

Unqueering the Essay

I have a tattoo on my chest that reads “take me out to the beach and I’ll tell you my secret name.”¹ I won’t tell *you* my secret name; in fact, when I was taken out to the beach yesterday (not by *you*, obviously, but the same beach Stephin Merritt was writing about, as it goes) I realized that there might not have been a secret after all. “Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking,” you wrote.² I wonder how the word “female” hit you – and here the “you,” until now so intimately addressed to *you*, the reading reader, must be taken to refer to a reader who’ll never read this, the late Lauren Berlant – in recent years. You blurbbed *Females: A Concern*, a book by a young feminist whose name was anything but secret, but whose complaint was all too real.³ The title of that book presumably derived from yours, switching the commercial “concern” for the medicalizing “complaint,” but its “female” means something quite different, an echo of a powerful ablative absolute:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.⁴

To begin an essay with this breezy *collatio* is to signal confidence in one’s own charisma, and very little in the *SCUM Manifesto* gives us reason to doubt the ferocious intimacy with which its author was almost literally armed. But we also know – you would teach us, let’s say – that we would be unwise to assume what this manifesto could demonstrate were it to be used as evidence in *The People v. Valerie Solanas* – whether it proved premeditation for attempted murder, for example, or whether its foreclosed dream of a foreclosed utopia betokened more metaphysical, though perhaps no less murderous, violence. Essays aren’t evidence – and “everyone knows” it.

After sitting in a body for over a year, this essay, “Unqueering the Essay,” is disgorged onto a laptop on a day in June 2021, the day that I learned of

your death. I find myself needing something more, less, or other than what “everyone knows,” more than what “there remains [...] only,” and yet what I have is the archive, which is what everyone knows. Do *I* know anything else? Emphatically not: I know that on the two occasions when I asked you to do something, and you declined, you were more courteous than demurals have any right to be; I know that you delivered “Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*” while perched on one leg, like a little yogic stripling.⁵ But who am I kidding, I didn’t know *you*, except the you that everyone knows. Luckily, that was rather a lot. In the midst of an interview with my friend Charlie Markbreiter, you told him that you were trans, that you had always been trans, that you went by they/them pronouns.⁶ To me, and to (I would have guessed) many like me, this was a confirmation of what everyone knew, shifting that past subjunctive (“I would have guessed”) into a diffused, deponent present (“everyone knows”).

We write *laterally* when we write *essayistically*, etymologically downstream from the Latin *exagium*, meaning both “a weight” and “a weighing,” both that which is used to measure the weight of an object and the act of establishing equilibrium on a scale. You were a Scorp, but on the Libra side – a Halloween babe. It often seems as though everyone who loathes me is a Scorp, but of course I merely run afraid of them because I am a double Pisces: flowy, self-indulgent, and vague, albeit that the remainder of my chart, more or less, is in Aries (a cock in a frock). As both weight and weighing, an essay assumes the hydraulically improbable task of being *both* the counterweight against which the value of a given object will be assessed, *and* the act of assessment, both participant and observation. I suppose it is this double-function of the essay that is responsible for an odd feature of the odd genre of “famous queer literary critics writing about famous queer literary critics,” a collection that would include (among others) Barbara Johnson’s “Bringing Out D. A. Miller,” D. A. Miller’s “Bringing Out Roland Barthes,” Lauren Berlant’s “Eve Sedgwick, Once More,” and (the primary focus of the present essay) Terry Castle’s “Desperately Seeking Susan.”⁷ The paradoxical feature: an expressed desire to wrest, from the colleague, an avowal that, apparently, the colleague has already performed. The paradoxical nature of this generic expectation is brandished, conspicuously, by its practitioners. Barbara Johnson, beginning her essay on the modalities of outness yielded by Miller’s reading of Barthes, begins by acknowledging that the phrase “Bringing Out D. A. Miller” “sounds like the equivalent of “Barging through an Open Door.”⁸ Not merely redundant, but foolhardy, and liable to trip one up.

