is the contradiction between seeing same-sex object choice on the one hand as a matter of liminality or

transitivity between genders, and seeing it on the other hand as reflecting an impulse of separatism—though by no means necessarily political separatism—within each gender. The purpose of this book is not to adjudicate between the two poles of either of these contradictions, for, if its argument is right, no epistemological grounding now exists from which to do so. Instead, I am trying to make the strongest possible introductory case for a hypothesis about the centrality of this nominally marginal, conceptually intractable set of definitional issues to the important knowledges and understandings of twentieth-century Western culture as a whole.

The word “homosexual” entered Euro-American discourse during the last third of the nineteenth century—its popularization preceding, as it happens, even that of the word “heterosexual.”¹ It seems clear that the sexual behaviors, and even for some people the conscious identities, denoted by the new term “homosexual” and its contemporary variants already had a long, rich history. So, indeed, did a wide range of other sexual behaviors and behavioral clusters. What *was* new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or a female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or a hetero-sexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence. It was this new development that left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherences of homo/heterosexual definition.

New, institutionalized taxonomic discourses—medical, legal, literary, psychological—centering on homo/heterosexual definition proliferated and crystallized with exceptional rapidity in the decades around the turn of the century, decades in which so many of the other critical nodes of the culture were being, if less suddenly and newly, nonetheless also definitively reshaped. Both the power relations between the genders and the relations of nationalism and imperialism, for instance, were in highly visible crisis. For this reason, and because the structuring of same-sex bonds can’t, in any historical situation marked by inequality and contest *between* genders, fail to be a site of intensive regulation that intersects

1. On this, see Jonathan Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac: A New Documentary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 147–50; for more discussion, David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 155n.1 and pp. 158–59n.17.

virtually every issue of power and gender,² lines can never be drawn to circumscribe within some proper domain of sexuality (whatever that might be) the consequences of a shift in sexual discourse. Furthermore, in accord with Foucault’s demonstration, whose results I will take to be axiomatic, that modern Western culture has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge, it becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know.

Accordingly, one characteristic of the readings in this book is to attend to performative aspects of texts, and to what are often blandly called their “reader relations,” as sites of definitional creation, violence, and rupture in relation to particular readers, particular institutional circumstances. An assumption underlying the book is that the relations of the closet—the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition—have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally. It has felt throughout this work as though the density of their social meaning lends any speech act concerning these issues—and the outlines of that “concern,” it turns out, are broad indeed—the exaggerated propulsiveness of ‘wearing flippers in a swimming pool: the force of various rhetorical effects has seemed uniquely difficult to calibrate.

But, in the vicinity of the closet, even what *counts* as a speech act is problematized on a perfectly routine basis. As Foucault says: “there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things. . . . There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.”³ “Closetedness” itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. The speech acts that coming out, in turn, can comprise are as strangely specific. And they may have nothing to do with the acquisition of new information. I think of a man and a woman I know,

2. This is an argument of my *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

3. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Volume I: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 27.

best friends, who for years canvassed freely the emotional complications of each other's erotic lives—the man's eroticism happening to focus exclusively on men. But it was only after one particular conversational moment, fully a decade into this relationship, that it seemed to either of these friends that permission had been given to the woman to refer to the man, in their conversation together, as *a gay man*. Discussing it much later, both agreed they had felt at the time that this one moment had constituted a clear-cut act of coming out, even in the context of years and years beforehand of exchange predicated on the man's *being gay*. What was said to make this difference? Not a version of "I am gay," which could only have been bathetic between them. What constituted coming out for this man, in this situation, was to use about himself the phrase "coming out"—to mention, as if casually, having come out to someone else. (Similarly, a T-shirt that ACT UP sells in New York bearing the text, "I am out, therefore I am," is meant to do for the wearer, not the constative work of reporting that s/he is out, but the performative work of coming out in the first place.) And as Chapter 1 will discuss, the fact that silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there as is knowledge.

Knowledge, after all, is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power. Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons. If M. Mitterrand knows English but Mr. Reagan lacks—as he did lack—French, it is the urbane M. Mitterrand who must negotiate in an acquired tongue, the ignorant Mr. Reagan who may dilate in his native one. Or in the interactive speech model by which, as Sally McConnell-Ginet puts it, "the standard . . . meaning can be thought of as what is recognizable solely on the basis of interlocutors' mutual knowledge of established practices of interpretation," it is the interlocutor who has or pretends to have the *less* broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice who will define the terms of the exchange. So, for instance, because "men, with superior extralinguistic resources and privileged discourse positions, are often less likely to treat perspectives different from their own as mutually available for communication," their attitudes are "thus more likely to leave a lasting imprint on the common semantic stock than women's."⁴

4. Sally McConnell-Ginet, "The Sexual (Re)Production of Meaning: A Discourse-Based Theory," manuscript, pp. 387–88, quoted in Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary* (Boston: Pandora Press, 1985), p. 264; emphasis added.

Such ignorance effects can be harnessed, licensed, and regulated on a mass scale for striking enforcements—perhaps especially around sexuality, in modern Western culture the most meaning-intensive of human activities. The epistemological asymmetry of the laws that govern rape, for instance, privileges at the same time men and ignorance, inasmuch as it matters not at all what the raped woman perceives or wants just so long as the man raping her can claim not to have noticed (ignorance in which male sexuality receives careful education).⁵ And the rape machinery that is organized by this epistemological privilege of unknowing in turn keeps disproportionately under discipline, of course, women's larger ambitions to take more control over the terms of our own circulation.⁶ Or, again, in an ingenious and patiently instructive orchestration of ignorance, the U.S. Justice Department ruled in June, 1986, that an employer may freely fire persons with AIDS exactly so long as the employer can claim to be ignorant of the medical fact, *quoted in the ruling*, that there is no known health danger in the workplace from the disease.⁷ Again, it is clear in political context that the effect aimed at—in this case, it is hard to help feeling, aimed at with some care—is the ostentatious declaration, for the private sector, of an organized open season on gay men.⁸

5. Catherine A. MacKinnon makes this point more fully in "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 515–44.

6. Susan Brownmiller made the most forceful and influential presentation of this case in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).

7. Robert Pear, "Rights Laws Offer Only Limited Help on AIDS, U.S. Rules," *New York Times*, June 23, 1986. That the ruling was calculated to offer, provoke, and legitimize harm and insult is clear from the language quoted in Pear's article: "A person," the ruling says, for instance, "cannot be regarded as handicapped [and hence subject to federal protection] simply because others shun his company. Otherwise, a host of personal traits, from ill temper to poor personal hygiene, would constitute handicaps."

8. Not that gay men were intended to be the only victims of this ruling. In even the most conscientious discourse concerning AIDS in the United States so far there has been the problem, to which this essay does not pretend to offer any solution, of doing justice at once to the relative (and increasing) heterogeneity of those who actually have AIDS and to the specificity with which AIDS discourse at every level has until very recently focused on male homosexuality. In its worldwide epidemiology, of course, AIDS has no distinctive association with gay men, nor is it likely to for long here either. The acknowledgment/management of this fact was the preoccupation of a strikingly sudden media-wide discursive shift in the winter and early spring of 1987. If the obsessively homophobic focus of AIDS phobia up to that moment scapegoated gay men by (among other things) subjecting their sexual practice and lifestyles to a glaring and effectually punitive visibility, however, it worked in an opposite way to expunge the claims by expunging the visibility of most of the disease's other victims. So far, here, these victims have been among groups already the most vulnerable—intravenous drug users, sex workers, wives and girlfriends of closeted men—on whom invisibility, or a public subsumption under the incongruous heading of gay men, can have no protective effect. (It has been notable, for instance, that media coverage of prostitutes with AIDS has shown no interest in the health of the women themselves, but only in their potential for infecting men. Again, the campaign to provide

Although the simple, stubborn fact or pretense of ignorance (one meaning, the Capital one, of the word "stonewall") can sometimes be enough to enforce discursive power, a far more complex drama of ignorance and knowledge is the more usual carrier of political struggle. Such a drama was enacted when, only a few days after the Justice Department's private-sector decision, the U.S. Supreme Court correspondingly opened the public-sector bashing season by legitimating state antisodomy laws in *Bowers v. Hardwick*.⁹ In a virulent ruling whose language made from beginning to end an insolent display of legal illogic—of what Justice Blackmun in dissent called "the most willful blindness"¹⁰—a single, apparently incidental word used in Justice White's majority opinion became for many gay or antihomophobic readers a focus around which the inflammatory force of the decision seemed to pullulate with peculiar density.¹¹ In White's opinion,

to claim that a right to engage in sodomy is "deeply rooted in this nation's history and tradition" or "implicit in the concept of ordered liberty" is, at best, facetious.¹²

What lends the word "facetious" in this sentence such an unusual power to offend, even in the context of a larger legal offense whose damage will be

drug users with free needles had not until early 1987 received even the exiguous state support given to safer-sex education for gay men.) The damages of homophobia on the one hand, of classism/racism/sexism on the other; of intensive regulatory visibility on the one hand, of discursive erasure on the other: these pairings are not only incommensurable (and why measure them against each other rather than against the more liberating possibilities they foreclose?) but very hard to interleave with each other conceptually. The effect has been perhaps most dizzying when the incommensurable damages are condensed upon a single person, e.g., a nonwhite gay man. The focus of this book is on the specific damages of homophobia; but to the extent that it is impelled by (a desire to resist) the public pressures of AIDS phobia, I must at least make clear how much that is important even to its own ambitions is nonetheless excluded from its potential for responsiveness.

9. Graphic encapsulation of this event on the front page of the *Times*: at the bottom of the three-column lead story on the ruling, a photo ostensibly about the influx of various navies into a welcoming New York for "the Liberty celebration" shows two worried but extremely good-looking sailors in alluring whites, "asking directions of a police officer" (*New York Times*, July 1, 1986).

10. "The Supreme Court Opinion. Michael J. Bowers, Attorney General of Georgia, *Petition v. Michael Hardwick and John and Mary Doe, Respondents*," text in *New York Native*, no. 169 (July 14, 1986): 15.

11. The word is quoted, for instance, in isolation, in the sixth sentence of the *Times*'s lead article announcing the decision (July 1, 1986). The *Times* editorial decrying the decision (July 2, 1986) remarks on the crudity of this word before outlining the substantive offensiveness of the ruling. The *New York Native* and the gay leaders it quoted also gave the word a lot of play in the immediate aftermath of the ruling (e.g., no. 169 [July 14, 1986]: 8, 11).

12. *New York Native*, no. 169 (July 14, 1986): 13.

much more indelible, has to be the economical way it functions here as switchpoint for the cyclonic epistemological undertows that encompass power in general and issues of homosexual desire in particular.

One considers: (1) *prima facie*, nobody could, of course, actually for an instant mistake the intent of the gay advocates as facetious. (2) *Secunda facie*, it is thus the court itself that is pleased to be facetious. Trading on the assertion's very (3) transparent stupidity (not just the contemptuous demonstration that powerful people don't have to be acute or right, but even more, the contemptuous demonstration—this is palpable throughout the majority opinions, but only in this word does it bubble up with active pleasure—of how obtuseness itself arms the powerful against their enemies), the court's joke here (in the wake of the mock-ignorant mock-jocose threat implicit in "at best") is (4) the clownish claim to be able at will to "read"—i.e., project into—the minds of the gay advocates. This being not only (5) a parody of, but (6) more intimately a kind of aggressive jamming technique against, (7) the truth/paranoid fantasy that it is gay people who can read, or project their own desires into, the minds of "straight" people.

Inarguably, there is a satisfaction in dwelling on the degree to which the power of our enemies over us is implicated, not in their command of knowledge, but precisely in their ignorance. The effect is a real one, but it carries dangers with it as well. The chief of these dangers is the scornful, fearful, or patheticizing reification of "ignorance"; it goes with the unexamined Enlightenment assumptions by which the labeling of a particular force as "ignorance" seems to place it unappealably in a demonized space on a never quite explicit ethical schema. (It is also dangerously close in structure to the more palpably sentimental privileging of ignorance as an originary, passive innocence.) The angles of view from which it can look as though a political fight is a fight against ignorance are invigorating and maybe revelatory ones but dangerous places for dwelling. The writings of, among others, Foucault, Derrida, Thomas Kuhn, and Thomas Szasz have given contemporary readers a lot of practice in questioning both the ethical/political disengagement and, beyond that, the ethical/political simplicity of the category of "knowledge," so that a writer who appeals too directly to the redemptive potential of simply upping the cognitive wattage on any question of power seems, now, naive. The corollary problems still adhere to the category of "ignorance," as well, but so do some additional ones: there are psychological operations of shame, denial, projection around "ignorance" that make it an especially galvanizing

category for the individual reader, even as they give it a rhetorical potency that it would be hard for writers to forswear and foolhardy for them to embrace.

Rather than sacrifice the notion of "ignorance," then, I would be more interested at this point in trying, as we are getting used to trying with "knowledge," to pluralize and specify it. That is, I would like to be able to make use in sexual-political thinking of the deconstructive understanding that particular insights generate, are lined with, and at the same time are themselves structured by particular opacities. If ignorance is not—as it evidently is not—a single Manichaeon, aboriginal maw of darkness from which the heroics of human cognition can occasionally wrestle facts, insights, freedoms, progress, perhaps there exists instead a plethora of *ignorances*, and we may begin to ask questions about the labor, erotics, and economics of their human production and distribution. Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth—these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth. We should not assume that their doubletting with knowledges means, however, that they obey identical laws identically or follow the same circulatory paths at the same pace.¹³

Historically, the framing of *Epistemology of the Closet* begins with a puzzle. It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of "sexual orientation." This is not a development that would have been foreseen from the viewpoint of the fin de siècle itself, where a rich stew of male algolagnia, child-love, and autoeroticism, to mention no more of its components, seemed to have as indicative a relation as did homosexuality

13. For an essay that makes these points more fully, see my "Privilege of Unknowing," *Genders*, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 102–24, a reading of Diderot's *La Religieuse*, from which the preceding six paragraphs are taken.

to the whole, obsessively entertained problematic of sexual "perversion" or, more broadly, "decadence." Foucault, for instance, mentions the hysterical woman and the masturbating child, along with "entomologized" sexological categories such as zoophiles, zooerasts, auto-monosexualists, and gynecomasts, as typifying the new sexual taxonomies, the "*specification of individuals*" that facilitated the modern freighting of sexual definition with epistemological and power relations.¹⁴ True as his notation is, it suggests without beginning to answer the further question: why the category of "the masturbator," to choose only one example, should by now have entirely lost its diacritical potential for specifying a particular kind of person, an identity, at the same time as it continues to be true—becomes increasingly true—that, for a crucial strain of Western discourse, in Foucault's words "the homosexual was now a species."¹⁵ So, as a result, is the heterosexual, and between *these* species the human species has come more and more to be divided. *Epistemology of the Closet* does not have an explanation to offer for this sudden, radical condensation of sexual categories; instead of speculating on its causes, the book explores its unpredictably varied and acute implications and consequences.

