

Eve's Triangles, or Queer Studies beside Itself

I met Eve Sedgwick on a bridge in Chicago in December 1990. My friend Tom Yingling, who knew he was dying, saw her in the distance. “That’s Eve,” he said in a voice filled with pleasure at everything he had just been lamenting: being on a bridge, at the MLA, in Chicago, in the freezing cold. She was the only woman coming toward us in a group of three, much shorter than the others, covered entirely in coat. I had seen Eve Sedgwick once, the year before, at a conference that Tom and I attended at Yale when her session erupted in a contested shout-out about her identity.¹ *Are you a lesbian?* Audience members demanded to know.² That was Sedgwick at a different distance—at a table in the front of a regular classroom, with a soft, almost ethereal voice, softer still in the raucous space in which the authority of her person was being called to question for the very authority she was taken to exert over a field that had finally found itself at Yale.

I talked to Sedgwick twice after that meeting on the bridge. When Tom died in 1992, she helped me secure a contract for his work at Duke University Press and encouraged me to use his personal writing as a way to represent and mourn him. That book—*AIDS and the National Body*—arrived

into print in 1997, shortly after the genocidal emergency of AIDS in North America had been “downgraded” and people began to imagine living with and not simply dying from the disease. What had been struggled for in the earliest years of the epidemic—the PLWA (Person Living with AIDS)—was emerging for the first time in U.S. history as a medical possibility. In one of her last published essays, Sedgwick described the affective density of that summer in 1996 when the “brutally abbreviated temporality of the lives of many women and men with HIV seemed suddenly, radically extended if not normalized. . . . [R]elief, hope, and expansiveness and surprise set the tone” (“Melanie” 639).⁵ Today, of course, the normalization of the disease remains incomplete, if not a first-world luxury. But the point is that by the time Tom’s book came out, a year after the controversial *Gary in Your Pocket*, which Sedgwick edited to memorialize the very talented and never published Gary Fisher, AIDS was being reinvented in U.S. popular and public health discourses as a chronic illness.⁴

I want to emphasize the word *normalized* above, because it is a strange feature of our present that the route queer inquiry would take after Sedgwick has largely turned its political gaze against normalization of every kind, becoming less and less interested in which norms a minoritized community can and cannot live without, and why the choices are never its alone. In this, the field that has emerged to claim an institutional domain called *queer studies* is surprisingly confident that the critique of normativity that now defines it is adequate to the political complexities of the contemporary world. This is not to imply that Sedgwick was complacent about the narrow vision of state-based civil rights that has framed popular conceptions of sexual politics in this century—what scholars now evocatively call *queer liberalism*, *homonormativity*, and *homonationalism*.⁵ Indeed, in “Thinking through Queer Theory,” first delivered as a talk in Japan in 2000, she argued against “the normalizing politics of the mainstream gay/lesbian movement” by lamenting the assimilationist agenda that prioritized “same-sex marriage” and “the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in the military, the Boy Scouts, electoral politics, and mainstream religions” (201). And yet, in her account, the political cost of this agenda did not arise from the pursuit of normativity per se; as she emphasized, “[T]he conservative mainstream of the gay/lesbian movement is achieving some successes, and I do not want to diminish the importance of any success in an antihomophobic undertaking. Such successes are all too rare” (202).⁶ The crucial matter was the contraction of the meaning of the political and the way that the demand toward institutional inclusion and respectability had been staked against the historical

and hermeneutic lessons of AIDS. “Believe it or not,” she wrote, “AIDS has disappeared as a public issue, and also as a gay issue, throughout the United States. Except for a few queer activists, the entire society seems to believe that AIDS is now being cured—which it is not—and that the number of people with AIDS has gone down—which it has not” (202). In this context, where the normalization of AIDS remained a cogent and much needed political goal, Sedgwick renewed the call for a “queer analysis, not a strictly gay one,” to address a “disease that respects no simple boundaries of identity” (202).