We might refer to this double-function – or, really, we might decide not to, and do something else instead – as the *queerness* of the essay. The phrase

seems automatically tiresome, doesn't it? In the era of *drones are queer*, for example; or when a resurgent LG-kinda-B movement seems determined to unreclaim the term; when the ontological security of sexuality and the sexual object seems to have become, inexplicably, a going political concern.⁹ Fucking *essays* are queer now, great – next, homework. The fatigue tells us a familiar story: that “queer” was to the 2010s what “modernism” was to the 2000s and “deconstruction” was to the 1980s – a ballooning cultural category absorbing and denaturing everything with which it came into contact, migrating far from the *recherché* scenes of the coalitional LGBT front in opposition to post-HIV/AIDS respectability politics; unpopular European avant-garde literature of the 1920s; and a minor epistemological dimension of Heideggerian phenomenology. This isn't a criticism; on the contrary – *bliss* was it in that bright dawn to be alive, but to be tenured was very heaven. Nonetheless, as the bodies thin, the party dwindles, and now that you have left us, I can't locate the fulcrum on which this sun will be levered over the horizon. Last night, I was at a cabaret show at the Crown and Anchor on Commercial Street, hearing short, hortative anecdotes about the meaning of Pride, and how far “the LGBT community” has come. Soon, I thought, that so-called community will at last summon the self-respect to abandon its feeble attempt to maintain that fourth, unwanted, quarter, and succumb to the antagonisms that bind the first to the second, and the third to the pack. The next morning, I heard that you, Lauren Berlant, the one indisputably trans indisputable genius, had died – and had found myself desperate to protest, all my cynicism in force, that you were just *queering death*, that I am now *queering mourning*, that perhaps you've *transed the eternal binary*, you've *transed gender for the final time, captain*, you've *gone where no nonbinary genius has gone before*. But death isn't subject to the optic switch between observation and participant that conditions the essay – it can't be verbed, much as “Internet” can't be pluralized.

Too much observation, not enough weight. More pedantically: Queer writers have often been drawn to write essayistically, not merely because essayistic writing might be understood and even defined as the writerly showing of a bit of leg, but more because essays differ from other genres of argumentative writing in formalizing the eminently queer switch between objective and subjective methods of analysis. The melancholy consequences of toggling between subject and object are offset, if they are, by the satisfaction of motley. On the other hand, the essayistic glimpse challenges the coalitional dimension of queerness, if it does, by confronting the flirtatiously self-disclosing subject with a reader whose desires, cathexes, aversions, and identities cannot but appear, if they do, alarmingly monodimensional by contrast. Over time, reader becomes writer – in fact, becomes obituarian – and the catalytic chain

continues indefinitely. But at the scene of the glimpse, the essay presents the exhibitionist subject herself as scantily clad behind words, while a reader – clumsily arrayed merely in whatever flesh happens to have fallen in place – cannot but hoot for more, different, or contradictory disclosures.

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At the Paris Dyke March this weekend, a group of women carried a banner that read “les LESBIENNES n’aiment PAS les PENIS,” lesbians don’t like dicks.¹⁰ No (cis) lesbian reader of the present essay whose advice I sought in composition and editing – does it disappoint *you* to know that you are neither the sole, nor indeed the original, reader of this work? – failed to point out that, whatever this banner’s demerits as a political slogan, it’s a bust as an empirical claim, as plenty of lesbians (cis) have been enthusiastically heralding penises, their own and others’, for a good four decades by now. Nonetheless, its deployment of a putatively unobjectionable descriptive statement as though it were a normative claim has long been one of the characteristic stylistic markers of the anti-trans activists who call themselves “gender critical feminists.”¹¹ The most notorious of these sleights-of-hand is the now ubiquitous slogan “a woman is an adult human female,” a line whose iambic-pentametric precision broadcasts its singular aesthetic feature: the self-evidence that contests any “woo” ambiguities that would drag each and every one of these words into the mire the moment that one looks at them for more than a second.¹² The anti-trans literalist’s literary mode takes straightforward (albeit inaccurate) self-evidence as the poetic sign for a no-bullshit approach to questions of sexual identity, turning away from the meandering striptease of the essay towards the quickening beat of the catechism, such that each of the slogans, in French as well as English, must be easily adaptable to the tune of “She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain When She Comes.”¹³ See also, “a female has large, immotile gametes.” From prose to verse to formula: The apparent purpose of the descriptive-as-normative move is to sustain the illusion that, although you can’t say anything anymore, nonetheless $2 + 2 = 4$, and it takes only the necessary impertinence to point out that the emperor is naked; but the dream of such a catechism would not merely be the displacement of one inadequate indexical system by a taxonomy of mathematical self-evidence, but the ontologization (or reontologization) of sexuality as the governing truth of social relations. The strategic gist, though not yet the prosody, of the verse-not-vers crowd was proudly on display on the signage of the group “Get the L Out,” an anti-trans lesbian organization that hijacked London Pride in 2018. “Lesbian = female homosexual” especially bears the unmistakable mark of apparent,

unobjectionable self-evidence through the transcription of desires and identities into deductively rationalizable metalanguage. There is more at stake in these slogans than questions of literary form, but there are *also* questions of literary form: specifically, the queerness of the essay form, the genre that denatures the “=” in both “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” and “lesbian = female homosexual,” postulating worlds in which one “two” and another “two” might be irreconcilable into a single “four,” or indeed where “lesbian,” “female,” and “homosexual” entail complex and perhaps even contradictory predicates.¹⁴

