Queering the State
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The time has come to think about queering the state.\footnote{The year 1994 has set a record for antigay initiatives in the United States. At latest count, there are between eighteen and twenty-seven ballot battles gearing up, surpassing the previous record of sixteen in 1993. This rising tide of hate is partly a backlash against an increasing number of gay rights initiatives. Last year sixteen state legislatures took up measures to grant civil rights protection to gay men and lesbians or to repeal antisodomy laws (most of these proposals failed). But antigay initiatives are also part of a grander scheme to organize a right-wing voting block to take on issues such as abortion rights, school curriculums, and tax policies. This fight will be a daunting challenge to the organized lesbian and gay rights movement: the combined budgets of the six largest gay organizations total only about $12 million, compared to the more than $210 million in the combined budgets of the six largest right-wing religious organizations.\footnotemark[2]

The financial clout and cultural reach of these organizations should not be underestimated. For instance, Focus on the Family, based in Colorado Springs and founded by Dr. James Dobson, formerly a member of the Meese Commission on Pornography, boasts a $90 million annual budget and affiliated Family Councils in thirty states. It distributes the antigay video, *The Gay Agenda*, publishes nine magazines, and supports sixteen hundred radio programs. The Christian Coalition of Chesapeake, Virginia, distributed 40 million voter guides in the 1992 elections in its campaign to take over state and local Republican parties. It supports the Christian Broadcasting Network, the Family Channel, and the 700 Club, which reach millions of viewers daily, as well as two newsletters, *Religious Rights Watch* and *Christian American*. The Coalition's leader, Pat Robertson, situates their agenda squarely in the middle of party politics: "We want . . . to see a majority of the Republican Party in the hands of pro-family Christians by 1996." Finally, Citizens for Excellence in Education, an arm of the National Association of Christian Educators led by Robert Simonds and located in Costa Mesa, California, distributes the manual, "How to Elect Christians to Public Office," and claims that thirty-five hundred Christians have been elected to school boards through its efforts.

It is clear that the strategies of the religious right go well beyond the simple articulation of homophobic, racist, and antifeminist sentiments. Their targets are precise and their program well formulated, as is indi-}
cated in a statement from a fundraising letter written by Simonds: “There are 15,700 school districts in America. When we get an active Christian parent's committee in operation in all districts, we can take complete control. . . . This would allow us to determine all local policy: select good textbooks, good curriculum programs, superintendents, and principals.”3

But the challenge is not only organizational and financial. The right-wing antigay zealots have mobilized new strategies and new rhetorics that challenge the customary practices, arguments, and slogans of liberal gay rights organizations. Successful opposition to the onslaught on the local, state, and national levels will require more than gearing up another round of the same kind of struggle. The opposition has changed its colors, and so must we.

The crisis specifically challenges those of us who teach and write about queer issues. We have already been faced with the rhetoric of crisis in higher education, mobilized by conservatives—a rhetoric that targets teaching and scholarship in the areas of class, race, gender, and sexuality as “politically correct” and as an effort to split, fragment, and destroy the idea of a common culture transmitted through education. In right-wing attacks on the state of higher education, lesbian and gay teachers and writers are often singled out as scholars of the particularly frivolous and absurd, though we are also often represented as uniquely powerful, able to overwhelm and destroy the very conception of a common culture.

These attacks are now paralleled by similar ones launched in the arena of national politics. Lesbian and gay efforts to secure civil rights protections have quickly become central in public debates of various kinds since the election of Bill Clinton. In conservative attacks on the new administration, queers are represented as ridiculous, with trivial political concerns, but also as a frightfully controlling presence in national politics. Shril cries of the dominance of the Gay Lobby have been mobilized with lightning speed, especially in response to the debates surrounding the military. Local and state initiatives to roll back or prevent antidiscrimination measures pick up and elaborate these themes, as they also try out new strategies and rhetorics.

