

## 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 heterosexualist 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.”<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> "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."<sup>4</sup>

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).<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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*.<sup>9</sup> 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”<sup>10</sup>—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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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

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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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

To understand these conceptual relations as irresolvably unstable is not, however, to understand them as inefficacious 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> 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 inefaceable 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 "inefaceably marked" by association with this one particular problematic—ineface-

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 perseverance 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."<sup>20</sup> (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 inflections 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—itself 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup>

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.