None of this quite requires calibration; to write an essay claiming that one cannot write an adequate definition for social types such as “lesbian,” “woman,” and “sexuality” without doing so in the form of an essay might risk merely affirming the implicit prejudices of the genre. But the claim that the essay *imposes* such inadequacies of relation might be worth testing by examining, to my mind, the most vigorously prosecuted essayistic sally of the century to date, Terry Castle’s obituary of the essayist Susan Sontag, “Desperately Seeking Susan,” published in the *London Review of Books* on March 17 (my birthday: double Pisces), 2005. At the core of the encomium Terry Castle (Libra) writes for her recently deceased friend (Capricorn) is the curious relationship that Sontag had to self-disclosure. Curious, partly because of its lack of curiosity. Sontag’s *New York Times* obituary, it is true, had made no reference to the author’s sexuality at all, but Castle notes that Allan Gurganus, in the *Advocate*, had made reference to the “disparity between her professed fearlessness and her actual self-protective closetedness,” where the visibility of a closet might be thought to imply the presence of an invisible homosexual.¹⁵ Gurganus and Castle were only the most prominent of many voices expressing frustration with Sontag’s tight-lippedness regarding sexual identity in the wake of her death. In an essay in *Out* entitled “Why Sontag Didn’t Want to Come Out: Her Words,” the magazine’s editor Brendan Lemon leaves suggestively open the question of whether or not Sontag was, at the moment of her death, technically out or not, after “Joan Acocella’s profile of her had just come out in *The New Yorker*, in which Sontag went on record as saying that she had had relationships with both women and men. Sontag didn’t name any of them.”¹⁶

Lemon’s essay in *Out* transcribes a conversation that the editor had one night in 2000, after the Acocella profile, in which he goaded Sontag into coming out with a set of moralizing challenges: “how can you say you’re interested in liberty [...] and be so reticent about asserting your own?” and “Don’t you feel that your ability to awaken people’s passions would be increased if you came out – it would give gay and lesbian readers another powerful thing to connect to?” All of this took place, in Lemon’s recollection, *after* Sontag had, in fact, already come out. To thicken the mystery,

Acocella's brief note in the *New Yorker* contained no reference at all to Sontag's sex life; Lemon, one presumes, had confused it with a more substantial profile in the *Guardian*, in which Sontag had disclosed a great deal about her sexual life, including that she had been in love nine times: "five women, four men."¹⁷ Lemon, of course, declines to see that disclosure as evidence of bisexuality, but in a short note published in the *Los Angeles Times* less than a week after Sontag's death, the gay historian Patrick Moore went much further in excluding that possibility from the record: "In a 1995 *New Yorker* profile, Sontag outed herself as bisexual, familiar code for 'gay.' Yet she remained quasi-closeted, speaking to interviewers in detail about her ex-husband without mentioning her long liaisons with some of America's most fascinating female artists."¹⁸ The phrase "outed herself," as though these carefully organized dances were no more contrived than a wardrobe malfunction, is hardly the most objectionable part of the sentence. Castle raises the possibility of "bisexuality" with less contempt than Moore, but without really taking the word seriously as a descriptor of a person:

I have to say I could never figure her out on this touchy subject – though we did talk about it. Her usual line (indignant and aggrieved) was that she didn't believe in "labels" and that if anything she was bisexual. She raged about a married couple who were following her from city to city and would subsequently publish a tell-all biography of her in 2000. Horrifyingly enough, she'd learned, the despicable pair were planning to include photographs of her with various celebrated female companions. Obviously, both needed to be consigned to Dante's Inferno, to roast in the flames in perpetuity with the Unbaptised Babies, Usurers and Makers of False Oaths. I struggled to keep a poker face during these rants, but couldn't help thinking that Dante should have devised a whole circle specifically for such malefactors: the Outers of Sontag.¹⁹

For Castle, "bisexual" is not necessarily "familiar code for 'gay,'" as it was for Moore, but it is perhaps evidence of the sophomoric evasiveness whereby a distaste for "labels" could stand for a refusal to grapple with the realities of the real world. One of many comical analogies by which Castle roots Sontag in literary history joins the essayist to Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby, one of the many monstrous matriarchs of *Bleak House*, whose peculiar crime was to care more about the plight of starving orphans in Africa than about her own dilapidated household.²⁰ At the root of that analogy, one suspects, is Castle's sense that for Sontag sexual identity remained notional, that her fame had allowed her to absent herself from what Gurganus called "what the rest of us daily endure."

