

P R E F A C E

Sex, or the Unbearable: the title of this book does not offer its readers a choice between these two terms, as in “your money, or your life.” Nor does it mean to imply that we think of sex as reducible to “the unbearable.” To be honest, there’s not that much sex in the book either, and the “unbearable” to which it points is all crossed over with the enjoyable too. But then again, enjoyment itself, as we discuss it here, can be unbearable. What we offer instead is an analysis of relations that both overwhelm and anchor us—an affective paradox that often shapes the experience of sex. We approach sex here as a site, therefore, at which relationality is invested with hopes, expectations, and anxieties that are often *experienced* as unbearable. Sex, though subject to the pressures of legal sanction, social judgment, unconscious drives, and contradictory desires, holds out the prospect of discovering new ways of being and of being in the world. But it also raises the possibility of confronting our limit in ourselves or in another, of being inundated psychically or emotionally. *Sex, or the Unbearable* examines our attempts to remain rooted in the social by both holding fast to and moving beyond our accustomed ways of experiencing ourselves and our connectedness to others. It explores the forms of negotiation we resort to in dealing with intimate estrangement, and it tries to enact, in its own formal structure, the constant, and at times disconcerting, adjustments those forms of negotiation demand.

The following chapters approach the scene of relationality by focusing on the “negativity” that can make it so disturbing. Negativity for us refers to the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or

fixity of identity. It denotes, that is, the relentless force that unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty. But its effects, in our view, are not just negative, since negativity unleashes the energy that allows for the possibility of change. So too “nonsovereignty,” a term to which we’ll return, invokes the psychoanalytic notion of the subject’s constitutive division that keeps us, as subjects, from fully knowing or being in control of ourselves and that prompts our misrecognition of our own motives and desires. At the same time, nonsovereignty invokes a political idiom and tradition, broadly indicating questions of self-control, autonomy, and the constraints upon them. To encounter ourselves as nonsovereign, we suggest, is to encounter relationality itself, in the psychic, social, and political senses of the term. For that reason, this book attends to those moments when negativity disturbs the presumption of sovereignty by way of “an encounter,” specifically, an encounter with the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation. Sex is exemplary in the way it powerfully induces such encounters, but such encounters exceed those experiences we recognize as sex.

These dialogues explore such encounters while simultaneously recording and performing one. It could be no other way. Relationality always includes a scenic component, a fantasmatic staging. It puts into play reaction, accommodation, transference, exchange, and the articulation of narratives. Just what an encounter entails, however, remains for us unresolved. As it must. For an encounter refers to an episode, an event, its fantasmatic scene, and the myriad misrecognitions that inform the encounter and define its limit. Our various ways of theorizing such encounters with relation shape our different views of the political and affective consequences of social embeddedness. We are constantly asking, What do our distinctive responses to each other and our cases tell us about the structural conditions that produce the encounter with nonsovereignty in the first place?

Though the negativity inseparable from the sexual encounter comes to the fore most insistently in the final chapter of this book, it makes itself felt repeatedly in the dialogues that follow. For encounter in all its ambiguity shapes the experience of sex, giving rise to various forms of response, including, as the first two chapters suggest, optimism and reparativity. We wonder throughout these dialogues whether it is possible to endure the experience of rela-

tion in the absence of optimism for bearing or surmounting what overwhelms us in ourselves and in each other. Is optimism, in fact, invariably at work in negativity? Or, conversely, is optimism a disavowal of what's unbearable in negativity? Do we even mean the same thing by optimism? This book attempts to hold such questions steadily in view. Even where we disagree with each other in the ways that we address them, though, we proceed together through the breaks and divisions that enable conversation, politics, and the creation of new social forms.

