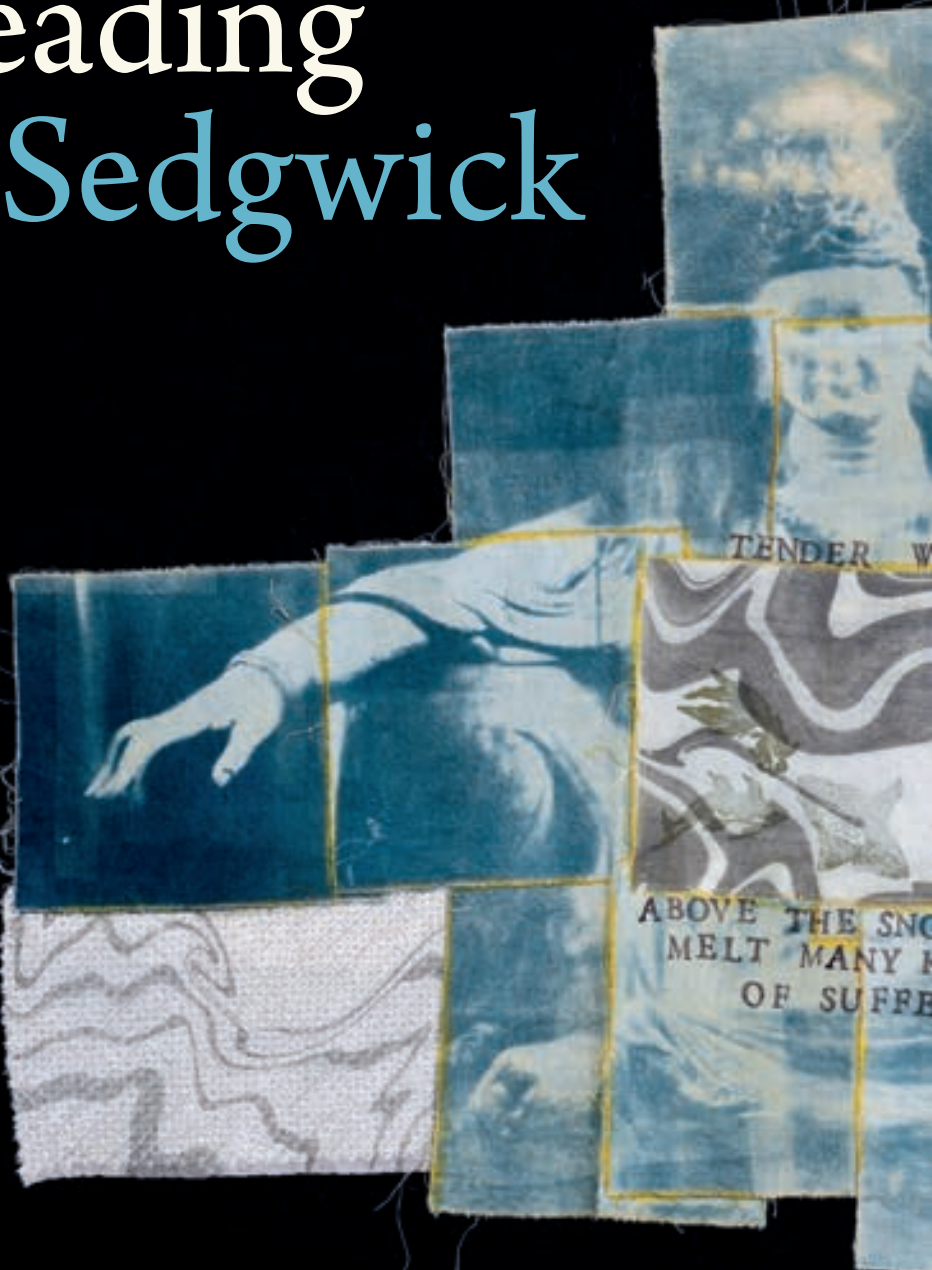


Reading Sedgwick



LAUREN BERLANT, EDITOR

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“An Open Mesh of Possibilities”

The Necessity of Eve Sedgwick in Dark Times

I think everyone who does queer studies considers Eve Sedgwick one of the, if not *the*, most important theorists of heterogeneity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Across the arc of her prodigious and ceaselessly fruitful oeuvre, Sedgwick obsessively pursued a project of generating rich accounts and interpretations of *human multiplicity*. While she was famous for her axiomatic pronouncement, “People are different from each other,”¹ this statement simply articulated a base-level condition of possibility for her much larger critical aim: to understand at the most expansive conceptual scale how our exceptionally diverse range of affective and material responses to one another’s differences constantly run up against culture-wide ways of knowing (or willful *unknowing*) the self and others that, sometimes banally but oftentimes murderously, reduce the complexity of those differences and foreclose countless other ways to apprehend and negotiate them. Early in her field-defining monograph *Epistemology of the Closet*, she would enumerate precisely this problematic:

Historically, the framing of *Epistemology of the Closet* begins with a puzzle. It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species . . . etc. etc. etc.) precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of “sexual orientation.”²

While in Sedgwick’s most virtuosic early publications she precisely identified and schematized cultural logics (most notably, “the closet”) that flatten, simplify,

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ossify, or refuse outright to deal with human differences, in her methods of analysis, her stylistic approach to writing (commonly associated with some of the most breathtakingly superlative yet incandescent prose in modern critical and cultural theory), and her affective orientation to her objects of study, she modeled ways to revivify the reality of heterogeneity not merely as the fact that “people are different from each other,” but as a study of what people *do* with those differences. Her work achieves its most stunning heights of intellectual and political force in those moments when she quite literally clears space on the page for transparently naming, playfully taxonomizing, cognitively conceiving, imaginatively rearranging, identifying across, and theorizing the relationship between a seemingly endless range of differences and the identities they underwrite—not only those of race, class, sexuality, and gender (“only four?!” she might say) but also of temperament, body shape, intellectual skill or aptitude, age, life experience, political investment, nationality, spiritual worldview, etc. etc. etc. In *Epistemology*, she would state with exasperation: “It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with [the] self-evident fact” that there are many kinds of people in the world.³

Sedgwick sought to grasp how the multiplicity of differentials in embodiment and identity that distinguish any two people also paradoxically provide the ground for, while also being an effect of, the equally multiplicitous attachments we develop with other bodies, objects, affects, experiences, ideas, textures, and particular kinds of erotic and social relationships. She found it endlessly fascinating and exhilarating how the seemingly infinite array of differences between any two people, or *many different kinds* of people, neither diminished the capacity, or potential desire, for relations of exchange and attachment across those differences nor mitigate even slightly the equally manifold ways that people are also very much alike. In other words, as the title of one her most beloved volumes attests, she was a theorist of *tendencies*, of the ways in which *what* we tend toward, invest in, feel affinity with, obsess over, attach ourselves to, and help nourish shapes and reshapes not only our sense of self but our ethical relationship to the world at large.

It is perhaps no surprise that this particular cluster of questions was for Sedgwick not merely an arena of disinterested intellectual inquiry or cool philosophical contemplation but, rather, the very ground for elaborating an explicitly politicized ethical stance toward the experience of *tending* toward, where tending captures the double sense of leaning or reaching toward something while cultivating and helping it thrive. In that collection of essays, she

would write: “I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meanings seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love.”⁴ Sedgwick repeatedly enjoins us to acknowledge that if we tend toward something, if we feel affinity to it, if we wish to help it flourish, then this relation of tending is itself something of ethical value that should be not only studied but actively developed as an affective orientation or stance for future contacts.

This is perhaps why she was so deeply drawn to the emergent field of queer studies, as it was arguably the first arena of humanistic inquiry to take seriously the public and political dimensions of erotic and affective desire, intimacy, attachment, and kinship; it is a theory, in short, of what we tend toward. Sedgwick pursued and honed methods of analysis that passionately make room for cultivating those forms of tending (such as same-sex desire and familial bonds outside blood relations) that are most devalued and violently prohibited in our culture while at every turn working to jam up, denature, unhinge, or unravel the very logics of prohibition, devaluation, and unknowing that so powerfully direct us all to *tend in the same way*.

