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SEPTEMBER 2009

New Conjugations

EMILY APTER ON EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK (1950–2009)



Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Durham, NC, 1992. Photo: H. A. Sedgwick.

WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in the 1980s, we were both teaching at New England schools. It was a dark and snowy night, but the friends and faculty who came out that evening for Sedgwick's lecture at Williams College (where I had recently joined the Romance-languages department) were excited to hear the Amherst professor who had authored the groundbreaking book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Sedgwick's talk was a thunderbolt. At a time when "theory" was riveted to analysis of Foucault's power-knowledge axis, her presentation revalued ignorance. In her discussion of Denis Diderot's *The Nun*, later published in her 1992 essay collection *Tendencies*, she proposed to "pluralize and specify" ignorance by looking at "psychological operations of shame, denial [and] projection," topics that would preoccupy her throughout her life and career. To this end, she did strange things with words. Her sentences contained a lot of stop-and-go; they thought out loud, they broke into confidential dramatic asides, and they took seemingly wrong turns into neologistic diction. Clearly, she was forging a poetic theory lingo, one that would prompt US-based critics schooled in the protocols of plain speaking to react with shock and then to seek out new registers of expression. Her phrases seemed to enact the very symptoms being diagnosed in the novel. Saying what the text left unsaid, disclosing how the text displayed its own epistemological opacities, she turned Diderot's nun into a histrionic "philosopher" of "sexual incomprehension" and "pure unknowing."

Sedgwick had a special gift for handling power-tool theory lightly, porting continental thought into subcultural, everyday idioms. In a late-career essay that appeared in 2007 in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, she compares reading Melanie Klein to "getting stoned" and qualifies Freud's view of "our relation to omnipotence" as "pretty simple: Bring it on." This pop argot, along with MLA paper titles like "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," garnered wrath and scorn from the cultural right as well as from more mainstream foes of cultural studies. But though she may have been fazed by the attacks, Sedgwick managed to draw on them for new subject fields (shame-culture) as well as for a unique practice of the literary profession that boldly flirted with self-exposure. She was endowed with the skill set of a performance artist; when she stood up to a packed house at a conference, the audience would collectively hold its breath, sensing that some intimate revelation wrapped in a novel articulation was about to issue forth. In her writing, she allowed glimpses of her postchemo tansure, her corpulent body, her self-pleasuring. In "A Poem Is Being Written" (1986), her personal memories of being spanked as a child are conjured as the backstory to her predilection for enjambment, "a physical gesture of the limbs, of the flanks"—*la jambe*—"the ham"—*jambon*—visualized as a "poetic gesture of *straddling* lines *together* syntactically, but also a pushing *apart* of lines." "White Glasses" (1991), a personal tribute to her cherished friend Michael Lynch (who had been diagnosed with HIV), turns into an account of her own diagnosis with breast cancer. Companionate in sickness, their couple sealed her complex cross-identification "as a gay man" with a "lesbian ego-ideal."

To a generation reared on disembodied theory and an ethic of philosophical impersonalism, this blur of the theoretical and the autoreferential granted permission to make bodies matter. The back cover of her 1994 poetry collection *Fat Art, Thin Art* features a photo of Sedgwick's generous frame in workout shorts and

links

braan image comparable to depictions of large women at ease in their flesh by Alice Neel or Catherine Opie and to Lucian Freud's paintings of Leigh Bowery and Sue Tilley. One cannot overappreciate the extent to which Sedgwick modeled largesse and coaxed sexual temper from a metaphoric language that turned on thermal calibrations. In a line from her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (2003), she moves from the heat flashes of Henry James to the possible worlds of contemporary sexualities: "[M]any of the performative identity vernaculars that seem most recognizably 'flushed' (to use James's word) with shame consciousness and shame creativity do cluster intimately around lesbian and gay worldly spaces. To name only a few: butch abjection, femtitude, leather, pride, SM, drag, musicality, fisting, attitude, zines, histrionicism, asceticism, Snap! culture, diva worship, florid religiosity; in a word, *flaming*."

