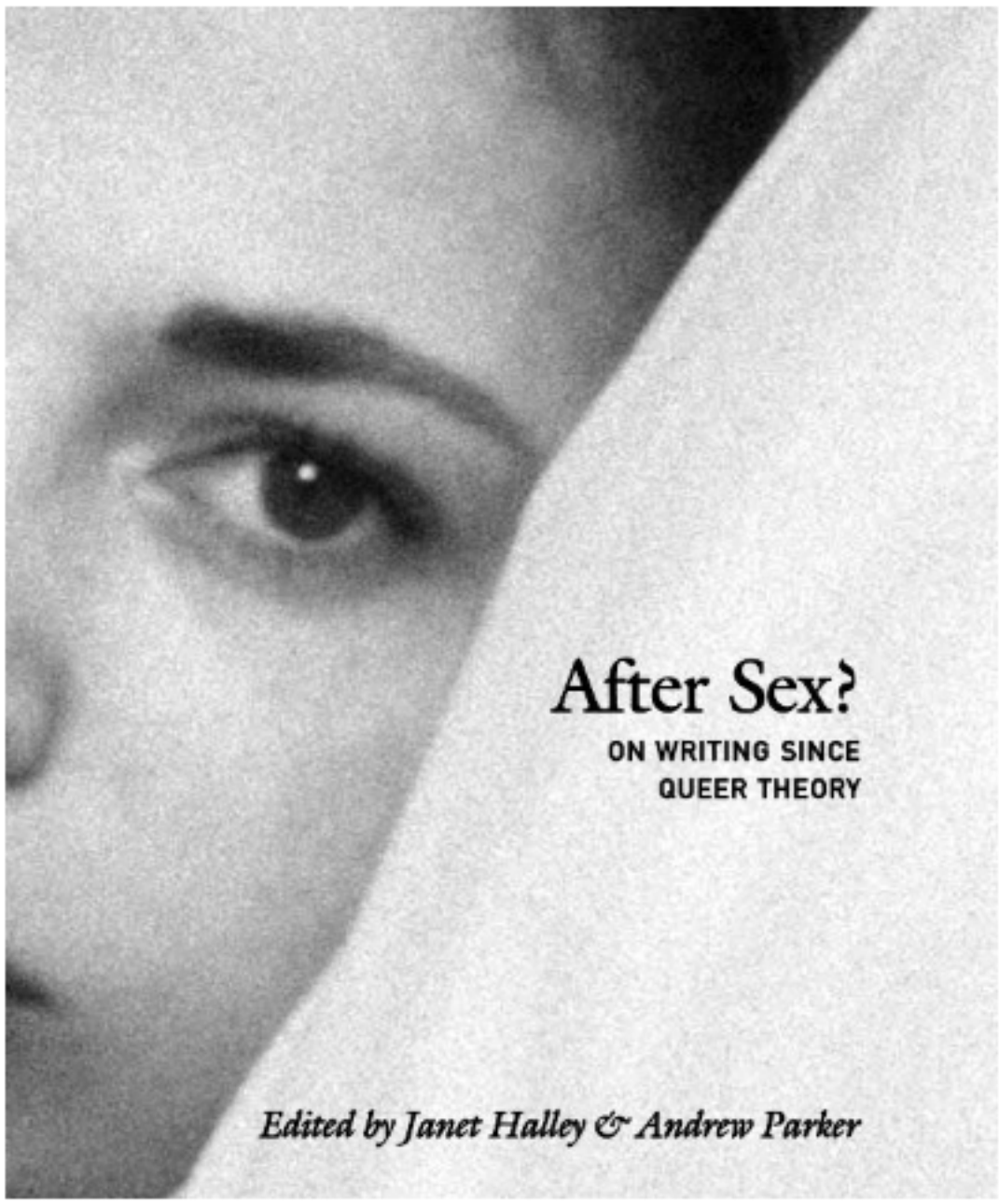

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS *Durham & London 2011*

Introduction

JANET HALLEY AND ANDREW PARKER

WHAT HAS QUEER THEORY become now that it has a past? What, if anything, does it not include within its purview? Does "sexuality" comprise its inside? If so, then does queer theory have an outside? Bringing together the work of both younger and more established scholars, primarily in the field of literary studies, *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory* explores these and related questions by asking its contributors to reflect on, among other things, what in their work *isn't* queer.[1]

