Introduction

The Unspeakable Past

Too Bleakly Stranded

In the summer of 1914, from his sanctuary at Lamb House in Rye, England, Henry James wrote a small letter he addressed to “Mrs. Fields.” This was Annie Adams Fields, the widow of Boston publisher James Fields and, for nearly a quarter of a century, the intimate companion of another famed American writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, who had died in 1909. (Fields was herself to die, at age eighty, in January of 1915.) “Dear Mrs. Fields,” James begins,

I have left so many days unacknowledged the so beautiful & touching letter prompted by your generous appreciation of my volume of Notes. The reason is largely that even still the high pressure London of June & July is always at some big interrupting assault on one’s time or one’s preferences, & that I have been but within a few days able to break away from it & get down into these quieter conditions. The arrears of my correspondence—a very desperate quantity—have had more than ever to wait. It is meanwhile the sympathy of all old friends from far back like yourself, of “those who know,” as Dante says, that is the reward of my attempt to reach back a little to the unspeakable past. I really like to think of those who know what I am talking about—& such readers are now of the fewest. We both have had friends all the way along, however; & I mustn’t speak as if we were too bleakly stranded today. The only thing is, none the less, that almost nobody understands what we mean, do they?—we can say that to each other (and to Mrs. Bell & to Miss Howe) even if we can’t say it to them. I think of you very faithfully & gratefully & tenderly, & am yours affectionately always Henry James

Everything about this marks it as, distinctively, late James: the attenuated syntax, the gestures toward referents both obscure and strangely
intensified, and not least the circulation of an only possibly implicit erotic content (flickering up there in the strange paired reference to the *Inferno* and to one or another variety of the unspeakable). Some of the referents are easy enough to trace. When James mentions Fields’s “generous appreciation of my volume of Notes,” for instance, he is referring to his collection of criticism, *Notes on Novelists with Some Other Notes*, published in 1914. More curiously, when James speaks of “those who know,” he is quoting Dante’s famous appellation for Aristotle (“Master of those who know”), which appears in Canto IV of the *Inferno* where Dante finds himself gazing, with mixed sorrow and reverence, upon the pre-Christian poets and philosophers, consigned to the outer edges of Hell but given there a place of sheltered honor.

It is a beguiling, if somewhat elusive, little letter. Ought we to read it as an essentially tender avowal of friendship and devotion? Or as chiefly melancholy? Does James intend it to be comic? Or merely wistful? And what of the small undercurrent of something sharper—something genial but, glancingly, ominous? The matter seems to pivot on what James calls, with characteristically rich suggestiveness, “the unspeakable past.” A bit melancholically, he suggests to Mrs. Fields that he and she, now late in life, must labor against the impulse to think of themselves as “bleakly stranded,” suffering the isolation that comes of inhabiting a world, or a vision of the world, that is comprehensible now only to “the fewest,” and those numbers diminishing. And yet this is plainly also a kind of love letter, playful if mordant. James’s affection, so vivid in the letter’s companionable good-humor, travels too along the vein of James’s sense of his and Mrs. Fields’s mutual illegibility as citizens of the present, his winking insistence that they share in the possession of some now-occult, very possibly damning, knowledge. And if the wistfulness of James’s sentences is any indication, their intimacy refreshes itself as well in the “sympathy” kindled by their mutual vulnerability to an odd kind of loss. It is as if, with a great lightness of touch, James enjoins Mrs. Fields to mourn with him the loss of nothing less than an entire world, a world in whose terms and horizons of knowledge friends might find one another, and be found.

Of course, James’s ambivalent relationship to legibility—or perhaps we should say, the pleasure he is able to wring from a legibility that is always tenuous, partial, and covert—is no less evident here as well. All of this might induce us to ask: What “past” is it, precisely, that James imagines himself, Mrs. Fields, and their friends to share? Why is knowledge of that past offered both as a mark of potentially infernal condemnation—those
who know, the letter reminds its recipient, dwell in Limbo—as well as a badge of proud distinction? And what is it, exactly, that makes this past, of all the possible and less manifestly Gothic things it could be, unspeakable? What rupture in historical continuity has unfolded between 1914 and some earlier time that leaves James and Mrs. Fields stranded, though not too bleakly?

Here is one way into the matter: “This is an event,” writes classicist David Halperin, “whose impact and whose scope we are only now learning how to measure.” He refers here neither to the death of Socrates, nor to the dawning of print technology, nor for that matter to the attacks of September 11th, 2001. The “event” he has in mind is something more diffuse but, in its way, no less consequential, especially so in the lives of Annie Adams Fields (1834–1915), Sarah Orne Jewett (1849–1909), Henry James (1843–1916), and many another. He is speaking of what is sometimes called the “invention,” at roughly the turn of the twentieth century, of homosexuality and its conceptual twin, heterosexuality, as distinct forms of being defined and differentiated by sexual object-choice. (Following the conventional scholarly wisdom, we could think of the Wilde trials of 1895, which James observed with stricken, horrified, plainly riveted interest, as one of the great watershed moments in the solidification, and public dissemination, of that invention.) In these terms, we might read James’s letter as the testimony of a man who lived through a long moment of singular upheaval and transformation: the movement (to put this in the most un-Jamesian starkness possible) from a time before the full emergence of modern sexuality as such, to a time after its surprisingly swift, decisive solidification. In its frank affection and obscure invocations, its enthusiasm and ambivalences, James’s letter might seem to us a message from the outerlands of the modern regime of sexuality, proffered by a man accustomed to (if not wholly at ease in) earlier taxonomies of intimate life, and dissatisfied with those springing up around him. What he offers, from that curious vantage, is at once a nostalgia for the presexological past, an ambivalence about the current possibilities for legibility and illegibility both, and an insistence on the bare fact of rupture, of the present’s ever-heightening dislocation from a past he understands himself and Mrs. Fields to share.

But to suggest that James lived, with impassioned ambivalence, in the aftermath of the emergence of modern “sexuality” as such is to raise all sorts of knotty questions. For instance: If the hetero/homo division we continue to live with today was “invented” little more than a hundred
years ago, then what exactly did erotic life look like in that bygone era for which James expresses his melancholic nostalgia, before the hardening of such a distinction into the stuff of present-day common sense? How, and in what terms, were nineteenth-century subjects able to imagine the parameters of sexuality? To ask that most Jamesian of questions: What could be counted as sexuality? Was it a circumscribed set of bodily practices? A form of identification? A mode of relation? Was sexuality an aspect of one’s identity? Or was it even something an individual could be said to possess? How did it consort with other coextensive and co-elaborated vectors of being, those at once embodied and legally consequential (such as one’s race, one’s gender)? And what, for that matter, did this great transformation feel like on the ground, to those who lived through the stages of its unfolding?