Even in friendly internal critiques of the state of progressive politics—critiques in which the problem of fragmentation is addressed—gay and lesbian politics are sometimes invoked to represent the narrowing of focus (what could be narrower?) and the neglect of the common interest. In a field of progressive alliances often pejoratively described as a conglomeration of “special interest groups,” lesbian and gay organizations seem to represent the most “special” interests of all. In this way we appear, on both the right and the left, as signifiers of the “crisis” of liberal politics itself.4

The problem for those of us engaged in queer scholarship and teach-
ing, who have a stake in queer politics, is how to respond to these attacks at a moment when we have unprecedented opportunities (we are present in university curriculums and national politics as never before), yet confront perilous and paralyzing assaults. It is imperative that we respond to these attacks in the public arena from which they are launched. We cannot defend our teaching and scholarship without engaging in public debate and addressing the nature and operations of the state upon which our jobs and futures depend. In other words, the need to turn our attention to state politics is not only theoretical (though it is also that). It is time for queer intellectuals to concentrate on the creative production of strategies at the boundary of queer and nation—strategies specifically for queering the state.⁵

In formulating the terms of address in this situation, we are also now faced with the problem of a gap between the languages of our classrooms and scholarship, and the languages of public debate on the subject of homosexuality.

To illustrate what I mean by a language gap, I will re-create a dialogue between literary critic and founding mother of queer studies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and a young fact-checker for Rolling Stone magazine. Stacey D'Erasmo, friend and editor at the Voice Literary Supplement, wrote an article on gay and lesbian studies for Rolling Stone in which she initially referred to Sedgwick as “straight”—a mistake she later regretted.⁶ When someone’s sexual identity is referred to in print, most periodicals will verify it; the article was sent to a fact-checker with no particular expertise in the subject area. The fact-checker called Sedgwick. Imagine now a split screen, with Sedgwick on one side in her office at Duke University, and on the other side, the young fact-checker, chewing gum. The dialogue—which I have re-created in the manner of a docudrama from Stacey’s second-hand account—is as follows:

Fact-checker: Professor Sedgwick, the article says here that you’re straight—are ya straight?
Sedgwick: Did Stacey say I’m straight? I didn’t tell her that.
Fact-checker: Well, it says here you’re straight. Is that true?
Sedgwick: Well, under some discursive regimes I might be considered queer.
Fact-checker: Right. So you’re not straight. Then you’re gay?
Sedgwick: I didn’t tell Stacey I was gay.
Fact-checker: Right. . . . But you just said you were queer. . . . Isn’t that the same as gay?
Sedgwick: Well, as I began to explain, under some discursive regimes . . .
Fact-checker: Look, Professor Sedgwick, you’re married, aren’t ya? So you’re straight.
Sedgwick: I never told Stacey I was married.

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I tell this story not to make fun of Sedgwick, who was attempting to interrupt and resist the imperative to sexual categorization, nor to condescend to the fact-checker, whose frustration followed from her attempts to decipher what Sedgwick was saying, but to illustrate the difficulty of communication across the gap between the predominantly constructionist language of queer studies and the essentialist presumptions of public discourse. One might easily imagine other examples. A Nightline panel of queer theorists could be assembled to discuss the new military policy: Judith Butler, D. A. Miller, and Leo Bersani. It is not that these figures would have nothing interesting or useful to say. They would simply have a great deal of trouble making themselves understood (as many of us in the field of queer studies would). The problems are on the levels both of cultural legibility and political palatability. Imagine Bersani: “As I argue, Ted, in my article ‘Is the Rectum a Grave?’ . . .” The ensuing discussion of heteromasculinity’s terror of penetration might put Ted in HIS grave.

Right now, several conflicting languages occupy the centers of public discourse in the U.S. In conservative politics, the language of morality and “values” predominates. This language assumes the universality and normative superiority of marital heterosexual relationships, and positions homosexuality and bisexuality as immoral and sinful threats to family values. In liberal politics, both gay and gay supportive, the rhetoric of rights and the call for an end to discrimination against a fixed minority population of lesbians, gays, and (sometimes) bisexuals hold sway. More militant gay politics stresses difference over equality and assertion over assimilation but still generally posits a fixed minority political constituency, though this is changing. Queer politics is beginning to develop a strategy of public display and cultural intervention—a strategy positing a shifting, oppositional constituency. This politics is still highly contested and only ambivalently constructionist, however.