Sex, or the Unbearable is thus an experiment in the forms of theoretical production. It proceeds from the belief that dialogue may permit a powerful approach to negativity, since dialogue has some of the risk and excitement we confront in the intimate encounter. Not for nothing does the *OED* list “communication” and “conversation” as the primary meanings of *intercourse*. In its dialogic structure, then, this book takes shape as collaboration, argument, and exploration at once. It belongs to an experimental genre in which theory, politics, and close textual analysis encounter the pedagogical necessity of responding to the provocations of otherness. Dialogue commits us to grappling with negativity, nonsovereignty, and social relation not only as abstract concepts but also as the substance and condition of our responses—and our responsibilities—to each other.

Reimagining forms of relation entails imagining new genres of experience. These chapters try to extend the generic contours of theoretical writing by making exchange, dialogic give-and-take, a genuine form of encounter. By that we mean that throughout this book we try to attend not only to what we can readily agree upon but also to what remains opaque or unpersuasive about the other's ideas, what threatens to block or stymie us. Resistance, misconstruction, frustration, anxiety, becoming defensive, feeling misunderstood: we see these as central to our engagement with each other and to our ways of confronting the challenge of negativity and encounter. Far from construing such responses as failures in the coherence or economy of our dialogues, we consider them indispensable to our efforts to think relationality. An academic culture in the United States still dominated by the privilege of the monograph only rarely affords occasions for critics to converse with each other

in print. That may reflect conversation's low place in the hierarchy of literary genres. Structurally determined by interruption, shifts in perspective, metonymic displacements, and the giving up of control, conversation complicates the prestige of autonomy and the fiction of authorial sovereignty by introducing the unpredictability of moving in relation to another. One never can know in advance to what one's interlocutor will respond or what turns the conversation may take through the associations of a single word. We are aware that what we're saying here sounds a lot like what we say about sex—and that, of course, is the point. As the book proceeds, the structural resonances among sex, politics, and theory become ever more insistently the focus of our analysis.

This discussion starts, as all discussions do, in the middle of many idioms and vernaculars and at the point where many genealogies converge. Entering a conversation always means entering it with an idiolect that has to adjust to someone else's, difficult as that may be. As a consequence, our own conversation includes and exceeds us at once; references taken for granted by one person are foreign to another; historical contexts or philosophical grounds are never fully shared (nor could they be, given the infinite expansion of knowledge that would require); alignments of context or reference take shape simultaneously as gaps, missed encounters, and blockages. So the process of clarification on which we embark must operate immanently from within the conversation rather than by appealing to an objectivized understanding of a set of issues that the conversation unproblematically presupposes. Each of us offers a set of terms that start to look different when the other uses them, and each of us develops ways of testing out, querying, and accounting for the other's conceptualizations. This process might make any reader, including the writers themselves, desire some dictionary or reference point to stabilize the conversation or long for an accompanying seminar to fill in the gaps and provide us with background knowledge to make the going smoother. But conversation, like relationality, proceeds in the absence of such a reference point or undisputed ground, often, in fact, producing the fiction of that ground only retroactively.

The question of assumed knowledge can also manifest itself as a question of address. Any given reader may feel that the conver-

sation is taking place elsewhere, failing to address her or him, or that it shifts its address unpredictably from inclusion to exclusion. Being in relation invariably involves the animation of distance and closeness; in that sense even direct address can be felt as indirect and acknowledgment can seem like misrecognition. Both of us had that experience in the course of these conversations, and it would be surprising if our readers did not have it too. But the process of negotiating those shifts, of finding one's bearings, is at the center of the ongoing project of relationality we explore in this text.

To sustain the critical dialogue we put fidelity to our ideas and their consequences above the performance of our friendship, on the one hand, or the scoring of points, on the other. (Whether or not we succeed, of course, is not for us to say.) Though friendship serves as the ground from which these dialogues arise, it doesn't prompt us to deny our differences or obscure our intellectual or political commitments. At the same time, those commitments themselves are what these dialogues put to the test. In the course of these conversations we both experienced clarification, surprise, and, most important, transformation; there were moments, that is, when the contours of our own understandings noticeably shifted and something of the other's language or intellectual imperatives affected our own. The differences in our political and theoretical investments did not, of course, disappear, but something else, new ways of inhabiting those investments, appeared as well.