Tomorrow’s Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America is an examination of literary imaginings of sexuality across a long and unsettled passage in its American history, from the 1840s to the first years of the new century—the span, roughly, of James’s life. As we shall see, this is a moment before it was assumed that every person and every intimacy could be assigned a hetero- or homosexuality, but in which the first stirrings of that great taxonomical division, the initial movements of coordination and solidification, could already be felt. In the chapters that follow I will consider in detail the work of authors whose places in the American history of sexuality range from the canonical to the improbable—from Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Harriet Jacobs to Sarah Orne Jewett, Frederick Douglass, Emily Dickinson, Henry David Thoreau, and Mormon founder and homegrown prophet Joseph Smith. Crucially, though, the book is concerned far less with intimated acts or practices (such as might gain an author entrée into a canon of queer or protoqueer literature, say) than with competing conceptions of the very domain of sexuality, of its habitable forms and extensions, that to contemporary eyes may seem extravagant, naïve, oblique, or even scarcely legible as “sex.” I read these varied passions—relations that are friendly, but not chaste; carnal, but not matrimonial; filial, but not organized by the ties of family—as testaments to the imaginative labor of authors who, for fantastically disparate reasons, worried over the encroachment of a new regime of sexual specification, and so placed a countervailing emphasis on the erotic as a mode of being not yet encoded in the official vocabularies of the intimate. The intimacies they conjure do not parse altogether easily in the commonsense vocabulary of social and sexual relations whose swift
ascendancy James puzzles over in his letter to Mrs. Fields. But it is exactly this resistance to easy legibility, even to the point of inscrutability, that makes these passions as beguiling, as bewildering, and as instructive, as they are.

Was Walt Whitman Gay?

Not long ago I edited and introduced a small book of prose Whitman published about his Civil War experiences and, because it was a Civil War–related undertaking, it afforded me the occasion to speak before far more general (as opposed to simply academic) audiences than I otherwise do. This was an almost uniform pleasure, a chance to introduce to groups more fluent in the details of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain’s flanking maneuver at Little Round Top some of the energizing insights of, among other things, queer studies. It did, however, bring home to me the less-than-immediate accessibility of a systematic account of this so vibrant period of transition. It is, as Foucault reminds us, the period in which the grafting of an age-old deployment of alliance onto a new, differently structured deployment of sexuality did so much to reconfigure the disposition of bodies, genders, perversities, and knowledges in what Foucault, with a somewhat breathless capaciousness, calls “the West.” It witnessed, too, the rise of sexology, a new science of experts whose once-arcane terminology—hetero- and homosexuality, say—would gradually become the commonplace designations they remain. All of these transformations in the meanings, parameters, and possibilities of sexuality in that period of such high upheaval make for a good deal of confusion of tongues between the texts of that era and the perfectly reasonably questions brought to them by a contemporary audience. For instance, the question that would come up on virtually every occasion was: “So, are you saying Walt Whitman was gay?”—a question posed sometimes querulously, sometimes encouragingly, but most often out of uninflected curiosity.

In a real sense, the desire to answer that question, thoroughly and precisely, to my own satisfaction and to that of my interlocutors, stands very near the origins of the book that follows.

The answer, after all, is not simple. What I said repeatedly, in a response that became honed with practice, was: yes and no. If you mean, did Whitman have what we would think of as sexual investments in and relations with people of the same gender, then the answer is, as far as I am
concerned, yes. If you are asking, though, if Whitman was a gay man in most of the other senses that might be colloquially meant by the term—not least, did he have access to a sexually-rooted, taxonomically specific category with which to identify himself and others—then the answer is no.

Here, unsurprisingly, complications ensued. Inevitably, we would talk about what was described to me as “evidence”—“Where is your proof?” someone would ask. To which my answer began to come easily, typically in the form of another question: When we are considering sexual practices not legally or ecclesiastically sanctioned, what kind of proof suffices? (I also found myself saying repeatedly: when I tell you Walt Whitman had sexual contact with men, I do not imagine myself to be accusing him of anything, which is what makes me uneasy, in the first instance, with strict deference to languages of evidence and proof, vestigially prosecutorial as they are.) My own interests lay less with thresholds of proof than with matters of time, history, and definition. Then, as now, I found myself much more fascinated by the messy misalignments—the uncoordinated points of partial overlap and unbridgeable disconnection—between the complex, modern senses of identity and affiliation that might be heard echoing in a commonplace term like “gay,” on the one hand, and on the other Whitman’s own experiences of erotic being and erotic life, as much as his writing seemed to me to gauge and explore them. To take one example: Whitman did not have to hand the same sort of far-flung network of allegiance and attachment that can come now from claiming the identity “gay.” Though there may indeed have been sexualized forms of affinity and mutuality in which Whitman happily partook—some of these would have been called “bohemia” or “sex-radicalism,” though the form of erotic affiliation most precious to him was always “America”—the fact of his having had desirous contact with men was neither at the defining core of any of them, nor did it gain him admission into any of their sodalities. And this is part, though only part, of what it means to think of Whitman as a man inhabiting an intimate world differently structured than our own.

Of course, for many auditors, what I was delicately calling a world “differently structured” seemed more precisely to be a place of inhospitable ignorance, punitive silence, and haphazard psychic brutality, a world necessarily deforming, to men and women “like Whitman,” in the kinds of loneliness and isolation it exacted as a matter of course. There is much to this position. Versions of it are repeated, in fact, with greater and lesser degrees of nuance and complexity, in not a few histories of
nineteenth-century American sexuality, especially those that regard the eventual emergence of a publicly legible homosexuality as a necessary triumph, the first of the steps on the way to making a habitable queer world, as well as a vital queer politics that would fight to dismantle ignorance, shame, silence, and brutality.7 (As for the loneliness of living a sexually nonnormative life in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, one does not struggle to unearth vivid testimonials to suffering and grief, as any who have read Whitman’s anguished notebooks, redacted at moments even by himself, can readily attest.) But there are pitfalls, too, in the reading of the past, even the sexual past, too strictly in the terms of a happily transcended, pre-enlightened “back then,” and they are not only the dangers of a triumphalist presentism. We miss, above all, what I want to call the earliness of the erotic being of these writers. That earliness—in Whitman, James, Jewett, Thoreau, and a raft of others—meant not only that they were, in their erotic lives, consigned to what Christopher Nealon calls a “harrowing privacy,” marooned and made mutually inaccessible by the lack of any usable language of self-nomination. What I mean to capture in the term “earliness” is instead the experience of sexuality as something in the crosshairs of a number of forms of knowledge and regulation but not yet wholly captivated or made coordinate by them.8 Earliness, in this sense, might also play out in other, less dire ways. Here again an aspect of James’s wistfulness in his letter to Mrs. Fields comes into focus. For to inhabit an erotic self in the twilit moment before the arrival or calcifying of the terms of sexual identity, as James did, might also be to enjoy a special kind of freedom—one threatened, to be sure by the encroachment of a variety of new regimes of sexual knowledge, but whose fragile, uncollapsed spaces of illegibility or definitional ambiguity left precious room for much besides suffering and loneliness: for invention, say, or teasing obliquity, or coy solicitation, as well as evasion, improvisation, and all the other vectors of extravagant imagining.