The language of queer studies, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly constructionist. Queer studies scholars are engaged in denaturalizing categories of sexual identity and mobilizing various critiques of the political practices referred to under the rubric “identity politics.” Three of these critiques might be summarized as follows:

(1) The homosexual/heterosexual polarity is historically recent and culturally specific. The notion that these sexual categories are fixed, mutually exclusive, and mark individual bodies and personalities is a modern Western development. In other times and places, sexual acts between or among persons of the same sex have been organized and understood in dramatically different ways.

(2) The production of a politics from a fixed identity position privileges those for whom that position is the primary or only marked identity. The result for lesbian and gay politics is a tendency to center prosperous

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white men as the representative homosexuals. (We can see this at work in the military issue.) Though proportionately many more lesbians are discharged than gay men, the issue is nearly always represented as centering around men. Every production of "identity" creates exclusions that reappear at the margins like ghosts to haunt identity-based politics. In lesbian/gay politics, such exclusions have included bisexuals and transgender persons, among others.

(3) Identity politics only replaces closets with ghettos. The closet as a cultural space has been defined and enforced by the existence of the ghetto. In coming out of the closet, identity politics offers us another bounded, fixed space of humiliation and another kind of social isolation. Homosexual desire is localized—projected out and isolated in the community of bodies found in the gay ghetto. In this sense, identity politics lets the larger society off the hook of anxiety about sexual difference.7

These critiques are now so well known and widely circulated in queer studies scholarship and classrooms that, in my own course called "Queer Cultures" at Brown University, there are no worse epithets than to accuse someone of "essentialism," or of engaging in identity politics. This identity-bashing is presented as the progressive cutting edge of politics as well as theory—but it can also be framed in ways that are quite reactionary. It can be a way of reinventing the closet, of condescending to lesbian and gay scholars, students, and activists, and of avoiding (if not outright despising) lesbian/gay/queer activism altogether—while posing as politically more progressive than thou. But the critical insights of queer theory might also be mobilized (and, I would argue, should be) to forge a political language that can take us beyond the limiting rhetorics of liberal gay rights and of militant nationalism.

When we turn our attention to this project, we run into difficulty the moment we step outside our classrooms, books, journals, and conferences. How do we represent our political concerns in public discourse? In trying to do this, in trying to hold the ground of the fundamental criticism of the very language of current public discourse that queer theory has enabled, in trying to translate our constructionist languages into terms that have the power to transform political practices, we are faced with several difficulties.

First, the discussion of the construction of categories of sexual identity resists translation into terms that are culturally legible and thus usable in consequential public debates. To illustrate this difficulty, let's imagine that you are asked to appear on the Oprah Winfrey show to talk about public school curriculums. Guest A says material on gays will influence children to think gay is okay and thus to become disgusting perverts themselves. Guest B, from Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, says that this will not happen because sexual identity is fixed by the age of three, if
We need to find ways to respond to two developing right-wing strategies: No Promo Homo and No Special Rights.

not in utero. You are Guest C—what do you say? That “the production of queer sexualities is historically and culturally conditioned,” that if gay materials in class are conducive to the production of queer sexualities, you are squarely in favor of their use? The difficulties here on the level of legibility and on the level of political palatability are readily apparent.

Second, the use of constructionist language to discuss homosexuality tends to leave heterosexuality in its naturalized place—it can be taken up by homophobes to feed the fantasy of a world without homosexual bodies and desires. “If history can make them, history can also UNmake them” seems to be the logic here. At a conference in Toronto a decade ago, Dorothy Allison and Esther Newton suggested responding to this danger in constructionist arguments by producing buttons demanding “Deconstruct Heterosexuality First.” Of course, we can respond as the button suggests and work to denaturalize heterosexuality (which queer studies is, in fact, doing), but this is unlikely to be received in current public debates without guffaws and disbelief.

The usual response to these difficulties is to resort to what is called “strategic essentialism”: the use of essentialist categories and identity politics in public debates because that is all anyone can understand, and we need to be effective in the political arena. I take the concerns that lead to the embrace of strategic essentialism seriously, but I think that it is ultimately an unproductive solution. It allows sexual difference and queer desires to continue to be localized in homosexualized bodies. It consigns us, in the public imagination, to the realms of the particular and the parochial, the defense team for a fixed minority, that most “special” of special interest groups—again, letting everyone else off the hook.