At the same time that this process of sexual specification or species-formation was going on, the book will argue, less stable and identity-bound understandings of sexual choice also persisted and developed, often among the same people or interwoven in the same systems of thought. Again, the book will not suggest (nor do I believe there currently exists) any standpoint of thought from which the rival claims of these minoritizing and universalizing understandings of sexual definition could be decisively arbitrated as to their "truth." Instead, the performative effects of the self-contradictory discursive field of force created by their overlap will be my subject. And, of course, it makes every difference that these impactions of homo/heterosexual definition took place in a setting, not of spacious emotional or analytic impartiality, but rather of urgent homophobic pressure to devalue one of the two nominally symmetrical forms of choice.

As several of the formulations above would suggest, one main strand of argument in this book is deconstructive, in a fairly specific sense. The analytic move it makes is to demonstrate that categories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions—heterosexual/homosexual,

14. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, pp. 105, 43.

15. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 43.

in this case—actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A. Harold Beaver, for instance, in an influential 1981 essay sketched the outlines of such a deconstructive strategy:

The aim must be to reverse the rhetorical opposition of what is “transparent” or “natural” and what is “derivative” or “contrived” by demonstrating that the qualities predicated of “homosexuality” (as a dependent term) are in fact a condition of “heterosexuality”; that “heterosexuality,” far from possessing a privileged status, must itself be treated as a dependent term.¹⁶

To understand these conceptual relations as irresolvably unstable is not, however, to understand them as ineffacious or innocuous. It is at least premature when Roland Barthes prophesies that “once the paradigm is blurred, utopia begins: meaning and sex become the objects of free play, at the heart of which the (polysemant) forms and the (sensual) practices, liberated from the binary prison, will achieve a state of infinite expansion.”¹⁷ To the contrary, a deconstructive understanding of these binarisms makes it possible to identify them as sites that are *peculiarly* densely charged with lasting potentials for powerful manipulation—through precisely the mechanisms of self-contradictory definition or, more succinctly, the double bind. Nor is a deconstructive analysis of such definitional knots, however necessary, at all sufficient to disable them. Quite the opposite: I would suggest that an understanding of their irresolvable instability has been continually available, and has continually lent discursive authority, to antigay as well as to gay cultural forces of this century. Beaver makes an optimistic prediction that “by disqualifying the autonomy of what was deemed spontaneously immanent, the whole sexual system is fundamentally decentred and exposed.”¹⁸ But there is reason to

16. Harold Beaver, “Homosexual Signs,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Autumn 1981): 115.

17. Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 133.

18. Beaver, “Homosexual Signs,” pp. 115–16.

believe that the oppressive sexual system of the past hundred years was if anything born and bred (if I may rely on the pith of a fable whose value doesn’t, I must hope, stand or fall with its history of racist uses) in the briar patch of the most notorious and repeated decenterings and exposures.

These deconstructive contestations can occur, moreover, only in the context of an entire cultural network of normative definitions, definitions themselves equally unstable but responding to different sets of contiguities and often at a different rate. The master terms of a particular historical moment will be those that are so situated as to entangle most inextricably and at the same time most differentially the filaments of other important definitional nexuses. In arguing that homo/heterosexual definition has been a presiding master term of the past century, one that has the same, primary importance for all modern Western identity and social organization (and not merely for homosexual identity and culture) as do the more traditionally visible cruxes of gender, class, and race, I’ll argue that the now chronic modern crisis of homo/heterosexual definition has affected our culture through its ineffaceable marking particularly of the categories secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, discipline/terrorism, canonic/noncanonic, wholeness/decadence, urbane/provincial, domestic/foreign, health/illness, same/different, active/passive, in/out, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, utopia/apocalypse, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntariness/addiction.¹⁹ And rather than embrace an idealist faith in the necessarily, immanently self-corrosive efficacy of the contradictions inherent to these definitional binarisms, I will suggest instead that contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition.

Perhaps I should say something about the project of hypothesizing that certain binarisms that structure meaning in a culture may be “ineffaceably marked” by association with this one particular problematic—inefface-

19. My casting of all these definitional nodes in the form of binarisms, I should make explicit, has to do not with a mystical faith in the number two but, rather, with the felt need to schematize in some consistent way the treatment of social vectors so exceedingly various. The kind of falsification necessarily performed on each by this reduction cannot, unfortunately, itself be consistent. But the scope of the kind of hypothesis I want to pose does seem to require a drastic reductiveness, at least in its initial formulations.

ably even when invisibly. Hypothesizing is easier than proving, but indeed I cannot imagine the protocol by which such hypotheses might be *tested*; they must be deepened and broadened—not the work of one book—and used, rather than proved or disproved by a few examples. The collecting of instances of each binarism that would appear to “common sense” to be unmarked by issues of homo/heterosexual definition, though an inexhaustibly stimulating heuristic, is not, I believe, a good test of such a hypothesis. After all, the particular kinds of skill that might be required to produce the most telling interpretations have hardly been a valued part of the “common sense” of this epistemologically cloven culture. If a painstaking process of accumulative reading and historical de- and recontextualization does not render these homologies resonant and productive, that is the only test they can directly fail, the only one they need to pass.

The structure of the present book has been markedly affected by this intuition—by a sense that the cultural interrogations it aims to make imperative will be trivialized or evacuated, at this early stage, to the degree that their procedures seem to partake of the *a priori*. I’ve wanted the book to be inviting (as well as imperative) but resolutely non-algorithmic. A point of the book is *not to know* how far its insights and projects are generalizable, not to be able to say in advance where the semantic specificity of these issues gives over to (or: itself structures?) the syntax of a “broader” or more abstractable critical project. In particular, the book aims to resist in every way it can the deadening pretended knowingness by which the chisel of modern homo/heterosexual definitional crisis tends, in public discourse, to be hammered most fatally home.

Perhaps to counter that, it seems now that the book not only has but constitutes an extended introduction. It is organized, not as a chronological narrative, but as a series of essays linked closely by their shared project and recurrent topics. The Introduction, situating this project in the larger context of gay/lesbian and antihomophobic theory, and Chapter 1, outlining its basic terms, are the only parts that do not comprise extended readings. Chapter 2 (on *Billy Budd*) and Chapter 3 (on Wilde and Nietzsche), which were originally conceived as a single unit, offer a different kind of introduction: an essay, through the specificity of these texts and authors, of most of the bravely showy list of binarized cultural nexuses about which the book makes, at other places, more generalized assertions. Chapter 4 discusses at length, through a reading of James’s “The Beast in the Jungle,” the elsewhere recurrent topos of male homosex-

ual panic. And Chapter 5, on Proust, focuses more sharply on the book’s preoccupation with the speech-act relations around the closet.

In consonance with my emphasis on the performative relations of double and conflicted definition, the theorized prescription for a *practical* politics implicit in these readings is for a multi-pronged movement whose idealist and materialist impulses, whose minority-model and universalist-model strategies, and for that matter whose gender-separatist and gender-integrative analyses would likewise proceed in parallel without any high premium placed on ideological rationalization between them. In effect this is how the gay movements of this century have actually been structured, if not how they have often been perceived or evaluated. The breadth and fullness of the political gestalt of gay-affirmative struggle give a powerful resonance to the voice of each of its constituencies. The cost in ideological rigor, though high indeed, is very simply inevitable; this is not a conceptual landscape in which ideological rigor across levels, across constituencies is at all possible, be it ever so desirable.

Something similar is true at the level of scholarship. Over and over I have felt in writing the book that, however my own identifications, intuitions, circumstances, limitations, and talents may have led its interpretations to privilege constructivist over essentialist, universalizing over minoritizing, and gender-transitive over gender-separatist understandings of sexual choice, nevertheless the space of permission for this work and the depth of the intellectual landscape in which it might have a contribution to make owe everything to the wealth of essentialist, minoritizing, and separatist gay thought and struggle also in progress. There are similar points to be made about the book’s limitation to what may sound, in the current climate of exciting interstitial explorations among literature, social history, and “cultural studies,” like unreconstructedly literary readings of essentially canonical texts. I must hope that, as the taken-for-grantedness of what constitutes a literary text, a literary reading, a worthwhile interpretive intervention, becomes more and more unstable under such pressures, the force of anyone’s perseveration in this specialized practice (I use “specialized” here not with the connotation of the “expert’s” technique, but with the connotation of the wasteful, value-making partiality of the sexual perversion) could look less like a rearguard defense than like something newly interrogable and interrogatory. Even more is this true of the book’s specification of male, and of Euro-American male, sexual definition as its subject. Any critical book makes endless choices of focus and methodology, and it is very difficult for these

choices to be interpreted in any other light than that of the categorical imperative: the fact that they are made in a certain way here seems a priori to assert that they would be best made in the same way everywhere. I would ask that, however sweeping the claims made by this book may seem to be, it not be read as making that particular claim. Quite the opposite: a real measure of the success of such an analysis would lie in its ability, in the hands of an inquirer with different needs, talents, or positionings, to clarify the distinctive kinds of resistance offered to it from different spaces on the social map, even though such a project might require revisions or rupturings of the analysis as first proffered. The only imperative that the book means to treat as categorical is the very broad one of pursuing an antihomophobic inquiry. If the book were able to fulfill its most expansive ambitions, it would make certain specific kinds of readings and interrogations, perhaps new, available in a heuristically powerful, productive, and significant form for other readers to perform on literary and social texts with, ideally, other results. The meaning, the legitimacy, and in many ways even the possibility for good faith of the positings this book makes depend radically on the production, by other antihomophobic readers who may be very differently situated, of the widest possible range of other and even contradictory availabilities.

This seems, perhaps, especially true of the historical periodization implied by the structure of this book, and its consequences. To hypothesize the usefulness of taking the century from the 1880s to the 1980s as a single period in the history of male homo/heterosexual definition is necessarily to risk subordinating the importance of other fulcrum points. One thinks, for instance, of the events collectively known as Stonewall—the New York City riots of June, 1969, protesting police harassment of patrons of a gay bar, from which the modern gay liberation movement dates its inauguration. A certain idealist bias built into a book about definition makes it too easy to level out, as from a spuriously bird's-eye view, the incalculable impact—including the cognitive impact—of political movements per se. Yet even the phrase “the closet” as a publicly intelligible signifier for gay-related epistemological issues is made available, obviously, only by the difference made by the post-Stonewall gay politics oriented around coming out of the closet. More generally, the centrality in this book's argument of a whole range of valuations and political perspectives that are unmistakably post-Stonewall will be, I hope, perfectly obvious. It is only in that context that the hypothesis of a

certain alternative, overarching periodization of definitional issues can be appropriately entertained.

The book that preceded this one, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, attempted to demonstrate the immanence of men's same-sex bonds, and their prohibitive structuration, to male-female bonds in nineteenth-century English literature. The relation of this book to its predecessor is defined most simply by the later time span that it treats. This has also involved, however, a different negotiation between feminist and antihomophobic motives in the two studies. *Between Men* ends with a coda pointing toward “the gaping and unbridgeable rift in the male homosocial spectrum” at the end of the nineteenth century, after which “a discussion of male homosocial desire as a whole really gives way to a discussion of male homosexuality and homophobia as we know them.”²⁰ (For more on that facile “as we know them,” see Axiom 5 below.) *Epistemology of the Closet*, which depends analytically on the conclusions reached in *Between Men*, takes up the story at exactly that point, and in that sense can more accurately be said to be primarily an antihomophobic book in its subject matter and perspective. That is to say, in terms that I will explain more fully in Axiom 2 below, the book's first focus is on sexuality rather than (sometimes, even, as opposed to) gender. *Between Men* focused on the oppressive effects on women and men of a cultural system in which male-male desire became widely intelligible primarily by being routed through triangular relations involving a woman. The inflictions of this system, far from disappearing since the turn of the century, have only become adapted and subtilized. But certainly the pressingly immediate fusion of feminist with gay male preoccupations and interrogations that *Between Men* sought to perform has seemed less available, analytically, for a twentieth-century culture in which at least some versions of a same-sex desire unmediated through heterosexual performance have become widely articulated.

Epistemology of the Closet is a feminist book mainly in the sense that its analyses were produced by someone whose thought has been macro- and microscopically infused with feminism over a long period. At the many intersections where a distinctively feminist (i.e., gender-centered) and a distinctively antihomophobic (i.e., sexuality-centered) inquiry have

20. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, pp. 201, 202.

seemed to diverge, however, this book has tried consistently to press on in the latter direction. I have made this choice largely because I see feminist analysis as being considerably more developed than gay male or anti-homophobic analysis at present—theoretically, politically, and institutionally. There are more people doing feminist analysis, it has been being done longer, it is less precarious and dangerous (still precarious and dangerous enough), and there is by now a much more broadly usable set of tools available for its furtherance. This is true notwithstanding the extraordinary recent efflorescence of gay and lesbian studies, without which, as I've suggested, the present book would have been impossible; that flowering is young, fragile, under extreme threat from both within and outside academic institutions, and still necessarily dependent on a limited pool of paradigms and readings. The viability, by now solidly established, of a persuasive feminist project of interpreting gender arrangements, oppressions, and resistances in Euro-American modernism and modernity from the turn of the century has been a condition of the possibility of this book but has also been taken as a permission or imperative to pursue a very different path in it. And, indeed, when another kind of intersection has loomed—the choice between risking a premature and therefore foreclosing reintegration between feminist and gay (male) terms of analysis, on the one hand, and on the other hand keeping their relation open a little longer by deferring yet again the moment of their accountability to one another—I have followed the latter path. This is bound to seem retardataire to some readers, but I hope they are willing to see it as a genuine deferral, in the interests of making space for a gay male-oriented analysis that would have its own claims to make for an illuminating centrality, rather than as a refusal. Ultimately, I do feel, a great deal depends—for all women, for lesbians, for gay men, and possibly for all men—on the fostering of our ability to arrive at understandings of sexuality that will respect a certain irreducibility in it to the terms and relations of gender.

A note on terminology. There is, I believe, no satisfactory rule for choosing between the usages "homosexual" and "gay," outside of a post-Stonewall context where "gay" must be preferable since it is the explicit choice of a large number of the people to whom it refers. Until recently it seemed that "homosexual," though it severely risked anachronism in any application before the late nineteenth century, was still somehow less temporally circumscribed than "gay," perhaps because it sounded more official, not to say diagnostic. That aura of timelessness about the word

has, however, faded rapidly—less because of the word's manifest inadequacy to the cognitive and behavioral maps of the centuries *before* its coining, than because the sources of its authority for the century *after* have seemed increasingly tendentious and dated. Thus "homosexual" and "gay" seem more and more to be terms applicable to distinct, nonoverlapping periods in the history of a phenomenon for which there then remains no overarching label. Accordingly I have tried to use each of the terms appropriately in contexts where historical differentiation between the earlier and later parts of the century seemed important. But to designate "the" phenomenon (problematical notion) as it stretches across a larger reach of history, I have used one or the other interchangeably, most often in contrast to the immediately relevant historical usage. (E.g., "gay" in a turn-of-the-century context or "homosexual" in a 1980s context would each be meant to suggest a categorization broad enough to include at least the other period as well.) I have not followed a convention, used by some scholars, of differentiating between "gay" and "homosexual" on the basis of whether a given text or person was perceived as embodying (respectively) gay affirmation or internalized homophobia; an unproblematical ease in distinguishing between these two things is not an assumption of this study. The main additional constraint on the usage of these terms in this book is a preference against employing the noun "gayness," or "gay" itself as a noun. I think what underlies this preference is a sense that the association of same-sex desire with the traditional, exciting meanings of the adjective "gay" is still a powerfully assertive act, perhaps not one to be lightly routinized by grammatical adaptations.