This extravagant imagining is what most preoccupies Tomorrow’s Parties. As Thoreau wrote in Walden: “Extra vagance! it depends on how you are yarded.”9 In the chapters that follow, we will track the extravagances that flourish in the space of a not-yet-congealed sexual specificity as they wind through the tangles of James’s syntax and the compressed obliquity of Dickinson’s correspondence; in the inarticulate longings of Walden; through the expansive dreams of the power of consecrated matrimony as offered by escaped slaves, land-bound sailors, and homegrown American prophets; in communities of the childless and chaste; in the
streets of Manhattan; in the locked rooms of the infirm; in the makeshift war hospitals of Washington, DC; and even out onto the tiny islands of coastal Maine. There, I will contend, in these repeated moments of indirection, obliquity, and untimeliness, the pursuit of systematic and detailed answers to simple questions—Was Walt Whitman gay?—brings us into sharp contact with impasses and dilemmas substantially more broad. Some of them cut to the quick of the conceptual underpinnings of a number of our critical practices. For instance: What exactly do we mean when, following in the tracks of Foucault, we speak of sex as “discourse,” say, or of the “discursive constitution” of sex? What are the codes of legibility that allow us even to recognize something—a body, an act, an impression, a thought, a sentence—as sex, or sexually invested? What have those codes of legibility to do with what gets to count, not only as sex or sexuality or sexual identity, but as History as well?

Speaking of History: Wilde in the World

Speaking of history: The “event” that carries the most conventionally historical weight in *Tomorrow’s Parties* (as protean, multiply determined, and blurred in its parameters as it is, as elementally without clearly defined origin or end) is the Wilde trials. A preliminary word about my sense of that event, of its gravity and consequence and reach, might help clarify something of the quality of the “history” at stake in what follows. It is of course by now common to think of the Wilde trials as a moment of crystallization, when the disparate, scattered, and inchoate energies of previous decades of legal wrangling, psychological profiling, medical opinion, demographic scrutiny, pedagogical insistence, and economic consolidation achieved—seemingly in one swift movement—their coordinated and astoundingly well-publicized fulfillment. Another way to put this has been to say, as Ed Cohen does in his crucial *Talk on the Wilde Side*, that the Wilde trials mark a special kind of culmination. They read, for Cohen, as the spectacular realization of the processes described in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, in which, among other things, the homosexual is invented as a species, a category of being. Of course, even this crystallization left ample room for disorder and definitional incoherence—think only of the sharp conflict between lingering “inversion” models of homosexuality and the emergent minoritizing accounts of a distinctive homosexual identity, a conflict Sedgwick anatomizes so productively in
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Epistemology of the Closet. Still, the mass proliferation of the image of Wilde as a type of man, and the supersaturation of that type with a host of legible—specifically sexual—signs and suggestions, revolutionized sexual life in Europe and America in a way no other single event, no publication or proclamation or act of law, had come near to doing. Many were the people on the ground who recognized as much: as W. D. Stead wrote to Edward Carpenter, the early, powerful advocate for the viability and vitality of gay male life, “A few more cases like Oscar Wilde’s, and we should find the freedom of comradeship now possible to men seriously impaired to the permanent detriment of the race.”

James’s letter, as I read it, is at once an echo and a confirmation of Stead’s trepidation.

But Cohen’s work also suggests that what transpired in the Wilde trials was not only the playing out, in slow motion, of Foucault’s famous dictum about the emergence of the homosexual as a species (though we can be certain that, in the spring of 1895, it felt rapid enough). What was at stake was something like the public emergence of “sexuality” as such, and what was achieved in the various legal proceedings was not merely a deducing of sex from exterior attributes, a specification of the telltale signs of male deviance, but rather a wider generalization of this deducing process. In their attentions to Wilde’s body and history, his tastes and his imagination, they invented a broad and, as it would prove, almost infinitely adaptive strategy for the linking of a whole series of unconventionalities (in dress, gender behavior, manner, speech, relation to class, family, age, nation, and law) to the possibility of a specific sexual deviance. What was “invented” by such a strategy, in turn, was the idea of sexuality itself as a thing within us, a thing belonging to each of us, that somehow bound together all these seemingly unconnected, heterogeneous traits, fusing them into a notion of character that was defined, with new and exhaustive “depth,” by sex. (This is part of what David Halperin means when he writes, in a passage to which we will return, that “modern” sexuality is distinguished by an “unprecedented combination of . . . previously uncorrelated conceptual entities” [emphasis added].) By virtue of the vast media coverage attending them, the Wilde trials made spectacularly public not just the new character of the homosexual, not just the sudden vulnerability of all intimate same-sex relations to being read as deviant and degenerate, and not just the unresolvable incoherence of competing inversion and minoritized models of homosexuality. They accomplish, too—again, in an unprecedentedly mass-publicized way—the sweeping coordination of a range of once only marginally interlinked dispositions under the idea of sexuality.
Only one of the things that might fascinate a reader of mid- to late-nineteenth-century eroticism is the trajectory, the flux and errancy, of this movement toward coordination: such a “movement” might come most alive in its intermediate stages, its scattered moments of pausing and acceleration. If we take the Wilde trials to be a kind of culmination of this movement, these stages imply a mode of “history” that would be given shape by partial formulation, recalcitrance and yielding in unpredictable sequence, uneven emergences and submersions. Precisely here, I think, is where the splendid, often exhilarating, sometimes bewildering extravagance of the literature of the period—Thoreau’s insistent disappointment, Dickinson’s wrought obliquity, Smith’s interplanetary ambitions—comes into rich meaning. For to look at moments before this coordination is to look squarely at possibilities for the disaggregation, or staggered articulation, or differential emphasis, of one or more of these not-yet-coordinated vectors of being. It is to see something of the shape sex could take—errant, unlikely, not always legible as sex—before it quite became the sexuality we now know, or think we know.