In what follows, I read Sedgwick’s contribution to the origin of queer theorizing by inhabiting the political imaginary that lives in the paragraph above where the contrast between a conservative gay politics of normalization and a politically queer one confounds the nearly canonical equation between queer inquiry and antinormativity that anchors queer studies’ contemporary self-definition.⁷ My purpose is not to dismiss the anti-normative commitments of the field so much as to mark their critical limits by engaging with the sensibility—in every sense of the word—that shapes Sedgwick’s work.⁸ A key passage for this investigation is Sedgwick’s own. In “Queer and Now,” the introduction to her 1993 book *Tendencies*, Sedgwick addresses the conceptual rubric that had come to frame her scholarship in the aftermath of *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). To answer the resonant question, “What’s ‘queer?’” she ruminates on “the monolith” created by Christmas as “religion, state, capital, ideology, domesticity, [and] the discourses of power and legitimacy” all come to speak “with one voice” (5, 6, 6, 5). “What if,” she counters, “there were a practice of valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other? What if the richest junctures weren’t the ones where *everything means the same thing?*” (6). While this provocation has been read as a master sign of Sedgwick’s own antinormative convictions, I take it as a potent reminder that the work of criticism, like politics, requires a confrontation with convergences of every kind, including those that now position antinormativity as *the* political horizon and (inter)disciplinary anchor of queer studies itself. My contribution to this special issue of *differences* returns to Sedgwick’s work to read it against the field’s well-honed insistence that normativity names the problem and antinormativity the solution to the political complexity of our social world. Using Sedgwick’s language, this essay contends that the richest junctures for queer inquiry today are to be found by engaging what the field claims most to know.

To that end, my discussion turns first to the book that is now taken to inaugurate an interdisciplinary field of study, *Epistemology of the*

Closet, to review its appetite for contradiction, incoherence, and the political double bind—all figures of thought that demonstrate Sedgwick’s investment in a deconstructive methodology that confounds, even as it invites, speculation on the agency of criticism as a political practice. While today the debate about the politics of deconstruction has been largely exhausted, *Epistemology of the Closet* is indecipherable without understanding Sedgwick’s commitment to its procedures, where attention to “the performative relations of double and conflicted” (13) meaning requires a critical approach that resists “the a priori” (12) and recognizes, when it comes to the realm of “practical politics” (13), that “this is not a conceptual landscape in which ideological rigor across levels, across constituencies is at all possible” (13). “A point of the book,” she writes, “is *not to know* how far its insights and projects are generalizable, not to be able to say in advance where the semantic specificity of these issues gives over to (or: itself structures?) the syntax of a ‘broader’ or more abstractable critical project” (12). By posing its methodology against “knowingness,” *Epistemology of the Closet* insinuates what will become a hallmark of Sedgwick’s oeuvre: its meditation on the limits of the critic’s performance of epistemological sovereignty (12).

If we now frame this matter in Sedgwick’s subsequent language as a turn away from paranoid toward reparative reading, it is nonetheless possible to approach *Epistemology* as an engagement, no matter how differently scored, with the rhetorical forms and analytic habits of criticism—and to do so in ways that link Sedgwick’s increasing specification of her object attachments to the fraught scenes in which her authority was questioned, at Yale and elsewhere.⁹ For it is precisely in grappling with the triangulated relations at stake in critical practice—between authorial agency, objects of study, and the reader’s own complicated need—that Sedgwick negotiated the contradictions of the anti-identitarian hermeneutics that made her so famously queer. By following “Eve’s triangles”—with Tom on the bridge; in the conversations she staged between her texts and their lesbian readers; and in the feminist, queer, and antihomophobic inquiries she crafted—there is much to be said about why Sedgwick never refused the question that followed her. *Are you a lesbian?* On more than one occasion she offered a simple, resonant *no*.

It might be hard today to recapture the audacity of Sedgwick’s proclamation in the second sentence of *Epistemology of the Closet* that “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” (1). This provocation followed volume 1 of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* but raised the ante of his historicizing claims by pondering the consequences of the story it told on the discursive shape of the present. Sedgwick was chiefly concerned with the fact that, among the many different figures Foucault discerned in the nineteenth century rise of *scientia sexualis*—the masturbator, hysteric, fetishist, pedophile, and homosexual—it was “precisely one, the gender of object choice, [that] emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of ‘sexual orientation’” (8). While she affirmed Foucault’s disinterest in identifying the origin of this radical contraction of sexual definition, she wanted to understand the consequences in our own time of his famous declaration that “the homosexual was now a species” by probing the extent to which contemporary competing political discourses reiterated the seeming coherence and legibility of homosexuality itself (*History* 43). What, she asked, was the homosexuality that late twentieth-century thinkers thought they knew? For her, this was the question submerged in scholarly arguments about the impact of Foucault’s volume, which undermined gay and lesbian studies projects that looked to homosexuality as a historically continuous identity by exposing the disciplinary apparatuses that wed homosexuality to modern personhood. As she framed the matter in the fifth of her seven field-generating axioms in *Epistemology of the Closet*: “The historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity” (44). Sedgwick’s goal instead was “to denaturalize the present, rather than the past—in effect, to render less destructively presumable ‘homosexuality as we know it today’” (48).