Gender has increasingly become a problem for this area of terminology, and one to which I have, again, no consistent solution. "Homosexual" was a relatively gender-neutral term and I use it as such, though it has always seemed to have at least some male bias—whether because of the pun on Latin *homo* = man latent in its etymological macaronic, or simply because of the greater attention to men in the discourse surrounding it (as in so many others). "Gay" is more complicated since it makes a claim to refer to both genders but is routinely yoked with "lesbian" in actual usage, as if it did not—as increasingly it does not—itsself refer to women. As I suggest in Axiom 3, this terminological complication is closely responsive to real ambiguities and struggles of gay/lesbian politics and identities: e.g., there are women-loving women who think of themselves as lesbians but not as gay, and others who think of themselves as gay women but not as lesbians. Since the premises of this study make it

impossible to presuppose either the unity or the distinctness of women's and men's changing, and indeed synchronically various, homosexual identities, and since its primary though not exclusive focus is in fact on male identities, I sometimes use "gay and lesbian" but more often simply "gay," the latter in the oddly precise sense of a phenomenon of same-sex desire that is being treated as indicatively but not exclusively male. When I mean to suggest a more fully, equitably two-sexed phenomenon I refer to "gay men and women," or "lesbians and gay men"; when a more exclusive one, to "gay men."

Finally, I feel painfully how different may be a given writer's and reader's senses of how best to articulate an argument that may for both seem a matter of urgency. I have tried to be as clear as I can about the book's moves, motives, and assumptions throughout; but even aside from the intrinsic difficulty of its subject and texts, it seems inevitable that the style of its writing will not conform to everyone's ideal of the pellucid. The fact that — if the book is right — the most significant stakes for the culture are involved in precisely the volatile, fractured, dangerous relations of visibility and articulation around homosexual possibility makes the prospect of its being misread especially fraught; to the predictable egoistic fear of its having no impact or a risible one there is added the dread of its operating destructively.

Let me give an example. There is reason to believe that gay-bashing is the most common and most rapidly increasing among what are becoming legally known as bias-related or hate-related crimes in the United States. There is no question that the threat of this violent, degrading, and often fatal extrajudicial sanction works even more powerfully than, and in intimately enforcing concert with, more respectably institutionalized sanctions against gay choice, expression, and being. The endemic intimacy of the link between extrajudicial and judicial punishment of homosexuality is clear, for instance, from the argument of legislators who, in state after state, have fought to exclude antigay violence from coverage under bills that would specifically criminalize bias-related crime — on the grounds that to specify a condemnation of *individual* violence against persons perceived as gay would vitiate the *state's* condemnation of homosexuality. These arguments have so far been successful in most of the states where the question has arisen; in fact, in some states (such as New York) where coverage of antigay violence was not dropped from hate-crimes bills, apparently solid racial/ethnic coalitions have fractured so badly over the issue that otherwise overwhelmingly popular bills have been repeatedly defeated. The state's treatment of nonstate antigay violence,

then, is an increasingly contested definitional interface of terms that impact critically but nonexclusively on gay people.

In this highly charged context, the treatment of gay-bashers who do wind up in court is also very likely to involve a plunge into a thicket of difficult and contested definitions. One of the thorniest of these has to do with "homosexual panic," a defense strategy that is commonly used to prevent conviction or to lighten sentencing of gay-bashers — a term, as well, that names a key analytic tool in the present study. Judicially, a "homosexual panic" defense for a person (typically a man) accused of antigay violence implies that his responsibility for the crime was diminished by a pathological psychological condition, perhaps brought on by an unwanted sexual advance from the man whom he then attacked. In addition to the unwarranted assumptions that all gay men may plausibly be accused of making sexual advances to strangers and, worse, that violence, often to the point of homicide, is a legitimate response to any sexual advance whether welcome or not, the "homosexual panic" defense rests on the falsely individualizing and pathologizing assumption that hatred of homosexuals is so private and so atypical a phenomenon in this culture as to be classifiable as an accountability-reducing illness. The widespread acceptance of this defense really seems to show, to the contrary, that hatred of homosexuals is even more public, more typical, hence harder to find any leverage against than hatred of other disadvantaged groups. "Race panic" or "gender panic," for instance, is not accepted as a defense for violence against people of color or against women; as for "heterosexual panic," David Wertheimer, executive director of the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, remarks, "If every heterosexual woman who had a sexual advance made to her by a male had the right to murder the man, the streets of this city would be littered with the bodies of heterosexual men."²¹ A lawyer for the National Gay Rights Advocates makes explicit the contrast with legal treatment of other bias-related crimes: "There is no factual or legal justification for the use of this [homosexual panic] defense. Just as our society will not allow a defendant to use racial or gender-based prejudices as an excuse for his violent acts, a defendant's homophobia is no defense to a violent crime."²²

21. Peter Freiberg, "Blaming the Victim: New Life for the 'Gay Panic' Defense," *The Advocate*, May 24, 1988, p. 12. For a more thorough discussion of the homosexual panic defense, see "Burdens on Gay Litigants and Bias in the Court System: Homosexual Panic, Child Custody, and Anonymous Parties," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 19 (1984): 498-515.

22. Quoted from Joyce Norcini, in "NGRA Discredits 'Homosexual Panic' Defense," *New York Native*, no. 322 (June 19, 1989): 12.

→ Thus, a lot of the popularity of the “homosexual panic” defense seems to come simply from its ability to permit and “place,” by pathologizing, the enactment of a socially sanctioned prejudice against one stigmatized minority, a particularly demeaned one among many. Its special plausibility, however, seems also to depend on a difference between antigay crime and other bias-related antiminority crime: the difference of how much less clear, perhaps finally how impossible, is the boundary circumscription of a minoritizing gay identity. After all, the reason why this defense borrows the name of the (formerly rather obscure and little-diagnosed) psychiatric classification “*homosexual panic*” is that it refers to the supposed uncertainty about his own sexual identity of the perpetrator of the antigay violence. That this should be the typifying scenario of defenses of gay-bashers (as uncertainty about one’s own race, religion, ethnicity, or gender is not in other cases of bias-related violence) shows once again how the overlapping aegises of minoritizing and universalizing understandings of male homo/heterosexual definition can tend to redouble the victimization of gay people. In effect, the homosexual panic defense performs a double act of minoritizing taxonomy: there is, it asserts, one distinct minority of gay people, and a second minority, equally distinguishable from the population at large, of “latent homosexuals” whose “insecurity about their own masculinity” is so anomalous as to permit a plea based on diminution of normal moral responsibility. At the same time, the efficacy of the plea depends on its universalizing force, on whether, as Wertheimer says, it can “create a climate in which the jurors are able to identify with the perpetrator by saying, ‘My goodness, maybe *I* would have reacted the same way.’”²³ The reliance of the homosexual panic plea on the fact that this male definitional crisis is systemic and endemic is enabled only, and precisely, by its denial of the same fact.

When in my work on *Between Men*, knowing nothing about this judicial use of “homosexual panic” (at that time a less common and publicized defense), I needed a name for “a structural residue of terrorist potential, of *blackmailability*, of Western maleness through the leverage of homophobia,” I found myself attracted to just the same phrase, borrowed from the same relatively rare psychiatric diagnosis. Through a linguistic theft whose violence I trusted would be legible in every usage of the phrase, I tried to turn what had been a taxonomic, minoritizing medical

category into a structural principle applicable to the definitional work of an entire gender, hence of an entire culture. I used it to denominate “the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century Western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail”—as, specifically, “only one path of control, complementary to public sanctions through the institutions described by Foucault and others as defining and regulating the amorphous territory of ‘the sexual.’”²⁴

The forensic use of the “homosexual panic” defense for gay-bashers depends on the medically mediated ability of the phrase to obscure an overlap between individual pathology and systemic function. The reason I found the phrase attractive for my purposes was quite the opposite: I thought it could dramatize, render visible, even render scandalous the same space of overlap. The set of perceptions condensed in that usage of “male homosexual panic” proved, I think, a productive feature of *Between Men* for other critics, especially those doing gay theory, and I have continued my explorations of the same phrase, used in the same sense, in *Epistemology of the Closet*. Yet I feel, as well, with increasing dismay, in the increasingly homophobic atmosphere of public discourse since 1985, that work done to accentuate and clarify the explanatory power of this difficult nexus may not be able to be reliably insulated from uses that ought to be diametrically opposed to it. For instance, it would not require a willfully homophobic reader to understand these discussions of the centrality and power of male homosexual panic as actually contributing to the credibility of the pathologizing “homosexual panic” legal defense of gay-bashers. All it would require would be a failure or refusal to understand how necessarily the discussions are embedded within their context—the context, that is, of an analysis based on systemwide skepticism about the positivist taxonomic neutrality of psychiatry, about the classificatory coherence (e.g., concerning “individual responsibility”) of the law. If, foreseeing the possibility of this particular misuse, I have, as I hope, been able to take the explanatory measures necessary to guard against it, still there may be too many others unforeseen.

Of course, silence on these issues performs the enforcing work of the status quo more predictably and inexorably than any attempt at analysis. Yet the tensions and pleasures that, even ideally, make it possible for a

23. Freiberg, “Blaming the Victim,” p. 11.

24. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 89.

writer to invest such a project with her best thought may be so different from those that might enable a given reader to.

- * In the remainder of this Introduction I will be trying to articulate some of the otherwise implicit methodological, definitional, and axiomatic groundings of the book's project and explaining, as well, something of my view of its position within broader projects of understanding sexuality and gender.

Anyone working in gay and lesbian studies, in a culture where same-sex desire is still structured by its distinctive public/private status, at once marginal and central, as *the* open secret, discovers that the line between straining at truths that prove to be imbecilically self-evident, on the one hand, and on the other hand tossing off commonplaces that turn out to retain their power to galvanize and divide, is weirdly unpredictable. In dealing with an open-secret structure, it's only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative. In this Introduction I shall have methodically to sweep into one little heap some of the otherwise unarticulated assumptions and conclusions from a long-term project of antihomophobic analysis. These nails, these scraps of wiring: will they bore or will they shock?

Under the rule that most privileges the most obvious:

★ *Axiom 1: People are different from each other.*

It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact. A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions. They, with the associated demonstrations of the mechanisms by which they are constructed and reproduced, are indispensable, and they may indeed override all or some other forms of difference and similarity. But the sister or brother, the best friend, the classmate, the parent, the child, the lover, the ex-: our families, loves, and enmities alike, not to mention the strange relations of our work, play, and activism, prove that even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species.

Everybody has learned this, I assume, and probably everybody who

survives at all has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human social landscape. It is probably people with the experience of oppression or subordination who have most *need* to know it; and I take the precious, devalued arts of gossip, immemorially associated in European thought with servants, with effeminate and gay men, with all women, to have to do not even so much with the transmission of necessary news as with the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about what *kinds of people* there are to be found in one's world.²⁵ The writing of a Proust or a James would be exemplary here: projects precisely of *nonce* taxonomy, of the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world.

I don't assume that all gay men or all women are very skilled at the nonce-taxonomic work represented by gossip, but it does make sense to suppose that our distinctive needs are peculiarly disserved by its devaluation. For some people, the sustained, foregrounded pressure of loss in the AIDS years may be making such needs clearer: as one anticipates or tries to deal with the absence of people one loves, it seems absurdly impoverishing to surrender to theoretical trivialization or to "the sentimental" one's descriptive requirements that the piercing bouquet of a given friend's particularity be done some justice. What is more dramatic is that—in spite of every promise to the contrary—every single theoretically or politically interesting project of postwar thought has finally had the effect of delegitimizing our space for asking or thinking in detail about the multiple, unstable ways in which people may be like or different from each other. This project is not rendered otiose by any demonstration of how fully people may differ also from themselves. Deconstruction, founded as a very science of *différ(e/a)nce*, has both so fetishized the idea of difference and so vaporized its possible embodiments that its most thoroughgoing practitioners are the last people to whom one would now look for help in thinking about particular differences. The same thing seems likely to prove true of theorists of postmodernism. Psychoanalytic theory, if only through the almost astrologically lush plurality of its overlapping taxonomies of physical zones, developmental stages, repre-

25. On this, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

representational mechanisms, and levels of consciousness, seemed to promise to introduce a certain becoming amplitude into discussions of what different people are like—only to turn, in its streamlined trajectory across so many institutional boundaries, into the sveltest of metatheoretical disciplines, sleeked down to such elegant operational entities as *the mother, the father, the preoedipal, the oedipal, the other or Other*. Within the less theorized institutional confines of intrapsychoanalytic discourse, meanwhile, a narrowly and severely normative, difference-eradicating ethical program has long sheltered under developmental narratives and a metaphors of health and pathology.²⁶ In more familiar ways, Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and other engagé critical projects have deepened understandings of a few crucial axes of difference, perhaps necessarily at the expense of more ephemeral or less global impulses of differential grouping. In each of these inquiries, so much has been gained by the different ways we have learned to deconstruct the category of *the individual* that it is easy for us now to read, say, Proust as the most expert operator of our modern technologies for dismantling taxonomies of the person. For the emergence and persistence of the vitalizing worldly taxonomic energies on which Proust also depends, however, we have no theoretical support to offer. And these defalcations in our indispensable antihumanist discourses have apparently ceded the potentially forceful ground of profound, complex variation to humanist liberal “tolerance” or repressively trivializing celebration at best, to reactionary suppression at worst.²⁷

This is among other things a way of saying that there is a large family of things *we know* and need to know about ourselves and each other with which we have, as far as I can see, so far created for ourselves almost no theoretical room to deal. The shifting interfacial resistance of “literature itself” to “theory” may mark, along with its other denotations, the surface tension of this reservoir of unrationalized nonce-taxonomic energies; but, while distinctively representational, these energies are in no sense peculiarly literary.

In the particular area of sexuality, for instance, I assume that most of us

26. For a good discussion of this, see Henry Abelove, “Freud, Male Homosexuality, and the Americans,” *Dissent* 33 (Winter 1986): 59–69.

27. Gayle Rubin discusses a related problem, that of the foreclosed space for acknowledging “benign sexual variation,” in her “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 283.

know the following things that can differentiate even people of identical gender, race, nationality, class, and “sexual orientation”—each one of which, however, if taken seriously as pure *difference*, retains the unaccounted-for potential to disrupt many forms of the available thinking about sexuality.

- Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people.
- To some people, the nimbus of “the sexual” seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others, it enfolds them loosely or floats virtually free of them.
- Sexuality makes up a large share of the self-perceived identity of some people, a small share of others’.
- Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little.
- Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none.
- Many people have their richest mental/emotional involvement with sexual acts that they don’t do, or even don’t *want* to do.
- For some people, it is important that sex be embedded in contexts resonant with meaning, narrative, and connectedness with other aspects of their life; for other people, it is important that they not be; to others it doesn’t occur that they might be.
- For some people, the preference for a certain sexual object, act, role, zone, or scenario is so immemorial and durable that it can only be experienced as innate; for others, it appears to come late or to feel aleatory or discretionary.
- For some people, the possibility of bad sex is aversive enough that their lives are strongly marked by its avoidance; for others, it isn’t.
- For some people, sexuality provides a needed space of heightened discovery and cognitive hyperstimulation. For others, sexuality provides a needed space of routinized habituation and cognitive hiatus.
- Some people like spontaneous sexual scenes, others like highly scripted ones, others like spontaneous-sounding ones that are nonetheless totally predictable.
- Some people’s sexual orientation is intensely marked by autoerotic pleasures and histories—sometimes more so than by any aspect of

alloerotic object choice. For others the autoerotic possibility seems secondary or fragile, if it exists at all.

- Some people, homo-, hetero-, and bisexual, experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meanings and gender differentials. Others of each sexuality, do not.

The list of individual differences could easily be extended. That many of them could differentiate one from another period of the same person's life as well as one person's totality from another's, or that many of them record differentia that can circulate from one person to another, does not, I believe, lessen their authority to demarcate; they demarcate at more than one site and on more than one scale. The impact of such a list may seem to depend radically on a trust in the self-perception, self-knowledge, or self-report of individuals, in an area that is if anything notoriously resistant to the claims of common sense and introspection: where would the whole, astonishing and metamorphic Western romance tradition (I include psychoanalysis) be if people's sexual desire, of all things, were even momentarily assumed to be transparent to themselves? Yet I am even more impressed by the leap of presumptuousness necessary to dismiss such a list of differences than by the leap of faith necessary to entertain it. To alienate conclusively, *definitionally*, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure. In this century, in which sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge, it may represent the most intimate violence possible. It is also an act replete with the most disempowering mundane institutional effects and potentials. It is, of course, central to the modern history of homophobic oppression.

The safer proceeding would seem to be to give as much credence as one finds it conceivable to give to self-reports of sexual difference—weighting one's credence, when it is necessary to weight it at all, in favor of the less normative and therefore riskier, costlier self-reports. To follow this proceeding is to enclose protectively large areas of, not mere agnosticism, but more active potential pluralism on the heavily contested maps of sexual definition. If, for instance, many people who self-identify as gay experience the gender of sexual object-choice, or some other proto-form of individual gay identity, as the most immutable and immemorial component of individual being, I can see no grounds for either subordinating this perception to or privileging it over that of other self-identified gay people whose experience of identity or object-choice has seemed to themselves to

come relatively late or even to be discretionary. In so homophobic a culture, anyone's dangerous decision to self-identify as gay ought to command at least that entailment of *bona fides* and propriodescriptive authority. While there are certainly rhetorical and political grounds on which it may make sense to choose at a given moment between articulating, for instance, essentialist and constructivist (or minoritizing and universalizing) accounts of gay identity, there are, with equal certainty, rhetorical and political grounds for underwriting continuously the legitimacy of both accounts. And beyond these, there are crucial reasons of respect. I have felt that for this study to work most incisively would require framing its questions in such a way as to perform the least possible delegitimation of felt and reported differences and to impose the lightest possible burden of platonic definitional stress. Repeatedly to ask how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially *mean*, has been my principal strategy.

- Axiom 2: *The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we can't know in advance how they will be different.* ★

Sex, gender, sexuality: three terms whose usage relations and analytical relations are almost irremediably slippery. The charting of a space between something called "sex" and something called "gender" has been one of the most influential and successful undertakings of feminist thought. For the purposes of that undertaking, "sex" has had the meaning of a certain group of irreducible, biological differentiations between members of the species *Homo sapiens* who have XX and those who have XY chromosomes. These include (or are ordinarily thought to include) more or less marked dimorphisms of genital formation, hair growth (in populations that have body hair), fat distribution, hormonal function, and reproductive capacity. "Sex" in this sense—what I'll demarcate as "chromosomal sex"—is seen as the relatively minimal raw material on which is then based the social construction of **gender**. Gender, then, is the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors—of male and female *persons*—in a cultural system for which "male/female" functions as a primary and perhaps model binarism affecting the struc-

ture and meaning of many, many other binarisms whose apparent connection to chromosomal sex will often be exiguous or nonexistent. Compared to chromosomal sex, which is seen (by these definitions) as tending to be immutable, immanent in the individual, and biologically based, the meaning of gender is seen as culturally, mutable and variable, highly relational (in the sense that each of the binarized genders is defined primarily by its relation to the other), and inextricable from a history of power differentials between genders. This feminist charting of what Gayle Rubin refers to as a "sex/gender system,"²⁸ the system by which chromosomal sex is turned into, and processed as, cultural gender, has tended to minimize the attribution of people's various behaviors and identities to chromosomal sex and to maximize their attribution to socialized gender constructs. The purpose of that strategy has been to gain analytic and critical leverage on the female-disadvantaging social arrangements that prevail at a given time in a given society, by throwing into question their legitimative ideological grounding in biologically based narratives of the "natural."

"Sex" is, however, a term that extends indefinitely beyond chromosomal sex. That its history of usage often overlaps with what might, now, more properly be called "gender" is only one problem. ("I can only love someone of my own sex." Shouldn't "sex" be "gender" in such a sentence? "M. saw that the person who approached was of the opposite sex." Genders—insofar as there are two and they are defined in contradistinction to one another—may be said to be opposite; but in what sense is XX the opposite of XY?) Beyond chromosomes, however, the association of "sex," precisely through the physical body, with reproduction and with genital activity and sensation keeps offering new challenges to the conceptual clarity or even possibility of sex/gender differentiation. There is a powerful argument to be made that a primary (or *the* primary) issue in gender differentiation and gender struggle is the question of who is to have control of women's (biologically) distinctive reproductive capability. Indeed, the intimacy of the association between several of the most signal forms of gender oppression and "the facts" of women's bodies and women's reproductive activity has led some radical feminists to question, more or less explicitly, the usefulness of insisting on a sex/gender distinc-

28. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157–210.

tion. For these reasons, even usages involving the "sex/gender system" within feminist theory are able to use "sex/gender" only to delineate a problematical *space* rather than a crisp distinction. My own loose usage in this book will be to denominate that problematized space of the sex/gender system, the whole package of physical and cultural distinctions between women and men, more simply under the rubric "gender." I do this in order to reduce the likelihood of confusion between "sex" in the sense of "the space of differences between male and female" (what I'll be grouping under "gender") and "sex" in the sense of sexuality.

For meanwhile the whole realm of what modern culture refers to as "sexuality" and *also* calls "sex"—the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women and men, that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them—that realm is virtually impossible to situate on a map delimited by the feminist-defined sex/gender distinction. To the degree that it has a center or starting point in certain physical sites, acts, and rhythms associated (however contingently) with procreation or the potential for it, "sexuality" in this sense may seem to be of a piece with "chromosomal sex": biologically necessary to species survival, tending toward the individually immanent, the socially immutable, the given. But to the extent that, as Freud argued and Foucault assumed, the distinctively sexual nature of human sexuality has to do precisely with its excess over or potential difference from the bare choreographies of procreation, "sexuality" might be the very opposite of what we originally referred to as (chromosomal-based) sex: it could occupy, instead, even more than "gender" the polar position of the relational, the social/symbolic, the constructed, the variable, the representational (see Figure 1). To note that, according to these different findings, *something* legitimately called sex or sexuality is all over the experiential and conceptual map is to record a problem less resolvable than a necessary choice of analytic paradigms or a determinate slippage of semantic meaning; it is rather, I would say, true to quite a range of contemporary worldviews and intuitions to find that sex/sexuality *does* tend to represent the full spectrum of positions between the most intimate and the most social, the most predetermined and the most aleatory, the most physically rooted and the most symbolically infused, the most innate and the most learned, the most autonomous and the most relational traits of being.

If all this is true of the definitional nexus between sex and sexuality, how much less simple, even, must be that between sexuality and gender. It will

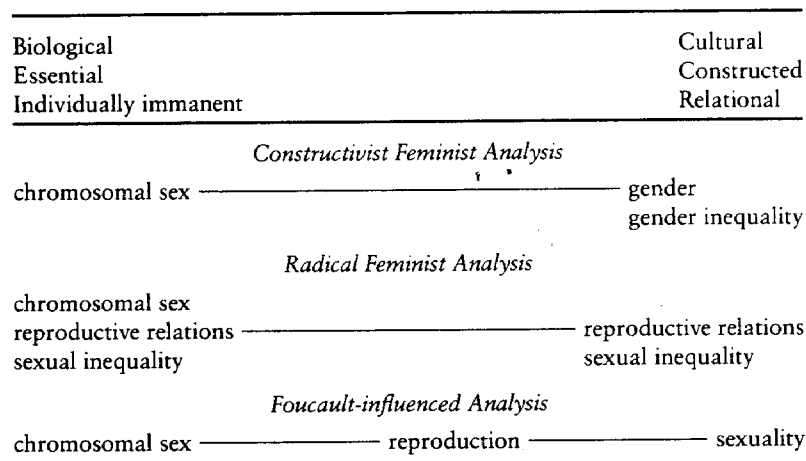


Figure 1. Some Mappings of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

be an assumption of this study that there is always at least the potential for an analytic distance between gender and sexuality, even if particular manifestations or features of particular sexualities are among the things that plunge women and men most ineluctably into the discursive, institutional, and bodily enmeshments of gender definition, gender relation, and gender inequality. This, too, has been posed by Gayle Rubin:

I want to challenge the assumption that feminism is or should be the privileged site of a theory of sexuality. Feminism is the theory of gender oppression. . . . Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing.²⁹

This book will hypothesize, with Rubin, that the question of gender and the question of sexuality, inextricable from one another though they are in that each can be expressed only in the terms of the other, are nonetheless not the same question, that in twentieth-century Western culture gender and sexuality represent two analytic axes that may productively be imagined as being as distinct from one another as, say, gender and class, or class and race. Distinct, that is to say, no more than minimally, but nonetheless usefully.

Under this hypothesis, then, just as one has learned to assume that

29. Rubin, "Thinking Sex," pp. 307–8.

every issue of racial meaning must be embodied through the specificity of a particular class position—and every issue of class, for instance, through the specificity of a particular gender position—so every issue of gender would necessarily be embodied through the specificity of a particular sexuality, and vice versa; but nonetheless there could be use in keeping the analytic axes distinct.

An objection to this analogy might be that gender is *definitionally* built into determinations of sexuality, in a way that neither of them is definitionally intertwined with, for instance, determinations of class or race. It is certainly true that without a concept of gender there could be, quite simply, no concept of homo- or heterosexuality. But many other dimensions of sexual choice (auto- or alloerotic, within or between generations, species, etc.) have no such distinctive, explicit definitional connection with gender; indeed, some dimensions of sexuality might be tied, not to gender, but *instead* to differences or similarities of race or class. The definitional narrowing-down in this century of sexuality as a whole to a binarized calculus of *homo-* or *heterosexuality* is a weighty fact but an entirely historical one. To use that fact as a reason for analytically conflating sexuality per se with gender would obscure the degree to which the fact itself requires explanation. It would also, I think, risk obscuring yet again the extreme intimacy with which all these available analytic axes do after all mutually constitute one another: to assume the distinctiveness of the *intimacy* between sexuality and gender might well risk assuming too much about the definitional *separability* of either of them from determinations of, say, class or race.

It may be, as well, that a damaging bias toward heterosocial or heterosexist assumptions inheres unavoidably in the very concept of gender. This bias would be built into any gender-based analytic perspective to the extent that gender definition and gender identity are necessarily relational between genders—to the extent, that is, that in any gender system, female identity or definition is constructed by analogy, supplementarity, or contrast to male, or vice versa. Although many gender-based forms of analysis do involve accounts, sometimes fairly rich ones, of intragender behaviors and relations, the ultimate definitional appeal in any gender-based analysis must necessarily be to the diacritical frontier between different genders. This gives heterosocial and heterosexual relations a conceptual privilege of incalculable consequence. Undeniably, residues, markers, tracks, signs referring to that diacritical frontier between genders are everywhere, as well, internal to and determinative of

the experience of each gender and its intragender relations; gender-based analysis can never be dispensed with in even the most purely intragender context. Nevertheless it seems predictable that the analytic bite of a purely gender-based account will grow less incisive and direct as the distance of its subject from a social interface between different genders increases. It is unrealistic to expect a close, textured analysis of same-sex relations through an optic calibrated in the first place to the coarser stigmata of gender difference.³⁰ The development of an alternative analytic axis—call it sexuality—might well be, therefore, a particularly urgent project for gay/lesbian and antihomophobic inquiry.

It would be a natural corollary to Axiom 2 to hypothesize, then, that gay/lesbian and antihomophobic inquiry still has a lot to learn from asking questions that feminist inquiry has learned to ask—but only so long as we don't demand to receive the same answers in both interlocutions. In a comparison of feminist and gay theory as they currently stand, the newness and consequent relative underdevelopment of gay theory are seen most clearly in two manifestations. First, we are by now very used to asking as feminists what we aren't yet used to asking as antihomophobic readers: how a variety of forms of oppression intertwine systemically with each other; and especially how the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may by the same positioning be enabled through others. For instance, the understated demeanor of educated women in our society tends to mark both their deference to educated men and their expectation of deference from women and men of lower class. Again, a woman's use of a married name makes graphic at the same time her subordination as a woman and her privilege as a presumptive heterosexual. Or, again, the distinctive vulnerability to rape of women of all races has become in this country a powerful tool for the racist enforcement by which white people, including women, are privileged at the expense of Black people of both genders. That one is either oppressed or an oppressor, or that if one happens to be both, the two are not likely to have much to do with each other, still seems to be a common assumption, however, in at any rate

30. For valuable related discussions, see Katie King, "The Situation of Lesbianism as Feminism's Magical Sign: Contests for Meaning and the US Women's Movement, 1968–1972," in *Communication* 9 (1986): 65–91. Special issue, "Feminist Critiques of Popular Culture," ed. Paula A. Treichler and Ellen Wartella, 9: 65–91; and Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," *Theatre Journal* 40 (May 1988): 155–77.

male gay writing and activism,³¹ as it hasn't for a long time been in careful feminist work.

