

Reading Sedgwick, Then and Now

THEN

This book calls up multiple pasts that are not past. Originally, the independent scholar Michael O'Rourke solicited many of these essays for a volume that was going to bear the title *Reading Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: Gender, Sexuality, Embodiment*. Most of them were first presented as talks at conference memorials to Sedgwick's person, art, and work, providing fresh critical and intimate reflections on the relation among her modes of being herself for her friends, students, colleagues, and for criticism, which meant taking on and addressing her style, her concepts, her fierce and creative modes of political resistance, her intricate, explosive readings, and her strong pedagogies.

As the essays in what is now *Reading Sedgwick* have gone through their final revisions, they honor the occasion of Eve's life and work by moving the status of "occasional writing" to something worthy of a queer respect. Sedgwick herself exemplified how all situational writing from specific historical moments—that might have felt more personal, as in "White Glasses," or collectively held, as in "Interlude, Pedagogic"—insisted on a slowed-down and amplifying attention.¹ The very wobble among styles that the chapters in this volume perform is itself a pedagogy of openness to the possibility that one might learn as much or more from the loose as from the tight, the sparsely referential to the meticulously researched piece. Authors have made individual decisions about retaining and erasing traces of their origins as talks, or as memorials. But the presence of their situatedness adds up, making them more striking with the vibrancy and variety of their use of reenactment, repetition, copying, echoing, mirroring, projecting, and imitating something to be found in or around Eve. She emanates a unique and powerful affective-critical compositional charisma. Critics turn to modes of memoir, reading, re-theorizing, and generative conceptualization. That is, if many of the essays in this volume display a strong mimetic drive to be with Eve by being

like Eve, “being like” has come to mean a variety of things to a variety of thinkers, and what follows in this volume demonstrates a significant formal and epistemological heterogeneity. These essays are at once personal and attentive to the world, paying homage and queering homage, extending Eve’s implication into places Eve can’t be. From the start, the volume promised to amplify the impacts of Eve’s work but always, inevitably, “she” appears in facets—one might even say taxonomically—through the quirky transference of her reader-heirs. This means that there’s a style of being on the page and being with concepts that comes to resonate across many chapters as the many phases of Eve.

Eventually, Michael O’Rourke handed this project to me as an editor of Theory Q, and Lee Edelman and I are delighted to bring it forward in tribute to his hard work and to the legacy of Series Q, which preceded us in time and alphabet. Editing, along with her writing and teaching, also provided a major part of Eve’s literary, historical, and theoretical impact, as any readers of her anthology *Novel Gazing* would attest.² So many kinds of collaboration were generated by Eve—but I would like to emphasize here the world-shifting impact of her collaborative work with her other editors, Michele Barale, Jonathan Goldberg, and Michael Moon, in Series Q. What a thrill it was to be included in their vision of what queer scholarship could do.

Which remains a centrally queer question. As Ramzi Fawaz’s introduction makes clear, the issue of attachment to someone known only through her writing poses different problems and makes possible different modes of reading from those available to those of us for whom Eve was a living presence at very specific historical conjunctures. How can Eve live for a generation of scholars who can assume queerness, paradoxically, as a theoretical field from the beginning of their careers?

For those of us who were Eve’s contemporaries, the questions are different. How do we make our attachment to a quality or practice in Eve available to a public that wasn’t there at the time? What story do we tell to make the project and her specific angles on it vibrate in unpredicted or alien worlds? Or when we are querying what it was that pulled us into the perceptual universe of Eve’s work, how do we continue the project of coming to terms with what we can’t specifically have asked for, the shocking impact of the radical reframing, stylistic challenge, theoretical elaboration, historical materialism, mode of focus and attention, and genre lability that mark what it meant, and still means, to be writing with Eve not just on, but in, our minds?

NOW

In her introduction to *Tendencies*, Sedgwick calls out the murderousness of the Reaganite neoconservative consensus that made indifference and demonization the twin engines of a politics that brought open expression of genocidal antigay fantasies into mainstream discourse.³ She tracks the logic by which appeals to a widespread popular homophobia, which would work in conjunction with a pervasive white supremacy and antifeminism, emerged in the 1980s as the weapon of choice to fan the flames of a culture war. The culture war was, of course, never only about “lifestyles” and hierarchies of social belonging. It also was a weapon and smokescreen to allow for and distract from the ultimate goal of dismantling civil rights and the Great Society, among other US systems with tendencies toward progressive taxation, economic equality, and social opportunity.