I would argue that we need to find a way to close the language gap in queer studies and queer politics. We need to do this especially with reference to the operations of the state. Though queer politics is presently claiming public and cultural space in imaginative new ways (kiss-ins, for example), the politics of the state are generally being left to lesbian and gay civil rights strategies. These strategies are greatly embattled at present, and there are still many gains to be made through their deployment. But they are increasingly ineffective in the face of new homophobic initiatives; they appear unable to generate new rhetorics and tactics against attacks designed specifically to disable identity-based antidiscrimination policies. We cannot afford to fall back on strategic essentialism (it will not get us out of the trouble we are now in), and we cannot afford to abandon the field.

We do have some precedents. Scholars and activists working on the issues surrounding the AIDS crisis have managed to transport the work of theory into the arena of politics and public policy with astonishing speed and commitment. In the arts the films of Isaac Julien and the Sankofa
collective and those of Marlon Riggs (*Tongues Untied* and *Color Adjustment*, both shown on public television) have brought into public discourse very complex ideas about the construction of racial and sexual identities and their intersections.

I have a modest proposal for attempting this translation in the context of our current political situation. We need to find ways to respond to two developing right-wing strategies: No Promo Homo and No Special Rights.

The No Promo Homo campaigns, designated as such by attorney and activist Nan D. Hunter, attempt to proscribe the public “promotion” of homosexuality, at least when state funds are involved. These campaigns began appearing in 1978 with the Briggs initiative in California.

The following list provides a brief history of these efforts:

— The Briggs Initiative (California, 1978) would have permitted the firing of any school employee who engaged in “advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging, or promoting of private or public homosexual activity directed at, or likely to come to the attention of, school children and/or other employees.”

— The Helms Amendment to the Labor–Health and Human Services Appropriation Act for Fiscal Year 1988 provided the caveat that “none of the funds made available under this Act to the Centers for Disease Control shall be used to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote or encourage, directly [‘or indirectly’ was removed], homosexual activities.”

— Britain’s Clause 28 of the Local Government Act of 1988 stated that local governments would not be permitted to “promote homosexuality or public material for the promotion of homosexuality” or “promote the teaching . . . of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.”

— In 1989, in the wake of a conservative outcry over reports that the National Endowment for the Arts had supported an exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs, the U.S. Congress enacted legislation prohibiting the NEA from funding “obscene” materials, “including but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts.”

— The 1992 Oregon ballot initiative, appropriating the basic form of Clause 28, would have required that “state, regional, local governments and their properties and monies shall not be used to promote, encourage, or facilitate homosexuality.” This legislation was defeated at the state level, then passed by several localities through ballot initiatives. Another effort to pass similar legislation is expected in 1994.

Interestingly enough, No Promo Homo campaigns concede the privacy arguments advanced by lesbian/gay advocates over the past two decades. There is no attempt to police “private” behavior. Instead, there is
an attempt to counter identity claims, and antidiscrimination efforts based on those claims, through the policing of speech, that is, "promotion" and "advocacy." These campaigns deny that lesbian/gay identities are fixed, and posit instead a contagion theory. (This may partly explain the turn to biology as a grounding for identity by some gay rights advocates and their liberal supporters, as a counter to the contagion theory at the heart of conservative strategies.) These strategies also borrow from the anti-abortion movement their focus on restriction through limitation of state funding. In addition to conceding privacy arguments, No Promo Homo campaigns also concede some right of access to "public" space, but only public space that is not supported by a state apparatus or by state revenues. This is an extremely constrained "public," in that state funds and institutions reach broadly into educational, cultural, and political life in the U.S.

The appeal in these campaigns is to some notion of a "neutral" state. The argument being made is "you can do what you want" (the concession to privacy) and "you can be who you are" (the concession to identity), but "you can't spread it around on MY dime." This, of course, is a profoundly false neutrality. Queers are presented as those who wish illegitimately to recruit the state into "promoting" a single minority viewpoint, a parochial "special" interest.