Errancy, Extravagance, Untimeliness: Notes on Method

If there is a strong emphasis in the chapters that follow on the errant and the unyarded, the extravagant and the untimely, it is in large part a measure of my desire to add my own voice to a broader conversation about queer sex, queer history, and their braidings around the question of temporality. Readers familiar with this work will have already heard its resonances here. In thinking about the in-between time of the regulated erotic body across the later nineteenth century, I am indebted to Dana Luciano’s reading of what she calls “chronobiopolitics”—“the sexual arrangement of the time of life”—in Arranging Grief, which so deftly conjoins an interest in emerging modalities of biopower with questions of temporality. My worry over the curtailments, rather than the affordances, of the advent of modern sexual identity draws on Heather Love’s reading of what she calls “chronobiopolitics”—“the sexual arrangement of the time of life”—in Arranging Grief, which so deftly conjoins an interest in emerging modalities of biopower with questions of temporality. My worry over the curtailments, rather than the affordances, of the advent of modern sexual identity draws on Heather Love’s accounts, in Feeling Backward, of those for whom the emergence of such an identity was the occasion for darker affects than those of liberation. And I am informed here, too, by the attunements to futures left dormant, or uncreated, that we find in Molly McGarry’s work on spiritualism, Jose Muñoz’s on Bloch and the “not yet,” and Christopher Castiglia’s on literature as counter-archive. Like Sharon Marcus, Bruce Burgett, Christopher Looby, and Jordan Stein,
I mean to attend most closely to styles of erotic being that may not rise to the level of “discourse” as it is traditionally understood, but are for that no less telling or worthy of explication. Perhaps above all I follow in the wake of Elizabeth Freeman’s magnificent work on “erotohistoriography” and the drags of temporality—on the spaces of lag, delay, and suspension we find between a variety of styles of erotic being and their becoming legible as form. All these works, whatever their other predilections, I take to be invaluable to the tasks at hand since they orient us, cumulatively, away from a sense of sex as that which is (as the phrase goes) “discursively constituted,” and toward a differently calibrated regard for the styles of erotic being that exceed, or precede, or fall aslant of, or otherwise escape captivation by, the genres, codes, and forms of their immediate surroundings. Freeman’s project of erotohistoriography “honors the way queer relations complexly exceed the present,” and the attention to precisely that otherwise she and these other scholars have brought to such high articulacy has been particularly valuable for me in the effort to describe, with as much clarity as intricacy, the contours of a series of erotic possibilities that were not quite, not yet, legible in the terms of the century’s impending sexual taxonomies.

All of this is to say that I borrow from this ample and varied critical conversation, in the first instance, a prevailing trepidation about the fate of those extravagances of erotic imagining—a trepidation over the way the reach and variability of such extravagant, its expressive richness, can fall out a bit in certain modes of literary historicism. In this sense, the most basic aim of Tomorrow’s Parties is counterhistorical and, you might say, restorative. The chapters that follow, addressed as they are to figures who occupy diverse places in the canon of sexually revelatory literatures, look to give a renewed sense of the vitality and breadth of imaginings of sex in the latter half of the American nineteenth century, even by so relatively narrow a range of figures as I consider here, and even by authors of whom it has long been presumed that “the sexual” was a matter of incidental or merely glancing concern. By pursuing detailed, comprehensive readings of a handful of authors and works, the book aims above all to provide a richer analytic vocabulary with which to describe the movements of sex in the long, last moments before it might have known itself as “sexuality” in its modern senses. Following, like so many of us, the trail blazed by Sedgwick, my hope is to try to tell “a story about sexuality that does not yet exist as a convention or an identity.”
Crucially, though, the work of the following chapters is not intended as a kind of exposé: the purpose is not to disclose in unforeseen places a suppressed or submerged sexual content. This is not, in other words, a project much invested in queering the nineteenth century because to do so—to turn “queer” into a transitive verb—seems to me to rely on a presumed knowledge of just what action “queering” would entail, just what it would mean to translate something not-yet-queer into something queer, or queerer. Indeed, one of what I take to be the high joys of this kind of work runs directly counter to such a presumption. I am thinking of the pleasures of unlikeliness, of errancy, and of surprise that follow from a readerly practice that takes seriously the idea that sex is not a pregiven quantity, a thing whose shape, form, and extent we know in advance. They are the pleasures that come from never settling the question of what sex can prove to be or to have been, or of what might prove to be sex. In the book’s final “Coda” I will discuss in greater detail some of the implications, theoretical as well as methodological, of such an approach to sex. Here I will say simply that the chapters that follow mean both to exemplify that readerly practice, and to explain the conceptual dividends we stand to receive from it, by looking in close detail at scenes from a long moment in which the questions of what sex could be, and what could be sex, were especially prominent.

On this point I do not wish to be misunderstood. Such hesitancy with respect to queering the sexual past does not require of us, in turn, a sweeping sort of anticredulity about sex before sexology: it does not require us to regard with an unbelieving wariness (which always borders on the dismissive) accounts of the passions of intimate relation in a time before the ascent of the categories of hetero and homo. The fact of these writers’ untimeliness—of their enmeshment in a moment of transformation, of uncompleted transition—offers livelier possibilities. Indeed, what unites the unruly collection of authors gathered here, beyond anything else, is the uncanny persistence with which, despite their so divergent interests, they return in their works to an articulate sense of what I have been calling the earliness of sexuality: a sense, again, of sexuality as a realm of experience and expression as yet uncodified, not yet battened into place by the discourses in which it increasingly found itself located. To tell this story properly requires not discarding but leaning against, and perhaps thickening, some prevailing historicist models, and I want to address these briefly by clarifying some of the stakes of my own procedures.
First, we are by now accustomed to approaches to presexological expressions of desire that have difficulty escaping the inevitable presumption that, as worldly post-Victorians, we see more clearly, can describe more acutely, and simply know so much more than even the authors themselves about the true tenor of the longings that they hesitantly or indirectly portray in their work. If this is a methodologically untenable presumption, its effects are not, for that, either uniform or simple. Depending on the critic’s inclination, this “knowledge” tends to cause the moments in question to be regarded in one of two ways: either with pleased certainty (“This is what’s really happening here”) or committed epistemological skepticism (“It is impossible now to say what, if anything, is happening here”). We can term these two options, for the sake of brevity, the anticipatory and the agnostic approach.