To risk a summation, then: It is beyond improbable that what Castle, Moore, Lemon, and Gurganus wanted from Sontag was merely a self-disclosure: The *Guardian* profile had quite clearly yielded one, albeit one

that enabled a phobic slippage between bisexuality, ambivalence, and ambiguity, though Sontag can hardly be blamed for that. What these writers wanted was for Sontag to write an *essay* on the subject. Castle acknowledges the fact somewhat explicitly with the double-subject of an especially choice finite clause, “the subject of female homosexuality – and whether she owed the world a statement on it – was an unresolved one for her.”²¹ Lemon puts the matter directly. After the failure of his moral case for Sontag to write a personal essay describing her sexuality, his final plea is offered in aesthetic terms: “I said all this would make for a fascinating essay, and that it was too bad she had never written it. She said she doubted she would ever take up this topic. Compared to the work, who cares about the biography? Oh, everybody, I replied.” Lemon seems to have missed the subtlety of Sontag’s response, which did not counterpose *work* to *life*, as Wilde is supposed to have done, but to *biography*, a genre of writing that, we know from Castle, the essayist held in low regard. Indeed, that subtlety indicates a willingness on Sontag’s part to allow verbal self-disclosures – chat, discourse – to absorb the subtle tonal and lexical polysemy of the essay form. One derives a similar impression from the notorious 2000 *Guardian* profile by Suzie Mackenzie, in which Sontag adopted the emphatically Anglo argot of her British interviewer, and chatted in a misleadingly cheerful, bright way: “When you get older, 45 plus, men stop fancying you. Or put it another way, the men I fancy don’t fancy me. I want a young man.”²² It is as though the very self-disclosure requires the erection of a parodic screen – Sontag as Bridget Jones.²³ Since the life/work futz raised the ghost of a famous Irish homosexual, one might as well recount, then, another sequence of necessary-but-redundant bringings-out: Pater on Winckelmann, Wilde on Pater, Bartlett on Wilde.²⁴

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Among the many juicy tidbits that Castle serves up in “Desperately Seeking Susan” – an essay, I might as well say, that I prefer to anything Sontag herself ever wrote, and which goes some way towards making an otherwise sepulchral unflapped manifestation of Manhattanite self-regard into someone it might have been fun to know – is that the grand defender of the modernism portion of the Western Civ syllabus adored Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt*. “As far as Sontag was concerned,” writes Castle, the “dykey little potboiler – published originally under a pseudonym – was right up there with *Buddenbrooks* and *The Man Without Qualities*.”²⁵ Though Castle’s relentless bathos serves her puckish satire of the closeted lesbian, it also establishes a related but distinct contradiction, between modernism

and its others, whose relation to the closeted/out distinction remains tantalizingly unspoken. That Sontag placed *The Price of Salt* alongside the voluminous Teutonic masterpieces of Mann and Musil allows a glimpse, we are to think, of the lesbian concealed by “a number of exotic, billowy scarves,” yet it also, and more damagingly, aligns Sontag with the vulgar tastes she consistently dismissed. It is this dimension of Castle’s obituary, exposing the bourgeois Tucson girl behind the *haute* Manhattanite, that causes “Desperately Seeking Susan” to edge closest to cruelty, but Castle’s omnivorous cultural appetites prevent such moments from drifting into contempt. Clearly, when Castle writes that “the famous Sontag ‘look’ always put me in mind of the stage direction in *Blithe Spirit*: ‘Enter Madame Arcati, wearing barbaric jewellery,’” she is at least half remembering Sontag’s dismissive categorization of Noel Coward’s plays as merely “camping,” rather than camp.²⁶ But whereas Sontag’s taxonomy depends upon a classed distinction between the apparently effortless grace of a Ronald Firbank and the belabored gagging of a Coward, Castle’s comparisons work, generally, to the benefit of the hacks, rather than the elect. Sontag’s “comically huge” feet, “like Bugs Bunny’s,” knock Sontag off the perch of airy, sophisticated polysexuality, and drag her into a cartoonish and “dykey” space – the misfit gallery from where Castle is lobbing her legumes.