For all the insistence of such differences, though, we acknowledge at the outset that we came to these dialogues with similar intellectual backgrounds and theoretical allegiances. Some might see that as a limitation, a failure of the dialogue to allow for an encounter with the disturbances of multiple kinds of difference. But even in the narrowcast of an encounter with the similar we recognize no putative sameness of self, no sovereignty, no coherence, and no identity that doesn't reveal its own radical differences. To be sure, many other encounters than this one both could and should take place—and encounters with other sorts of difference than those that develop here. But one of the points this book hopes to make is that any encounter (with the world, with another, or even with oneself) discloses a nest of differences that carry what Barbara Johnson so memorably called “the surprise of otherness” (1987, 16).

One of our goals, as we've already mentioned, is to think together about the social, political, and theoretical consequences of "negativity." Negativity points to many kinds of relation in what follows, from the unbearable, often unknowable, psychic conflicts that constitute the subject to the social forms of negation that also, but differently, produce subjectivity. Generally negativity signifies a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience. In its disturbance of such totalizations, negativity enacts the dissent without which politics disappears. Negativity, in this sense, is inseparable from the struggles of subordinated persons to resist the social conditions of their devaluation. However, by challenging the coherence of the categories through which the subordinated produce their claims for legitimation, negativity can also become an obstacle to their organized resistance to things as they are. This double valence of negativity accounts for its centrality to a set of debates that have occupied queer theory for some time—and that occupy our debate with each other here.

One of the motives for our orientation toward questions of negativity and relation is to dislodge one position in those debates, what has been called "the antisocial thesis," from a set of understandable anxieties that it has provoked among some queer thinkers.¹ The historic practice of LGBTQ studies has been toward reclaiming and repairing lost histories and ongoing practices of delegitimation. Negativity as a source for social theory tends to reject the impulses to repair social relations that appear to us irreparable, and in that light, our work might seem quietistic, apolitical, nihilist, defeatist, or even irresponsible. By engaging closely with sociality and with our own deep-rooted tendencies to think about its zones of optimism and longing, we are seeking to make a persuasive case for the necessity of recognizing the importance of addressing structural antagonisms in any analytic of the social. In doing so, we seek to affirm negativity's central role in any antinormative politics. We hope this conversation might permit a reframing of the antisocial

1. While evidence of that debate abounds, the most concentrated venue of its performance can be found in the PMLA roundtable "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory."

thesis that has already generated such lively debate and so much important theoretical work by its critics and adherents alike.

Part of the problem we have to confront in trying to move that debate forward, however, is that the very name “antisocial” disregards our persistent embeddedness in and attentiveness to sociality. It is not a matter for either of us of standing outside the social or sociality or against the possibility of creating more capacious social worlds. Rather we recognize that negativity emerges as resistance to the fixity of social forms that seem to define the possibilities for and the limits of relationality. We want to explore the valences of social intensities and fantasies, of the contradictory pressures implicit in established forms of relation, in order to read them not in any simple antithesis to the social but rather as intrinsic to it.

We recognize too that “antisocial” has sometimes functioned as a synonym or coded shorthand for “antisentimental” or “antireparative.” Where the issues of sentimentality and repair are concerned, our positions are not identical and we do not agree in all cases on the meanings of those terms. These dialogues address them directly, though, and try to work through the ways we understand the investments they bespeak. Nor do we exempt ourselves from investments, including unrecognized investments, in what those terms may name. Our approach, however, depends on acknowledging the specific contexts of their uses in order to recognize both what they enable and what they might foreclose. This book thus aspires to reformulate discussion of the antisocial thesis by conceding from the outset that the questions of sociality so vigorously argued in its wake are genuinely hard and politically imperative, which is why they call forth such intensity of thought on all sides of the debate.