With respect first to the agnostic approach: readings that emphasize the intractable illegibility of the past—those that, we might say, side with James’s point about the unspeakability of the dynamics of intimate life from across the divide of modern sexual categories—have the virtue of a certain refusal. They resist, in the first instance, the impulse to erode the distinctiveness of the past by rendering it in the terms and taxonomies of the present. We might think here of Caleb Crain’s admonition about early nineteenth-century intimacy in his *American Sympathy*: “They dwelt in possibilities that we cannot help but reduce to prose.” He describes here a reduction that is in practice exceptionally difficult to resist, inasmuch as the taxonomies of sexual being that postdate the nineteenth century make up for us the very fabric of commonsense sexual knowledge.

My own divergence from the agnostic approach is not the queer-deconstructive one. Crain’s resistance to anachronism—to the reading of the sexual past in contemporary terms—does not strike me in any meaningful sense as a commitment to the normative more generally, as has been suggested in critiques of historicist approaches that self-consciously guard against anachronism and the misplacement of specifically modern conceptions of sexuality. Resistances to sanctioned temporal modes, specific temporalizations of being-in-the-body, and of the life cycle more broadly, may indeed be hallmarks of queer sexualities past and present, as a wealth of new queer theorists have taught us to see. It does not follow, though, that to embrace anachronism as a scholarly or historical mode is, of necessity, to be queer, nor that to attend to the specificity of a given moment’s codes of sexual being (its “policing of borders,” say, or its concern for structures of historical “propriety”) is to side, methodologically, with the
normalizing impulses of modernity. Such a reading depends on a series of more and less facile analogies between, say, sexual and evidentiary versions of “propriety.” It is only according to the false cognates of analogical thinking, in other words, that the treatment of the past as other to ourselves in certain key respects might parse as a necessarily sexually normative or even colonizing move. One might think instead of the overlapping of historical frames more in the terms suggested by Freeman’s erotohistoriography—that is, as a kind of friction, an always-erotic rubbing together of similarities and differences. Such an approach neither ontologizes difference—there is in it no refusal of what Carolyn Dinshaw calls the “touch across time” that queer work can enable—nor elides the fact of specific differences, themselves only loosely grasped in their abstraction as différance.22

So my divergences are not, or not precisely, in the broadly deconstructive vein. And yet the agnostic approach does, I think, broach other sorts of methodological worries, and these come into particularly sharp focus when the matter at hand is sexuality in the long moment just prior to the advent of its modern taxonomies. For the agnostic mode, despite its strengths, also threatens to understress the movements toward a consolidation of sexual ideology that were already afoot, and that could be felt in their encroachment from a number of vantages. (This uneasy sense of encroachment is, as we shall see, very much at the heart of Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance.) To regard the presexological past too strictly as a site of Jamesian unspeakability and illegibility, in other words, is to miss the degree to which the emergence of modern sexuality was a movement, a slowly unfolding process, rather than an event, however decisively the massive publicity of the Wilde trials may have circulated and solidified that emergence. As agnostics, we run the risk of underreading late-century figures’ entanglement in regimes of sexuality that were, though not crystallized, impending.23

On precisely this ground, the anticipatory reading of presexological intimacy clearly appeals. In works like Kathryn Kent’s Making Girls into Women, Jonathan Ned Katz’s Love Stories, Valerie Rohy’s Impossible Women, and Annamarie Jagose’s Inconsequence, strains of social and cultural life from the 1840s through the 1880s and ’90s come into meaning as harbingers of a complex sort, as early iterations of what would eventually come to be aspects of gay and lesbian identity, or as sites in which a protoqueer identificatory impulse might find traction or shelter, to emerge more fully in a later, more viable moment. Here, too, there is much to
admire, and much that is generative. We might appreciate particularly the
day such work renders the nineteenth century less a blank canvas, best
left unbesmirched by presentist speculation or historical coding of any
sort, than a period of coming-to-be in which impulses and desires not yet
authorized by commonly available languages or codes found some of their
first vital life. So, for instance, in Kathryn Kent’s work (like Lisa Moore’s
before her and, in somewhat more problematic ways, Lillian Faderman’s
before them), we see the affordances made, in the many rituals of the
cult of female friendship and in “sentimental culture” more generally, for
modes of protolesbian identification and affiliation.24

If in what follows I depart a bit from the anticipatory approach, it is
not because I think it is implausible, inaccurate, or without wide uses
and strong insights. But as a way of telling the story of nineteenth-cen-
tury sexuality, it threatens a particular kind of narrowness. To read the
sexually piquant moments of nineteenth-century American writing as
finally anticipatory—as harbingers for the approach of, or as laying the
groundwork for, a language of sexual identity and affiliation that would
indeed arrive later—is to risk missing much of the story. It is to presume,
for instance, that all roads lead to Rome: that in the realm of sexual
being, all muted deviances and inarticulate errancies were preparatory,
awaiting their redemption in a later moment. But what if the sexual pos-
sibilities dreamed into being in the era before sexology proved not to be
amenable to the forms of sexual subjectivity and sexual specificity that
would, in fact, arrive? What if the queerness any of these authors pro-
posed, or yearned after, or otherwise intuited, fell somehow aslant of the
languages of sexual specificity that were to come, with a newly legible
homosexual identity in tow? What if what we find are not uncanny fore-
tellings but, as Molly McGarry has it, ghosts of futures past?25 We might
notice, in this vein, that in his letter to Mrs. Fields James can hardly be
said to revel in the pleasure of a newly acquired language of queer self-
nomination. But this does not make him a homophobe, or a coward, or a
man suffering a crippling inability to love (as a curiously popular vision
of James now has it).26 It may be, rather, that in their extravagance and
errancy, their disappointment or dislocation—in their bracing untime-
lessness—many of these authors envision possibilities that the arrived
future, whatever its other affordances, simply would not yield. Thus,
James looks back with a curious kind of regret, not on what was gained
but what was, for himself and Mrs. Fields and their friends, irrevocably
lost.
Introduction

It is worth reminding ourselves, in other words, that the appearance of what we might want to call queer identity, or modern homosexual identity, was not a fate fixed in the stars, and was not the target toward which all emergences were speeding, arrow-like, across the century. Part of what can make us unmindful of this fact, I think, is precisely a too rigid concentration on “discourse,” on the discourses in which sex might have found itself spoken. This is why Jordan Stein worries over the current critical difficulty entailed in “collect[ing] into the history of sexuality versions of queerness that never accede to discourse.” “The history of sexuality,” he avers, “can and should be written in relation to texts and experiences that fail to be represented at the manifest level of discourse” (emphasis added). He points here to a fundamental methodological problem, and works with great deftness to turn us away from what we might think of as commonplace Americanist misapprehensions, or slightly misbegotten applications, of the work of Michel Foucault.