Indeed, it was the long, painful realization, *not* that all oppressions are congruent, but that they are *differently* structured and so must intersect in complex embodiments that was the first great heuristic breakthrough of socialist-feminist thought and of the thought of women of color.³² This realization has as its corollary that the comparison of different axes of oppression is a crucial task, not for any purpose of ranking oppressions, but to the contrary because each oppression is likely to be in a uniquely indicative relation to certain distinctive nodes of cultural organization. The *special* centrality of homophobic oppression in the twentieth century, I will be arguing, has resulted from its inextricability from the question of

31. Gay male-centered work that uses more complex models to investigate the intersection of different oppressions includes Gay Left Collective, eds., *Homosexuality: Power and Politics* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980); Paul Hoch, *White Hero Black Beast: Racism, Sexism, and the Mask of Masculinity* (London: Pluto, 1979); Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (London: Allison & Busby, 1978); Mario Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Gay Men's Press, 1980); D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); Michael Moon, "The Gentle Boy from the Dangerous Classes: Pederasty, Domesticity, and Capitalism in Horatio Alger," *Representations*, no. 19 (Summer 1987): 87–110; Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); and Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London: Longman, 1980).

32. The influential socialist-feminist investigations have included Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: Verso, 1980); Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979); and Juliet Mitchell, *Women's Estate* (New York: Vintage, 1973). On the intersections of racial with gender and sexual oppressions, see, for example, Elly Bulkin, Barbara Smith, and Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (New York: Long Haul Press, 1984); Bell Hooks [Gloria Watkins], *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Katie King, "Audre Lorde's Lacquered Layerings: The Lesbian Bar as a Site of Literary Production," *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (1988): 321–42; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1984); Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca paso por sus labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown: Persephone, 1981; rpt. ed., New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1984); and Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983). Good overviews of several of these intersections as they relate to women and in particular to lesbians, can be found in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds., *The Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review/New Feminist Library, 1983); Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*; and de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference."

knowledge and the processes of knowing in modern Western culture at large.

The second and perhaps even greater heuristic leap of feminism has been the recognition that categories of gender and, hence, oppressions of gender can have a structuring force for nodes of thought, for axes of cultural discrimination, whose thematic subject isn't explicitly gendered at all. Through a series of developments structured by the deconstructive understandings and procedures sketched above, we have now learned as feminist readers that dichotomies in a given text of culture as opposed to nature, public as opposed to private, mind as opposed to body, activity as opposed to passivity, etc. etc., are, under particular pressures of culture and history, likely places to look for implicit allegories of the relations of men to women; more, that to fail to analyze such nominally ungendered constructs in gender terms can itself be a gravely tendentious move in the gender politics of reading. This has given us ways to ask the question of gender about texts even where the culturally "marked" gender (female) is not present as either author or thematic.

The dichotomy heterosexual/homosexual, as it has emerged through the last century of Western discourse, would seem to lend itself peculiarly neatly to a set of analytic moves learned from this deconstructive moment in feminist theory. In fact, the dichotomy heterosexual/homosexual fits the deconstructive template much more neatly than male/female itself does, and hence, importantly differently. The most dramatic difference between gender and sexual orientation—that virtually all people are publicly and unalterably assigned to one or the other gender, and from birth—seems if anything to mean that it is, rather, sexual orientation, with its far greater potential for rearrangement, ambiguity, and representational doubleness, that would offer the apter deconstructive object. An essentialism of sexual object-choice is far less easy to maintain, far more visibly incoherent, more visibly stressed and challenged at every point in the culture than any essentialism of gender. This is not an argument for any epistemological or ontological privileging of an axis of sexuality over an axis of gender; but it is a powerful argument for their potential distinctness one from the other.

Even given the imperative of constructing an account of sexuality irreducible to gender, however, it should already be clear that there are certain distortions necessarily built into the relation of gay/lesbian and antihomophobic theory to a larger project of conceiving a theory of sexuality as a whole. The two can after all scarcely be coextensive. And

this is true not because "gay/lesbian and antihomophobic theory" would fail to cover heterosexual as well as same-sex object-choice (any more than "feminist theory" would fail to cover men as well as women), but rather because, as we have noted, sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren't well described in terms of the gender of object-choice at all. Some of these dimensions are habitually condensed under the rubrics of object-choice, so that certain discriminations of (for instance) *act* or of (for another instance) *erotic localization* come into play, however implicitly and however incoherently, when categories of object-choice are mobilized. One used, for instance, to hear a lot about a high developmental stage called "heterosexual genitality," as though cross-gender object-choice automatically erased desires attaching to mouth, anus, breasts, feet, etc.; a certain anal-erotic salience of male homosexuality is if anything increasingly strong under the glare of heterosexist AIDS-phobia; and several different historical influences have led to the de-genitalization and bodily diffusion of many popular, and indeed many lesbian, understandings of lesbian sexuality. Other dimensions of sexuality, however, distinguish object-choice quite differently (e.g., human/animal, adult/child, singular/plural, autoerotic/alloerotic) or are not even about object choice (e.g., orgasmic/nonorgasmic, noncommercial/commercial, using bodies only/using manufactured objects, in private/in public, spontaneous/scripted).³³ Some of these other dimensions of sexuality have had high diacritical importance in different historical contexts (e.g., human/animal, autoerotic/alloerotic). Others, like adult/child object choice, visibly do have such importance today, but without being very fully subsumed under the hetero/homosexual binarism. Still others, including a host of them I haven't mentioned or couldn't think of, subsist in this culture as nondiacritical differences, differences that seem to make little difference beyond themselves—except that the hyperintensive structuring of sexuality in our culture sets several of them, for instance, at the exact border between legal and illegal. What I mean at any rate to emphasize is that the implicit condensation of "sexual theory" into "gay/lesbian and antihomophobic theory," which corresponds roughly to our by now unquestioned reading of the phrase "sexual orientation" to mean "gender of object-choice," is at the very least damagingly skewed by the specificity of its historical placement.

33. This list owes something to Rubin, "Thinking Sex," esp. pp. 281–82.



Axiom 3: There can't be an a priori decision about how far it will make sense to conceptualize lesbian and gay male identities together. Or separately.

Although it was clear from the beginning of this book project that its central focus would be on male sexual definition, the theoretical tools for drawing a circumferential boundary around that center have been elusive. They have changed perceptibly even during the period of this writing. In particular, the interpretive frameworks within which lesbian writers, readers, and interlocutors are likely to process male-centered reflections on homo/heterosexual issues are in a phase of destabilizing flux and promise.

The lesbian interpretive framework most readily available at the time this project began was the separatist-feminist one that emerged from the 1970s. According to that framework, there were essentially no valid grounds of commonality between gay male and lesbian experience and identity; to the contrary, women-loving women and men-loving men must be at precisely opposite ends of the gender spectrum. The assumptions at work here were indeed radical ones: most important, as we'll be discussing further in the next chapter, the stunningly efficacious re-visioning, in female terms, of same-sex desire as being at the very definitional center of each gender, rather than as occupying a cross-gender or liminal position between them. Thus, women who loved women were seen as *more* female, men who loved men as quite possibly more male, than those whose desire crossed boundaries of gender. The axis of sexuality, in this view, was not only exactly coextensive with the axis of gender but expressive of its most heightened essence: "Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice." By analogy, male homosexuality could be, and often was, seen as the practice for which male supremacy was the theory.³⁴ A particular reading of modern gender history was, of course, implicit in and in turn propelled by this gender-separatist framework. In accord with, for instance, Adrienne Rich's understanding of many aspects of women's bonds as constituting a "lesbian continuum," this history, found in its purest form in the work of Lilian Faderman, deemphasized the definitional discontinuities and perturbations between more and less sexualized, more

34. See, among others, Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1983), and Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 170-91.

and less prohibited, and more and less gender-identity-bound forms of female same-sex bonding.³⁵ Insofar as lesbian object-choice was viewed as epitomizing a specificity of female experience and resistance, insofar as a symmetrically opposite understanding of gay male object-choice also obtained, and insofar also as feminism necessarily posited male and female experiences and interests as different and opposed, the implication was that an understanding of male homo/heterosexual definition could offer little or no affordance or interest for any lesbian theoretical project. Indeed, the powerful impetus of a gender-polarized feminist ethical schema made it possible for a profoundly antihomophobic reading of lesbian desire (as a quintessence of the female) to fuel a correspondingly homophobic reading of gay male desire (as a quintessence of the male).

Since the late 1970s, however, there have emerged a variety of challenges to this understanding of how lesbian and gay male desires and identities might be mapped against each other. Each challenge has led to a refreshed sense that lesbians and gay men may share important though contested aspects of one another's histories, cultures, identities, politics, and destinies. These challenges have emerged from the "sex wars" within feminism over pornography and s/m, which seemed to many pro-sex feminists to expose a devastating continuity between a certain, theretofore privileged feminist understanding of a resistant female identity, on the one hand, and on the other the most repressive nineteenth-century bourgeois constructions of a sphere of pure femininity. Such challenges emerged as well from the reclamation and relegitimation of a courageous history of lesbian trans-gender role-playing and identification.³⁶ Along with this new historical making-visible of self-defined mannish lesbians came a new salience of the many ways in which male and female homosexual identities had in fact been constructed through and in relation to each other over

35. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in Catharine R. Stimpson and Ethel Spector Person, eds., *Women, Sex, and Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 62-91; Lilian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York: William Morrow, 1982).

36. See, for instance, Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," in Estelle B. Freedman, Barbara C. Gelpi, Susan L. Johnson, and Kathleen M. Weston, eds., *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from SIGNS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 7-25; Joan Nestle, "Butch-Fem Relationships," pp. 21-24, and Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With," pp. 58-62, both in *Heresies* 12, no. 3 (1981); Sue-Ellen Case, "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 11, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1988-1989): 55-73; de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference"; and my "Across Gender, Across Sexuality: Willa Cather and Others," *SAQ* 88, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 53-72.

the last century—by the variously homophobic discourses of professional expertise, but also and just as actively by many lesbians and gay men.³⁷ The irrepressible, relatively class-nonspecific popular culture in which James Dean has been as numinous an icon for lesbians as Garbo or Dietrich has for gay men seems resistant to a purely feminist theorization.³⁸ It is in these contexts that calls for a theorized axis of sexuality as distinct from gender have developed. And after the anti-s/m, antipornography liberal-feminist move toward labeling and stigmatizing particular sexualities joined its energies with those of the much longer-established conservative sanctions against all forms of sexual “deviance,” it remained only for the terrible accident of the HIV epidemic and the terrifyingly genocidal overdeterminations of AIDS discourse to reconstruct a category of the pervert capacious enough to admit homosexuals of any gender. The newly virulent homophobia of the 1980s, directed alike against women and men even though its medical pretext ought, if anything, logically to give a relative exemptive privilege to lesbians,³⁹ reminds un- gently that it is more to friends than to enemies that gay women and gay men are perceptible as distinct groups. Equally, however, the internal perspective of the gay movements shows women and men increasingly, though far from uncontestedly and far from equally, working together on mutually antihomophobic agendas. The contributions of lesbians to current gay and AIDS activism are weighty, not despite, but because of the intervening lessons of feminism. Feminist perspectives on medicine and health-care issues, on civil disobedience, and on the politics of class and race as well as of sexuality have been centrally enabling for the recent waves of AIDS activism. What this activism returns to the lesbians in-

37. On this see, among others, Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

38. On James Dean, see Sue Golding, “James Dean: The Almost-Perfect Lesbian Hermaphrodite,” *On Our Backs* (Winter 1988): 18–19, 39–44.

39. This is not, of course, to suggest that lesbians are less likely than persons of any other sexuality to contract HIV infection, when they engage in the (quite common) acts that can transmit the virus, with a person (and there are many, including lesbians) who already carries it. In this particular paradigm-clash between a discourse of sexual *identity* and a discourse of sexual *acts*, the former alternative is uniquely damaging. No one should wish to reinforce the myth that the epidemiology of AIDS is a matter of discrete “risk groups” rather than of particular acts that can call for particular forms of prophylaxis. That myth is dangerous to self-identified or publicly identified gay men and drug users because it scapegoats them, and dangerous to everyone else because it discourages them from protecting themselves and their sex or needle partners. But, for a variety of reasons, the incidence of AIDS among lesbians has indeed been lower than among many other groups.

volved in it may include a more richly pluralized range of imaginings of lines of gender and sexual identification.

Thus, it can no longer make sense, if it ever did, simply to assume that a male-centered analysis of homo/heterosexual definition will have no lesbian relevance or interest. At the same time, there are no algorithms for assuming a priori what its lesbian relevance could be or how far its lesbian interest might extend. It seems inevitable to me that the work of defining the circumferential boundaries, vis-à-vis lesbian experience and identity, of any gay male-centered theoretical articulation can be done only from the point of view of an alternative, femino-centric theoretical space, not from the heart of the male-centered project itself.

However interested I am in understanding those boundaries and their important consequences, therefore, the project of this particular book, just as it will not *assume* their geography, is not the one that can trace them. That limitation seems a damaging one chiefly insofar as it echoes and prolongs an already scandalously extended eclipse: the extent to which women’s sexual, and specifically homosexual, experience and definition tend to be subsumed by men’s during the turn-of-the-century period most focused on in my discussion, and are liable once again to be subsumed *in* such discussion. If one could demarcate the extent of the subsumption precisely, it would be less destructive, but “subsumption” is not a structure that makes precision easy. The problem is obvious even at the level of nomenclature and affects, of course, that of this book no less than any other; I have discussed above the particular choices of usage made here. Corresponding to those choices, the “gay theory” I have been comparing with feminist theory doesn’t mean exclusively gay male theory, but for the purpose of this comparison it includes lesbian theory insofar as that (a) isn’t simply coextensive with feminist theory (i.e., doesn’t subsume sexuality *fully* under gender) and (b) doesn’t a priori deny all theoretical continuity between male homosexuality and lesbianism. But, again, the extent, construction, and meaning, and especially the history of any such theoretical continuity—not to mention its consequences for practical politics—must be open to every interrogation. That gay theory, falling under this definition and centering insistently on lesbian experience, can still include strongly feminist thought would be demonstrated by works as different as those of Gayle Rubin, Audre Lorde, Katie King, and Cherrie Moraga.



Axiom 4: The immemorial, seemingly ritualized debates on nature versus nurture take place against a very unstable background of tacit assumptions and fantasies about both nurture and nature.