As is widely granted, *Epistemology of the Closet*’s turn toward interrogating the coherence of homosexuality as a category of identity was foundational to the anti-identitarian hermeneutics that now serve as a signal characteristic of queer critique. But its analytic power belongs less to a critique of identity than to its explication of the way that the discourses and institutions on which modern homo/heterosexual definition depends are not only complex but contradictory scenes for the production of antihomophobic activities and critical projects. This is clear in Sedgwick’s opening description of the double binds that shape Western sexual subjectivity where what we have “inherited from the architects of our present culture,” she writes, are two spellbinding contradictions, neither of which can be understood according to the familiar political contrast “between prohomosexual and

antihomosexual people or ideologies” (1). These contradictions—between a minoritizing and universalizing view of homosexuality, on the one hand, and a gender separatist and gender integrationist view of same-sex object choice, on the other—frame the critical dilemma that governs the work and mark its most compelling challenge to current understandings of critical practice and politics alike.¹⁰ For in her focus on the contradictions that are “internal to all the important twentieth-century understandings of homo/heterosexual definition, *both* heterosexist and antihomophobic,” Sedgwick reorients the tendency in left criticism toward rhetorical strategies of opposition, choosing instead to figure *Epistemology*’s analytic value in its studied determination to make palpable the relational complexities of the social situation it names (1, emphasis added). “The purpose of this book is not to adjudicate between the two poles of either of these contradictions, for, if its argument is right, no epistemological grounding now exists from which to do so” (2).¹¹ To read *Epistemology* as though this grounding exists—as a firm rejection of identity and the politics organized around it (what she called minoritizing)—disregards the capacious framing of the project no less than the critical sensibility it hones, as Sedgwick never pledged her own preferences for constructionist, universalizing, and gender-transitive understandings of sexuality against the strategies they were taken to oppose. On the contrary, *Epistemology* is pointedly introduced by affirming that “the space of permission for this work and the depth of the intellectual landscape in which it might have a contribution to make owe everything to the wealth of essentialist, minoritizing, and separatist gay thought and struggle” (15).

In the context of contemporary queer studies, it is surely odd to return to *Epistemology of the Closet* to recover the value of its epistemological hesitations, given how decisively its critical impact now rests on its analytic precision in deciphering the homophobic consequences of sexuality’s centrality to modern regimes of knowledge in the West. But the double move *Epistemology* makes in knowing the objects of its inquiry while registering the inadequacy of a critical practice bent toward adjudication can be read as an early (and crucial) episode in Sedgwick’s long-standing engagement with the performative sovereignty of the critical act, what she would come to call, following Melanie Klein, “paranoid reading” (“Paranoid” 1). Often deployed under the surname of the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, paranoid reading is understood in current literary critical debates as a practice bent toward diagnosis, demystification, and revelation, ready at every moment to alert readers to worlds of meaning they are unable to discern on their own.¹² In the hands of left critics, it has been a powerful tool in the transformation

of the humanities, underwriting the rise of cultural studies in both its psychoanalytic and Marxian orientations while extending critical concern to a wide variety of objects of study, including the psychic, semiotic, and discursive formation of the social itself. Under its influence, cultural criticism has been institutionalized as a political practice, which has helped to rewrite the epistemological authority of the critical act as a potent political agency. For some critics in queer studies, as in most other projects organized by identity, it is the political agency at stake in critical sovereignty that sustains both the internal logic and ongoing value of the field. While the current critical consensus takes *Epistemology* as partaking in the paranoid disposition that Sedgwick would come to disclaim, its predilection for incoherence, contradiction, and the political double bind signals a critical sensibility grappling with paranoid reading and its orientation toward political mastery over its objects of study.

