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THE NOTION



Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1950-2009

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I have only ever worn out one book. The first copy--which I still keep as an artifact of my 20s--became a palimpsest of sorts, its text underlined in four different colors of pencil, emblazoned with streaks of yellow and green neon highlighter. Little enigmatic notes crawl up and down the margins of dog-eared pages, and decomposing Post-it notes jut out untidily from the edges; the spine has long since given way. At a certain point, picking up this particular copy became too overwhelming an encounter with my old selves, and so I bought a fresh one, which I tried in vain to keep clean. That book is *Epistemology of the Closet*, and its author is the brilliant, inimitable, explosive intellectual **Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick**, who died last night from breast cancer at the age of 58.

It is difficult to calculate the impact of Sedgwick's scholarship, in part because its legacy is still in the making, but also because she worked at a skew to so many fields of inquiry. Feminism, queer theory, psychoanalysis and literary, legal and disability studies--Sedgwick complicated and upended them all, sometimes in ways that infuriated more anodyne scholars, but always in ways that pushed established parameters.

In one of her more audacious insights, Sedgwick proposed two ways of understanding homosexuality: a "minoritizing view" in which there is "a distinct population of persons who 'really are' gay," and a "universalizing view" in which sexual desire is unpredictable and fluid, in which "apparently heterosexual persons...are strongly marked by same-sex influences." Think of it, in shorthand, as the difference between Ellen Degeneres' "Yep, I'm gay!" and Gore Vidal's "There is no such thing as a homosexual or heterosexual person; there are only homo- or heterosexual acts."

Sedgwick wasn't interested in validating either view, but rather in how these two views compete and collude in ways that produce an "irreducible incoherence" ([see Mark Edmundson's review of *Epistemology* in *The Nation*](#)). Consider, for example, her analysis of homosexual panic defense, which was once accepted by juries as a rationale for reducing sentences for gay bashers. As Edmundson summarized:

The defense plays on the incoherence between minoritizing and universalizing conceptions of sexual identity. "Gay bashing," the juror may suppose, "is something only latent homosexuals do: Those people are sick and deserve judicial mercy." But

also (secretly), "That's something I might do: Let's let them off easy." Of course, that thinking sets up scenarios in which anyone ("because we're all a little bit gay") can be identified by another as a homosexual ("someone who's really gay") making an advance, and be assaulted as a consequence. This incoherence leaves everyone, at times, open to blackmail, open to violence...



At a moment that seems so far from (post-gay?) and yet so eerily close to (gay panic?) the tangled time (the late '80s) in which Sedgwick wrote *Epistemology*, her intervention is worth pondering again. Consider, for example, the oft-unintelligible debate over gay marriage. Is gay marriage a "right" that a small minority of people deserve as a matter of equality? Or is it a threat to, as George W. Bush once put it, the "most fundamental institution of civilization?"

These two questions aren't so much devices for sorting the world into pro-gay and anti-gay factions as they are competing, volatile frames of reference. When liberals find it irksome that anyone could possibly object to gay marriage ("Explain how my gay marriage hurts your straight marriage?!"), they implicitly endorse a minoritizing view. Meanwhile, conservatives who rant about the end of civilization may believe (rightly?) that homosexuality is everywhere, and that without strong state injunctions against it, people will be so busy practicing gay S/M that they forget to continue the species. In this case, the framework that might produce the more immediate pro-gay result doesn't line up with the more potent expression of homosexuality, and it might also, in other contexts (like say, genetic testing to weed out likely gay babies), produce antigay results. It's difficult to know in advance, however, and that was Sedgwick's point.

Sedgwick's work was marked throughout by an abiding love for gay people, gay men in particular. She once proposed that in a gay-affirmative world, there would be guide books on how to bring your kids up gay. "Advice on how to make sure your kids turn out gay, not to mention your students, your parishoners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous than one might think," she deadpanned in *Epistemology*. It's funny, and then, after you laugh, it hits you like a rock.

Sedgwick once wrote of what "a pleasure and privilege" it was to write her second book *Between Men*; she was always a pleasure and privilege to read.

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