If there is one compulsory setpiece for the Introduction to any gay-oriented book written in the late 1980s, it must be the meditation on and attempted adjudication of constructivist versus essentialist views of homosexuality. The present study is hardly the first to demur vigorously from such a task, although I can only wish that its demurrer might be vigorous enough to make it one of the last to need to do so. My demurrer has two grounds. The first, as I have mentioned and will discuss further in later chapters, is that any such adjudication is impossible to the degree that a conceptual deadlock between the two opposing views has by now been built into the very structure of every theoretical tool we have for undertaking it. The second one is already implicit in a terminological choice I have been making: to refer to "minoritizing" versus "universalizing" rather than to essentialist versus constructivist understandings of homosexuality. I prefer the former terminology because it seems to record and respond to the question, "In whose lives is homo/heterosexual definition an issue of continuing centrality and difficulty?" rather than either of the questions that seem to have gotten conflated in the constructivist/essentialist debate: on the one hand what one might call the question of phylogeny, "How fully are the meaning and experience of sexual activity and identity contingent on their mutual structuring with other, historically and culturally variable aspects of a given society?"; and on the other what one might call that of ontogeny, "What is the cause of homo-[or of hetero-] sexuality in the individual?" I am specifically offering minoritizing/universalizing as an *alternative* (though not an equivalent) to essentialist/constructivist, in the sense that I think it can do some of the same analytic work as the latter binarism, and rather more tellingly. I think it may isolate the areas where the questions of ontogeny and phylogeny most consequentially overlap. I also think, as I suggested in Axiom 1, that it is more respectful of the varied proprioception of many authoritative individuals. But I am additionally eager to promote the obsolescence of "essentialist/constructivist" because I am very dubious about the ability of even the most scrupulously gay-affirmative thinkers to divorce these terms, especially as they relate to the question of ontogeny, from the essentially gay-genocidal nexuses of thought through which they

have developed. And beyond that: even where we may think we know the conceptual landscape of their history well enough to do the delicate, always dangerous work of prying them loose from their historical backing to attach to them newly enabling meanings, I fear that the special volatility of postmodern bodily and technological relations may make such an attempt peculiarly liable to tragic misfire. Thus, it would seem to me that gay-affirmative work does well when it aims to minimize its reliance on any particular account of the origin of sexual preference and identity in individuals.

In particular, my fear is that there currently exists no framework in which to ask about the origins or development of individual gay identity that is not already structured by an implicit, trans-individual Western project or fantasy of eradicating that identity. It seems ominously symptomatic that, under the dire homophobic pressures of the last few years, and in the name of Christianity, the subtle constructivist argument that sexual aim is, at least for many people, not a hard-wired biological given but, rather, a social fact deeply embedded in the cultural and linguistic forms of many, many decades is being degraded to the blithe ukase that people are "free at any moment to" (i.e., must immediately) "choose" to adhere to a particular sexual identity (say, at a random hazard, the heterosexual) rather than to its other. (Here we see the disastrously unmarked crossing of phylogenetic with ontogenetic narratives.) To the degree—and it is significantly large—that the gay essentialist/constructivist debate takes its form and premises from, and insistently refers to, a whole history of other nature/nurture or nature/culture debates, it partakes of a tradition of viewing culture as malleable relative to nature: that is, culture, unlike nature, is assumed to be the thing that can be changed; the thing in which "humanity" has, furthermore, a right or even an obligation to intervene. This has certainly been the grounding of, for instance, the feminist formulation of the sex/gender system described above, whose implication is that the more fully gender inequality can be shown to inhere in human culture rather than in biological nature, the more amenable it must be to alteration and reform. I remember the buoyant enthusiasm with which feminist scholars used to greet the finding that one or another brutal form of oppression was not biological but "only" cultural! I have often wondered what the basis was for our optimism about the malleability of culture by any one group or program. At any rate, never so far as I know has there been a sufficiently powerful place from which to argue that such manipulations, however triumphal the

ethical imperative behind them, were not a right that belonged to anyone who might have the power to perform them.

The number of persons or institutions by whom the existence of gay people—never mind the existence of *more gay people*—is treated as a precious desideratum, a needed condition of life, is small, even compared to those who may wish for the dignified treatment of any gay people who happen already to exist. Advice on how to make sure your kids turn out gay, not to mention your students, your parishioners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous than you might think. By contrast, the scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people is unimaginably large. No major institutionalized discourse offers a firm resistance to that undertaking; in the United States, at any rate, most sites of the state, the military, education, law, penal institutions, the church, medicine, mass culture, and the mental health industries enforce it all but unquestioningly, and with little hesitation even at recourse to invasive violence. So for gay and gay-loving people, even though the space of cultural malleability is the only conceivable theatre for our effective politics, every step of this constructivist nature/culture argument holds danger: it is so difficult to intervene in the seemingly natural trajectory that begins by identifying a place of cultural malleability; continues by inventing an ethical or therapeutic mandate for cultural manipulation; and ends in the overarching, hygienic Western fantasy of a world without any more homosexuals in it.

That's one set of dangers, and it is against them, I think, that essentialist understandings of sexual identity accrue a certain gravity. The resistance that seems to be offered by conceptualizing an unalterably *homosexual body*, to the social engineering momentum apparently built into every one of the human sciences of the West, can reassure profoundly. Furthermore, it reaches deeply and, in a sense, protectively into a fraught space of life-or-death struggle that has been more or less abandoned by constructivist gay theory: that is, the experience and identity of gay or proto-gay children. The ability of anyone in the culture to support and honor gay kids may depend on an ability to name them as such, notwithstanding that many gay adults may never have been gay kids and some gay kids may not turn into gay adults. It seems plausible that a lot of the emotional energy behind essentialist historical work has to do not even in the first place with reclaiming the place and eros of Homeric heroes, Renaissance painters, and medieval gay monks, so much as with the far

less permissible, vastly more necessary project of recognizing and validating the creativity and heroism of the effeminate boy or tommyish girl of the fifties (or sixties or seventies or eighties) whose sense of constituting precisely a *gap* in the discursive fabric of the given has not been done justice, so far, by constructivist work.

At the same time, however, just as it comes to seem questionable to assume that cultural constructs are peculiarly malleable ones, it is also becoming increasingly problematical to assume that grounding an identity in biology or "essential nature" is a stable way of insulating it from societal interference. If anything, the gestalt of assumptions that undergird nature/nurture debates may be in the process of direct reversal. Increasingly it is the conjecture that a particular trait is genetically or biologically based, *not* that it is "only cultural," that seems to trigger an estrus of manipulative fantasy in the technological institutions of the culture. A relative depressiveness about the efficacy of social engineering techniques, a high mania about biological control: the Cartesian bipolar psychosis that always underlay the nature/nurture debates has switched its polar assignments without surrendering a bit of its hold over the collective life. And in this unstable context, the dependence on a specified *homosexual body* to offer resistance to any gay-eradicating momentum is tremblingly vulnerable. AIDS, though it is used to proffer every single day to the news-consuming public the crystallized vision of a world after the homosexual, could never by itself bring about such a world. What whets these fantasies more dangerously, because more blandly, is the presentation, often in ostensibly or authentically gay-affirmative contexts, of biologically based "explanations" for deviant behavior that are absolutely invariably couched in terms of "excess," "deficiency," or "imbalance"—whether in the hormones, in the genetic material, or, as is currently fashionable, in the fetal endocrine environment. If I had ever, in any medium, seen any researcher or popularizer refer even once to any supposed gay-producing circumstance as the *proper* hormone balance, or the *conducive* endocrine environment, for gay generation, I would be less chilled by the breezes of all this technological confidence. As things are, a medicalized dream of the prevention of gay bodies seems to be the less visible, far more respectable underside of the AIDS-fueled public dream of their extirpation. In this unstable balance of assumptions between nature and culture, at any rate, under the overarching, relatively unchallenged aegis of a culture's desire that gay people *not be*, there is no unthreatened, unthreatening conceptual home for a concept of gay origins. We have all

the more reason, then, to keep our understanding of gay origin, of gay cultural and material reproduction, plural, multi-capillaried, argus-eyed, respectful, and endlessly cherished.



Axiom 5: The historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity.

Since 1976, when Michel Foucault, in an act of polemical bravado, offered 1870 as the date of birth of modern homosexuality,⁴⁰ the most sophisticated historically oriented work in gay studies has been offering ever more precise datings, ever more nuanced narratives of the development of homosexuality "as we know it today."⁴¹ The great value of this scholarly movement has been to subtract from that "as we know it today" the twin positivist assumptions (1) that there must be some *transhistorical* essence of "homosexuality" available to modern knowledge, and (2) that the history of understandings of same-sex relations has been a history of increasingly direct, true knowledge or comprehension of that essence. To the contrary, the recent historicizing work has assumed (1) that the differences between the homosexuality "we know today" and previous arrangements of same-sex relations may be so profound and so integrally rooted in other cultural differences that there may be no continuous, defining essence of "homosexuality" to be known; and (2) that modern "sexuality" and hence modern homosexuality are so intimately entangled with the historically distinctive contexts and structures that now count as *knowledge* that such "knowledge" can scarcely be a transparent window onto a separate realm of sexuality but, rather, itself constitutes that sexuality.

These developments have promised to be exciting and productive in the way that the most important work of history or, for that matter, of anthropology may be: in radically defamiliarizing and denaturalizing, not only the past and the distant, but the present. One way, however, in which such an analysis is still incomplete—in which, indeed, it seems

40. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 43.

41. See, for instance, Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982); Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*; Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981); and George Chauncey, Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salmagundi*, no. 58–59 (Fall 1982–Winter 1983): 114–45.

to me that it has tended inadvertently to *refamiliarize*, *renaturalize*, damagingly reify an entity that it could be doing much more to subject to analysis—is in counterposing against the alterity of the past a relatively unified homosexuality that "we" *do* "know today." It seems that the topos of "homosexuality as we know it today," or even, to incorporate more fully the antipositivist finding of the Foucauldian shift, "homosexuality as we *conceive* of it today," has provided a rhetorically necessary fulcrum point for the denaturalizing work on the past done by many historians. But an unfortunate side effect of this move has been implicitly to underwrite the notion that "homosexuality as we conceive of it today" itself comprises a coherent definitional field rather than a space of overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual definitional forces. Unfortunately, this presents more than a problem of oversimplification. To the degree that power relations involving modern homo/heterosexual definition have been structured by the very tacitness of the double-binding force fields of conflicting definition—to the degree that, as Chapter 4 puts it more fully, the presumptuous, worldly implication "We Know What That Means" happens to be "the particular lie that animates and perpetuates the mechanism of [modern] homophobic male self-ignorance and violence and manipulability"—to that degree these historical projects, for all their immense care, value, and potential, still risk reinforcing a dangerous consensus of knowingness about the genuinely *unknown*, more than vestigially contradictory structurings of contemporary experience.

As an example of this contradiction effect, let me juxtapose two programmatic statements of what seem to be intended as parallel and congruent projects. In the foundational Foucault passage to which I alluded above, the modern category of "homosexuality" that dates from 1870 is said to be

characterized... less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.

In Foucault's account, the unidirectional emergence in the late nineteenth century of "the homosexual" as "a species," of homosexuality as a minorizing identity, is seen as tied to an also unidirectional, and continuing, emergent understanding of homosexuality in terms of gender inversion

and gender transitivity. This understanding appears, indeed, according to Foucault, to underlie and constitute the common sense of the homosexuality "we know today." A more recent account by David M. Halperin, on the other hand, explicitly in the spirit and under the influence of Foucault but building, as well, on some intervening research by George Chauncey and others, constructs a rather different narrative—but constructs it, in a sense, *as if it were the same one*:

Homosexuality and heterosexuality, as we currently understand them, are modern, Western, bourgeois productions. Nothing resembling them can be found in classical antiquity. . . . In London and Paris, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there appear . . . social gathering-places for persons of the same sex with the same socially deviant attitudes to sex and gender who wish to socialize and to have sex with one another. . . . This phenomenon contributes to the formation of the great nineteenth-century experience of "sexual inversion," or sex-role reversal, in which some forms of sexual deviance are interpreted as, or conflated with, gender deviance. The emergence of homosexuality out of inversion, the formation of a sexual orientation independent of relative degrees of masculinity and femininity, takes place during the latter part of the nineteenth century and comes into its own only in the twentieth. Its highest expression is the "straight-acting and -appearing gay male," a man distinct from other men in absolutely no other respect besides that of his "sexuality."⁴²

Halperin offers some discussion of why and how he has been led to differ from Foucault in discussing "inversion" as a stage that in effect preceded "homosexuality." What he does not discuss is that his reading of "homosexuality" as "we currently understand" it—his presumption of the reader's commonsense, present-tense conceptualization of homosexuality, the point from which all the thought experiments of differentiation must proceed—is virtually the opposite of Foucault's. For Halperin, what is presumed to define modern homosexuality "as we understand" it, in the form of the straight-acting and -appearing gay male, is gender intransitivity; for Foucault, it is, in the form of the feminized man or virilized woman, gender transitivity.

What obscures this difference between two historians, I believe, is the underlying structural congruence of the two histories: each is a unidirectional narrative of supersession. Each one makes an overarching point

42. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, pp. 8–9.

about the complete conceptual alterity of earlier models of same-sex relations. In each history one model of same-sex relations is superseded by another, which may again be superseded by another. In each case the superseded model then drops out of the frame of analysis. For Halperin, the power and interest of a postinversion notion of "sexual orientation independent of relative degrees of masculinity and femininity" seem to indicate that that notion must necessarily be seen as superseding the inversion model; he then seems to assume that any elements of the inversion model still to be found in contemporary understandings of homosexuality may be viewed as mere historical remnants whose process of withering away, however protracted, merits no analytic attention. The end point of Halperin's narrative differs from that of Foucault, but his proceeding does not: just as Halperin, having discovered an important *intervening* model, assumes that it must be a *supervening* one as well, so Foucault had already assumed that the nineteenth-century intervention of a minoritizing discourse of sexual identity in a previously extant, universalizing discourse of "sodomitic" sexual acts must mean, for all intents and purposes, the eclipse of the latter.

This assumption is significant only if—as I will be arguing—the most potent effects of modern homo/heterosexual definition tend to spring precisely from the inexplicitness or denial of the gaps *between* long-coexisting minoritizing and universalizing, or gender-transitive and gender-intransitive, understandings of same-sex relations. If that argument is true, however, then the enactment performed by these historical narratives has some troubling entailments. For someone who lives, for instance, as I do, in a state where certain acts called "sodomy" are criminal regardless of the gender, never mind the homo/heterosexual "identity," of the persons who perform them, the threat of the juxtaposition *on* that prohibition against *acts* of an additional, unrationalized set of sanctions attaching to *identity* can only be exacerbated by the insistence of gay theory that the discourse of acts can represent nothing but an anachronistic vestige. The project of the present book will be to show how issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times they do coexist. This project does not involve the construction of historical narratives alternative to those that have emerged from Foucault and his followers. Rather, it requires a reassignment of attention and emphasis within those valuable nar-

atives — attempting, perhaps, to denarrativize them somewhat by focusing on a performative space of contradiction that they both delineate and, themselves performative, pass over in silence. I have tended, therefore, in these chapters not to stress the alterity of disappeared or now-supposed-alien understandings of same-sex relations but instead to invest attention in those unexpectedly plural, varied, and contradictory historical understandings whose residual — indeed, whose renewed — force seems most palpable today. My first aim is to denaturalize the present, rather than the past — in effect, to render less destructively presumable “homosexuality as we know it today.”



Axiom 6: The relation of gay studies to debates on the literary canon is, and had best be, tortuous.