It would be at least an anachronism to frame this maneuver as an instance of the conflict between queer theory and its less rarefied antagonists – Sontag may not have been a lesbian in the sense that her obituarists had wanted, but nor was she a queer theorist in the Berlantian mold. Still, the sense that Castle is a lifer in, and Sontag merely passing through, the historical and cultural setting delineated by the “anthology of lesbian-themed literature I’d been working on for several years,” roots itself in Castle’s descriptions of the environments in which the two women encountered each other – to be precise, in the complex quasi-institutional setting of lesbian studies, in the era of Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and early Berlant. The assertive unfashionableness of “Desperately Seeking Susan,” in other words, coincided with an emerging sense of sexual indeterminacy and anti-identitarianism as the keynotes of scholarly fashionableness. Although that turn, accomplished most grandly in Eve Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet*, did not in general avow Sontag as an influence, it *did* present itself (as Sedgwick’s own career exemplifies, and *Epistemology* narrates) as a move away from the premodernist focus of much lesbian and gay scholarship in the 1980s and towards the promise of modernism as formal pattern for the post-identitarian sexualities that queer theory named.²⁷ (“Patterning” is Berlant’s summary of Sedgwick: She “dedicated her remarkable intellect to asking about patterning, especially in the relation of aesthetics to sexualities.”)²⁸

The sense of institutional embattlement, of imbrication within this particular cultural conflict, makes itself known in the two crowd scenes that bookend the narrative account of the friendship between Castle and Sontag: one, a triumphant, if embarrassing, moment of lesbian election, and the other, the door being shut in the mob wife's face. The first takes place after a lecture at Stanford's Kresge Auditorium, in which Sontag had read from her "excruciatingly turgid" novel *In America*, after which:

Sideswiping the smiling president of Stanford and the eager throng of autograph-seekers, she elbowed her way towards me, enveloped me rakishly in her arms, and said very loudly: "Terry, we've got to stop meeting like this." She seemed to think the line hilarious and chortled heartily. I felt at once exalted, dopey, and mortified, like a plump teenage boy getting a hard-on in front of everybody.²⁹

Triumphant *if* embarrassing, or triumphant *because* embarrassing? The desire to drag Sontag into the mulch of low cringe comedy, after all, characterizes much of the essay, and here is a moment of plain, stupefied witlessness, whose immediate effect is to endow Castle with an analogical "hard-on," the phallus being, prototypically, the object at which exaltation meets mortification. Yet the giddy little thrill, which feels little enough like an articulation of transsexual desire on Castle's part, also signals the essay's debt to the great nonmodernist plot for which Sontag was, revealingly, a sucker: Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*.³⁰ Castle may describe the plot with a heavy implication that Sontag identified with the young Therese – "a gifted (yet insecure) young woman who moves to Manhattan in the early 1950s" – but clearly, the "rakish" embrace signals the swagger of Carol herself. (It's too much to suggest, surely, that when Castle has Sontag "chortle," she thereby exhibits her in the role of Carroll: Lewis of that ilk.)³¹

The closing party scene belongs to a different melodrama, and a different institutional setting: Much of Sontag's discourse had worked to set "academics" – pedantic, small-minded, provincial – against the real seat of American intellectualism, the Manhattan art scene. When Castle is finally invited into the latter, she finds herself among the bodies of those whose names have been in circulation as currency: Here is Lou Reed, "O great rock god of my twenties," now merely "silent and surly" – as if to show how far things have fallen, and yet how interbleeding are the social circles of the culturally elect. There is "the freakish-looking lead singer from the cult art-pop duo Fischerspooner," the spondaic phrase "cult art pop duo" coming as close as "Desperately Seeking Susan" ever does to actual clumsiness, rather than its virtuosic imitation.