To put the matter at its bluntest: Tomorrow’s Parties is determinedly not an attempt to tell the story of nineteenth-century sexuality as a “history of discourses.” I offer this demurral for a few basic reasons. First, as Stein intimates above, the telling of the history of sexuality as a history of discourse is a method Foucault’s History of Sexuality neither exemplifies nor endorses, though we are often assured that it does. The misapprehension here, I think, is at once conceptual and practical. For Foucault, the emergence of a modern regime of sexuality is not only, and not primarily, a matter of sex finding itself located more and more in one or another sort of official, quasi-confessional, expert discourse. That is, instead, a component of a larger series of movements he wishes to trace. No one turns this point more forcefully than David Halperin, who, in How to Do the History of Homosexuality, writes,

The history of sexuality, as Foucault conceived it, then, is not a history of the representations, categories, cultural articulations, or collective and individual expressions of some determinate entity called sexuality but an inquiry into the historical emergence of sexuality itself, an attempt to explain how it happened that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sexuality gradually came into existence as a conjunction of strategies for ordering social relations, authorizing specialized knowledges, licensing expert interventions, intensifying bodily sensations, normalizing erotic behaviors, multiplying sexual perversions, policing personal expressions, crystallizing political resistances, motivating introspective utterances, and constructing human subjectivities.
Or again, returning to the quote we saw earlier in relation to Wilde: “What historically distinguishes ‘homosexuality’ as a sexual classification,” Halperin writes, endeavoring to specify what it is about the invention of “modern” sexuality that so fascinated Foucault, “is its unprecedented combination of at least three distinct and previously uncoordinated conceptual entities: (1) a psychiatric notion of a perverted or pathological orientation . . . (2) a psychoanalytic notion of same-sex sexual object-choice or desire . . . and (3) a sociological notion of sexually deviant behavior.”

What is crucial here is Halperin’s canny insistence that it is the “unprecedented combination” of these movements, their heretofore unaccomplished systematic coordination, that makes for what we now call sexuality. The regime of sexuality, in other words, is one of implantation and investment: an intensification of zones of the body, a making-vulnerable or making-sensitized, a saturation of personhood with proddings and incitements and solicitations. Much of this goes missing when we think of sex as discourse, or when we underread what Foucault means when he suggests sex is “discursively constituted.”

In practice, this conceptual misapprehension translates into a reduction of Foucault’s project—which is an account of the emergence of sexual subjectivity as such, as a vector of modern, individuating, post-Enlightenment power—into a flattening sort of contextualization: the reading of a text, or act, or person, or phenomenon, in carefully accomplished coordination with one of several kinds of discourse that are contemporaneous with it. But this is to imagine Foucault as a far more conventional sort of historian than he was. As was his writerly habit, Foucault in The History of Sexuality tells the story of the emergence of sexual subjectivity as a vector of modern power from, in essence, the perspective of power’s own ideal of operational efficiency and coordination. But he does not offer that fantasy of perfected and fully systematized coordination and control as a conventional historical account of, say, the unfolding of social and private life across the mid- and late-nineteenth century. (I think of Lauren Berlant’s trenchant observation: “Sovereignty is a fantasy misrecognized as an objective state.”) To turn Foucault’s approach into a kind of discursive contextualization is to miss this fundamental distinction. More grievously still, for scholars of nineteenth-century sexuality at least, it is also a mode of approach that gives us less purchase than we might want on the loose ends, the remainders of the processes Foucault describes: on the experience of any of the soon-to-be coordinated intensifications of the regime of sexuality in their separation from each other, in a moment before
their accomplished systematization. Among its other substantial pleasures, the literature of period, with its extravagances and errancies, helps us fill in that other, looser part of the story.\textsuperscript{31}

The work of \textit{Tomorrow’s Parties} does not presume, then, that legal, medical, pedagogical, commercial, and/or religious languages addressing themselves to sex “produced” nineteenth-century American sexuality, additively or otherwise. Thinking of discourse as a master code for nineteenth-century sexuality makes especially little sense, after all, when we consider that so much of the imaginative efforts of the writers in question was precisely to \textit{evade} such codification, to conceive erotic being in terms and in formulations other than the given. We could think here of what Sedgwick calls the “nonce taxonomies” of intimate relation in James, and of their articulation, as the codification of sexuality became more and more strict, in an ever-more-stylized syntax that prizes attenuation, indirection, and deferral far above clarity of reference;\textsuperscript{32} or of that syntax’s strange kinship with Emily Dickinson’s own deployments of suspension and multiplicity in the service of a privacy at once obdurately guarded and passionately communicative;\textsuperscript{33} or of what Perry Miller aptly enough thinks of as Thoreau’s “perverse” insistence on ceaselessly translating his passionate attachments to his fellow men into states of frustration, disappointment, and, in his dreamier moments, expectancy;\textsuperscript{34} or even of Whitman’s own late-in-life boasts about his fecund heterosexuality, which we might read less as self-closeting defensiveness (he was in dialogue with John Addington Symonds who, with new-minted languages of sexual identity to hand, pressed him insistently on the specifically homoerotic meaning of his poems) than as an unwillingness to have the intimacies he had imagined and enacted redescribed in the falsifying terms of a rapidly solidifying latter-day sexual taxonomy.\textsuperscript{35}

In all these cases, the matters of chief interest to the readings that follow—errancy, extravagance, untimeliness in imagining the domain of sexuality—are ill served by an approach that assumes too hastily that something called sexuality, in mid- and late-nineteenth-century America, is exhausted in the discourses that aimed to regulate and codify it.\textsuperscript{36} They have seemed to me better served by a practice invested in detail, particularity, and unsystematizable variousness—all the specificities that literature proffers in such abundance, \textit{and in whose explication close textual reading specializes}. “Philosophical poetics is historical,” Simon Jarvis has recently reminded us, “insofar as it takes technique to be at once the way in which art thinks and the way in which the work of art most intimately
registers historical experience.” Following this note (itself borrowed from a reading of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*), and following, too, my own understanding of “close reading as a way of doing history,” *Tomorrow’s Parties* unfolds in chapters built chiefly around the patient, ground-level explanation of the way I take the works in questions to think: that is, around logics, shadings, and idiosyncrasies of literary form. It seems only hospitable to mention in advance, then, that a lot of what might be thought of as the explicitly theoretical and critical contestation in what follows is embedded in chapters that themselves attend quite often to larger uninterrupted swaths of primary materials than is perhaps now customary. Not everyone likes this, I know. But I risk that mode of critical address in the conviction that it is by dwelling with texture, rhythm and pulse, accretion and dispersal—the specific atmospheres of a given work’s language, which come clearest in long exposure—that we can best begin to articulate those more errant, more uncoded stories of sexual possibility that are the book’s central preoccupation.