Despite the fact that Sedgwick spent most of her career exfoliating the erotic, emotional, gendered, relational, and political logics of a very particular, often canonical (some might even say rarefied) set of late nineteenth-century Euro-American texts, among which the work of Henry James and Marcel Proust stand paramount (with occasional forays into Jane Austen, Willa Cather, Buddhism, Silvan Tomkins, and Shakespeare, to name a few), she masterfully used this set of works to make vast, compelling, transformative claims about the nature of affinities across difference in Western culture. In her commitment to these texts, she acknowledged, both explicitly and implicitly, her own tendencies toward the particular kinds of narratives, social types, relational conflicts and arrangements, and affective projects that drew her back, over and over, to certain objects, questions, and cultural patterns. She was obsessed with the literary production and biographies of a small cadre of (very) queer white male authors of the Euro-American nineteenth century; she cross-identified as a gay man, often through her self-proclaimed embodied experiences as a Jewish, fat, woman intellectual; and as part of this identification, she claimed intense, abiding love relationships with a range of gay male colleagues and friends. She was fascinated by vulnerability of

many sorts—by the way people are made vulnerable to one another through physical illness and aging, desire (requited or not), loneliness and emotional need—and by our various modes of identifying, which make us susceptible to a range of intensely volatile emotions, from the pain of rejection and loss to the overwhelming deluge of love and infatuation; and she really, really, *really* didn't like those sites in our culture where meanings are supposed to "line up perfectly with each other" or "everything" is supposed to "mean the same thing!"⁵ For a scholar who often presented her arguments in a linguistic and conceptual architecture so stunningly rigorous that it could appear like the Eiffel Tower of critical scholarship, she is a surprisingly open book: read her essays, and you get what she's all about. She is, in this way, a scholar of her own tendencies who brings us into contact with her highly particular psychic and intellectual attachments not so that we may leave knowing more about her (although we certainly do, sometimes uncomfortably so), but so we may have cognitive tools for grappling with the very discursive conditions that enable or foreclose our own ways of tending toward some things and not others. She wants us to leave her writing understanding that what we tend toward may also be an avenue to a vast range of questions, potential relationships, or ways of knowing and being we have yet to fully grasp but still might, with world-transformative results.

If it is difficult to describe Sedgwick's theoretical legacy in a svelte or pithy formulation, it is perhaps because, unlike the many iconic theorists with whom she engaged as beloved and sometimes agonistic interlocutors (Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, Melanie Klein, Silvan Tomkins, and Barbara Johnson, to name a few), Sedgwick claimed no steadfast allegiance to any single theoretical lineage or method (moving with dazzling alacrity among deconstructive, Foucauldian, feminist, psychoanalytic, and queer theoretical formulations, depending on the breadth of their explanatory force in any given query) and consistently produced critical interpretations of culture that refuse to congeal into a once-and-for-all, transhistorical explanation for any given aesthetic, social, or political phenomenon or text. If there is a broad trend (or, more appropriately, *tendency*) that one might track across the arc of her writing, it may be a general move from an exploration of the structuring logics of same-sex desire—captured in the elegant polygons of the homosocial triangles of *Between Men*,⁶ as well as in the four-square double bind of the minoritizing/universalizing—gender transitive/gender separatist logics of homo/hetero definition mapped so magisterially in *Epistemology of the Closet*—to an abiding interest in theories of affective multiplicity, such

as Silvan Tomkins's affect system or Buddhism's nondualistic approach to knowing, that can account for a vastly expanded set of relationships, identities, feelings, and desires that fall outside the stultifying logics she traces in her earlier writing. This shift is not, as it might appear at first glance, a simple reversal of priorities or interests. It is not so much that Sedgwick begins as a structuralist and ends as a poststructuralist (in fact, she does not have any truck with adjudicating the "rightness" of either of these well-worn theoretical lineages, instead showing far more keenness for their distinct utility as explanatory heuristics in particular instances). Rather, she begins by studying the logics that contain or delimit the variability and unpredictability of meaning that can attach to erotic and social relations (and the numerous anxieties that attend the discursive failure to do so) and moves increasingly toward a fascination for, and desire to expand, the many theories that name and encourage the *proliferation* of meanings and attachments that can never quite adequately be contained, fixed, delimited, or once and for all snuffed out by any structure, any logic, any prohibition. In both inquiries, her adherence to the *value* of multiplicity, regardless of whether it is under duress or made to flourish, is the same.

Sedgwick, then, does not confer on us a fully formed theory of her own but a theoretical *position*, stance, or orientation from which to conduct inquiry. I like to think of it, using her classic term, as an axiom or cluster of axioms: in place of a universal theory, structure, or model for analysis, Sedgwick offers us operating procedures to think with and live by. One effect of her orientation is a promiscuous attachment to many theories, and many identities, in the formulation of one's queries of the world and of how one goes about answering the questions that keep one up at night. "As a general principal," she would claim, "I don't like the idea of 'applying' theoretical models to particular situations or texts—it's always more interesting when the pressure of application goes in both directions."⁷ The world, she suggests, is full of compelling theories, and more can and should be produced. What it is deficient in are the ethical, affective, and political orientations required to make those theories have a palpable, materially nourishing, or transformative effect on our daily lives.

In this introduction, I aim to render a picture—sharp in its contours yet expansive and open-ended in its concept and content—of Sedgwick's intellectual legacy as a conferral of a particular kind of orientation or mode of approach to the world that she transmits to her readers through the very particularity of her own intellectual and affective tendencies. In other words, I want

to give shape to Sedgwick as a particular kind of formation—like a snowflake (aren't we all now?) whose utter distinctness still tells us something about the nature of all other snowflakes, even if it is only that they are all distinct—that has bestowed critical tools, which we might still access, and ones that frankly we *need more than ever* to survive and thrive amid the social and political realities of our time. My main headings are:

Sedgwick is a *particularist with a heart for the universal*.

Sedgwick is a theorist of *multiplicity*.

Sedgwick is a proponent of *cross-identification*.

Sedgwick is a *stylist*.

Sedgwick is an *affective curator*.

SEDGWICK IS A PARTICULARIST WITH A HEART FOR THE UNIVERSAL

Sedgwick's oeuvre is enchanting, or elicits wonder, in part, because of the breathtaking specificity, nuance, detail, precision, and pointedness of her analytical capacities. But even more so because of the way she can, in one magnificent phrase or conceptual leap, scale upward from the stultifying ideological grind of a well-worn binarism in Melville, or the affective work of a particular character type in the work of Henry James, or the recurrent juxtaposition of a particular set of terms in the work of Judith Butler to the most pressing, wide-reaching, world-significant questions or problems of our time. She is a theorist of the particular par excellence. Her work grounds us repeatedly in the specificities of her identity and her historical moment; the influence of the institutions at which she teaches and conducts research; the specificity of distinct texts, characters, or turns of phrase as they appear across time; the fine nuances among varied arguments, positions, or ideologies; and, most pressingly, the particularities of embodied and cultural differences.

Yet if there is any recurrent pattern in Sedgwick's argumentative logic, it is her oscillation between the highly specifying gesture—often accomplished in her naming a fine distinction, homing in on a particular rhetorical gambit, or providing an anecdote of a personal experience—and the sweeping universalizing gesture by which she hypothesizes a large-scale phenomenon as either causally or simply significantly linked to the pointed detail to which she has brought our attention. Consider the epic conclusion to her spellbinding reading of Melville's novella *Billy Budd*. Analyzing this very particular early twentieth-century text, which closes with the ignominious deaths of three

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implicitly queer men, she radically scales upward from the specificity of this plot trajectory to claim:

In our culture as in *Billy Budd*, the phobic narrative trajectory toward imagining a time after the homosexual is finally inseparable from that toward imagining a time after the human; in the wake of the homosexual, the wake incessantly produced since first there were homosexuals, every human relation is pulled into its shining representational furrow. . . . One of the many dangerous ways that AIDS discourse seems to ratify and amplify pre-inscribed homophobic mythologies is in its pseudo-evolutionary presentation of male homosexuality as a stage doomed to extinction (read, a phase the species is going through) on the enormous scale of whole populations.⁸

Here, as in all her work, Sedgwick demands that we read the particularity of any given text in relation to large-scale, seemingly universal phenomena and ideological formations—for, after all, the plots of our dearest fictions are *of the world*, not outside or beyond it. A plot that concludes with the eradication of every visibly queer life given shape in the previous narrative, she argues, cannot but materialize an extant fantasy of “a world after the homosexual” and, by extension, of humanity itself, since the society recurrently presumes that anyone and everyone could potentially be secretly, terribly gay.