In the more densely populated setting of a Marina Abramović dinner party, Castle's Dickensian diction neatly moves between an apparently

sympathetic free indirect discourse and brutally satirical farce, characters becoming more monstrously cartoonish in the face of the narrator's apparent desire to impress them: "when I asked the man from the Guggenheim, to my right, what his books were about, he regarded me disdainfully and began, 'I am famous for –,' then caught himself. He decided to be more circumspect – he was 'the world's leading expert on Arte Povera' – but then turned his back on me for the next two hours." Castle's eventual retreat from the gay world into that of the "Little People" contains its own wobble: "Turning round one last time, I saw Sontag still slumped in her seat, as if she'd fallen into a trance, or somehow caved in. She'd clearly forgotten all about me." Upon turning, Orpheus (chubby priapic boy?) learns that Euridice has had no intention of following him, whether out of the Lethean *demi-monde* or out of a closet grown to the size of the whole world.

The friction between the various polarities by which "Desperately Seeking Susan" examines its subject affords much of the interpretive interest of the essay: How, exactly, could the half-articulated critique of modernism map onto the half-articulated critique of queerness? Yet rather beautifully, Castle describes a category beyond modernism and its others, beyond lesbianism and its dissolution, or rather a category in which these differences can be experienced, provisionally, as harmonic: music. Fischerspooner and Lou Reed aside, and notwithstanding Sontag's hilariously rendered habit for overstatement ("Yes, Terry, I *do* know all the lesser-known Handel operas. I told Andrew Porter he was right – they *are* the greatest of musical masterpieces"), music is the topic on which Castle's enthusiasm/ambivalence shudders least into mere resentment. After failing Sontag's quizzes on Robert Walser and Thomas Bernhard, Castle gains Sontag's admiration (or at least she is "exempt from idiocy") because she "could hold [her] own with [Sontag] in the music-appreciation department." The nerdy swapping of music strikes Castle as "a peculiar, masculine, trainspotting" kind of pastime, but if it is so, it is one that even in the author's own irreverent style retains contact with German Romanticism, and thus bypasses the aggression at modernist culture that structures much of the affect pointed at Sontag. "I was rapt, like a hysterical spinster on her first visit to Bayreuth. *Schwärmerei* time for T-Ball."³²

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Do we just want those we love to be on our teams? I'm aware of how much of this work – not just mine, but Castle's and maybe Sontag's too – seems to collapse into a Carrie Bradshaw strapline, a telegram to *Miss Lonelyhearts*. If Castle's gossipy tribute to her erstwhile unrequited succeeds in

making Sontag into more than she might have been, it would be because the emperor inflates with a surprising and sudden pathos at the moment that his nudity has been noted.

“But he hasn’t got anything on,” a little child said.

“Did you ever hear such innocent prattle?” said its father. And one person whispered to another what the child had said. “He hasn’t anything on. A child says he hasn’t anything on.”

“But he hasn’t got anything on!” the whole town cried out at last.

The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, “This procession has got to go on.” So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn’t there at all.³³

The ending of Hans Christian Andersen’s story is, inevitably, far more complicated than its cooption by anti-trans literalists might have suggested. For one thing, the emperor’s power, far from being undermined by the child’s epistemic interruption, actually grows “more proudly than ever,” and the noblemen whom the knavish tailors have cajoled into the ruse continue to carry his train. But it’s not just that: It is far from clear, in fact, whether those who repeat the child (oddly genderless) really believe what the child has said. This translation, from the H. C. Anderson Centre and written by Jean Hersholt, introduces some speech from the townspeople, one to the other, that doesn’t appear in Andersen’s Danish, but neither in Hersholt’s formulation (“A child says he hasn’t anything on”) nor in the original is it clear that the townspeople’s perceptions have indeed been freed from ideology. On the contrary, the child’s perspective is characterized as both ideologically powerful (it spreads quickly) and political inefficacious (it makes no real difference).

One might expect an essay of this sort to conclude by aligning Castle’s dream of an impossibly out Sontag with those of the “les lesbiennes n’aiment pas les penis” crowd. And there is certainly in both cases an articulated desire for a straightforward, no-bullshit, sexuality – the kind that was, a month before Sontag’s death, exemplified in a paper published in *Psychological Science*, entitled “A Sex Difference in the Specificity of Sexual Arousal,” and collectively authored by a team under the supervision of Meredith L. Chivers and Gerulf Rieger.³⁴ To investigate the titular difference, Chivers and Rieger isolated three groups – “women, men, and postoperative male-to-female transsexuals” – asked them to describe their sexuality, and then connected their genitals to electrodes while showing them pornography. As rudely physical as an ontologized account of sexuality could be, the electrical circuit convened as porn→electrodes→genitals→sensorium proves, or seems to, a set of hypotheses about the differences