Other campaigns that are not, strictly speaking, No Promo Homo campaigns pick up this theme as well. The Colorado ballot initiative of 1992 called for a ban on antidiscrimination legislation to protect lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights, a variation on the many repeal initiatives which began with Anita Bryant's notorious Save the Children campaign in 1977. Many of the 1994 antigay initiatives are straightforward attempts to repeal existing antidiscrimination legislation; others are modeled on the more expansive Colorado effort to preempt the antidiscrimination strategy before it is mobilized. The Colorado antigay activists circulated the popular and effective slogan, "No Special Rights."

We know who really has the special rights. In fact, the state is deeply involved in regulating and "promoting" heterosexuality. It is queers who have been excluded from the benefits of state support in all kinds of areas, from tax law to education to support for cultural production, and more. As Michael Warner has argued, "The dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea how widespread those institutions and accounts are."13

I therefore propose that we respond to the No Promo Homo and No Special Rights campaigns NOT with our familiar emphasis on equality (we're just like you and want the same rights) or difference (we're here, we're queer, get used to it) ONLY, but with campaigns of our own: NO
PROMO HETERO, or WHOSE SPECIAL RIGHTS? What I am suggesting in substance is that we look beyond the language of rights claims for a fixed minority and calls for antidiscrimination (rhetorical positioning largely borrowed from the civil rights movement and feminism), and instead borrow from and transform another liberal discourse, that surrounding the effort to disestablish state religion, to separate church and state. We might become the new disestablishmentarians, the state religion we wish to disestablish being the religion of heteronormativity. We might argue that public policy and public institutions may not legitimately compel, promote, or prefer inter-gender relationships over intra-gender attachments. Without appropriating too much of the liberal baggage of the discourse of religious tolerance, we might borrow from this rhetoric a strategy for reversing the terms of antigay propaganda and exposing the myriad ways that state apparatuses promote, encourage, and produce “special rights” for heterosexuality.

A rhetorical move such as this has several advantages. First, it highlights the embeddedness of heteronormativity in a wide range of state policies, institutions, and practices. Tracing out in a concrete way the extent of the state’s involvement in promoting heterosexuality would be a useful, though enormous, project. Media materials would be effective here. For instance, under the banner of WHOSE SPECIAL RIGHTS? we might use billboards, posters, video, film, and other published material to outline the ways in which heterosexuality is endorsed through state activity (education, tax law, marriage and family life, etc.), specifying the unfair preferences that operate in each area.

Second, such a move may be articulated within a widely understood and accepted liberal discourse (the state may no more establish a state sexuality than a state religion, a heterosexual presumption has no more place in public life than a presumption of Christianity). In other words, it could be framed in terms that are completely understandable within this political culture. Yet, third, its implications are much more radical and far-reaching than the rights claims we are currently forwarding. From marriage to employment and from health care policies to public school curriculums, the aggressive deployment of this argument could transform public debate.

In many ways the religion analogy works better than analogies to liberal discourses surrounding race and gender. For instance, affirmative action strategies, which have had some limited success in relation to gender and race, would never work for us. We need strategies that do not require us to specify who is and is not a “member” of our group. If sexual desire is compared to religion, we can see it as not natural, fixed, or ahistorical, yet not trivial or shallow, as the term “lifestyle choice” implies. Religion is understood as not biological or fixed; for instance, people can

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and do convert. But it is also understood as a deep commitment. That commitment is seen as highly resistant to coerced conversion and deserving of expression and political protection. That is why an argument for “disestablishment” might work better than calls for an end to discrimination against an identifiable population.

Deconstructing heteronormativity reverses the terms of No Promo Homo and No Special Rights campaigns that try to claim that the lesbian/gay movement is seeking privilege and that call upon the populist disdain for privilege to discredit our political efforts. Instead, we point out on “Larry King Live” who really is trying to maintain privilege. Such a reversal has the potential to expose and disable the conservative rhetoric in ways that antidiscrimination language cannot, stripping it of its phony populist appeal.

