PREFACE

I am the child from down the street.
Now I’ve grown into someone you might never meet.
—Tret Fure, “Something Blue”

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a well-known scholar in the field of gay and lesbian studies, opened her book *Tendencies* by writing, “I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents” (1993, 1). The statistics on suicide among gay and lesbian teens are dramatic and horrifying. They are also far too close to home to have a purely academic ring to them. Only a few years ago, these statistics touched my own university community when a lesbian undergraduate committed suicide, apparently for reasons connected with the oppression she faced or expected to face due to her sexual orientation. In her memory, her family endowed a lecture series at the university to bring in speakers in the field of gay and lesbian studies. They hoped that educating young lesbians and gay men would help them find alternatives to a final escape from a society that makes them feel rejected and unwanted.

This book is not about suicide, nor about adolescence, so perhaps the relevance of this preface will not immediately be apparent. Yet Sedgwick’s observation, the life of the young woman who committed suicide in my own community, and the subsequent actions of her family bring home the motivation and the impulse for this kind of work with a clarity and an urgency that no theoretical justification can capture. Obviously, there are academic motives for undertaking such a study. Yet there is also something more: a faith that language plays a central role in shaping our internal and external worlds; a belief that scholarly pursuits are intimately connected to
the achievement of social change; and a hope that the visibility of the written word has the potential to reach people within and beyond academia in a way that appeals to more than detached intellectual interest, a way that actualizes “humanistic” study in its profoundest sense.

Any inquiry into issues of gay or lesbian representations must be circumscribed by the recognition of real lives in peril, by the urgency of achieving social change that ensures the safety of those lives and makes them livable. Human beings are constantly subject to powerful, if constructed, categories, and those categories have concrete consequences that affect happiness, health, opportunity, safety, even life and death. In reality, most of these outcomes remain untouched by even the most dazzling of our theoretical insights. There are obvious limitations to approaching social change through academic means, undeniable drawbacks to the slow timetable and the indirect effects of scholarly pursuits. Arguably, such writing may never save an adolescent life, may never arrive in time, may never reach those whose lives we dream of changing. The specter of adolescent suicide, and of other physical and emotional violence inflicted on lesbians and gay men by themselves and others, is a constant reminder of how many lives have been and remain beyond our reach.

Yet there are also possibilities here, opportunities for reaching out in the hope that our work will mean something to someone, with the belief that it can make a difference. Scholarship of this sort, like the inauguration of a lecture series, is not simply a memorial to what has been, not only a means of recognizing what is past. It is also a statement of hope, a belief that despite the tragedies we have not been able to prevent, there are some that perhaps we can. It is, above all, a commitment to creating another kind of future. In a sense, this may be what all of us—as scholars, writers, and simply human beings—in our highest aspirations seek to achieve.