between sexual capacity of this tripartite sexual taxonomy. The study claims, interestingly enough, that “transsexuals showed a category-specific pattern [of arousal], demonstrating that category specificity can be detected in the neovagina using a protoplethysmographic measure of female genital sexual arousal,” but more provocatively, that of the thirty-three bisexual-identifying men, one-quarter (eight men) experienced arousal when shown straight porn, but not gay porn, and three-quarters (twenty-five men) experienced arousal when shown gay porn, but not straight porn. The study was seized upon as evidence for the long-held prejudice that there are no bisexual men, only gay men in denial and straight men with flexible, not to say questionable, standards. In other words, that sexuality could be fully ontologized, if not as a gene, then at least as a singular capacity, inflexible and ennobling. The gay advice columnist Dan Savage interviewed Rieger, himself a gay man, who wonders of the 25 percent, “they might be straight, but go in for sex with other guys because it’s so much easier for a male to have quick sex with another male than with a woman. But their true sexual feelings are still for women.” Savage himself used the *t* word, suggesting that there’s a difference between someone’s *true* sexual orientation and their sexual capabilities (*emphasis added*).³⁵ I don’t mean to claim that the “true” coming out that Castle would have extracted from Sontag would have had anything in common with the porn→electrode→genitals→sensorium test, whose flaws as a test for sexuality perhaps warrant a footnote but no more, but the study and its reception do illustrate the proposition that the moment of Sontag’s death felt like a crisis point for LGBT liberalism in more senses than one.

So, back to Berlant’s generous, but devastating, assessment of the place feminist popular culture accords the real ambivalence women so frequently – inevitably – feel when confronted with knowledge of the gap between romantic fantasy and intimate suffering: “in popular culture ambivalence is seen as the failure of a relation, the opposite of happiness, rather than as an inevitable condition of intimate attachment and a pleasure in its own right.”³⁶ So the truth is, I’m no longer convinced that the link between Castle and “les lesbiennes n’aiment pas les penis” is as unbroken as it seems, nor that the queering of identity successfully inoculated those who used it against the fraught desires exhibited in “Desperately Seeking Susan.” In the days following the death of Lauren Berlant, a contest emerged on academic Facebook over which pronoun should be used to describe the recently dead. The difficulty of honoring Berlant’s request – linked at the bottom of emails they’d sent – for a “they” is made clear in the University of Chicago’s published obituary. Berlant’s colleague Elaine Hadley (a member, with Berlant, of the Late Liberalisms group and thanked in the

acknowledgments to *The Female Complaint*) deploys the repeated proper noun to skirt away from having to use pronouns at all: “Lauren wanted to know what young people were thinking and learn from them, which empowered them. On the other hand, Lauren was incisive and challenged them to work harder and be better [...] Lauren was always organizing reading groups...”³⁷ It’s understandable, kind of: However used to it some of us have become since 2005, to those unused to the syntactical rhythms it produces, the singular “they” can still feel clumsy and a little embarrassing to say out loud – perhaps because it dares to name a utopia in the here and now, an ethical relation whose material presence manifests in the mouths of those who speak, those clothed in the dumb flesh of the respondent. But one couldn’t escape the sense that to others in this conversation, those who could claim the intimacy of Berlant, “they” could only refer to someone they had never met – it was a cold and formal textual convention, merely clever. Inevitably, such voices claimed to have felt, and sometimes to have been, “policed” into the deployment of alienated and alienating speech. Berlant, of course, had written a great deal about the conflictual relations between desire and identity that emerge from the collision of public and private spheres (Facebook), generational tension (those who feel that the phrase “cancel culture” means something versus those who are terrorized on account of it), and the charismas of the page and the seminar room. But the queerness of the essay form remains oddly inaccessible: The *out* that you *come* is different from the *out* that you *write*.

Notes

- 1 The Magnetic Fields, “Living in an Abandoned Firehouse with You,” Stephin Merritt, songwriter, track 6 on *Distant Plastic Trees*, PoPuP, 1991.
- 2 Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.
- 3 Lauren Berlant, cover endorsement, *Females: A Concern* by Andrea Long Chu (London: Verso Books, 2019).
- 4 Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (London: Verso Books, 2004), n.p.
- 5 Lauren Berlant, “Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28 (2015): 191–213, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-014-9190-y>, accessed March 22, 2022
- 6 Charlie Markbreiter, “Can’t Take a Joke: An Interview with Lauren Berlant,” *The New Inquiry* (March 22, 2019), <https://thenewinquiry.com/cant-take-a-joke/>, accessed March 22, 2022
- 7 Barbara Johnson, “Bringing out D. A. Miller,” *Narrative* 10.1 (2002): 3–8; D. A. Miller, *Bringing out Roland Barthes* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1992); Lauren Berlant, “Eve Sedgwick, Once More,” *Critical Inquiry* 34.4 (2009): 1089, <https://doi.org/10.1086/605402>; Terry Castle, “Desperately