Sedgwick explicates the critical impact of this sensibility at the end of “Reality and Realization,” an essay in the posthumous volume of her work edited by Jonathan Goldberg. In charting her turn toward Buddhism and its critical as well as affective value, she discusses how “respect for realization as both process and practice” stands in contrast to the epistemological pursuits of Western critical theory (212). She writes:

[T]he stuttering, exclusive perseveration of epistemological propositions in contemporary critical theory reads as a stubborn hysterical defense. Whether it comes in the form of anti-essentialist hypervigilance or, say, of the moralizing Marxist insistence that someone else is evading a true recognition of materiality, all this epistemological fixation, with all its paralyzing scruples or noisy, accusatory projections, can also seem like a hallucinatorily elaborated, long-term refusal to enter into realization as into a complex practice. Rather, it can't stop claiming mastery of reality as the flat, propositional object of a single verb, shivering in its threadbare near-transparency: the almost fatally thin “to know.” (212–13)

In this reference to two seemingly divergent critical traditions—poststructuralism and Marxism—Sedgwick casts prominent contemporary forms of left critique as not simply impoverished but belligerently, even willfully so, as both draw their political credibility from the pretense “to know” the truth about “reality,” no matter how differently conceived. Hence, for her, the hypervigilance required to ward off theoretical error for the post-structuralist is as epistemologically driven as the moralizing noise of the

Marxist's accusatory proclamation that the theoretical stakes of theory are materially real. In this textual terrain of paralyzing scruples, Buddhism is compelling for Sedgwick precisely because it inhabits the limit questions of humanism not by turning its back on knowing, but by trying to attend to what that "single verb" pursuit is so desperate to elude.

While there is much to say about the way that *thin* and *fatally* collide in the quote above to conjure a set of relations found throughout Sedgwick's writing, it is her emphasis on the epistemological fixation of critical theory that interests me the most.¹³ For one can hear a similar "stubborn hysterical defense" in the rhetorical habits of contemporary queer studies where the now characteristic declaration of antinormativity as the field's most important political intervention cloaks the epistemological power it thereby secures through the deeply affective and intensely aspirational claim to political transgression and transformation; this, after all, is what the invocation of the political as the value of critical thought so optimistically confers. But the analytic cost of this security is great, as normativity is transformed from its status as an object of study into the figure that renders political the field's own institutional ambitions. In this condensation, normativity is overwritten by the ahistorical presumption that it is always regressive and constraining—in short, that it is always politically bad. The problem here is simple, if perplexing: that no matter the ongoing affiliation of queer inquiry with the itinerant, unstable, unintelligible, fluid, negative, backward, unproductive, low, open-ended, or out-of-sync, the political imaginary that antinormativity yields as the defining politics of queer studies exacts a disciplinary toll on critical practice, rendering the contingent relationship between knowledge and politics in noncontradictory, if not wholly predetermined, terms. At the same time, critical belonging to the field is implicitly organized along epistemological lines, as critical authority is dispensed (or withheld) on the basis of *always* knowing the difference between normativity and the value of being queerly set against it.¹⁴ It is this kind of guarantee—this certainty about the political capacity of critical judgment—that I reference above in describing Sedgwick's critical sensibility as something other than "political mastery."

To be sure, Sedgwick never aimed her discussion of the epistemological fixations of critical practice toward queer studies, let alone normativity per se, and no one can argue that her scholarship has had no impact on orienting queer inquiry toward the antinormative dispositions that now characterize it. *Queer* was an adjective attached to the activity of her criticism in the aftermath of the publication of *Epistemology of the*

Closet. By the time she embraced it in the introduction to *Tendencies*, it served as the framework for self-nomination and explanation, providing the necessary vehicle for responding to the identity expectations we now take as endemic of those years. If, today, we consider her to be a foundational figure in the field *and* if we consider queer studies to be premised on an opposition to identity-oriented thought, this twin billing is possible only because the struggles over Sedgwick's identity have been largely muted by casting the early demand on her to be a lesbian as decidedly different from the demand the field now exerts on practitioners to claim antinormativity as the epistemological and political value of the designation *queer*. As strange as it might now seem, *queer* amassed power in Sedgwick's work *as a defense* against the charge of appropriation, inauthenticity, and heterosexual complicity, providing the framework for distinctions that would be as important to her own position in the field as they would become to the field's institutional self-definition as an anti-identitarian and antinormative project. For in "valuing the ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with one another," Sedgwick was able to distinguish her identificatory relations with gay men from the institutions of marriage and heterosexuality to which the question, "Are you a lesbian?" worked to keep her bound ("Queer" 6). As she put it in 1993, "[W]hat it takes—all it takes—to make the description 'queer' a true one is the impulsion *to use it in the first person*" ("Queer" 9).