This brings us to one final hesitation with respect to anticipatory readings of nineteenth-century sexuality. The reading of the emergence of modern sexuality as part of a “history of discourses”—in which early discursive formulations of erotic being are read as premonitory signs of a mode of sexual personhood that *had not yet* but would later come into full realization—has the signal hazard of erasing not only the staggered or disarticulated components of modern sexuality, but also all the fantastic visions, excessive imaginings, and unforeclosed possibilities that *would not come to be*. As Kathryn Bond Stockton reminds us, in terms I find resonant for so many of the writers we will consider, “our futures grow sideways whenever they cannot be envisioned *as* futures.” Think again of James and his wistful, half-pained regard for a now-unspeakable past whose details seem to him escalatingly illegible to any but those who, like him, partook in the strange pleasures of a time freer than his present from captivity by languages at once potentially “validating” (offering recognition, legibility, an alternative to silence) and, to a man of James’s temperament, potentially entrapping. What I am calling the persistent earliness of sexuality across the works to be considered—an earliness whose evaporation James could be said to mourn—brings into rich and articulate clarity the range, the unsystematizable variety of investments that might be sustained in relation to the late-century arrival of new languages of sexual specificity. They help us envision not only those languages’ affordances (for queer self-nomination and mutual-recognition of the sort pioneered
by a man like Symonds) but also, and I think more revealingly, all that might have been lost at the close of the nineteenth century, all the errant possibilities for imagining sex that have sunk into a kind of muteness with the advent of modern sexuality. The modern form of sexual subjectivity that solidified around James and his friends, in other words, was not the only possible or imaginable historical emergence; a preoccupation with something like “discourse,” or with the discourses in which sex found itself spoken of, can obscure this fundamental premise. So the larger aim of *Tomorrow’s Parties*, in its departures from practices of discursive contextualization, is less to make clear the routes by which presexological forms of intimate relation came to arrive at what we now recognize as modern habitations of sexuality than to trace, in as much detail as we can, the outlines of any number of broken-off, uncreated futures, futures that would not come to be.

(Maps and Trajectories)

In all these ways, *Tomorrow’s Parties* means to set itself in conversation with emerging scholarship that addresses temporality: the temporality of social forms (as in Wai Chee Dimock’s recent accounts of nation-time) and, most crucially for my purposes, new queer scholarship that has begun to address the interface between sex and time as a way to reapproach, and perhaps enliven, the question of sexual history. Unsurprisingly, much of this work has drawn strength from an attentive return to the works, fortunes, and followers of the Frankfurt School—unsurprising because Benjamin and Adorno (and Nietzsche before them) had much to say in their own time about expectancy, disillusionment, and the staggered temporalities they took to be modernity’s signature. As should by now be clear, my work here is informed by Benjamin’s regard for history as, in Christopher Nealon’s fine phrase, “a matrix of claiming,” a scene of unfolding always vulnerable to the predations or reclaims of an unknowable future. But in what follows, and particularly in the prevailing concern with nineteenth-century sexuality as a phenomenon not yet captivated by the forces circumscribing it, I am interested as much in the richness a writer like Adorno enables us to see in something like waiting, in the pause that bespeaks a yearning without a viable path toward its own fulfillment; a politics not resigned but forestalled; an unwillingness to cede to the terms of a given social world, even in the absence of usable
alternatives to it; or a multiply-inflected cathexis of the bare possibility of an arrived future that might, if not redeem, at least alter the intractable terms of the present tense.\(^\text{42}\) (All these possibilities seem to me to follow from Adorno’s sense of Nietzsche, who would aver, “I write for a species… that does not yet exist.”\(^\text{43}\)) As the new work of queer Americanist scholars like Freeman, McGarry, Castiglia, Rohy, Stein, Luciano, Looby, and a range of others makes clear, these formulations can propel us toward a more intricate, less simplifying regard for dispositions, affects, and only marginally articulable relations to politics and to history—relations that, because of what Lauren Berlant calls the difficulty of their immediate “convertibility to politics” or to conventionally “political” terms, can be too hastily dismissed as simply “a failure to be politics.”\(^\text{44}\) Beyond this, a framework given some of its shape by a reading of Adorno may allow us to see, too, how investments in futurity might not always and everywhere amount to capitulation to the logic of reproductive heteronormativity—that is, to see in what terms an antireproductive futurity might come into articulacy (it is in just these terms that we will be interested in the roles of children and of childlessness in a writer like Jewett, for example) and what it might take of us, as critics, to read expressions of hesitancy, disillusionment, pausing, or waiting away from the stark dichotomies of optimistic and pessimistic, insufficiently political or insufficiently free from the captivations of the Symbolic, happy or sad, no-future or yes-future. The stories the writers assembled here endeavor to tell tend to inhabit neither end of these polarities without remainder, and so are ill perceived by an insistence on the gravity and priority of only one.

