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***TENDENCIES***



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# QUEER AND NOW

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

The knowledge is indelible, but not astonishing, to anyone with a reason to be attuned to the profligate way this culture has of denying and despoiling queer energies and lives. I look at my adult friends and colleagues doing lesbian and gay work, and I feel that the survival of each one is a miracle. Everyone who survived has stories about how it was done

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

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

**EPISTEMOLOGIES** I've heard of many people who claim they'd as soon their children were dead as gay. What it took me a long time to believe is that these people are saying no more than the truth. They even speak for others too delicate to use the cruel words. For there is all the evidence. The

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1. Paul Gibson, “Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide* (Washington, D.C., 1989), vol. 3, pp. 110–142.

preponderance of school systems, public and parochial, where teachers are fired, routinely, for so much as intimating the right to existence of queer people, desires, activities, children. The routine denial to sexually active adolescents, straight *and* gay, of the things they need—intelligible information, support and respect, condoms—to protect themselves from HIV transmission. (As a policy aimed at punishing young gay people with death, this one is working: in San Francisco for instance, as many as 34 percent of the gay men under twenty-five being tested—and 54 percent of the young black gay men—are now HIV infected.)<sup>3</sup> The systematic separation of children from queer adults; their systematic sequestration from the truth about the lives, culture, and sustaining relations of adults they know who may be queer. The complicity of parents, of teachers, of clergy, even of the mental health professions in invalidating and hounding kids who show gender-dissonant tastes, behavior, body language. In one survey 26 percent of young gay men had been forced to leave home because of conflicts with parents over their sexual identity;<sup>4</sup> another report concludes that young gays and lesbians, many of them throwaways, comprise as many as a quarter of all homeless youth in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

And adults' systematic denial of these truths to ourselves. The statistics on the triple incidence of suicide among lesbian and gay adolescents come from a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 1989; under congressional pressure, recommendations based on this section of the report were never released. Under congressional pressure, in 1991 a survey of adolescent sexual behavior is defunded. Under the threat of congressional pressure, support for all research on sexuality suddenly (in the fall of 1991) dries up. Seemingly, this society wants its children to know nothing; wants its queer children to conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die; and wants not to know that it is getting what it wants.

**PROMISING, SMUGGLING, READING, OVERREADING** This history makes its mark on what, individually, we are and do. One set of effects turns up in the irreducible multilayeredness and multiphasedness of what queer survival means—since being a survivor on this scene is a

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2. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), poem 325, p. 154.

3. T.A. Kellogg et al., "Prevalence of HIV-I Among Homosexual and Bisexual Men in the San Francisco Bay Area: Evidence of Infection Among Young Gay Men," *Seventh International AIDS Conference Abstract Book*, vol. 2 (Geneva, 1991) (W.C. 3010), p. 298.

4. G. Remafedi, "Male Homosexuality: The Adolescent's Perspective," unpublished manuscript, Adolescent Health Program, University of Minnesota, 1985. Cited in Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide."

5. Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," pp. 113–15.

matter of surviving *into* threat, stigma, the spiraling violence of gay- and lesbian-bashing, and (in the AIDS emergency) the omnipresence of somatic fear and wrenching loss. It is also to have survived into a moment of unprecedented cultural richness, cohesion, and assertiveness for many lesbian and gay adults. Survivors' guilt, survivors' glee, even survivors' responsibility: powerfully as these are experienced, they are also more than complicated by how permeable the identity "survivor" must be to the undiminishing currents of risk, illness, mourning, and defiance.

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

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

For me, this strong formalist investment didn't imply (as formalism is generally taken to imply) an evacuation of interest from the passionate, the imagistic, the ethical dimensions of the texts, but quite the contrary: the need I brought to books and poems was hardly to be circumscribed, and I felt I knew I would have to struggle to wrest from them sustaining news of the world, ideas, myself, and (in various senses) my kind. The reading practice founded on such basic demands and intuitions had necessarily to run against the grain of the most patent available formulae for young

people's reading and life—against the grain, often, of the most accessible voices even in the texts themselves. At any rate, becoming a perverse reader was never a matter of my condescension to texts, rather of the surplus charge of my trust in them to remain powerful, refractory, and exemplary. And this doesn't seem an unusual way for ardent reading to function in relation to queer experience.