Like kindred spirits D. A. Miller and Wayne Koestenbaum and their common ancestor Roland Barthes, Sedgwick gave theory an erotic inflection, thus contributing to historic shifts from structuralism to poststructuralism and from the Barthesian neuter (*le neutre*) to queerness. She was also a crucial figure within a cohort of theorists, including Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Douglas Crimp, Tim Dean, David Halperin, Teresa de Lauretis, and Michael Warner, who were committed to putting Freud, Lacan, and Foucault to work in the analysis of discursive sex and power. Their investigations opened traditional Anglo-American disciplines like classics, English, anthropology, music, history, and art history to "gender and sexuality studies." As this catchall designation became a field, gradually scoring respect, campus real estate, and degree-granting authority, it naturally lost some of its edge. But when Sedgwick's major works, *Between Men and Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), were appearing, the term *transgression* had not yet become mere shorthand for institutionally domesticated sexual politics.

Though sexual politics as critical praxis was never the same after the publication of these two landmark works of queer theory, it would be wrong to see the books as definitive brackets of what Butler, in an essay published in editors Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark's 2002 anthology *Regarding Sedgwick*, called Sedgwick's "capacity." Over the course of Sedgwick's career (which took her from Amherst to Duke University and then to the City University of New York), her interests flowed out into countless other areas beckoning future investigation. She wrote on Buddhism and experimented with collage, textile, and book art. In addition to poetry, she published a diary of psychoanalysis (*A Dialogue on Love* [2000]), edited, with Andrew Parker, the 1995 anthology *Performance and Performativity*, and gave vent to anti-Freudianism through forays into social psychology (*Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* [1995], edited by Adam Frank). She brought to term a memorial volume, *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher* (1996). (Fisher, once a student of Sedgwick's, was an African-American writer, unpublished in his lifetime, who died of AIDS in 1993 at age thirty-two.)

All that said, Sedgwick will be best remembered as the cofounder, with Butler, of queer theory, a movement—a moment?—characterized by the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality, by exposés of homosexual panic, and by a notion of the closet enlarged to include minoritized people of every race, gender, nation, and income. Though it enjoyed a particularly vital period in the mid-'90s, queer theory lives on in transgender, intersexuality, intersectionality, and disability studies, all of which, it might be said, look non-normatively at what parts of bodies do, and delegitimize the terms of psychosexual foreclosure according to which bodies have conventionally been represented. Shaped by Sedgwick's example, queer theory asserted its place among post-Stonewall liberation movements by maintaining a foothold in activism. Sedgwick never missed an opportunity to declare her support for ACT UP, to denounce homophobia and public indifference to the AIDS crisis, or to contest the family-values brigade (as typified by the 1989 essay "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys").



Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon at the conference "Discourses of the Emotions," University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, April 21, 1990.

As a gay-male-identified woman married to a man, Sedgwick was well aware that her subject-position put her at odds with certain strands of partisan identity politics. But the perplex of her own sex/gender/body was part of what allowed queer theory to happen. Non-identitarian identity, for her, was a condition of queer love and allocentric desire, yielding a diversity of object-choices and a flux of affective attachments. This configuration could be traced to her very first book, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), based on her 1975 Yale Ph.D. thesis, which captured what she called an "early-deconstructive insouciance . . . about the exact boundaries or meanings of a 'self.'" For some, this open door to fungible, roving affect was problematic. Bersani (*Homos*) and Terry Castle (*The Apparitional Lesbian*) were among those who feared that queer theory's pluralism diluted the specificity of gay and lesbian sexuality. But for others, the way in which queer theory capitalized on Gayle Rubin's severance of sex from gender (in the 1970s) was precisely what made apparently contradictory psychosexual subjectivities vitally dialectical and interestingly contingent. You could be hetero and gay-identified, you could queer the family and fight for a marriage license, you could eroticize homosocial amity without calling it gay or lesbian, you could be bisexual and sexually reassigned, you could participate in communities of cross-homosexual love and live a celibate life, and so on and so on. Drives and objects—though understood to be housed in situated bodies subject to surveillance, to policing, to familial and fiscal restraints—were nonetheless open to new conjugations, readily assimilated by every medium.