We didn't know what to expect when, in the earliest stages of this project, we posed these questions to potential contributors. Though we couldn't predict what they'd make of it, we had a variety of reasons for asking them in these terms. In the first place, we'd been hearing from some quarters that queer theory, if not already passé, was rapidly approaching its expiration date, and we wanted to learn from others whether or how this rumor might be true.[2] We knew, of course, that the activist energies that helped to fuel queer academic work in the United States had declined sharply since the early 1990s, when the books that would become foundational for queer theory began to appear.[3] With *Gender Trouble* and *Epistemology of the Closet* now past their age of majority, it didn't entirely surprise us that a recent issue of a journal could ask, "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" —with "now" an obviously pointed way to announce a departure from earlier habits of thought.[4] But the authors around whom queer theory first crystallized seem to have spent the past decade distancing themselves from *their* previous work: in recent years, for example, Judith Butler began writing about justice and human rights, Michael Warner about sermons and secularism, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick about Melanie Klein and Buddhism.[5] In what sense, we wondered, are these writers' current interests commensurate with their earlier (or concurrent) work on sexuality—if, indeed, they are? Does the very distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual matter to queer thinking, and if so, when, where, and how? Can work be regarded as queer if it's not explicitly "about" sexuality? Does finding oneself "after" queer theory differ—in terms of desire, location, temporality, loyalty, antagonism, comradeship, or competence—from finding oneself "after" a traditional academic discipline, critical race theory, a religious orientation, a political conviction, feminism, lesbian and gay studies . . . ?

We posed these questions to potential contributors whose previous work on queer subjects suggested that they might have something especially pertinent to say in response—either because the focus of their work has changed over the course of their careers, or because it hasn't; either because their work revolves around sexual and nonsexual topics alike, or because it retains queerness as its single or predominant object or lens. Since younger scholars are "after" queer theory in yet another sense, we wondered, too, what they might tell us about inheriting a canon of queer texts and preoccupations at a moment so different from that of the early 1990s. Finally, and in order to delimit even further the range of responses, we first directed these questions for the most part to people in the fields we know best—literary and legal studies. We envisioned, at any rate, a collection consisting of many short pieces (suitable for reading on the subway, say, or in the john), focused reflections on the trajectory of each contributor's work and its relation to queer theory, rather than extended analyses. We hoped that these would be "personal" statements whose purpose, for once, would be to tell rather than show.

Though the essays included here are terrific by any standard of measurement, they are also less than fully representative of the range of current queer work even within the fields we specifically targeted. We note, most obviously, the scarcity of contributions from people working in film and cultural studies and on non-Anglophone literatures, as well as the near-total absence of essays from people working principally in law. We regret the resulting gaps, of course, though we knew from the start we wouldn't be able to incorporate everything we wanted, even in this expanded edition. One thing we learned, or so we think we did, is that queer theory in the law schools has nothing like the éclat it still enjoys in literary study. Most of the people we took to be doing queer work in law didn't warm to our invitation at all, and when they did, our question about being "after" didn't resonate with their sense of how queerness came to matter in their work (if, that is, it has mattered at all). We see in this nonresponse the effects of a great many causes. To name a few: the simple temporal lag of the law schools (queer theory started earlier and elsewhere); the failure of queer theory to engage the critical tradition in legal studies (and its resulting failure to grok the critique of rights); hostility in centrist legal studies both to the a-rationalist traditions of thought that have provided so much to queer theory, and to theoretical approaches more generally that do not quickly produce a "policy recommendation"; the plentitude of legal problems that have nothing to do with (are "after"?) sex; and the usual politics of law-as-praxis versus humanities-as-theory, with all the angst of unrequited love it has produced on both sides of the divide.[6] We remain disappointed with this outcome.