One effect of this rhetorical and conceptual practice is to make visible the stakes of even the most seemingly aesthetically rarefied rhetorical gestures, accepted modes of argumentation, or taken-for-granted theoretical assumptions we hold so dear: it is in these specific formulations of canonical literary productions, Sedgwick would have us realize, that some of the farthest-reaching structures of Western civilization are played out, given particularity, and made to infiltrate our imagination. But rather than pitting the particular and universal against each other or seeing one as a conceptual starting point that leads to the other, she simply sees both as ways to understand the world, ways to know, that grant insights as much as occlude them. We should inhabit, and see from, both positions, Sedgwick tells us, not only because it is a more generous way to open oneself up to multiple ways of knowing, but because, in truth, we cannot do anything else, since our very sense of self depends on our ability to scale constantly between our individual selves and the collective reality of inhabiting a world with others that is far wider in scope than the limits of our skin.

As she movingly states, “As gay community and the solidarity and visibility of gays as a minority population are being consolidated and tempered in the forge of this specularized terror and suffering, how can it fail to be all

the more necessary that the avenues of recognition, desire, and thought between minority potentials and universalizing ones be opened and opened and opened?”⁹ In other words, in a world that wants us dead, should we not develop as many stories as possible about our identities as queers to flood the world with our existence? Shouldn't we embrace narratives about our particularity, individuality, and specificity as much as stories about what we essentially share with all human beings (and many others)? Neither kind of story has to be “true” in an unequivocal sense; rather, they can sit productively “beside” each another as different ways of knowing and being queer.

Among Sedgwick's favorite universalizing claims: “I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents”; “I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects . . . became a prime resource for survival”; “Something about queer is inextinguishable”; “A hypothesis worth making explicit: there are important senses in which ‘queer’ can signify *only when attached to the first person*”; and, perhaps most famous, “This book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition.”¹⁰ I say that Sedgwick *has a heart* for the universal, then, because she sees it is a contingent and hence intellectually imaginative space where, even if for a moment, we posit something widely shared among us so that we can create a sense of collective reality and belonging, and where we might offer alternative universals to the existing ones proffered by liberal society that delimit our capacity to be otherwise.

Because of this, and as some of the preceding examples explicitly indicate, for Sedgwick the universal is primarily a space for hypothesizing, for making conjectures about what is going on around us, what is tending to happen, despite our many differences. Precisely because we are all so different from one another, Sedgwick repeatedly suggests, we can never know in advance just how widely certain commonalities, shared experiences, or frames of reference might extend across and between individuals, communities, or perhaps even the entirety of the human race. Remaining agnostic about such a question allows Sedgwick to reach for the universal in her own argumentation and analyze various instances of its deployment (both pernicious and benevolent) in our culture, without delimiting in advance what we might learn from it. When she opens *Epistemology of the Closet* with the line, “[I] am trying to make the strongest possible introductory case for a hypothesis about the centrality of

this nominally marginal, conceptually intractable set of [homo/hetero] definitional issues to the important knowledges and understandings of twentieth-century Western culture as a whole,” she is (1) performatively bringing into being the very centrality of such questions “to Western culture as a whole,” and by extension humanistic inquiry, simply by naming them as such; (2) offering a logical supposition about just how far such issues might reach into a culture that attaches, as a dictum, one form of homo/hetero identity onto every single subject in existence; and (3) inviting others to expand, contest, specify, query, or confirm that claim.

To hypothesize or articulate a universal claim is to invite, almost instantaneously, criticism of its limitations, attempts to fine-tune its suppositions, or projects to abolish it altogether (or replace it with another universal). Sedgwick aims to elicit such responses, particularly from other scholars who might help her to further define what a field such as queer theory might have to say about literature, politics, human relationships, community formation, the state, imperialism, or whatever. Her work is always inviting a counter-response, a particular, *other* claim to specify her grand sweeping one, rather than defensively shoring up any given position she herself chooses to take. “The meaning, the legitimacy, and in many ways even the possibility for good faith of the positings this book makes,” she states in *Epistemology of the Closet*, “depend radically on the production, by *other* antihomophobic readers who may be very differently situated, of the widest possible range of *other* and even contradictory availabilities.”¹¹ We might say that rather than producing fixed universals, Sedgwick liked to think “universal-ly”; to include as much of the world, or a given “social ecology,” as she could in any single claim, without losing its coherence or meaning, while making that structure of thought available for others to reconstruct in new and unexpected ways. Consider that the introduction to her single most famous and widely taught monograph, *Epistemology of the Closet*, is titled “Axiomatic.” If an axiom offers up a moral dictum, law, or rule of thumb—a statement about universal operating principles—to be *axiomatic* is to take an orientation or position willing to entertain universals, or wide-reaching procedures of thought and action, but only in spirit and not necessarily always in one way.

SEDGWICK IS A THEORIST OF MULTIPLICITY

Under the rule that privileges the most obvious: Sedgwick loves to “pluralize and specify”; to “make certain specific kinds of readings and interrogations . . .

available in heuristically powerful . . . forms for other readers”; to “keep our understandings of gay origins . . . plural [and] multi-capillaried”; to think in ways that tend “across genders, across sexualities, across genres, across ‘versions’”; to think in “multiply transitive ways”; to “disarticulate” seemingly fixed hierarchies of relationality (the family for instance) or desire; to “invoke the art of *loosing*” or releasing our firm grip on “life, loves, and ideas” so that they may “sit freely in the palm of our open hand”; to think “beside” and to “include, include” wherever possible; alternatively, she hates when everything comes to seem as though it “means the same thing!”¹² Despite its own multiplicity and range, Sedgwick’s oeuvre can be understood collectively to forward a sustained project of mapping, and making room for grappling with, multiplicities—of human bodies and identities, of affective orientations and desires, of ideas and methods of analysis, of meanings and practices—and their infinite combinations.

This is gorgeously rendered in her expansive definition of the most central term of queer studies:

What’s striking is the number and difference of the dimensions that “sexual identity” is supposed to organize into a seamless and univocal whole. And if it doesn’t? That’s one of the things that “queer” can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental, linguistic, epistemological, representational, political adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantacists, drags, clones, leather folk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! Queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or . . . people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.¹³

I have written elsewhere about this passage that “Sedgwick’s understanding of queerness is expansive and elastic, an orientation from which to articulate multiplicitous identities and desires that do not fit into the schema of heterosexual normativity; yet it is also committed to endless specificity and distinction within a broad frame of reference, attending to the fact ‘that people are different from each other.’”¹⁴ At first glance, Sedgwick’s reference to an open mesh of possibilities may strike one as odd, if not wholly oxymoronic:

if a mesh describes a tightly bound weave, how can it be open? It is this very formulation—whereby an interconnected network of relations is also understood as expansive and elastic—that defines Sedgwick’s canny framing of human multiplicity as that which binds us together while also distinguishing us and requiring affective openness to that “self-evident” fact. For us to be bound together by difference does not necessitate that those differences, or that experience of being linked, must mean or signify in the same way.