Early on in the work on *Epistemology of the Closet*, in trying to settle on a literary text that would provide a first example for the kind of argument I meant the book to enable, I found myself circling around a text of 1891, a narrative that in spite of its relative brevity has proved a durable and potent centerpiece of gay male intertextuality and indeed has provided a durable and potent physical icon for gay male desire. It tells the story of a young Englishman famous for an extreme beauty of face and figure that seems to betray his aristocratic origin — an origin marked, however, also by mystery and class misalliance. If the gorgeous youth gives his name to the book and stamps his bodily image on it, the narrative is nonetheless more properly the story of a male triangle: a second, older man is tortured by a desire for the youth for which he can find no direct mode of expression, and a third man, emblem of suavity and the world, presides over the dispensation of discursive authority as the beautiful youth murders the tortured lover and is himself, in turn, by the novel's end ritually killed.

But maybe, I thought, one such text would offer an insufficient basis for cultural hypothesis. Might I pick two? It isn't yet commonplace to read *Dorian Gray* and *Billy Budd* by one another's light, but that can only be a testimony to the power of accepted English and American literary canons to insulate and deform the reading of politically important texts. In any gay male canon the two contemporaneous experimental works must be yoked together as overarching gateway texts of our modern period, and the conventionally obvious differences between them of style, literary positioning, national origin, class ethos, structure, and thematics must

cease to be taken for granted and must instead become newly salient in the context of their startling erotic congruence. The book of the beautiful male English body foregrounded on an international canvas; the book of its inscription and evocation through a trio of male figures — the lovely boy, the tormented desirer, the deft master of the rules of their discourse; the story in which the lover is murdered by the boy and the boy is himself sacrificed; the deftly magisterial recounting that finally frames, preserves, exploits, and desublimates the male bodily image: *Dorian Gray* and *Billy Budd* are both that book.

The year 1891 is a good moment to which to look for a cross-section of the inaugural discourses of modern homo/heterosexuality — in medicine and psychiatry, in language and law, in the crisis of female status, in the career of imperialism. *Billy Budd* and *Dorian Gray* are among the texts that have set the terms for a modern homosexual identity. And in the Euro-American culture of this past century it has been notable that foundational texts of modern gay culture — *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *Death in Venice*, for instance, along with *Dorian Gray* and *Billy Budd* — have often been the identical texts that mobilized and promulgated the most potent images and categories for (what is now visible as) the canon of homophobic mastery.

Neither *Dorian Gray* nor *Billy Budd* is in the least an obscure text. Both are available in numerous paperback editions, for instance; and, both conveniently short, each differently canonical within a different national narrative, both are taught regularly in academic curricula. As what they are taught, however, and as what canonized, comes so close to disciplining the reading permitted of each that even the contemporaneity of the two texts (*Dorian Gray* was published as a book the year *Billy Budd* was written) may startle. That every major character in the archetypal American “allegory of good and evil” is English; that the archetypal English fin-de-siècle “allegory of art and life” was a sufficiently American event to appear in a Philadelphia publisher's magazine nine months before it became a London book — the canonic regimentation that effaces these international bonds has how much the more scope to efface the intertext and the intersexed. How may the strategy of a new canon operate in this space?

Contemporary discussions of the question of the literary canon tend to be structured either around the possibility of change, of rearrangement and reassignment of texts, within one overarching master-canon of literature — the strategy of adding Mary Shelley to the Norton Anthology — or,

more theoretically defensible at the moment, around a vision of an exploding master-canon whose fracture would produce, or at least leave room for, a potentially infinite plurality of mini-canons, each specified as to its thematic or structural or authorial coverage: francophone Canadian or Inuit canons, for instance; clusters of magical realism or national allegory; the blues tradition; working-class narrative; canons of the sublime or the self-reflexive; Afro-Caribbean canons; canons of Anglo-American women's writing.

In fact, though, the most productive canon effects that have been taking place in recent literary studies have occurred, not from within the mechanism either of the master-canon or of a postfractural plurality of canons, but through an interaction between these two models of the canon. In this interaction the new pluralized mini-canons have largely failed to dislodge the master-canon from its empirical centrality in such institutional practices as publishing and teaching, although they have made certain specific works and authors newly available for inclusion in the master-canon. Their more important effect, however, has been to challenge, if not the empirical centrality, then the conceptual anonymity of the master-canon. The most notorious instance of this has occurred with feminist studies in literature, which by on the one hand confronting the master-canon with alternative canons of women's literature, and on the other hand reading rebelliously within the master-canon, has not only somewhat rearranged the table of contents for the master-canon but, more important, given it a title. If it is still in important respects *the* master-canon it nevertheless cannot now escape naming itself with every syllable also *a* particular canon, a canon of mastery, in this case of men's mastery over, and over against, women. Perhaps never again need women—need, one hopes, anybody—feel greeted by the Norton Anthology of mostly white men's Literature with the implied insolent salutation, "I'm nobody. Who are you?"

This is an encouraging story of female canon-formation, working in a sort of pincers movement with a process of feminist canon-naming, that has been in various forms a good deal told by now. How much the cheering clarity of this story is indebted, however, to the scarifying coarseness and visibility with which women and men are, in most if not all societies, distinguished publicly and once and for all from one another emerges only when attempts are made to apply the same model to that very differently structured though closely related form of oppression, modern homophobia. It is, as we have seen, only recently—and, I am

arguing, only very incompletely and raggedly, although to that extent violently and brutally—that a combination of discursive forces have carved out, for women and for men, a possible though intensively proscribed homosexual identity in Euro-American culture. To the extent that such an identity is traceable, there is clearly the possibility, now being realized within literary criticism, for assembling alternative canons of lesbian and gay male writing *as* minority canons, as a literature of oppression and resistance and survival and heroic making. This modern view of lesbians and gay men as a distinctive minority population is of course importantly anachronistic in relation to earlier writing, however; and even in relation to modern writing it seems to falter in important ways in the implicit analysis it offers of the mechanisms of homophobia and of same-sex desire. It is with these complications that the relation between lesbian and gay literature as a minority canon, and the process of making salient the homosocial, homosexual, and homophobic strains and torsions in the already existing master-canon, becomes especially revealing.

It's revealing only, however, for those of us for whom relations within and among canons are active relations of thought. From the keepers of a dead canon we hear a rhetorical question—that is to say, a question posed with the arrogant intent of maintaining ignorance. Is there, as Saul Bellow put it, a Tolstoi of the Zulus? Has there been, ask the defenders of a monocultural curriculum, not intending to stay for an answer, has there ever yet been a Socrates of the Orient, an African-American Proust, a female Shakespeare? However assaultive or fatuous, in the context of the current debate the question has not been unproductive. To answer it in good faith has been to broach inquiries across a variety of critical fronts: into the canonical or indeed world-historic texts of non-Euro-American cultures, to begin with, but also into the nonuniversal functions of literacy and the literary, into the contingent and uneven secularization and sacralization of an aesthetic realm, into the relations of public to private in the ranking of genres, into the cult of the individual author and the organization of liberal arts education as an expensive form of masterpiece theatre.

Moreover, the flat insolent question teases by the very difference of its resonance with different projects of inquiry: it stimulates or irritates or reveals differently in the context of oral or written cultures; of the colonized or the colonizing, or cultures that have had both experiences; of peoples concentrated or in diaspora; of traditions partially internal or largely external to a dominant culture of the latter twentieth century.

From the point of view of this relatively new and inchoate academic

presence, then, the gay studies movement, what distinctive soundings are to be reached by posing the question our way — and staying for an answer? Let's see how it sounds.

Has there ever been a gay Socrates?

Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?

Has there ever been a gay Proust?

Does the Pope wear a dress? If these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies. A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, Proust; and, beyond that, legion — dozens or hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures in what the monoculturalists are pleased to consider "our" culture, as indeed, always in different forms and senses, in every other.

What's now in place, in contrast, in most scholarship and most curricula is an even briefer response to questions like these: Don't ask. Or, less laconically: You shouldn't know. The vast preponderance of scholarship and teaching, accordingly, even among liberal academics, does simply neither ask nor know. At the most expansive, there is a series of dismissals of such questions on the grounds that:

1. Passionate language of same-sex attraction was extremely common during whatever period is under discussion — and therefore must have been completely meaningless. Or

2. Same-sex genital relations may have been perfectly common during the period under discussion — but since there was no language about them, *they* must have been completely meaningless. Or

3. Attitudes about homosexuality were intolerant back then, unlike now — so people probably didn't do anything. Or

4. Prohibitions against homosexuality didn't exist back then, unlike now — so if people did anything, it was completely meaningless. Or

5. The word "homosexuality" wasn't coined until 1869 — so everyone before then was heterosexual. (Of course, heterosexuality has always existed.) Or

6. The author under discussion is certified or rumored to have had an attachment to someone of the other sex — so their feelings about people of their own sex must have been completely meaningless. Or (under a perhaps somewhat different rule of admissible evidence)

7. There is no actual proof of homosexuality, such as sperm taken

from the body of another man or a nude photograph with another woman — so the author may be assumed to have been ardently and exclusively heterosexual. Or (as a last resort)

8. The author or the author's important attachments may very well have been homosexual — but it would be provincial to let so insignificant a fact make any difference at all to our understanding of any serious project of life, writing, or thought.

These responses reflect, as we have already seen, some real questions of sexual definition and historicity. But they only reflect them and don't reflect *on* them: the family resemblance among this group of extremely common responses comes from their closeness to the core grammar of *Don't ask; You shouldn't know*. It didn't happen; it doesn't make any difference; it didn't mean anything; it doesn't have interpretive consequences. Stop asking just here; stop asking just now; we know in advance the kind of difference that could be made by the invocation of *this* difference; it makes no difference; it doesn't mean. The most openly repressive projects of censorship, such as William Bennett's literally murderous opposition to serious AIDS education in schools on the grounds that it would communicate a tolerance for the lives of homosexuals, are, through this mobilization of the powerful mechanism of the open secret, made perfectly congruent with the smooth, dismissive knowingness of the urbane and the pseudo-urbane.

And yet the absolute canonical centrality of the list of authors about whom one might think to ask these questions — What was the structure, function, historical surround of same-sex love in and for Homer or Plato or Sappho? What, then, about Euripides or Virgil? If a gay Marlowe, what about Spenser or Milton? Shakespeare? Byron? But what about Shelley? Montaigne, Leopardi...? Leonardo, Michelangelo, but...? Beethoven? Whitman, Thoreau, Dickinson (Dickinson?), Tennyson, Wilde, Woolf, Hopkins, but Brontë? Wittgenstein, but... Nietzsche? Proust, Musil, Kafka, Cather, but... Mann? James, but... Lawrence? Eliot? but... Joyce? The very centrality of this list and its seemingly almost infinite elasticity suggest that no one *can* know *in advance* where the limits of a gay-centered inquiry are to be drawn, or where a gay theorizing of and through even the hegemonic high culture of the Euro-American tradition may need or be able to lead. The emergence, even within the last year or two, of nascent but ambitious programs and courses in gay and lesbian studies, at schools including those of the Ivy League, may now make it possible for the first time to ask these difficult

questions from within the very heart of the empowered cultural institutions to which they pertain, as well as from the marginal and endangered institutional positions from which, for so long, the most courageous work in this area has emanated.

Furthermore, as I have been suggesting, the violently contradictory and volatile energies that every morning's newspaper proves to us are circulating even at this moment, in our society, around the issues of homo/heterosexual definition show over and over again how preposterous is anybody's urbane pretense at having a clear, simple story to tell about the outlines and meanings of what and who are homosexual and heterosexual. To be gay, or to be potentially classifiable as gay—that is to say, *to be sexed or gendered*—in this system is to come under the radically overlapping aegis of a universalizing discourse of acts or bonds and at the same time of a minoritizing discourse of kinds of persons. Because of the double binds implicit in the space overlapped by universalizing and minoritizing models, the stakes in matters of definitional control are extremely high.

Obviously, this analysis suggests as one indispensable approach to the traditional Euro-American canon a pedagogy that could treat it neither as something quite exploded nor as something quite stable. A canon seen to be genuinely unified by the maintenance of a particular tension of homo/heterosexual definition can scarcely be dismantled; but neither can it ever be treated as the repository of reassuring “traditional” truths that could be made matter for any settled consolidation or congratulation. Insofar as the problematics of homo/heterosexual definition, in an intensely homophobic culture, are seen to be precisely internal to the central nexuses of that culture, this canon must always be treated as a loaded one. Considerations of the canon, it becomes clear, while vital in themselves cannot take the place of questions of pedagogic relations within and around the canon. Canonicity itself then seems the necessary wadding of pious obliviousness that allows for the transmission from one generation to another of texts that have the potential to dismantle the impacted foundations upon which a given culture rests.

I anticipate that to an interlocutor like William Bennett such a view would smack of the sinister sublimity peculiar to those of us educated in the dark campus days of the late sixties. I must confess that this demographic specification is exactly true of me. In fact, I can be more precise about where I might have acquired such a view of the high volatility of canonical texts. At the infamous Cornell of the infamous late sixties I was

privileged to have teachers who invested in both texts and students their most trenchant passions. Like a lot of intellectually ambitious undergraduates, for instance, I gravitated into the orbit of Allan Bloom; my friends and I imitated, very affectionately and more than superficially, his infusion of every reading project with his own persona and with “p-p-p-passion”—his tattoo on the plosive consonant, part involuntary, part stagecraft, all riveting, dramatizing for us the explosive potential he lent to every interpretive nexus. It was from Bloom, as much as from more explicitly literary and deconstructive theorists or from more leftist ones, that I and some others of that late-sixties generation learned the urgencies and pleasures of reading against the visible grain of any influential text. The so-called conservative practical politics that, even then, so often seemed to make Bloom's vital cross-grained interpretive interventions boil down to a few coarsely ugly stereotypes and prescriptions wasn't quite enough, at least for awhile, to eclipse the lesson that the true sins against the holy ghost would be to read without risking oneself, to write or utter without revealing oneself however esoterically, to interpret without undergoing the perverse danger of setting in motion all the contradictory forces of any only semi-domesticated canonical text.