The noes we received from people in literature were revealing in other ways. Some declined given the press of their existing commitments (what comes "after sex" may turn out to be administration). Others replied—also unsurprisingly—that they had already said everything they wanted on this subject, while a few others regretted having so much to say that our page limit would have been a vexation. What was more surprising to one of us, if anticipated by the other, was that several people responded to our invitation not so much by declining it as by *refusing* it. Some expressed their continuing skepticism about queer theory itself, while others (apparently not much engaged by the question in our title) reacted angrily to "our" supposition that sex—like, say, Hegel's conception of art—had become a thing of the past.[7]

As if *we* knew the meaning of sex. Or after. Or since. Or writing. Or queer theory.

(Well, we do. But we're not telling. Or showing.)

Thus the space into which this collection crowds its energies is highly specific. Despite all of our different recruitment failures, we present here immensely rich and varied essays that, taken together, suggest that all kinds of excitement remain possible "after sex." Not only are these essays all "on writing," they are also the very thing they are writing about. And they are about something that hovers at the limits of articulation, at the opening edge of their authors' sense of their work and the histories they've lived through. Though the contributors wrote for the most part in isolation from one another and had only a few very oblique questions to go by, highly articulate if often tacit conversations can be traced across these different texts. As the first readers of these essays, we were struck not only by their sustained meditation on sex as a source of delight and trouble, as a subject of serious inquiry, as a political conundrum, and as a spur or occasion for writing. We were also astonished at how often that meditation was itself enabled by a thought of "after-ness": in reporting on the

state of queer theory vis-à-vis their own intellectual itineraries, our authors have much to say about the social affects, theoretical demands, and politics of thinking and writing in time.

In the first place, none of the contributors wanted "after" to signify a decisive loss or relinquishment of sex, queer theory, or *temps perdu*. Crisp distinctions between before and after appealed to no one. Instead, the essays multiplied the meanings of "After Sex?" and sent the potential linearity of that question ("Now that sex is over, what comes next?") around a Möbius strip ("In sex, what am I after?") in order to make it possible, again and again, for everything that is posterior to precede. Straightforward questions of succession—Did queer theory ever replace feminism? Did Foucault supplant Freud? Did gay and lesbian become queer?—seemed universally uninteresting and inapposite. While no one denied that succession can and does occur (it is, of course, conceivable to smoke a cigarette *after* sex), our authors were much more interested in posing questions about simultaneity, multiple temporalities, and overlapping or internally riven regimes of social practice, thought, and analysis.

There are many good reasons why this complex sensibility about time runs through a collection of essays of/about queer theory. In the first place, the very relationship between two books crucial for all queer theory — volumes 1 and 2 of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*—plant s the temporal question in the center of the courtyard.[8] Foucault's own struggle with the problematic of a "Great Paradigm Shift" to modernity from antiquity, the intense exploration he made into that claim by proceeding backward, in volume 2, from the modern to the antique, imbricated the question "What is sexuality?" with the question "*When* is it?"—and this has ensured that no simple answer to either will satisfy anyone who has a taste for queer.[9] Freud, too, struggled with the syntax of his discovery that the individual's progression through a series of stages (oral, anal, genital) is finally all but indistinguishable from a repetitive marching-in-place, "the finding of an object" from "a refinding of it."[10] Queer theory, dependent as it is on these two precursors, will hence be less the story of the slow-but-steady emergence of an identity over time than an acknowledgment of a temporal predicament—a constitutive impasse, in Lauren Berlant's terms herein. Which is why so many of this volume's contributors and other queer writers put pressure on the full semantic range of "after-ness" and the problem of historical periodization.[11] "Did I turn up at the party a little late, or awkwardly early?" Kate Thomas asks, leaving the question suspended. Reciting Gertrude Stein, Michael Moon wonders, "What is the use of being a boy if one is going to grow up to be a man?" What, indeed.