As Dorothy Allison and Esther Newton proposed, it is a strategy that in a sense deconstructs heterosexuality first. Rather than relying on the solidification of lesbian and gay identities, it attacks the natural and preferred status of heterosexuality. No Promo Hetero and Whose Special Rights? would be, in a sense, tactical reversals (of No Promo Homo and No Special Rights), but ones that work to destabilize heteronormativity rather than to naturalize gay identities.

Moreover, this destabilization brackets debates about morality and values. As in the case of religious differences, we do not need to persuade or convert others to our view. We simply argue for “disestablishment” of state endorsement for one view over another. It brackets political differences among progressive activists (liberal assimilationists, militant nationalists, and constructionists) and debates about biology (the gay brain, the lesbian twins): we can agree on this strategic move without having to resolve our differences. And it makes a case for freedom of association (to form relationships) and freedom of speech (acknowledgment or assertion) for everyone, rather than asks for “rights” for a fixed minority. In this way, we can escape being positioned as narrow and parochial. Of course, antidiscrimination efforts work to this end as well, arguing for an end to discrimination based on anyone’s sexual preference or orientation. (The success of the anti-Briggs campaign in California was partly owing to such an emphasis on everybody’s rights.) But this is becoming more difficult to do, as the No Promo Homo and No Special Rights rhetoric becomes more sophisticated at forcing gay rights activists to specify the group they represent. Turning the tables by asking right-wing activists to justify the “special rights” of heterosexuality might help undermine this new rhetoric.

Finally, a disestablishment strategy does not require us to localize or naturalize gendered desire. But the disadvantages of such a strategy mirror the advantages. Because this case is formulated within the terms of liber-
alism, it may trap us in as many ways as it releases us. For instance, in some ways it seems to construct a zone of liberty in negative relation to the state (it argues about what the state can NOT do). This is not the historical moment when we want to set up a negative relation to state power or slip into limiting forms of libertarianism. The arguments would need to be carefully framed to emphasize that state institutions must be even-handed in the arena of sexuality, not that sexuality should be removed from state action completely. Activists might also make the crucial distinction between state institutions (which must, in some sense, be neutral) and “the public” arena, where explicit advocacy is not only allowable but desirable.15

The radical implications of a destabilizing strategy, set in motion as they are by liberal arguments, will not be invisible to our opponents. We might very well still find ourselves beyond the pale of the McNeil-Lehrer Report and the New York Times. We might expect a very strong response—perhaps the argument that the state MUST and SHOULD promote and prefer heterosexuality as the foundation for “the family.” This response would be very difficult to reply to, given the powerful valence of “family.”16 But it would usefully put conservatives on the defensive. They would have to acknowledge and defend heterosexual privilege rather than claim we are the ones who want unfair preferences. It would force them back into an old conservative argument, taking the au courant antiprivilege spin off their revamped rhetoric.

No Promo Hetero will probably not be successful in winning any kind of disestablishment of heteronormativity in the near future. Its success in the short run might be the rhetorical disabling of conservative strategies. But even in the event of this kind of success, it is not a broad solution but only a local tactic embedded in a larger strategy of destabilizing heteronormativity. It is one among many conceivable tactics. It is not meant to replace civil rights strategies, and it would not be appropriate in all situations. There are many problems in legal and state institutions that it could not address (antiporn laws, for instance). We have to keep imagining new ways both to respond to attacks and to put our own vision forward.

I have one other suggestion for reconceptualizing our relation to state politics. In representing our situation in public discourse, we need a less defensive, more politically self-assertive linguistic and conceptual tools to talk about sexual difference. (This is the problem to which a nascent queer politics is now productively addressing itself.) We might begin to think about sexual difference not in terms of naturalized identities but as a form of dissent, understood not simply as speech, but as a constellation of nonconforming practices, expressions, and beliefs.17 Here, again, I am drawing from religion. The right to religious dissent has been understood

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not solely as the right to belief but as a right to practices expressive of those beliefs. Framing our difference in this way would be useful in several contexts. First, a notion of dissent would present our difference as oppositional, bringing into the frame the illegitimacy of the social and political privilege accorded to heterosexuality. Second, this notion of dissent would join our right to sexual conduct, both desire and expression, our right to a multiplicity of possible shifting identities, and our right to state a viewpoint and promote it, to express ourselves publicly, politically, and culturally. This is useful now because of the move in both mainstream religious organizations and the military to separate “orientation” and “conduct,” permitting the former (a concession to antidiscrimination arguments) but not the latter. We need to aggressively rejoin these elements, not cooperate in their separation. Some notion of “dissent” might work to that end.