As the passage quoted earlier attests, one of the most visible and beloved practices for “cherishing” multiplicity that Sedgwick has in her rhetorical arsenal is *the list*. Listing is a common practice in Sedgwick’s work, whether as a nonce-taxonomy that specifies particulars within a broader overarching category; a naming of various elements that make up a single idea, concept, or ideology; or a numerical breakdown of the multiple meanings that spin off from a single phrase or rhetorical gesture. As I discuss later, Sedgwick is also enamored of long chains of adjectives and adverbs that function *as* lists, that modify, complicate, extend, “deform,” resignify, or sharpen terms that have come to be taken for granted. This is one of the senses in which I will later describe her a stylist: she fundamentally believes that the formal arrangement of language can stylistically model, and sometimes performatively bring into being or affectively invest, the reality of human multiplicity.

It is rare to come across a page in any Sedgwick essay that does not have one or another form of a list, as an open-ended sequential format (one might venture to say, an “open mesh of possibilities”) for expanding or extending a series of ideas. Most often, Sedgwick produces a list to take a seemingly solid, univocal, or monolithically understood concept, term, or operating principle (e.g., the family, sexual identity, the closet) and explicitly reassert its underlying plurality. Consider, for instance, her tour de force deconstruction of “Christmas Effects,” a phrase she uses in her introduction to *Tendencies* to describe that season of the year when “[t]hey all—religion, state, capital, ideology, domesticity, the discourses of power and legitimacy—line up with each other so neatly” to impose a grid of family-oriented consumerism and worship on nearly everyone.¹⁵ Here, she brilliantly fragments that seemingly unified monolith of “the family” by providing a list of all of the unruly things that the term attempts to contain: “a surname, a sexual dyad, a legal unit based on state-regulated marriage, a circuit of blood relations, a system of companionship and succor, a building . . . , an economic unit of earning and taxation . . . , a mechanism to produce, care for, and acculturate children . . . and of course the list could go on.”¹⁶ The list functions not only to disperse

or fragment the very notion of the family but also, in its formal multiplicity, to remind us of plurality *as such*—that is, as a fundamental fact of human existence. It is so easy to forget this fact, Sedgwick suggests, that lists can shake us out of our complacency, reminding us that most things are, in fact, *many things*. One consequence of this move is that Sedgwick’s list makes it easier to “disarticulate . . . the bonds of blood, of law, of habitation, of privacy, of companionship and succor . . . from the lockstep of their unanimity in the system called ‘family.’”¹⁷

Fittingly for a scholar whose career-long interest in performative acts shaped nearly every research question she pursued, lists function for Sedgwick precisely performatively: in its literal elaboration on the page a list rhetorically and formally brings into being the very idea of multiplicity that Sedgwick is aiming to capture. Under Sedgwick’s deft rendering, lists (1) account for multiple things (ideas, positions, desires, categories, objects, meanings); (2) acknowledge the existence of that which is listed (for instance, Sedgwick repeatedly uses lists to elaborate or give name to desires, pleasures, and fantasies that commonly go unrecognized or wholly ignored by dominant regimes of sexuality); (3) encourage potential addition and hence carry a spirit of inclusion (they are, after all, serial in nature and practically beg for further elaboration—who can read that sexy, ribald list of queer figures, among whom are leather folk, Snap! Queens, butch bottoms, divas, and masturbators, and not want to name and include themselves or their friends?); (4) encourage comparison (each time we read a list related to identity or desire, for example, we are moved to ask, “Do I see myself in this list? How would my inclusion shift the terms, add something, or rearrange the organization?”); and (5) elicit the deployment of multiple frames of reference to comprehend and do something with the items enumerated. Every list, after all, produces a series of objects or ideas that demand more than one way to comprehend them, and in this way a list not only catalogues the actual material fact of multiplicity but elicits multiplicitous reading practices.

On a more immediately visceral level, Sedgwick’s lists are a way to do justice to the dead and counter the culture’s genocidal “desire that gay people *not be*.”¹⁸ Lists like the one quoted earlier, which fabulously unfolds the manifold styles and sexual and erotic identities of queer culture, also implicitly reference the countless queer lives lost to AIDS. As Sedgwick makes clear in her introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, to account for fine human distinctions and multiplicitous identifications is not only a universally ethical project, but for those living through the AIDS epidemic, it is an urgent

psychic necessity to keep the specificity of particular friends, lovers, family members, artists, companions, and neighbors vividly alive even past their literal deaths.¹⁹ For Sedgwick, then, lists are one way to reparatively confer plenitude on an event of mass diminishment: they have the potential to revivify the complexity and richness of queer life in the face of the flattening abyss that mainstream culture simply calls “AIDS deaths.”

SEDGWICK IS A PROPONENT OF CROSS-IDENTIFICATION

Perhaps no form of multiplicity captivated Sedgwick’s imagination, and efforts to grasp, more than the promiscuousness of identification. Across the arc of her work, Sedgwick devoted an extraordinary amount of intellectual energy to understanding the modes, mechanisms, and consequences of people’s highly refined ways of knowing, identifying with, relating to, and touching others (both figuratively and literally), despite—or, perhaps, precisely because of—their differences. It is now nearly a cliché to recount that Sedgwick herself promiscuously identified with gay male identity, going so far as to mark herself *as* a gay man and narrating a number of deeply intimate, psychically charged investments in gay male friends who were often also her colleagues and students. This social reality mirrored her intellectual fascination with the discursive production of gay male subjectivity in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-American culture, which she often described as an ongoing intellectual and political project to forward an explicitly antihomophobic theory.

Put bluntly, Sedgwick often perceived her work as an attempt to bring into being the very kinds of antihomophobic sentiments that might make the lives of her closest friends more livable and humane. Consequently, we can see that Sedgwick perceived cross-identification as both an inevitable fact of coming into contact with other human beings with whom one might share any number of meaningful experiences and a necessary and ongoing practice of ethical caring for others. This is bracingly evident in her essay “White Glasses,” in which she explores the generative, even if sometimes eerie, consequences of her identification with her friend and colleague Michael Lynch:

From Michael I also seem always to hear the injunction . . . “Include, include”: to entrust as many people as one possibly can with one’s actual body and its needs, one’s stories about its fate, one’s dreams and one’s sources of information or hypothesis about disease, cure, consolation,

denial, and the state or institutional violence that are also invested in one's illness. It's as though there were transformative political work to be done just by *being available to be identified with* in the very grain of one's illness (which is to say, the grain of one's own intellectual, emotional bodily self as refracted through illness and as resistant to it)—*being available for identification* to friends, but as well to people who don't love one; even to people who may not like one at all or even wish one well.²⁰

"Being available to be identified with" functions for Sedgwick as a potentially politically transformative and highly ethical affective orientation to others. It is a description of the very condition for friendship, which requires a bond of trust developed through mutual vulnerability and provides one highly potent basis for long-term associations across difference. In our terrifying contemporary political terrain, in which basic human variety is ever more spectacularly villainized, denigrated, flattened, and murderously prosecuted, and the forces working against such processes are frantically and valiantly struggling to protect, nourish, and sustain the communities most intensely crushed beneath the weight of this society-wide mandate to eradicate difference, it would seem that Sedgwick's particular brand of theorizing multiplicity and encouraging cross-identification would be of utmost utility. And yet, her name and thought are rarely spoken of outside the pages of queer and literary studies. My wager is that this is precisely because Sedgwick had little interest in protecting, preserving, conserving, or maintaining the integrity of cultural and political identities. She wanted instead to make all identities as such *available for identification*.