- Seeking Susan,” *London Review of Books* 27.6 (March 17, 2005), www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v27/no6/terry-castle/desperately-seeking-susan, accessed March 22, 2022
- 8 Johnson, “Bringing out D. A. Miller,” 3.
- 9 Since the publication in 2015 of the graduate student Cara Daggett’s essay “Drone Disorientations: How ‘Unmanned’ Weapons Queer the Experience of Killing in War,” the phrase “drones are queer” has become a perhaps-rather-unfair shorthand among online LGBT communities, signifying the tendency of academic queer theory to treat the term “queer” as migrating ever further from the lived experiences and commitments of queer people. Cara Daggett, “Drone Disorientations,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17:3 (2015): 361–379. The LG-sorta-B movement, which seeks to excise trans people from queer communities altogether, exemplifies the political platform of the British charity “the LGB Alliance,” whose founder Bev Jackson argued in 2020 that “A lesbian is a biological woman who is attracted to another biological woman. That’s obvious. Or at least it was obvious until a few years ago.” Any individual attraction, provided it is “biological,” makes a lesbian, apparently. See Camilla Tominey, “Lesbians facing extinction as transgenderism becomes pervasive, campaigners warn,” *The Telegraph* (December 25, 2020).
- 10 *Les lesbiennes N’aiment Pas les Pénis*, <https://tetu.com/2021/06/28/pride-paris-2021-militante-trans-interpellee-altercation-feministes-anti-trans-terf/>, accessed July 13, 2021
- 11 See Sophie Lewis, “How British Feminism Became Anti-Trans,” *New York Times* (February 7, 2019), www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/terf-trans-women-britain.html, accessed March 22, 2022
- 12 See, for example, the conversation entitled “How long will the gender woo movement last?,” on *Ovarit*, www.ovarit.com/o/GenderCritical/13360/how-long-will-the-gender-woo-movement-last, accessed March 22, 2022
- 13 “She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain” is a traditional American folk song, which I use here as shorthand for trochaic hexameter. See Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1927), 372.
- 14 The lesbian feminist Monique Wittig famously distinguished “lesbians” from “women” along these lines; for example: “it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for ‘woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women.” Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” *Feminist Issues* 1 (1980): 103–111.
- 15 Margalit Fox, “Susan Sontag, Social Critic with Verve, Dies at 71,” *New York Times* (December 29, 2004).
- 16 Brendan Lemon, “Why Sontag Didn’t Want to Come Out: Her Words,” *Out*, January 5, 2005.
- 17 Suzie Mackenzie, “Finding Fact from Fiction,” *The Guardian* (May 27, 2000).
- 18 Patrick Moore, “Susan Sontag and a Case of Curious Silence,” *Los Angeles Times* (January 4, 2005).
- 19 Castle, “Desperately Seeking Susan.”
- 20 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1993).
- 21 Castle, “Desperately Seeking Susan.”
- 22 Mackenzie, “Finding Fact from Fiction.”
- 23 Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

- 24 Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873); Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Philadelphia: Lippincott's, 1890); Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man?: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988).
- 25 Castle, "Desperately Seeking Susan."
- 26 Ibid.; Sontag, *Notes on Camp*.
- 27 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1990).
- 28 Berlant, "Eve Sedgwick, Once More."
- 29 Castle, "Desperately Seeking Susan."
- 30 Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004).
- 31 Lewis Carroll, "Jabberwocky," from *Through the Looking Glass* (London: Macmillan, 1871).
- 32 Castle, "Desperately Seeking Susan."
- 33 Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1949).
- 34 Meredith Chivers et al., "A Sex Difference in the Specificity of Sexual Arousal," *Psychological Science* 15.11 (2004): 736–744.
- 35 Dan Savage, "Savage Love," *The Stranger* 14.44 (July 14, 2005).
- 36 Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 2.
- 37 Sarah Patterson, "Lauren Berlant, Preeminent Literary Scholar and Cultural Theorist, 1957–2021," *University of Chicago News* (June 28, 2021).