Queer theory's success, its extraordinary availability, eventually made it difficult to localize. Little wonder, then, that by 2007 *South Atlantic Quarterly* editors Janet Halley and Parker (glossing Joseph Litvak's contribution to a special issue titled "After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory") were trying to figure out what wasn't queer. They noted a sharp trending away from queerness by queer theorists themselves: "Judith Butler has been writing about justice and human rights, Michael Warner about sermons and secularism, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick about Melanie Klein and Buddhism." In pondering whether there was continuity between past and present interests in the work of these theorists, Halley and Parker posed

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the question: "Can work be regarded as queer if it's not explicitly 'about' sexuality?"

A similar question had earlier been raised with respect to feminism. Could work be regarded as feminist if it was no longer about women? Sedgwickian queer theory answered yes and arguably came into focus around the "woman question." A founder of Amherst's Department of Women's and Gender Studies and the author of a long-running column for *Mamm*, a magazine for women with breast or reproductive cancer, Sedgwick never wavered in her feminist convictions. But her work challenged conventional notions of what feminism is by insisting on its connection to gay male culture. *Between Men* appeared, interestingly enough, in a feminist book series ("Gender and Culture") edited by Nancy K. Miller and Carolyn G. Heilbrun. And while the book acknowledged feminist trailblazers from Rubin to Julia Kristeva and posited a "homosocial continuum" inspired by Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum," it also announced, without apology, its "almost exclusive focus on male authors" and its oblique engagement with lesbianism: "The absence of lesbianism from the book was an early and, I think, necessary decision, since my argument is structured around the distinctive relation of the male homosocial spectrum to the transmission of unequally distributed power."

The fact that *Between Men* and her most acclaimed work, *Epistemology of the Closet*, were published during the florescence of a psychoanalytic feminism congenial, in many respects, to Sedgwick's way of thinking makes it all the more interesting that she chose to engage with this theoretical tendency sparingly. Parveen Adams, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Kristeva, Miller, Juliet Mitchell, Jacqueline Rose, and Naomi Schor all were revisiting Freud and Lacan to counter gender essentialism, the phallic symbolic order, and regimes of sexual difference that reproduced inequality. But instead of, say, running with Irigaray's theory of the female body's fluid, decentered erotogeneity, Sedgwick in *Between Men* was more concerned with calling Irigaray on her "expensive" view of male homosexuality, a view that, in her estimation, entailed the "sacrifice of sex itself." This judgment was, I think, not so much a short-shrifting of Irigaray as the demonstration of an instinct that psychoanalytic feminism should remain the path not taken if the intention was to move feminism to a different place, one that refused to let condemnations of misogyny be used as cover for homophobia, that encouraged women in masculinity studies, that recuperated the "reparative" potential of Klein (the "depressive position") within the politics of gender injury, and that reimagined "family" outside genetic bonds.

In a passage from the introduction (famously titled "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You") to her 1997 book *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, Sedgwick left us with a fleeting intuition of such a "family"—one defined not by blood but by a reconfiguration of friendship, intergenerationalism, and non-heteronormative chronometries of life span—in keeping with what Barber and Clark have posited as a kind of Sedgwickian temporality. It is particularly moving to read it now:

A more recent and terrible contingency, in the brutal foreshortening of so many queer lifespans, has deroutinized the temporality of many of us in ways that only intensify this effect. I'm thinking, as I say this, of three very queer friendships I have. One of my friends is sixty; the other two are both thirty, and I, at forty-five, am exactly in the middle. All four of us are academics, and we have in common a lot of interests, energies, and ambitions; we have each had, as well, variously intense activist investments. In a "normal" generational narrative, our identifications with each other would be aligned with an expectation that in another fifteen years, I'd be situated comparably to where my sixty-year old friend is, while my thirty-year-old friends would be situated comparably to where I am.

But we are all aware that the grounds of such friendships today are likely to differ from that model. . . . [L]iving with advanced breast cancer, I have little chance of ever being the age my older friend is now. My friends who are thirty years old are similarly unlikely ever to experience my present, middle age: one is living with an advanced cancer caused by a massive environmental trauma (basically, he grew up on top of a toxic waste site); the other is living with HIV. The friend who is a very healthy sixty is the likeliest of us to be living fifteen years from now.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick died at fifty-eight on April 12, 2009. We mourn her passing, but we will take up the task of untiming the temporalities of finitude and generation, and the other projects, critical, personal, and political, that she bequeathed to us.

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