Sedgwick's work is ironically perfectly fit for our times but also runs counter to much of what counts as common sense in the academic and activist left. In the generative intellectual and political scenes of these latter formations, we have seen the elaboration of an entire host of precise terms for identifying pernicious acts of cultural appropriation, exploitation, commodification, violence, microaggression, and all-out theft directed at a vast range of minoritized subjects. According to Sedgwick's oeuvre, however, what we have far fewer terms to describe are the equally multiplicitous, generative, generous, loving, self-critical, and sometimes simply brazen, forms of identification whose ordinary or quotidian expressions go by the names of sharing, learning, growing, nourishing, exchanging, repairing, embracing, loving, caring, inhabiting, modeling, and playfully performing. These are terms of loving relationality, certainly fraught and risky, but for Sedgwick absolutely

worth the risk—how will we know if we have appropriated or overstepped if we do not risk the adventure of encounter, identification, and engagement in the first place? More to the point, perhaps, Sedgwick asserts over and over (echoing the classic deconstructive adage, though in queer garb) that we are never identical to ourselves, never one thing internally, just as much as we are not the same with others: “Realistically, what brings me to this work can hardly be that I am *a* woman, or *a* feminist, but that I am this particular one. . . . [I]t is not only identifications across definitional lines that can evoke or support or even require complex and particular narrative explanation; rather, the same is equally true of any person’s identification with her or his ‘own’ gender, class, race, sexuality, nation.”²¹ Sedgwick’s identity politics, then, are precisely a politics of *cross-identification*. At her most forceful, Sedgwick posits cross-identification as having life-or-death implications: in the absence of the ability to identify with others, we become incapable of grasping or wholly insensible to the fact of human multiplicity and consequently lose any ethical ground on which to construct a mutual sense of care, investment, and love, even for ourselves. It is this reality that makes dehumanization and genocidal violence all too possible.

Ultimately, Sedgwick reminds us that our ability to identify across genders, sexualities, classes, ethnoracial formations, temperaments, abilities, nationalities, and family ties is one of our greatest tools for working against the forces of consolidation that seek to make these identities or orientations *mean* monolithically—when people cross-identify, they multiply or complicate the very possibilities and meanings of their own identities simply by stepping out of their most normative, assumed, or habitual workings. Sedgwick understands the process of identifying (which we commonly, and mistakenly, view as a practice of “making same” or identical) as one way that we make explicit, and grapple with, difference broadly construed: to identify is to negotiate the apparent gaps that distinguish people on the basis of their distinctions and to produce new identities from that negotiation, perhaps ones that are better equipped affectively to engage, think through, and do something productive with the fact of human variation.

SEDGWICK IS A STYLIST

To say that Sedgwick is a stylist is by now practically a tautology. Perhaps no one who has ever written explicitly about her does not write paeans to her virtuosic, nearly transcendent command of language; her breathtaking turns

of phrase; her epic, multi-claused sentences; and her shriek-inducing wit and humor. She is a theorist's theorist in part because through her language she is constantly performing a meta-critique of the very epistemological foundations on which she makes her most original claims. I often think of her essays as dodecahedrons, each paragraph producing a new dimension or surface of argumentation that complicates and expands but gives further shape and stability to the last until the multisided structure is complete, at which point we realize she has given us the very tools to take that same structure apart, keep what works for our own inquiries, discard other dimensions, or reconstruct a wholly different shape. She makes this explicitly clear when she states in the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*: "If the book were able to fulfill its most expansive ambitions, it would make certain specific kinds of readings and interrogations, perhaps new, available in a heuristically powerful, productive, and significant form for other readers to perform on literary and social texts with, ideally, other results."²² Her writing, as she constantly reminds us, is made to be portable, transposable, disarticulated, and reassembled, depending on the needs of a particular inquiry. It is fundamentally generous and attuned to producing a multiplicity of interpretative possibilities.

Sedgwick's most common writerly qualities include her encyclopedic vocabulary (I confess that even on my fifth reading of *Epistemology of the Closet*, my smartphone sits open on my desk ready to help me locate definitions of such terms as "ukase," "otiose," "omnicide," "pellucid," "lambency," "ramified," and "hypostatized," to name just a few); sentences that compact six, seven, eight clauses to exfoliate the full dimensions of an idea or phenomenon, or else qualify a single subject with a kaleidoscopic range of adjectives and adverbs to allow us to perceive its many modalities; dramatic shifts in tone, whereby the focused analysis of a single rhetorical turn of phrase or plot point in a work of literature gives way to a searing pronouncement about the larger political implications of said work, and said interpretation; and quite simply, a damn-near unparalleled skill at simply telling it like it is: "Has there ever been a gay Socrates? Has there ever been a gay Shakespeare? Has there ever been a gay Proust? Does the Pope wear a dress? If these questions startle, it is not least as tautologies. A short answer, though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare, and Proust."²³ (I cannot help but read lines such as these in Sedgwick's work and want to shriek, "Yaaaaa Mama!")

Often the diamond-like precision of her prose, not to mention her internally complex organization of ideas, which laminate and interconnect multiple

layers of argumentation of the highest caliber, have the tendency to inspire stunned and awestruck reverie or complete repulsion and bewilderment. Despite a general sense of being mind-blown by their first encounter with her work, there are always one or two among my graduate students who grumpily groan, “Why would *anyone* write like this if they wanted people to understand them?” These diametrically opposed responses oddly produce the same intellectual result: we generally remain at a loss to understand what, exactly, she is doing with her distinctive style of writing, even if we adore it (or else turn a sour lip in annoyance). In my discussion of Sedgwick’s exploration of multiplicity, I suggested that her virtuosic use of language often has the effect of performatively modeling the value of heterogeneity. This is the case not only in the sheer diversity of her vocabulary and rhetorical formulations, but also, even more substantively, in her constant attempts to spin off ever more expansive, multiplicitous, and capacious meanings from the phenomena and texts on which she sets her gaze. If Sedgwick is so virulently against societal processes, institutions, and discourses that “make everything mean the same thing,” then her linguistic gymnastics are no frivolous or showy fare but active attempts to make everything mean a lot of things.

I would say, however, that the most potent and lasting effect of Sedgwick’s writing, a legacy she bequeaths us but that many writers assiduously avoid today (perhaps from fear of the effects that might reverberate from any bombastic intellectual gesture, including argumentative or critical counter-response), is to construct a writing style that functions not merely to transmit ideas but also to pass along, invoke, or generate the very kinds of affects required to understand and grapple with them. In her introduction to *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick laments,

A lot of voices tell us to think nondualistically, and even what to think in that fashion. Fewer are able to transmit how to go about it, the cognitive and even affective habits and practices involved, which are less than amenable to being couched in prescriptive forms. At best, I’d hope for this book to prompt recognition in some of the many people who successfully work in such ways; and where some approaches may be new or unarticulated, a sense of possibility. The ideal I’m envisioning here is a mind receptive to thoughts, able to nurture and connect them, and susceptible to happiness in their entertainment.²⁴

Sedgwick never assumes that a sentence can adequately convey its meaning if it does not articulate that meaning as also affectively laden—it is not so

much that she thinks emotions and feelings should be smuggled into a sentence to make it more exciting but that ideas themselves are, for all intents and purposes, affective states, or at the very least can only precisely arrive at their conceptual destination by virtue of a reading subject *affectively capable of receiving them*. Her sentences are Trojan horses that get under our skin because they use language or turns of phrase that upend what we thought we knew, that make us viscerally uncomfortable or, alternatively, exhilarated, thereby altering our sensorium, or at least leveraging it just slightly open, perhaps enough to change our perception, our investments, or our assumptions so that we may actually be convinced by one or another of her claims.

As with her commitment to cross-identification, Sedgwick's virtuosic style is both perfectly fit for our political moment and often overlooked by contemporary leftist analysis as rarefied, convoluted, or, perhaps worst of all, "flowery" when the demand of the day calls for clarity and simplicity of language in articulating fixed truths lobbied at the litany of falsehoods spun by our unraveling yet seemingly politically invulnerable government. Dare I conjecture, invoking her spirit in the abstract, that Sedgwick would cringe at this near religiously orthodox obsession with truth and fact across the spectrum of leftist politics and intellectual life. Sedgwick's work evinces a consistent suspicion (despite her most reparative impulses) of the attempt to seek out singular truths, not because facts and reality do not matter to her (she masterfully deploys sociological data like statistics in her most famous essays) but because framing them in the language of unequivocal truth simply models the same form of consolidation, convergence, and narrowing of meaning making that the most conservative political orientations covet and promulgate: What does it matter, she repeatedly queries, if being gay is a question of nature or culture, if the fundamental belief structure of our society is that gay people should simply not exist? Rather than adjudicating the truth value of such narrowly constructed binary logics, Sedgwick is interested in the conditions by which certain kinds of truths, or ways of knowing oneself and one's relationship to the world, can become widely shared and recognized or can induce curiosity, even care, in those who might normally wish you harm. In a world where queer life is devalued, she vociferously argues, "We have all the more reason . . . to keep our understandings of gay origin, of gay cultural and material reproduction, plural, multi-capillared, argus-eyed, respectful, and endlessly cherished."²⁵ She proposes that such open-ended conditions for knowing are often made possible when the style in which a particular truth is named and delivered—from the form of the claim, to its vocal or textual

tonality, to its affective force—hits a viewer or reader in unexpected but potentially radically unsettling or transformative ways.