It is in the context of that debate that we came to put this book together. Having mounted different but related arguments against the normative domination of sex, sexuality, and political collectivity by the ideological lure of the future, we were separately called on by Heather Love to give papers at a conference, *Rethinking Sex* (2009), that she was organizing in honor of Gayle Rubin. Initially invited to give papers at a session tentatively called “Tomorrow,” we decided instead to have a public conversation that would build on Rubin’s writings in order to move beyond the accounts of futurity we each had separately produced and engage instead the implication of sex

in the normative logic of optimism. We began with the notion of optimism because it hooks us to fantasies of the good life, however the good life may be defined. Often such optimism enacts the hope of successful integration into dominant orders—social, psychic, and political—by anticipating ways of resolving the various contradictions amid which we live. Sex, as a locus for optimism, is a site at which the promise of overcoming division and antagonism is frequently played out. But the consequences of such efforts to resolve our social and psychic contradictions can include the establishment of sexual norms and the circumscription of sex for socially legitimated ends. It can equally, however, give rise to fantasies of sexual liberation and a paradise of polymorphous sexualities. We have different concerns about the effects and efficacy of these fantasies, which led us to wonder what it would mean to think about or even desire the experience of sex without optimism. What if we accepted the challenge of negativity and began the process of conceptualizing sex in the absence of such optimism? What sorts of displacements would it introduce into our ways of thinking sex?

That first conversation challenged clichés about the antisocial thesis by making criticism a social and collaborative form even while broaching sociality and sex outside their connection to repair. Our presentation at the Rethinking Sex conference, the basis for chapter 1, undertook to show that negativity, far from being reductively antisocial, is invariably an aspect of the social: that sociality's inherent contradictions give rise to structures of self-relation fundamentally out of synch with themselves. We began with a common interest in negativity's resistance to forms of sovereignty and so in its status as an impediment to normativity's will to social closure and coherence. Our discussion touched on the tragic, dramatic, and comic frames that negativity can inhabit and surprisingly (to us) found its focal objects in the vistas of "the queer adorable." The energy informing that dialogue emerged from our efforts to be in relation at once to each other, our objects, and our ideas, while unfolding the negativity of relation as indispensable to political vitality.

In the aftermath of that conversation, finding ourselves still working through the questions that it raised, we began to ask if it would be useful to try to expand it into a book. So when we were invited the following year to take part in a panel at the annual con-

vention of the Modern Language Association that was being organized in memory of our friend and colleague, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, we decided once more to use the opportunity to pursue these ideas together. Sedgwick's work, over the arc of her career, inspired us to return to the ideological imbrications of sex and the forms of optimism, but to do so by engaging negativity in the context of her analyses of repair.

Given the inevitable, and often unbearable, disturbances onto which sex can open, how is it possible, we asked ourselves (and each other and Sedgwick as well), to address that negativity as inseparable from what is most compelling in sex? In pursuing this thought we had to deal with the difficulty of articulating the join of psychic and social scenes and dynamics. Any analytic encounter with sex should push psychoanalytic accounts of the subject and of the subject's psychic experience to acknowledge and address their constitution within an invariably political field. Sedgwick's interest in Silvan Tomkins and Melanie Klein—especially as her theoretical and activist concerns intersected with her own therapeutic ambitions in *A Dialogue on Love*—encouraged us to tackle a question that followed directly from our previous dialogue: Can we hope to transform our relation to the structural disturbance of the subject's coherence without just producing ever new fantasies of simplifying or repairing it? Our efforts to respond to the challenge posed by such ruptures of continuity gave shape to the talk that later became our second chapter, "What Survives." Sedgwick's death, which viscerally brought home the insistence of rupture in relation, impelled us to explore what follows—affectively, narratively, and politically—from the persistence of negativity in every practice of repair.