Without a doubt, however, our invitation did encourage people who devoted major portions of their thinking and writing careers to work on sexuality and/or in queer theory to reflect on the possibility of directing some of their passions and energies *elsewhere*—to work that was *not* about sexuality, or that *wasn't* queer, at least in some significant way. Unsurprisingly, serious dissension broke out over this query. Many of the contributors seem to take some version of Freud's "expanded notion" of sexuality— its extension beyond its "popular meaning"—to be a prime condition of queer thinking.[12] Thus Joseph Litvak admits in his essay to having trouble identifying what in his work isn't queer: "It is not just that the imperial ambitions of so much queer theory seem to render the question almost unanswerable. The problem is less that queer theory makes 'everything about sex' than that it lodges the nonsexual firmly within the sexual." Similarly pondering whether a queer sense of sex "obliterates any distinction between the sexual and the nonsexual," Elizabeth Freeman suggests that the collapse of distinction is itself the point: "Wasn't my being queer, in the first instance, about finding sex where it was not supposed to be, failing to find it where it was, finding that sex was not, after all, what I thought it was?" This may be, if such a thing exists, queer doxa. For one potential contributor, the very idea of an "outside" to sexuality (let alone an "end") seemed preposterous. Milder demurrals also arrived: for several authors, the possibility of a break with sexuality was exactly what they did *not* want—or even think possible. For Moon, sexuality was like the weather, inescapably an element in everything; for Litvak and Richard Rambuss, work on the dark, harsh, and undignified elements of sexuality remained a crucial, treasured, and not-yet-completed agenda. Litvak, Rambuss, and Erica Rand all close their essays with a decisive response to the query "After Sex?": "No, not for me, thank you."

For similar reasons, other contributors resisted the idea that queer theory—originating, we suppose most would agree, in work on sexuality —must be limited to that topic. Jonathan Goldberg's reading of Lucretius is situated in the problematic of succession from volume 1 to volume 2, but is not ostensibly "about" sex, sexuality, or gender; Rand insists on the importance of domains, such as race, that cannot be subsumed in queer (but notes as well that, when she studies them, such domains tend perversely to morph into sex all over again); Michael Cobb proposes bravely to leave sex behind altogether so that he can inquiry queerly into the politics and affects of singleness; Elizabeth A. Povinelli wonders what kind of being she becomes when she passionately affiliates with sexual *and* nonsexual identities; and Freeman probes again and again for what is "least queer in my work"—note, not "not queer" but "*least* queer"—and finds it in her desire to understand the lives of ordinary women, the sentimentalism of their affective appeals to one another, and the sheer relief she herself experiences in putting her scholarly finger on the pulse of the everyday. Thomas invites us to share her amazement that an obsessive emphasis on sexuality has led queer readings of Michael Field's lesbianism to miss entirely the fact that all of her/ their sex was incest!

But even as most who have been interested in queer theory would reject the idea that it has or should have a single "proper object" called "sexuality," some in the field have been ready to take a break from it, to imagine questions it cannot answer.[13] Sharon Marcus, for example, has complained in an important synoptic essay,

> Queer has been the victim of its own popularity, proliferating to the point of uselessness as a neologism for the transgression of any norm (queering history, or queering the sonnet). Used in this sense, the term becomes confusing, since it always connotes a homosexuality that may not be at stake when the term is used so broadly. Queerness also refers to the multiple ways that sexual practice, sexual fantasy, and sexual identity fail to line up consistently. That definition expresses an important insight about the complexity of sexuality, but it also describes a state experienced by everyone. If everyone is queer, then no one is— and while this is exactly the point queer theorists want to make, reducing the term's pejorative sting by universalizing the meaning of queer also depletes its explanatory power.[14]

"If everyone is queer, then no one is": Heather Love makes a similar point in this volume about the "queer universal." Others (including both editors) would suggest that queer theory's powers are practical and political, not epistemological—one puts tools to use rather than to explanation. For Carla Freccero, the "insatiable appetites and marvelous elasticity" of queer theory are good reasons to treasure, sustain, and extend it, but they also obscure the possibility that queer theory might not be "the conceptual analytic most useful to what is being described." Here Freccero echoes Gayle Rubin's pragmatic attitude to theory.