We need look no farther than Sedgwick's analysis of her own writing to fully grasp the affective impact of her style: "Many people doing all kinds of work are able to take pleasure in aspects of their work; but something different happens when the pleasure is not only taken but openly displayed. I like to make that different thing happen. Some readers identify strongly with the possibility of a pleasure so displayed; others disidentify from it with violent repudiations; still others find themselves occupying less stable positions in the circuit of contagion, fun, voyeurism, envy, participation, and stimulation."²⁶ I tend to believe that Sedgwick wrote precisely for that third kind of reader who might come to "[occupy] less stable positions in the circuit of contagion, fun, voyeurism, envy, participation, and stimulation." Her style aimed to produce that kind of generative instability, one that induces not alienation, fragmentation, or bewildering vertigo but a potentially exciting, if unnerving, sense that things might not all line up as "tidily" as you might think. It is her investment in "making that different thing happen" that is at the heart of the affective project of her prose: to produce language that performatively affects others.

SEDGWICK IS AN AFFECTIVE CURATOR

Finally, I wish to stake a claim that one of Sedgwick's most potent legacies lies in her studied curation of affective states—most vividly, those of surprise, wonder, passion, and agnostic openness to ideas. She not only identifies and analyzes such states throughout her oeuvre but repeatedly performs them in her pursuit of particular intellectual queries and in the structure of her writing. In her early writings, she is committed to the idea that an antihomophobic criticism remains open to the surprise of encountering queerness in numerous forms across time and space; later in her career she enjoins that very same mode of criticism (and its practitioners) to be open to the surprise of seeing queerness not only and ever caught in the crosshair of homophobia but also in those places where it unexpectedly appears to flourish.

Elsewhere I have theorized the concept of "affective curation" as a pedagogical model for the queer studies classroom that "centralizes the value of intentionally eliciting, or 'triggering,' uncomfortable affective responses from students that then become the object of discussion . . . in order to develop new strategies for retuning, rerouting, or altogether altering their sense perceptions of the world."²⁷ From the many descriptions she provides of her

queerly inflected pedagogy, to her own fascination with the unpredictability, variability, and mutability of affective states (a reality to which she increasingly came to devote much of her intellectual energies later in her career), to the sheer abundance of affectively forceful linguistic formulations that her writing provides, Sedgwick created public intellectual space for feelings to be experienced, named, argued over, and rerouted.

This is frequently on display in Sedgwick's recurrent references to the quotidian or everyday as the site from which affective attachments to particular ideas, theories, research questions, and modes of analysis come to be nourished and grow in intensity. The protracted illnesses of members of her chosen family (among them colleagues and students), her own bodily transformations in relation to an early breast cancer diagnosis, her attendance at activist meetings and rallies, and her negotiations with students in the classroom during the height of the AIDS epidemic all become occasions for her to think through questions of vast theoretical scope. She is no stranger to the anecdote, which, in the mode of Jane Gallop's "anecdotal theory," she consistently uses to encapsulate a problem or question that haunts her and that she wishes to encourage her readers to be equally invested in puzzling over. Like clockwork, these anecdotes or references to personal idiosyncrasy almost always begin with the activation of an affective, sensory, or felt experience that jolts Sedgwick into cognitive action. Take a few scattered examples (the emphasis is mine):

Probably my most formative influence from a quite early age has been a *viscerally intense*, highly speculative (not to say inventive) cross-identification with gay men and gay male cultures as I inferred, imagined, and later came to know them. It wouldn't have required quite so overdetermined a trajectory, though, for almost any forty year old facing a protracted, life-threatening illness in 1991 to realize that the people with whom she had perhaps most in common, and from whom she might well have most to learn, are people living with AIDS, AIDS activists, and others whose lives had been profoundly reorganized by AIDS in the course of the 1980s.²⁸

I'm *fond* of observing how *obsession* is the most durable form of intellectual capital.²⁹

Patton's comment suggests that for someone to have an unmystified, *angry* view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or

narrative consequences. To know that the origin or spread of HIV realistically might have resulted from a state-assisted conspiracy—such knowledge is, it turns out, separable from the question of whether the energies of a given AIDS activist intellectual or group might best be used in the tracing and exposure of such a possible plot. They might, but then again, they might not.³⁰

In these and countless other instances, Sedgwick describes a circuit of affective exchange from an intensely felt initial sensation (here, a visceral identification as a child, an intellectual obsession as a scholar, anger and rage as an activist) that occasions an array of other interested affects and practices: the wonder of inventing new forms of cross-identification, the fondness of valuing obsession as a form of intellectual capital, the ability of an outside point of view to reroute one's anger into hope, or simply to allow anger to reside alongside hope and possibility.

Like her feminist forebears, then, Sedgwick sees feelings as genuine sources of knowledge, as places where we might intuit something about ourselves and the world in which we live that traditional modes of humanistic inquiry would ignore or overlook as mere subjective experience. Her deep fascination with the realm of the affective and textural in her later writing, most beautifully condensed in the collection *Touching Feeling*, had much to do with her increasing sense that the study of affect held out one of the supplest models for accounting for the sheer heterogeneity of human sensory experience and, by extension, our ability to invest a nearly infinite number of affective states in our various identities, relationships, desires, and aspirations. In her turn to a largely ignored or overlooked psychoanalytic theorist of affect such as Silvan Tomkins, she quite literally curates her readers' encounter with a theory of affects that she feels positively electrified by, one that, to its core, promulgates the notion that "affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affect."³¹

It makes sense, then, that Sedgwick's most widely circulated, cited, and debated essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," offered a fully formed affective theory of reading, perhaps the closest that Sedgwick ever got to articulating a complete analytical model of interpretation. Describing the mode of interpretation she would famously dub "reparative," she claimed:

The desire of a reparative impulse . . . is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical

to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self. . . . No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.³²

Here, Sedgwick appears to anthropomorphize a mode of interpretation as something that itself has feelings such as fear and hope; in so doing, she forces us to see that any mode of analysis is ultimately an expression or extension of human impulses, motives, and desires to make meaning in a particular way in the hope of producing particular effects. She encourages us to loosen our commitments to any singular program of analysis and ask ourselves instead how our own desires, aspirations, fears, and anxieties might provide a key to new ways to read the culture we make and that, in turn, makes us.

And, of course, the list could go on. I have attempted here, however schematically, to map the kind of position, or intellectual orientation, that Eve Sedgwick carved out for those who might follow her. Her work was always aspirational and anticipatory, less in the paranoid frame she so famously enumerated, but more in the sense of a hopeful desire to spin outward analytical possibilities that might help “confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.”³³ One way to reread this oft-cited line reparatively is to suggest that, for Sedgwick, the object that she sought to confer plenitude on was the field of critical thought itself, while the inchoate self she sought to provide resources to is *all of us*, who trained and came of age in the era of queer theory.

My aim has been to show that Sedgwick’s deepest legacy lies not in any single body of knowledge she produced or illuminated—though her contributions to *what* and *how* we know in the vast field of humanistic inquiry are astonishing—but, rather, in her construction and performance of a particular *way of knowing* that at its core is attuned to seeing, valuing, and negotiating multiplicity. I can only ever grasp Sedgwick this way because I never “met” her except in and through her textual performances, which have enjoined me,

wherever possible, to scatter, fragment, disarticulate, proliferate, branch outward, or unstitch the lineaments of my most sacred intellectual models and scholarly objects so I can see what they are truly capable of, not simply what I want them to be. In the process, I usually discover they do far more than I could ever have dreamed.