Finally, the framework of “dissent” could help us think about a central paradox of sexual difference: it is both malleable—historically, culturally, and in many individual lives—and yet highly resistant to coercive change. This paradox of malleability and resistance is built into the general understanding of how “dissent” works; people change their opinions and practices over time yet will hold to them under torture. This is a paradox that neither notions of identity nor fluidity can quite capture.

Extensive transformation of these strategies will be necessary beyond the terms outlined here if they are actually to be mobilized. If we can use the discourses of religious liberty and religious dissent at all, we must rework them into a dramatically new shape. This has been done before. The U.S. civil rights movement drew on and transformed familiar religious rhetoric, reworking it in light of new political needs and cultural practices to get it to do a kind of cultural work it was never designed to do. The question is: At this historical moment, can we transform ANY liberal rhetoric in the interests ultimately of going beyond liberal categories and solutions? Or, given the difficulty of translating our most radical insights and arguments into effective public discourse, can we afford not to try?

Whether this specific strategy will fly or not, we need to think seriously about how to formulate the insights of queer theory and transport them into public discourse. We need (I emphasize NEED here) to be both transformative AND effective. We need not only to defend ourselves in the university, in the polity, and in the streets but to move our political vision forward beyond the limits of lesbian and gay rights and militant nationalism. We need to do this in a way that allows us to address the general without losing sight of the particular. (We need both to specify our own situation and to reach beyond it.) We need to do this for the defense, promotion, and advocacy not only of our scholarship and teaching, but of our political, personal, and indeed our physical lives.

Lisa Duggan
Notes

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3. The data on these organizations is taken from materials presented by a member of People for the American Way at a workshop on the religious right sponsored by the Texas Family Planning Association, December 1993.

4. At an April 1993 conference at the University of Illinois, radical critic Todd Gitlin attacked the emphasis on “difference” in progressive politics and called for a return to “universalism.” This kind of pointing to “fragmentation” as caused by all those “special” and parochial interests, rather than by the false “universalism” of a failing left politics, is common. See Gitlin’s article in The Crisis in Higher Education, ed. Michael Bérubé and Cary Nelson (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

5. Michael Warner has called for queer intellectuals to turn their attention to theorizing the social and for critical theorists of politics and the state to take sexuality seriously as a category of analysis. See his introduction to Fear of a Queer Planet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).


6. Stacey D’Erasmo, “The Gay Nineties: In Schools across the Country, Gay Studies Is Coming on Strong,” Rolling Stone, 3 October 1991. The article finally referred to Sedgwick as “a bit of a puzzle—a married woman who describes herself as ‘queer’” (87). I thank Stacey for allowing me to repeat this story, and I am grateful to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for graciously allowing me to use her name.

7. For a collection of articles in which these arguments are laid out, see Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David Halperin, eds., The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader (New York: Routledge, 1993). Their “Suggestions for Further Reading” at the end of the volume is especially helpful for a sense of the development of these arguments over time.


9. For a discussion of the ways right-wing strategies have evolved in response to progressive identity politics, see Cindy Patton, “Tremble Hetero Swine!” in Fear of a Queer Planet.

10. I am thinking here of the work of Douglas Crimp, Paula Treichler, and Cindy Patton, among many others.

12. The Colorado ban has been declared unconstitutional by the courts, but this decision is presently being appealed.


15. For an especially helpful discussion of the importance of this distinction, Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990).

16. I am indebted to Henry Abelove, who pointed out that conservatives would no doubt respond to *No Promo Hetero* with a defense of “the family.”

17. Gayle Rubin has used the terms “sexual dissenters,” “erotic dissidents,” “sexual dissidents,” and “dissident sexuality” in ways similar to my use of “sexual dissent” here. See “The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M,” in *Coming to Power*, ed. SAMOIS (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981), and “Thinking Sex.”