Now, reading *The Closing of the American Mind*, the splendid pedagogic charms of this great popularizer (i.e., of this great teacher) come flooding back to me. Along with feeling gratitude for his enablement of outrageous but central projects of reading, too, I more specifically recognize in retrospect the actual outlines of what have been for me anti-homophobic canonical reconstructions. For Bloom, that is, as also for a particular gay studies project within the traditional canon, the history of Western thought is importantly constituted and motivated by a priceless history of male-male pedagogic or pederastic relations. In a climactic chapter beguilingly entitled “Our Ignorance,” for instance, Bloom encapsulates Western culture as the narrative that goes from the *Phaedrus* to *Death in Venice*. The crisis of Aschenbach's modern culture is seen as the deadeningness of the readings that are performed within its intrinsically explosive canon. As Bloom explains:

As Aschenbach becomes more and more obsessed by the boy on the beach, quotations from the *Phaedrus* . . . keep coming into his head. . . . The *Phaedrus* was probably one of the things Aschenbach was supposed to have read as a schoolboy while learning Greek. But its content, discourses on the love of a man for a boy, was not supposed to affect him. The dialogue, like so much that was in the German education, was another

scrap of "culture," of historical information, which had not become a part of a vital, coherent whole. This is symptomatic of the deadness of Aschenbach's own cultural activity.⁴³

Bloom is frightened by the petrification of these passions within the tradition. The other danger that, in Bloom's view, threatens cultural vitality, however, is not that these desires might be killed but that they might be expressed. For Bloom, and in this I believe he offers an ingeniously faithful and candid representation of Western hegemonic culture, the stimulation and glamorization of the energies of male-male desire (and who could deny that he does an enviable job of glamorizing them?) is an incessant project that must, for the preservation of that self-contradictory tradition, coexist with an equally incessant project of denying, deferring, or silencing their satisfaction. With a mechanistic hydraulicism more reductive than the one he deprecates in Freud, Bloom blames the sexual liberation movements of the sixties—all of them, but of course in this philosophic context the gay movement must take most of the blame—for dissipating the reservoirs of cathectic energy that are supposed to be held, by repression, in an excitable state of readiness to be invested in cultural projects. Instead, as Plato's "diversity of erotic expression" (237) has been frittered away on mere sex, now supposedly licit, "the lion roaring behind the door of the closet" has turned out "to be a little, domesticated cat" (99). In Bloom's sad view, "sexual passion is no longer dangerous in us" (99); "the various liberations wasted that marvelous energy and tension, leaving the students' souls exhausted and flaccid" (50–51).

So Bloom is unapologetically protective of the sanctity of the closet, that curious space that is both internal and marginal to the culture: centrally representative of its motivating passions and contradictions, even while marginalized by its orthodoxies. The modern, normalizing, minoritizing equal-rights movement for people of varying sexual identities is a grave falling-off, in Bloom's view, from the more precarious cultural *privilege* of a past in which "there was a respectable place for marginality, bohemia. But it had to justify its unorthodox practices by its intellectual and artistic achievement" (235). The fragile, precious representational compact by which a small, shadowily identified group both represented

the hidden, perhaps dangerous truths about a culture to itself, and depended on its exiguous toleration, is by this account exactly like the position of Socrates and, by extension, of the ideal philosopher/teacher—of anyone who uncovers the explosive truths within the body of a culture to a transient young audience whose own hunger for such initiations is likeliest to be, at the very most, nothing more than a phase they are going through. "He is, therefore," Bloom poignantly writes,

necessarily in the most fundamental tension with everyone except his own kind. He relates to all the others ironically, i.e., with sympathy and playful distance. Changing the character of his relationship to them is impossible because the disproportion between him and them is firmly rooted in nature. Thus, he has no expectation of essential progress. Toleration, not right, is the best he can hope for, and he is kept vigilant by the awareness of the basic fragility of his situation and that of philosophy. (283)

Socrates within the life of the Greeks, like the individual vessel of same-sex desire within the homoerotic tradition of homophobic Western high culture, depends for his survival on the very misrecognitions that his prestige comes from his having the power to demystify. Furthermore, the compact between the philosopher and youth is held together not only by love but by the perhaps necessarily elitist community formed of mutual contempt. He is allowed to despise them for not, he thinks, seeing him for what he is ("Crito, the family man, thinks of Socrates as a good family man. Laches, the soldier, thinks of Socrates as a good soldier" [283]). Meanwhile, they are allowed to condescend to the spectacle of what both are glad to think of as a certain final, irreducible difference from themselves. It's no wonder that such tight knots of desire-laden self-congratulation at one another's expense should be difficult to untie.

What Bloom offers is eloquent as an analysis—if indeed it is meant to be an analysis—of the prestige, magnetism, vulnerability, self-alienation, co-optability, and perhaps ultimately the potential for a certain defiance that inhere in the canonical culture of the closet. However, it is far from being the whole story. One of the things that can be said about the post-Stonewall gay movement, for instance, is that, to the extent that it posited gay women and men as a distinct minority with rights comparable to those of any other minority, it served notice that at least some people were in a position to demand that the representational compact between the closet and the culture be renegotiated or abrogated. Obviously, for many crucial purposes this move has been indispensable. It is heartbreakingly

43. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1988), p. 236. Further citations of this edition will be noted by page numbers in the text.

premature for Bloom to worry, at least with regard to homophobic prohibition, that the times are now such that anything goes, that "sexual passion is no longer dangerous in us." Our culture still sees to its being dangerous enough that women and men who find or fear they are homosexual, or are perceived by others to be so, are physically and mentally terrorized through the institutions of law, religion, psychotherapy, mass culture, medicine, the military, commerce and bureaucracy, and brute violence. Political progress on these and similar life-and-death issues has depended precisely on the strength of a minority-model gay activism; it is the normalizing, persuasive analogy between the needs of gay/lesbian students and those of Black or Jewish students, for instance, and the development of the corresponding political techniques that enable progress in such arenas. And *that* side of the needed progress cannot be mobilized from within any closet; it requires very many people's risky and affirming acts of the most explicit self-identification as members of the minority affected.

So, too, at the level of the canon. The invaluable forms of critique and dismantlement within the official tradition, the naming as what it is of a hegemonic, homoerotic/homophobic male canon of cultural mastery and coercive erotic double-binding, can be only part of the strategy of an antihomophobic project. It must work in the kind of pincers movement I have already described with the re-creation of minority gay canons from currently noncanonical material. Most obviously, this would be necessary in order to support lesbian choices, talents, sensibilities, lives, and analyses at the same level of cultural centrality as certain gay male ones: as women of every kind are tangential to the dominant canons of the culture, a fortiori gay women are, and at a terrible price to the culture's vibrance and wealth. Men who write openly as gay men have also often been excluded from the consensus of the traditional canon and may operate more forcefully now within a specifically gay/lesbian canon. Within every other minority canon as well, the work of gay/lesbian inquiry requires to be done. We can't possibly know in advance about the Harlem Renaissance, any more than we can about the New England Renaissance or the English or Italian Renaissance, where the limits of a revelatory inquiry are to be set, once we begin to ask—as it is now beginning to be asked about each of these Renaissances—where and how the power in them of gay desires, people, discourses, prohibitions, and energies were manifest. We know enough already, however, to know with certainty that

in each of these Renaissances they were central. (No doubt that's how we will learn to recognize a renaissance when we see one.)

Axiom 7: The paths of allo-identification are likely to be strange and recalcitrant. So are the paths of auto-identification. ★

In the Introduction to *Between Men* I felt constrained to offer a brief account of how I saw the political/theoretical positioning of "a woman and a feminist writing (in part) about male homosexuality";⁴⁴ my account was, essentially, that this was an under-theorized conjunction and it was about time someone put her mind to it. Issues of male homosexuality are, obviously, even more integral to the present volume, and the intervening years have taught me more about how important, not to say mandatory, such an accounting must be—as well as how almost prohibitively difficult. I don't speak here of the question of anyone's "right" to think or write about the subjects on which they feel they have a contribution to make: to the degree that rights can be measured at all, I suppose this one can be measured best by what contribution the work does make, and to whom. Beyond the difficulty of wielding a language of rights, however, I find that abstractive formulations like that phrase in the Introduction to *Between Men* always seem to entail a hidden underpinning of the categorical imperative, one that may dangerously obscure the way political commitments and identifications actually work. Realistically, what brings me to this work can hardly be that I am *a* woman, or *a* feminist, but that I am this particular one. The grounds on which a book like this one might be persuasive or compelling to you, in turn, are unlikely to be its appeal to some *bienpensant*, evenly valenced lambency of your disinterested attention. Realistically, it takes deeply rooted, durable, and often somewhat opaque energies to write a book; it can take them, indeed, to read it. It takes them, as well, to make any political commitment that can be worth anything to anyone.

What, then, would make a good answer to implicit questions about someone's strong group-identification across politically charged boundaries, whether of gender, of class, of race, of sexuality, of nation? It could never be a version of "But everyone *should* be able to make this identifica-

44. *Between Men*, p. 19.

tion." Perhaps everyone should, but everyone does not, and almost no one makes more than a small number of very narrowly channeled ones. (A currently plausible academic ideology, for instance, is that everyone in a position of class privilege *should* group-identify across lines of class; but who hasn't noticed that of the very few U.S. scholars under 50 who have been capable of doing so productively, and over the long haul, most also "happen to have been" red diaper babies?) If the ethical prescription is explanatory at all—and I have doubts about that—it is anything but a full explanation. It often seems to me, to the contrary, that what these implicit questions really ask for is narrative, and of a directly personal sort. When I have experimented with offering such narrative, in relation to this ongoing project, it has been with several aims in mind.⁴⁵ I wanted to disarm the categorical imperative that seems to do so much to promote cant and mystification about motives in the world of politically correct academia. I wanted to try opening channels of visibility—toward the speaker, in this case—that might countervail somewhat against the terrible one-directionality of the culture's spectacularizing of gay men, to which it seems almost impossible, in any powerful gay-related project, not also to contribute. I meant, in a sense, to give hostages, though the possible thud of them on the tarmac of some future conflict is not something I can contemplate. I also wanted to offer (though on my own terms) whatever tools I could with which a reader who needed to might begin unknitting certain overdetermined impactions that inevitably structure these arguments. Finally, I have come up with such narrative because I desired and needed to, because its construction has greatly interested me, and what I learned from it has often surprised me.

A note appended to one of these accounts suggested an additional reason: "Part of the motivation behind my work on it," I wrote there, "has been a fantasy that readers or hearers would be variously—in anger, identification, pleasure, envy, 'permission,' exclusion—stimulated to write accounts 'like' this one (whatever that means) of their own, and share those."⁴⁶ My impression, indeed, is that some readers of that essay have done so. An implication of that wishful note was that it is not only identifications *across* definitional lines that can evoke or support or even

45. The longest such narrative appears as "A Poem Is Being Written," *Representations*, no. 17 (Winter 1987): 110–43. More fragmentary or oblique ones occur in "Tide and Trust," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 745–57; in Chapter 4 of the present book; and in "Privilege of Unknowing."

46. "A Poem Is Being Written," p. 137.

require complex and particular narrative explanation; rather, the same is equally true of any person's identification with her or his "own" gender, class, race, sexuality, nation. I think, for instance, of a graduate class I taught a few years ago in gay and lesbian literature. Half the students in the class were men, half women. Throughout the semester all the women, including me, intensely uncomfortable with the dynamics of the class and hyperconscious of the problems of articulating lesbian with gay male perspectives, attributed our discomfort to some obliquity in the classroom relations between ourselves and the men. But by the end of the semester it seemed clear that we were in the grip of some much more intimate dissonance. It seemed that it was among the group of women, all feminists, largely homogeneous in visible respects, that some nerve of individually internal difference had been set painfully, contagiously atremble. Through a process that began, but *only* began, with the perception of some differences among our mostly inexplicit, often somewhat uncrystallized sexual self-definitions, it appeared that each woman in the class possessed (or might, rather, feel we were possessed by) an ability to make one or more of the other women radically and excruciatingly doubt the authority of her own self-definition as a woman; as a feminist; and as the positional subject of a particular sexuality.

I think it probable that most people, especially those involved with any form of politics that touches on issues of identity—race, for instance, as well as sexuality and gender—have observed or been part of many such circuits of intimate denegation, as well as many circuits of its opposite. The political or pedagogical utility or destructiveness of those dissonant dynamics is scarcely a given, though perhaps it must always be aversive to experience them. Such dynamics—the denegating ones along with the consolidating ones—are not epiphenomenal to identity politics, but constitute it. After all, to identify *as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as against*; but even did it not, the relations implicit in *identifying with* are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal. For a politics like feminism, furthermore, effective moral authority has seemed to depend on its capacity for conscientious and nonperfunctory enfoldment of women alienated from one another in virtually every other relation of life. Given this, there are strong political motives for obscuring any possibility of differentiating between one's identification *as* (a woman) and one's identification *with* (women very

differently situated—for bourgeois feminists, this means radically less privileged ones). At least for relatively privileged feminists of my generation, it has been an article of faith, and a deeply educative one, that to conceive of oneself as a woman at all must mean trying to conceive oneself, over and over, as if incarnated in ever more palpably vulnerable situations and embodiments. The costs of this pressure toward mystification—the constant reflation, as one monolithic act, of *identification with/as*—are, I believe, high for feminism, though its rewards have also been considerable. (Its political efficacy in actually broadening the bases of feminism is still, it seems to me, very much a matter of debate.) *Identification with/as* has a distinctive resonance for women in the oppressively tidy dovetailing between old ideologies of women's traditional "selflessness" and a new one of feminist commitment that seems to begin with a self but is legitimated only by willfully obscuring most of its boundaries.

For better and for worse, mainstream, male-centered gay politics has tended not to be structured as strongly as feminism has by that particular ethical pressure. Yet, as I will be discussing at length in Chapter 3, there is a whole different set of reasons why a problematics of *identification with/as* seems to be distinctively resonant with issues of male homo/heterosexual definition. *Between Men* tried to demonstrate that modern, homophobic constructions of male heterosexuality have a conceptual dependence on a distinction between men's *identification* (with men) and their *desire* (for women), a distinction whose factitiousness is latent where not patent. The (relatively new) emphasis on the "homo-," on the dimension of sameness, built into modern understandings of relations of sexual desire within a given gender, has had a sustained and active power to expose that factitiousness, to show how close may be the slippage or even the melding between identification and desire. Thus, an entire social region of the vicarious becomes peculiarly charged in association with homo/heterosexual definition. Chapter 3 will argue that processes of homosexual attribution and identification have had a distinctive centrality, in this century, for many stigmatized but extremely potent sets of relations involving projective chains of vicarious investment: sentimentality, kitsch, camp, the knowing, the prurient, the arch, the morbid.

There may, then, be a rich and conflictual salience of the vicarious embedded within gay definition. I don't point that out to offer an excuse for the different, openly vicariating cathexis from outside that motivates this study; it either needs or, perhaps, can have none. But this in turn may

suggest some ways in which the particular obliquities of my approach to the subject may bias what I find there. I can say generally that the vicarious investments most visible to me have had to do with my experiences as a woman; as a fat woman; as a nonprocreative adult; as someone who is, under several different discursive regimes, a sexual pervert; and, under some, a Jew. To give an example: I've wondered about my ability to keep generating ideas about "the closet," compared to a relative inability, so far, to have new ideas about the substantive differences made by post-Stonewall imperatives to rupture or vacate that space. (This, obviously, despite every inducement to thought provided by the immeasurable value of "out" liberatory gay politics in the lives around me and my own.) May it not be influenced by the fact that my own relation, as a woman, to gay male discourse and gay men echoes most with the pre-Stonewall gay self-definition of (say) the 1950s?—something, that is, whose names, where they exist at all, are still so exotically coarse and demeaning as to challenge recognition, never mind acknowledgment; leaving, in the stigma-impregnated space of refused recognition, sometimes also a stimulating aether of the unnamed, the lived experiment.

Proust: "The book whose hieroglyphs are not traced by us is the only book that really belongs to us." I feel it about the way the book belongs to me; I hope it about the different way it belongs to some of its readers.