And, if we can listen to them, they tell us things that might be of critical value to us. Tomorrow’s Parties aims to bring back into focus some of the visions and conceptions of sexual possibility that may have disappeared from view with the advent of modern taxonomies of sexuality. In doing so, it works to suggest less that the writers of the presexological past were innocent, or naïve, or hopelessly repressed, than that their renderings of the intimate may offer us a good deal more than we have yet acquired the skills to read, renderings that may open out in particular onto imaginings of sexuality as something other than we have come to know it: as something not reducible, for instance, to a set of practices, an aspect of identity, or a property of the self. In this sense, the final and broadest aim of the book is theoretical. For the sexuality that enlivens the work of James and Jewett, Whitman and Smith, Thoreau and Dickinson, and the others is notable not only for its nimble refusals to yield to the divisive sexual
teleologies and the punishing languages of deviance that would arrive at the century’s end. The varied passions on display in these writings also share a remarkable resistance to one of the more intractable inheritances from the advent of modern sexuality, which we might understand as, in essence, the liberalization of sexuality. They share a resistance, that is, to the turning of sex into another of the liberal self’s secured properties, into something that each of us, alone, is understood to have. This is a resistance we might do well to consider closely, since that privatization of sex is so much a part of even our strongest critical languages about sexuality. By laboring to wrench sex away from not only punitive languages but from possessive understandings of sexuality—from a conception of sexuality as something isolable in individual persons—the writers of the American nineteenth century have an enormous amount to teach us here in the new millennium, where the energy and insight of two decades of dynamic queer scholarship has yielded to a national moment of astonishing hostility and intransigence, where signs of progress are forever being counterbalanced by further reactionary contractions. (“The limitations on this possessive understanding of homosexuality,” writes Nealon, with an eye to precisely this inhospitable civic climate, “are only just becoming clear to us in the United States.”45) In their very obliquity and seeming naiveté, the disparate authors who come together in Tomorrow’s Parties, allergic as they are to the liberalization of sexuality, provide a fantastically rich resource for the articulation of sex away from its possessivist moorings, as something more than an accoutrement of the private self, and as something more like a mode of relation, a style of affiliation, even, for some, a blueprint for sociality: the “parties” of my title.

Tomorrow’s Parties pursues these possibilities across three sections, each one emphasizing a different aspect of that extravagance of imagining we have begun to discuss here. Part 1, “Lost Futures,” looks at Thoreau and Whitman, as well as Dickinson, to gauge a range of ambitions for and yearnings after a discursively uncaptivated sexuality; much of the attention here rests on imaginings of sexual possibility that, in the event, would not find ample room for themselves in the structures of sex that would harden into place at the century’s end. Part 2, “To Speak of the Woe That Is in Marriage,” takes up several derangements of sexuality’s chief sanctioning institution. It looks at the improvised and unsanctified couplings found in Sarah Orne Jewett, and turns then to the spectacularly extravagant imaginings of the power of extradyadic intimacy we find in the late work of Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Unfolding
around the explication of a single, abidingly difficult question—What does the polygamist want?—this chapter sets Smith’s vision of the inadequacy of monogamous marriage alongside Frederick Douglass’s sense of what that same intimate form, once consecrated and state-sanctioned, might do for the former slave. The coda to part two stages a related dialogue between Herman Melville and Harriet Jacobs. Where the work on Smith and Douglass wonders how our sense of the history of sexuality might be altered by the specificities of American trajectories of secularization (which are so drastically different from those of the European context Foucault had in mind), the coda considers how deeply the presence of chattel slavery and its institutions might transform other key conceptual grounding points in Foucault’s genealogy, the entanglement of sexuality with an older system of alliance not least among them. The third and final part, “Speech and Silence: Reckonings of the Queer Future,” reads James’s The Bostonians and Hawthorne’s The Blithedale Romance as a kind of diptych, each representing the perils and attractions of an erotic unconventionality, a deviance willing to know and name itself as such. The book’s conclusion, a coda to part three entitled “The Turn,” looks at James’s The Turn of the Screw to consider the efficacies and liabilities of an understanding of sexual history as ruptured by a climactic turn—around Wilde, around James, around Freud—at the very end of the nineteenth century.

As the introductory and concluding remarks about Wilde suggest, the story told in Tomorrow’s Parties is a transnational one, though it is not in my rendering a story about transnationality. It borrows from what has been called the transnational turn in American studies, principally by taking as a given that American life and writing in the era was shaped by forces, as well as by fantasies, that extended well beyond national borders, and that anything offered as “American” was always already a collocation of tropes, languages, impulses, and imperatives of wide, multinational provenance. At the same time, the work here does at moments address itself to the question of America’s historical peculiarity and to the differences the American context might make to conceptualizations of sexual history. Nor is the book uninterested in, or for that matter unbeguiled by, the question of American nationalism— not, again, the idea of American nationalism as such but nationalism as an unforeclosed question. This is to say that the readings assembled here aim to attune us as closely as possible to the different inflections given to the idea of nationness by the various authors in question. In what follows, in other words, I try to hew
closely to the ways that, for someone like James, Americanness is inconceivable in the absence of a European counterreferent, while for a writer like Whitman an investment in, and fluctuating ambivalence toward, the idea of an American national distinctiveness prevails more forcefully; for still others (Joseph Smith, for instance), formulations of America and Americanness expand well beyond the parameters of virtually any theoretically standard articulations of the nation. As we shall see, for these many and divergent strands of nationalist imaginings—in particular for the concept of “this young nation” (as Thoreau put it in 1852) as an entity in a dynamic state of coming-to-be, imbued with expansive promise but capable of fulfillment only in a moment just over the horizon of present-tense articulability—sexuality proved both a sensitive register of anxiety and ambition, and an exquisitely responsive expressive vehicle.

Scholars of the history of sexuality, and of queer studies more generally, often find ourselves asking: What would it take to imagine sexuality differently? What would it mean, and what would it require, to disentangle the disparate elements of being, of experience and affect, sensuality and selfhood, bullied into lockstep coordination by the modern, postsexological regime of sexuality? If one of the most potent legacies of the Wilde trials is its invention (and massive circulation) of an almost infinitely adaptive strategy for the linking of a whole series of dispositions and comportments to the possibility of a specifically sexual deviance, how do we begin to think outside the terms of those solidified linkages? What does sex even look like if it is somehow removed from the idea of sexuality as a thing within us, a thing that somehow sweepingly binds together all these scattered attributes and fuses them into a definitive sense of who we are? What are the terms in which such alternate inhabitations of corporeality, desire, and their extensions might be lived, or imagined, or brought to articulacy? And what would the experience of those inhabitations feel like? What affects would they harness or align? How would we even begin to recognize as sexuality a mode of being that disaggregates those now-coordinated vectors of selfhood?

Luckily for us, the writings of mid- to late-nineteenth-century America address themselves to precisely these matters, and do so searchingly, eloquently, and variously. Their authors lived through a moment both before the great aggregation of elements we now call sexuality had taken solid hold, but in which the process of their initial, sometimes halting, sometimes swift and decisive, coordination was underway. And with differing
emphases, enthusiasms, anxieties, and investments, they wrote about that experience. In many cases, they used it as a starting point for the most bracingly errant and extravagant imaginings of sex, sexual being, and much else besides. The challenge of course from here on the other side of the divide between ourselves and that unspeakable past is to read them, and so to leave them something other than too bleakly stranded. That is the prevailing ambition of the chapters that follow.