> For some, feminism had become the successor to Marxism and was supposed to be the next grand theory of all human misery. I am skeptical of any attempt to privilege one set of analytical tools over all others and of all such claims of theoretical and political omnipotence.
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> I approach systems of thoughts as tools people use to get leverage and control over certain problems. I am skeptical of all universal tools. A tool may do one job brilliantly and be less helpful for another. [When I wrote "Thinking Sex,"] I did not see feminism as the best tool for the job of getting leverage over issues of sexual variation.[15]

Povinelli makes a similar point, less pragmatic than critical: understanding the "larger social matrices" within which sexuality studies and queer theory have emerged can't be extracted solely from the materials of sexuality studies and queer theory. And Rand, Neville Hoad, and Heather Love desire an "outside" to queer theory because they want to avoid universalizing political formations generally; this seems to all of them important, normatively, at this moment in the historical extension of the American empire.

And then there's "and": queer theory and critical race theory; queer theory and feminism; queer subjects and racial subjects; queer theory and "lesbian and gay studies." And "and" has been multiplying: when thinking about racial, ethnic, religious, and other dimensions along which subjectivity and political life can be divided, the contributors and many other participants in the queer-theoretical enterprise have moved beyond multiculturalism and to transnationality and globalization.[16] Several contributors—plus two who got away—seek to put gay and lesbian identity back on the map, as projects needing queer affirmation, inhabitation, or perhaps even rehabilitation. The affective range of these projects is large and suggests a somewhat surprising —to us, somewhat disconcerting—but apparently strong association of the lesbian mark with utopia (Ann Cvetkovich) and the gay male mark with various intensities of dystopia (Rambuss). We will return to the divisions in the volume that have arisen in response to the "shift to affect" below; here, what interests us is the suggestion that intellectual work might productively correspond, *in queer projects*, with highly conventional gender distinctions. Other contributors took the disaggregative, explosive, biopoweristic, multiple-rather-than-serial impulses of queer work *to* domains strongly structured by racial and national discourses: for Richard Thompson Ford the "queer" is a way to loosen the lockups of race-equality talk, while for Bethany Schneider (via Craig Womack and Hank Williams) the paradoxes of Native American sovereignty are most salient precisely in relation to their queerness. For José Esteban Muñoz the soft, labile openness of peaceful sleep becomes a model for a method opening up feminism, queer theory, and "even race" (race being for all three of these contributors, it seems, more difficult to "queer" than sexuality). That is to say, when our authors offered us identity-inflected or intersectional work, they implicitly argued that a queer impulse was indispensable and directly productive, both of desire and of analysis—even if, as Schneider underscores, different kinds of queerness don't map neatly onto each other. Only Hoad wondered whether the transnational and the global have become "the new queer," effectively supplanting it from a vanguardist position in academic life which it may never regain.

To the extent, then, that queer theory lives on in these essays, it lives on after itself. What is it like to be doing queer theory *still*, to be working today in a tradition that has managed somehow to have acquired a past? Several essays recall the hectic, heady, and truly terrifying days of its birth in the riveting nexus of the feminist sex wars with the crescendo—which at the time we did not know would diminish—in AIDS-related death among United States gay men. Jeff Nunokawa offers a particularly poignant reminiscence of the queer street, the delicate encounter of activist with theoretical energies, back in the legendary day of Queer Nation and ACT UP. He and Eve Sedgwick take on, directly, the fact that *those days are over*.[17] What replaces the sense of political purpose of those inaugural moments?