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

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

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

permitted assumptions of their liberal arts education. Yet the same education was being used so differently by students who brought to it sharper needs, more supple epistemological frameworks.

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

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

- a surname
- a sexual dyad
- a legal unit based on state-regulated marriage
- a circuit of blood relationships
- a system of companionship and succor
- a building
- a proscenium between "private" and "public"
- an economic unit of earning and taxation
- the prime site of economic consumption
- the prime site of cultural consumption
- a mechanism to produce, care for, and acculturate children

- a mechanism for accumulating material goods over several generations
- a daily routine
- a unit in a community of worship
- a site of patriotic formation

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

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

- your biological (e.g., chromosomal) sex, male or female;
- your self-perceived gender assignment, male or female (supposed to be the same as your biological sex);
- the preponderance of your traits of personality and appearance, masculine or feminine (supposed to correspond to your sex and gender);
- the biological sex of your preferred partner;
- the gender assignment of your preferred partner (supposed to be the same as her/his biological sex);
- the masculinity or femininity of your preferred partner (supposed to be the opposite<sup>6</sup> of your own);
- your self-perception as gay or straight (supposed to correspond to whether your preferred partner is your sex or the opposite);
- your preferred partner’s self-perception as gay or straight (supposed to be the same as yours);
- your procreative choice (supposed to be yes if straight, no if gay);
- your preferred sexual act(s) (supposed to be insertive if you are male or masculine, receptive if you are female or feminine);
- your most eroticized sexual organs (supposed to correspond to the procreative capabilities of your sex, and to your insertive/receptive assignment);

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

and—again—many more. Even this list is remarkable for the silent presumptions it has to make about a given person's sexuality, presumptions that are true only to varying degrees, and for many people not true at all: that everyone "has a sexuality," for instance, and that it is implicated with each person's sense of overall identity in similar ways; that each person's most characteristic erotic expression will be oriented toward another person and not autoerotic; that if it is alloerotic, it will be oriented toward a single partner or kind of partner at a time; that its orientation will not change over time.<sup>7</sup> Normatively, as the parenthetical prescriptions in the list above suggest, it should be possible to deduce anybody's entire set of specs from the initial datum of biological sex alone—if one adds only the normative assumption that "the biological sex of your preferred partner" will be the opposite of one's own. With or without that heterosexist assumption, though, what's striking is the number and *difference* of the dimensions that "sexual identity" is supposed to organize into a seamless and univocal whole.

And if it doesn't?

That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes,

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6. The binary calculus I'm describing here depends on the notion that the male and female sexes are each other's "opposites," but I do want to register a specific demurral against that bit of easy common sense. Under no matter what cultural construction, women and men are more like each other than chalk is like cheese, than ratiocination is like raisins, than up is like down, or than 1 is like 0. The biological, psychological, and cognitive attributes of men overlap with those of women by vastly more than they differ from them.

radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or...people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.

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

At the same time, a lot of the most exciting recent work around “queer” spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identityfracturing discourses, for example. Intellectuals and artists of color whose sexual self-definition includes “queer”—I think of an Isaac Julien, a Gloria Anzaldúa, a Richard Fung—are using the leverage of “queer” to do a new kind of justice to the fractal intricacies of language, skin, migration, state. Thereby, the gravity (I mean the *gravitas*, the meaning, but also the *center* of gravity) of the term “queer” itself deepens and shifts.

Another telling representational effect. A word so fraught as “queer” is—fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement—never can only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. Anyone’s use of “queer” about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else. This is true (as it might also be true of “lesbian” or “gay”) because of the violently different connotative evaluations that seem to cluster around the category. But “gay” and “lesbian” still present themselves (however delusively) as objective, empirical categories governed by empirical rules of evidence (however contested). “Queer” seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation. A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which “queer” can signify only *when attached to the first person*. One possible corollary: that what it takes—all it takes—to make the description “queer” a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person.

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7. A related list that amplifies some of the issues raised in this one appears in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 25–26.