Among the responses that greeted our presentation of "What Survives" were several that wondered how to survive the irreparable negativity it evoked. The possibility of a life not governed by the logic of repair seemed, according to some in the audience, unbearable to imagine. How, in the absence of wanting to repair, could one possibly go on? What would such going on look like if we turned our theory into practice? Would living with negativity entail the death of the optimism that animates desire and energizes politics? We felt a responsibility to address these questions as clearly as possible and to flesh out the imbrication of negativity, politics, and the phe-

nomenality of life in order to show how negativity is not the opposite of politics, not a practice of withdrawal from contesting the terms or structures of existence, but rather a challenge to engage with politics in unexpected places and in unpredicted ways.

We also felt the need to think about theory as a type of social practice and to consider the aesthetic in terms of the narratives with which we turn life to account. In the first chapter we focused on separate aesthetic (and, in each case, visually iconic) objects through which to organize our speculations on what sex without optimism might mean. In the second we used Sedgwick's texts to approach what's beyond the optimistic model of attachment forms meant to solve the problem of living. What survives once the model of reparative relation is forced to share space with all sorts of negativity or when it starts to open onto a negativity of its own? For the final chapter we thought it important to link the question of living with negativity to the processes of narrating it, gathering up the diverse kinds of realism, causality, fantasy, and organization in movement that narrative forces to the fore. It struck us as crucial, in that regard, to engage a common text, one that would somehow speak to the question of living with negativity while opening onto the interrelations among sex, narrative, and the prospect for changing how we inhabit and relate to the world.

After considering a wide array of objects that might galvanize our thought, we read Lydia Davis's *Collected Stories* together and knew we had found our author. Though drawn to a dozen of Davis's texts, each perfect for this chapter's project, we decided to direct our energies to a close reading of only one. A single text seemed fitting here because this chapter, following our speculations on repair in "What Survives," concerns finding ways of living with an object, or with the loss or breakdown of an object, that roots one in the world.

"Break It Down," the story we finally chose, engages living with others and living on in their absence. Enigmatic and haunting, filled with the pathos of a narrator not fully controlling what he reveals, "Break It Down" provides a scaffold for this chapter's meditations on negativity. It does so, moreover, while enacting a continuous interrogation of what "sex" means. Because it plays so crucial a role in "Living with Negativity" and because we want it to enter our conversation here in its own right, we have reprinted "Break It Down"

as an appendix to our dialogue with the generous approval of Lydia Davis and the permission of her publishers. In this way we hope the story makes audible another voice in this book and provides the opportunity for another encounter with Davis's work—an encounter different, we hope, from reading the story in a different context and one that adds a different context to the dialogues gathered here.

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We have suggested that this book uses dialogue to refine theoretical questions and to bring different aesthetic and critical archives to bear upon them. Those questions about the overwhelming intensities that shape ordinary subjectivity, even in noncrisis times, are harder than any one dialogue can bear, and we are not seeking to *do justice* to them, in the sense of repairing the world in which they operate as registers of subjectivity and power—if, that is, repair and justice could ever be construed as synonymous. We aim instead, through our own conversation, to initiate many others, including one among theorists of politics, affect, psychoanalysis, and aesthetics, that would try to account for the disturbances and anchors within relationality (to ourselves, across ourselves, to the world at large) and for the effects those disturbances and anchors have on our thinking about sociality. We believe that such conversations can expand our sense of sociality and the possibility of political movement. Paradoxically, though, our strategy of enlargement relies on narrowing our focus here. In other work we each might have moved outward to different exempla and archives. Here the form of the dialogue impels us to ever greater specificity as we respond to a recurrent anxiety about whether our iterations of words, objects, and scenes are understood in the way we intended. Along with the disturbance it occasions, though, the dialogue form affords us the chance to experience the “same thing” as different and to encounter the metamorphic potential that the sameness of things contains. Ultimately for us, it isn't a choice between disturbance and transformational possibility. We are interested in the inseparability of the two, in what can never be predicted or controlled in any engagement with the world, with otherness, and thus with ourselves as well.