My encounter with Sedgwick, then, has always been with the conceptual tools that she so generously spun outward to those of us who might take her hypotheses seriously, even if we disagreed with her. Perhaps most shocking to those of us trained in the extraordinarily precarious academic climate of the post-poststructuralist era—when jockeying for intellectual capital has become a particularly fraught and fine-grained practice that regularly includes intellectual takedowns, cross-generational infighting and moralism, accusatory pronouncements, and the narcissism of small differences—Sedgwick never made claims that necessarily foreclosed any intellectual position except those that would reinforce heterosexist, misogynist, racist, or other phobic frameworks for apprehending the world. There is nothing in Sedgwick's oeuvre that forecloses its possible uses for the study of race, or the study of gender transitivity, or the study of disability, or the study of a vast range of embodied and cultural differences; as she might say, there is no way to know the extent to which her own theoretical insights might extend to these arenas unless one makes the attempt to deploy them and ceaselessly test them against the limits of any particular query. I remain endlessly surprised, for instance, that Sedgwick has not been placed more often in direct dialogue with the foundational work of black feminist thought. If, as Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong have so pointedly elaborated, "the definition of difference for women of color feminism . . . [was] not a multiculturalist celebration [or] an excuse for presuming a commonality among all racialized peoples, but a clear-eyed appraisal of the dividing line between valued and devalued, which can cut within, as well as across, racial groupings," and if the critique of that mode of political thought is "fundamentally organized around difference, the difference between and within racialized, gendered, sexualized collectivities," then Sedgwick's exceptionally fine-grained attention to "differences within differences" could be read as an indirect descendant of—or, more aptly, queer kin to—black feminist analysis.³⁴

In her writings about Tomkins, Sedgwick repeatedly suggests that her fascination with his work has something to do with the way that his theory of affect, what he called "the affect system," essentially modeled her own default orientation toward critical thought: just as she takes as bedrock the

operating principle that *everything means a lot of things*, so, too, does Tomkins develop a theory of emotions that claims that *any affect can attach to anything*. She is drawn, in other words, not only to the content of Tomkins's theory, but also to the very logic that underwrites it, a logic of proliferation, dispersal, and multiplicity that is itself affectively generous. Similarly, my attachment to Sedgwick has always been about a visceral sense that she thinks the way that I think—not in a kind of symmetrical identity or in a way that might lead me to reproduce the same analytical conclusions but, rather, in the orientation of our thought; in our commitment to the formulation *both/and*; in our default assumption that a theory that seeks to “include, include” is more valuable than one that forecloses possibilities; in our commitment to the reparative impulse; in our sense that field-wide debates should produce many intellectual positions and possibilities rather than a few; in our promiscuous attachment to many theoretical models and tools; in our irreverence toward moralism of all kinds and the taken-for-granted doxa of any disciplinary formation. And so, I cross-identify with Sedgwick not as a gay, male, Lebanese American immigrant who spent his formative years reading comics and now teaches literature and writes about queer and feminist cultural production, but as someone who is all these things, *as well as* a particular kind of scholar whose thought moves in a particular kind of way.

I can conjure few thinkers whom we have more need of invoking, grappling with, and making use of than Eve Sedgwick at the present time. In the field of queer studies, we have become just as extraordinarily skilled at producing the most elegant ideological readings of our culture as we have at producing a reparative reconstruction of that same culture, often in the same breath. As Tyler Bradway has compellingly argued, we have been less successful at taking up Sedgwick's actual call to proliferate numerous analytical positions and perspectives that far exceed even the binary calculus of the paranoid and the reparative.³⁵ We have been less successful in being generous to one another's intellectual lineages, objects of interest, and theoretical insights. As a consequence, we become members of embattled encampments (commonly known as “subfields”) that can be safely neutralized or easily encapsulated in something as innocuous as a graduate seminar title: queer affect studies, queer-of-color critique, queer disability studies, queer Marxism, queer ecologies, queer posthumanism. These labels are by no means pernicious or wrong, but they are too easy to list off as transparently obvious units of knowledge, as though each was not totally and utterly dependent on and interconnected with the others.

Where our field's range of concern has expanded—now taking as its purview the geographical span of the globe, the institutional range of neoliberal capital, even the entire gamut of nonhuman life—I would venture to say that the *affective* range of our arguments and internal conflicts has remained surprisingly narrow: to be social or antisocial, to be normative or antinormative, to think queer or trans, to think sexuality or race, to be Marxist or Foucauldian, to be a decolonizer or an agent of homonationalism, to believe in surface or depth, to study rarefied Literature or neoliberal capital etc. etc. etc. (dare I say, blah blah blah?). The very same binarisms that Sedgwick spent the bulk of *Epistemology of the Closet* deconstructing, and working through, perhaps unsurprisingly (but to my eyes, oftentimes depressingly) shape a large swath of our internal conflicts in the field of queer studies, conflicts that often seem more like interpersonal clashes than substantial axes of conceptual or theoretical differences. These binarisms become so rote, so often repeated and taken up in the structure and modes of our argumentation, that they come to seem like unequivocal truths that actually say something about the theorists who are seen to occupy these various positions; moreover, these truths are often laden with moralizing claims on both sides about who is or is not analytically or historically rigorous enough; who adequately attends to race or gender transitivity and who doesn't; who appropriately cites particular authors and who elides those citations (and what such elisions *say* about said thinker); who adequately “cares” about actual living human beings and who merely makes abstraction of them for their own intellectual gain.

These questions are ethically indispensable, but the dualistic and moralizing frames within which they are repeatedly invoked or articulated most often reproduce knowledge that isn't in the least surprising or useful, for to limn Sedgwick herself, it simply confirms the very suspicions that lead us to ask the questions in the first place rather than giving us another vantage point from which to view the terrain. Speaking through and revising Sedgwick, and without seeking to flatten or reduce the genuine stakes of these disciplinary conflicts, I would still implore us to consider that, regardless of whether you take on the position of the social or the antisocial, the humanist or the posthumanist, the antinormative or the postnormative, “[U]nder the overarching, relatively unchallenged aegis of a culture's desire that [queer studies scholars] *not be*, there is no unthreatened, unthreatening conceptual home for a concept of [a uniformly radical queer theory]. We have all the more reason, then, to keep our understandings of [queer theory], of gay cultural and material

reproduction, plural, multi-capillaried, argus-eyed, respectful, and endlessly cherished.”³⁶

In the rare instances I have ever been explicitly asked to position myself on either side of our field’s most recurrent and entrenched conflicts, I simply abjure the request because my work in queer theory, while deeply informed, influenced, and in dialogue with these various formulations, ultimately has no truck with almost any of them. I address antinormativity because it appears everywhere in the cultural texts I analyze (superheroes are non-normative weirdos, in case you didn’t know). I take up the antisocial thesis when the objects I study model forms of radical refusal that willfully sever ties to normative social relations. I work with intersectional theories of race because texts and readers I investigate attest to the existence of, and seek to support, multiply marginalized subjectivities. I turn to affect theory to help me explain why reading stories about monstrous superhuman power or viewing art about movements for women’s and gay liberation might be exhilarating, bewildering, terrifying, confusing, or just plain fun. I believe in depth reading not because texts are defined by either surfaces or conceptual depth, but because I understand that human beings impute complex and multivalent meaning to the objects they live with and love. None of this means that I forsake the value of certain norms, or have no investment in queer sociality, or do not understand that not all identities are operating simultaneously in the same way at all times.

Rather, my objects of study force me to see terms traditionally opposed within the disciplinary boundaries of our field as productively co-extensive, so that my own positions are endlessly subject to change. It is the precise agonisms of our collective queer theoretical arguments, seemingly so clearly demarcated, colliding with the world’s messiness that electrified Sedgwick’s thought.