Some of our contributors find rich theoretical and stylistic resources with which to make sense of current circumstances in two contemporary forms of queer analysis: the so-called "antisocial thesis" (the Bersanian project, exemplified here by Edelman and qualified by Leo Bersani himself), and the "turn to affect" (the Sedgwickian project, exemplified here *not* by Sedgwick—more about that later—but by Berlant and Cvetkovitch). The difference between these styles of analysis can sometimes be performed as a stark parting of the ways, which may make each as susceptible to caricature as, well, masculinity and femininity.[18] Where the "anti-social thesis" offers a stern polemic, a strict oppositional stance, a lashing style, and an intense focus on political and psychic dysphoria, the "turn to affect" offers an open-ended or exploratory trajectory, a distrust and avoidance of yes/no structures, luxuriantly sensuous writing . . . and an intense focus on political and psychic dysphoria. So much for the absolute difference between the two. To be sure, some of our contributors — Cvetkovitch, Ford, Moon, Muñoz, Thomas—sound an ecstatic, enamored note, while others—Cobb, Litvak, Rambuss—seek out the lessons of hard experience, but these differences resist reduction to any antisocial/affective contrast. Other offerings utterly confound the two poles. Berlant's essay (which reads as a composite of twenty-two prose poems) is as antinormative as Edelman's, but also more antiformal; the affective repertoire it discovers in what she describes as the current sexual and political impasse is vast. Povinelli's essay—which spans her politically and affectively problematic identification with American lesbian life and her equally problematic identification with her Australian tribal friends—concludes with this thought: "I can relate, and as a result I am disturbed." Freccero, having traced some pretty severe pathologies in queer history to strong social/ subjective dichotomies, shifts to a more hortatory mode to urge a queer *and post-queer* historiography which, rather than dividing affect and desire from the social and the political, aims to study their relations. Indeed, for Edelman, "the antisocial is never, of course, distinct from the social itself," which means that even in this iconic essay the world of affect is alive and well.

Still, the antisocial project comes in for serious criticism from several quarters, even from Bersani himself here when, in discussing barebacking as a "literalizing of the ontology of the sexual," he now finds "naïve and dangerous" aspects of his iconic essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Nunokawa, on the other hand, laments that this essay foreclosed all possibility of a utopian search for a happier embodiment that might be launched from the Foucauldian idea that power is not (always) nearly so monolithic and top-down as it had seemed at the very pitch of the AIDS epidemic. For Nunokawa, the microplay of micropowers in the small social avoidances of everyday life—for tools to notice them, he turns (as do Love and Michael Lucey) to the sociologist Erving Goffman—constitute, simply, a factual rebuke to the Manicheanism of the Bersanian vision: "How, by this view, could anyone get out alive?" Similarly challenging any tendency to construe queerness exclusively in psychological terms, Lucey underscores that sexuality "is lived and experienced as a set of evolving cultural forms into which and within which agents move."

Sedgwick is yet more critical of queer orthodoxies in an essay we include in this collection even though it had its origin elsewhere—and even though (or especially because) it questions both the Freudian and Foucauldian dimensions of queerness and departs from queer theory in ways unlike any other essay in

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Break from Feminism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) .

14 Sharon Marcus, "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay," *Signs* 31.1 (Autumn 2005): 191–218, at 196.

15 Gayle Rubin with Judith Butler, "Sexual Traffic: Interview," in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 97 (originally a special issue of *differences* 6 [Summer/ Fall 1994]). Rubin reflects here on the work that led to her "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 267–319—an essay which, while it does not label itself "queer," was nonetheless crucial to the development of queer theory.

16 See, for instance, Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncy, eds., "Thinking Sexuality Transnationally," special issue, *GLQ* 5.4 (1999) . For one editor's contribution to this tradition in queer theory, see Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

17 And now over, sadly, in another sense as well: Eve's long struggle with metastatic breast and bone cancer came to an end on 12 April 2009.

18 See, for example, "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006) : 819–28. The journal asked Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, all participants in a program arranged by the Division on Gay Studies in Language and Literature at the December 2005 MLA Convention, to produce "accounts of their positions." The resulting text has the texture, though not the form, of a debate.

19 Sedgwick's essay originated, 20 October 2005, as a presentation in Halley's Book Trouble series at Harvard Law School; the texts that Sedgwick read were Melanie Klein's "Love, Guilt and Reparation," in *Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921–1945* (London: Virago, 1988) and Meira Likierman, *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

20 Duncan Kennedy, "A Semiotics of Critique," *Cardozo Law Review* 22.3–4 (2001) : 1147–89, at 1169–75.