Especially in the case of those populations metonymically linked to AIDS, the rapidity and nakedness of the slippage from a routinized homophobic aversion to a viscerally enjoyable, and strategically valuable, incitement to violence and hatred lent renewed urgency to the epistemological questions that Eve had examined in *Between Men* and *The Epistemology of the Closet*.⁴ But it also alerted her to the necessity of engaging the affective consequences of cultural abjection, humiliation, illness, and political hopelessness. Toting up the numerous ways in which government action and inaction alike seemed focused on the self-destruction of queer youth, she aligned her project in *Tendencies* with the opening of alternative, queer-empowering worlds through modes of thought intended not simply to encourage, but also to enact, political resistance.

When Eve died in April 2009, Barack Obama was in the White House, and many in America wanted to imagine that more than just the tide had turned: perhaps a few pages had been turned, as well. There was the ludicrous millisecond of the postracism fantasy. Then *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the US Supreme Court decision about which Sedgwick wrote so acerbically in *Epistemology of the Closet*, was reversed by *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003; in the following year, gay marriage, the unexpected wedge issue in the normalization of gay and lesbian life, was legalized in Massachusetts, and the push elsewhere to enshrine the marital privilege of heterosexuals in state constitutions would work, paradoxically, to nationalize that issue and lead to the Supreme Court’s affirmation of the right to marriage as a question of “dignity” for lesbians and gay men. At the same time, and without necessarily thinking that the antihomophobic project

of Sedgwick's work was superseded, US academics turned their attention to other aspects of Eve: in particular, to the reparative aspiration expressed by her interest in affect—in Silvan Tomkins and Melanie Klein—and to the Buddhist metempsychoses of her later years.⁵

The introduction of “reparativity” as the name for a new critical attitude has been variously traced through the present moment of “post-critique,” but clearly the essay “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You,” from *Novel Gazing*, was its splashiest referent.⁶ Much that follows in this volume turns from the need to fine-tune, intensify, and elaborate the negativity of queer critique toward the ethical pressure to figure out repair in the face of intensifying world disrepair. I won’t rehearse those arguments here; I will just note that the political moment of the Reaganite culture wars, with the intimate public of white patriarchy claiming its exposure to vulnerability as a traumatic injury, returns with a vengeance now. The undisguised homo-hatred endorsed in the ’80s, in political rhetoric as well as in regulatory and funding decisions, now expands into explicit neo-Nazi and white-supremacist pronouncements from the White House itself. The non-mattering of black lives no longer hides its death-driven carceral lens under white liberal sentimental veneers; nor does hatred of nonmarital sexuality and non-normative genders. Official policy on immigration is determined by a president who can declare that all Haitian immigrants have AIDS. The contemporary state not only enjoys but explicitly promotes discrimination—not only as policy but as a constitutional and affective right.

This current iteration of the reactionary turn puts renewed pressure on the tools of our critical analyses and disturbs the textures of our objects. And it makes the Eve who diagnosed the “then” even more newly necessary in the emerging and solidifying “now.” The essays that follow were not shaped by the scene of accelerated austerity, populist racism, and xenophobia from within which I now write. But they model how to use an object—Eve Sedgwick’s life, work, friendship, style, concepts—to counter the aggressively bad lifeworld contexts infusing our own, to build alternative attachments within them, to resist the redefinition manias of hegemonic power that destabilize our emerging alliances, and to revitalize political and epistemological struggle. We turn to reinterpret, once again, “the personal is political.” In constructing a legacy in the wake of loss and in conceptualizing the work of appreciation and grief and what can follow from their bond, these essays offer ways to occupy these dark times not only with anger, depression, and exhaustion, but also with

inventiveness, reimagined collectivity, intellectual energy, persistent curiosity, and fierce—the warmest and fiercest; the Sedgwickiest—attention.

NOTES

- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “White Glasses,” in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 252–66; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Interlude, Pedagogic,” in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 27–34.
- 2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37.
- 3 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*.
- 4 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, [1985] 1993); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
- 5 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 496–522; Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading”; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 624–42.
- 6 Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.”