Sedgwick ceaselessly reminded her readers that we need not see queer theory’s various frames of reference as a fixed set of assumptions that pre-determine what we can think about a given cultural text or phenomenon. She enjoined us to engage in a circuit of exchange between our own intellectual values (grounded in the commitment to attending to multiplicity), the objects we aim to illuminate (the contexts of their making alongside their creative content), the theories that help us name the phenomenon we are seeing, and the insights of our colleagues, who are passionate readers and viewers themselves, whatever theoretical training or commitments they hold. For Sedgwick, “The only imperative [she treated] as categorical is the very broad one of pursuing an antihomophobic inquiry.”³⁷ That inquiry necessitates the embrace

of multiplicity not only as a reality of the world, but also as a scholarly orientation to ideas and their co-mingling.

I conclude by asking a question that Sedgwick might have: How can queer studies identify and cultivate the thought of those scholars for whom the current shape of the field seems unresponsive to their interests, attachments, or needs? One answer is simply that we must entertain more than one solution to a given problem and that doing so includes granting scholars the space where they need not align themselves with one or the other of the various positions that have polarized queer studies. This task should not be difficult, considering we claim a field whose mission is to study and cultivate alternative erotic, social, and aesthetic desires, especially those anathema to the broader culture. Over and over, Sedgwick teaches us that the infinitely generative field of erotic possibilities we call *desire* might not be so far from the quotidian ways we obsess over and attach to ideas, methods, terms, and bodies of thought. To realize that might involve respecting desires and methods not our own, valuing answers that do not accord with our initial aspirations, and turning to one another to learn something (dare I say surprising!?) about how our colleagues' investments, even those that rub us the wrong way (perhaps especially those), might have something to teach us through that very irritation. This might look like what Audre Lorde calls "the uses of the erotic," or what Linda Zerilli identifies as feminism's "radical imagination," or what Janet Halley dubs the practice of "splitting decisions," or finally what Sedgwick simply enacted in her life and her writing: in other words, everything she "endlessly cherished" under the term *queer*. I don't believe one has to maintain fixed allegiances to any one of the proliferating strands of queer thought for us to remain ethical, vigilant, politically effective, and intellectually generous. And neither did Sedgwick. We might simply need to learn how to better tend to one other.

NOTES

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 22.
- 2 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8.
- 3 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 22.
- 4 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.
- 5 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6, 20.
- 6 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

- 7 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 12.
- 8 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 129.
- 9 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 130.
- 10 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 1, 3, xii, 9; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1.
- 11 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 14, emphasis added.
- 12 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8, 14, 44; Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, xii, 3, 6, 261; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.
- 13 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 8.
- 14 Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 32.
- 15 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6.
- 16 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6.
- 17 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 6.
- 18 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 14.
- 19 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.
- 20 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 261, emphasis added.
- 21 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 59–61.
- 22 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 14.
- 23 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 52.
- 24 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 1.
- 25 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 43.
- 26 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 19.
- 27 Ramzi Fawaz, “How to Make a Queer Scene, or Notes toward a Practice of Affective Curation,” *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 3 (2016): 760.
- 28 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 14.
- 29 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 2.
- 30 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.
- 31 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 19.
- 32 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149–51.
- 33 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 149.
- 34 Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, eds., *Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization, Perverse Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 9, 11.
- 35 Tyler Bradway, “Bad Reading: The Affective Relations of Queer Experimental Literature after AIDS,” *GLQ* 24, nos. 2–3 (2018): 189–212.
- 36 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 43.
- 37 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 14.

From H. A. Sedgwick

In October 2005, Eve and I traveled to Dublin at the invitation of Noreen Giffney and Michael O'Rourke. Eve gave a talk at University College Dublin and had informal discussions with Noreen, Michael, and the others in their group. The enthusiasm and vibrancy of that group was impressive. It was clear that they had accomplished a great deal through their creative energy, strong sense of mission, and sheer hard work in an environment that was often less than enthusiastic in its support of queer scholarship.

Michael's and Noreen's commitment to Eve and her work was evident again in the intensive one-day seminar at Independent Colleges, Dublin, that they organized to commemorate her after her death in 2009. At about the same time, Michael began the long process of organizing this book. I am honored to write this brief note and happy to have this chance to express my deep appreciation to him and to everyone else who has worked on this project.

An extended consideration of Eve's work, consisting of three linked panels of papers, took place at the convention of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in January 2011. The panels were spread over three days of the convention, one each afternoon, and the cumulative effect was, for me at least, very powerful. The nine papers that were presented were very different from one another in style, in approach, and in the aspects of Eve's work that they addressed, yet together they evoked a strong vision of the depth, the power, and the underlying coherence of her work. I'm very happy that all nine of those MLA papers, some in expanded form, are now included in this book. The other papers included here add an even greater variety of approaches and contribute to an even more complex vision of Eve's work.

Surely, much of the diversity of all of these contributions is due to the individuality and creativity of their authors—an impressive indication of the talented friends, students, and colleagues whom Eve attracted, or sought out,

over the years. But the range and variety of the contributions also resonates with the range of Eve's work and the variety of ways that it touches people.

This book's emphasis is on the best-known portions of Eve's work, drawing largely on the middle period of her career, with only a few of the book's essays exploring her earlier or her later work. Most of Eve's work from the last decade or so of her life was in the form of talks that were unpublished when she died and may not have been known to some of the present authors at the time when their papers were written. Much of this work is now available in a collection titled *The Weather in Proust*, edited by Jonathan Goldberg and published in 2011 by Duke University Press.

Understandably, Eve's early writing—from graduate school, from college, and from even earlier—is not much referenced here, most of it being available, until quite recently, only in her archives. Much of her most intense creative energies during that time were devoted to her poetry, which was already highly accomplished, and strikingly queer, when she was thirteen or fourteen. Eve published only one collection of her poetry, *Fat Art, Thin Art* (1994).¹ In 2014, the twentieth anniversary of that book's publication, Jason Edwards organized a conference on Eve's poetry at the University of York, and then in 2017, he published a collection of essays from that conference. The collection, *Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet*, also includes a substantial selection of Eve's previously uncollected poetry, thus making widely available a crucial portion of her work written before *Between Men* (1985).²

Eve's earliest attempt at publication that I know of was a letter (now lost) that she wrote to the *Washington Post* when she was twelve protesting the firing of her French teacher for homosexuality. (He was entrapped in a public restroom.) That letter went unpublished because the *Post's* letters editor called to consult her mother, who denied permission to publish it. Melissa Solomon, in her essay here, suggests that even that denial of publication may have had a profound effect. Addressing herself to Eve, Solomon writes about a conversation that she had, after Eve's death, with Eve's mother:

At the time, she understood herself to be rightfully protective of you, still a child, who would be caught in the middle of public debate if such a letter were to be published. Now, she worries that she picked the wrong side of right, especially given your career path and your own intellectual, emotional, and political interests. I suggested the possibility that her prohibition was a kind of foundational turning point without which your future might not have progressed in the direction it did. Did you promise yourself

something in childhood that you made come true in adulthood? Would we have *Epistemology of the Closet* if you had not?

Eve's first successful attempt at publication, as far as I know, was an omnibus book review for *Seventeen* magazine, written about a year later. That review was only rediscovered quite recently; it created a flurry of activity as notice of it circulated around the internet. Whatever spurred Eve's development as a writer, her writing at thirteen is already notably mature. Eve's friend Josh Wilner remarks, "What I enjoy most is the way Eve figures out exactly what the features of a chatty sophisticated literary-review for *Seventeen* are—and nails it."³

It is my hope that over time more of Eve's writing—unpublished, obscurely published, or created for specific occasions, such as lecture or course handouts—will find its way into her archive and onto her website at EveKosofskySedgwick.net.

Thus, this book, as many of its authors are quick to acknowledge, surely will not be the final word on Eve and her work. But it is a splendid and very welcome contribution, and I have no doubt that it contains the beginnings of much more that will develop from it.

H. A. Sedgwick

New York City, 2013, revised 2019

NOTES

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).
- 2 Jason Edwards, ed., *Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet* (New York: Punctum, 2017); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- 3 Personal communication with author. Originally published in "Eve's First Publication?," *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* (blog), 2012, <http://evekosofskysedgwick.net/blog/pages/>.

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