To think about Eve Sedgwick in this way is to encounter her at a different distance, one that locates her self-defense in the context of queer inquiry's institutional history, where antinormativity has served not only as the framework of its most passionate political commitments but as an adjudicating metric for determining and establishing critical authority in the field. A quick comparison with the queer embrace of Judith Butler's 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* is especially telling in this regard, as its foundational status was never predicated on the author's defense of her object attachments or underwritten by a personal narrative to justify the identity assumptions it sought to critique. And yet, it was Butler who made famous her own resistance to going "to Yale to be a lesbian" in the essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," which extended her critique of identity as a regulatory regime from gender to sexual identity (18). This is not to say that Butler was spared critiques of her work—far from it.¹⁵ But it is to magnify the way that contestations concerning the relation between identity and identification—evoked most dramatically by the specter of Sedgwick's presumptive heterosexuality—have been complexly implicated

in the political pursuits of the field. It is not far-fetched to say, in fact, that the greatest mobility for anti-identitarian thought has issued from the most secure identity quarters, as if the propulsion not to “be” a lesbian required the ability to claim the category as a precondition for its transgression. The implications of this—the disavowed identity epistemologies of queer inquiry—are enormous, especially today as the ongoing political value of the field is being defined against the complicity of various *queer* identifications with normativity. In this context, where antinormativity and the critique of identity converge, nothing seems to have escaped suspicion except belief in the political purchase of antinormativity itself.

Let’s return now to the scene at Yale, where Eve’s triangulated identification as a married woman who loved and studied gay male life in the context of Western cultural organization was taken as a political as well as a professional threat to feminist and lesbian feminist audiences. I must confess that I was conflicted about the prominence of gay men in the critical imaginary of sexual studies as it unfolded in those years, even as Sedgwick’s 1985 book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, had taught me to read the asymmetry of homosociality in patriarchal social orders as crucial to my own dissertation interests in the racialized nexus of masculine bonds in the United States.¹⁶ But while I had some hint of how the scene of interracial male bonding was serving in my own work as a means to identify with the women of color feminism that had brought me to the topic of race and masculinity in the first place, I had no idea how to deploy that identification as a central part of my inquiry.¹⁷ Instead, I feared it: feared attending to the way that black male bodies were part of a project of routing my affinities away from whiteness and the potent compact across sexual difference that comprises white racial formation and undermines feminism at every turn—feared, that is, what it might mean for me, as a white woman, to seek an allegiance with black men in a history in which white women have been deadly to them.¹⁸ It was easier to concern myself with the question of the legibility of the lesbian where the authority of my claim to the category could defer the difficulty of exploring the actual and at times awful explosiveness of political alliances, or the discomfort that can accompany identification, or the confusion that can follow the errant itineraries of desire—that is, all the ways in which who we are, what we want, what we feel, and what moves or makes us are not commensurate with either our social identities or the political subjectivities we seek.

Sedgwick, as we know, was never unaware of these complexities. In the early days of institutionalizing identity-oriented knowledges, when discerning an identity object of study from the vantage point of “being it” *was* what identity studies meant, Sedgwick understood well the dicey terrain in which her first book, *Between Men*, maneuvered. In the introduction she wrote, “As a woman and a feminist writing (in part) about male homosexuality, I feel I must be especially explicit about the political groundings, assumptions, and ambitions of this study. [. . .] My intention throughout has been to conduct an antihomophobic as well as feminist inquiry” (19). In doing so, Sedgwick sought to intervene in the existent literature on the relationship between women and male homosexuality, which had suffered, she writes, from one of two overdetermining assumptions: “either that gay men and all women share a ‘natural,’ transhistorical alliance [. . .] or else that male homosexuality is an epitome, a personification, an effect, or perhaps a primary cause of woman-hating” (19–20). By reading both of these assumptions as false, Sedgwick set out to develop an analytic that could help “shed light” on the “alliance” between “feminism and antihomophobia” by attending to the distinctly gendered history of homosocial desire in the modern West (20).

This agenda entailed setting feminism’s own analysis of the continuum that shaped the relationship between “women loving women” and “women promoting the interests of women” in a wider frame of reference, one capable of accounting for the radical discontinuity that underwrote male bonds, where there had been no modern cultural or political discourse aimed at negotiating “the divide between ‘men-loving-men’ and ‘men-promoting-the-interests-of-men’” (3). On the contrary, male homosocial bonds were structured by homophobic prohibition, denial, and violent negation—not generically, but as a primary characteristic of twentieth-century Western patriarchy. By detailing this structure through careful readings of (mostly) canonical Western literature, *Between Men* made a feminist case for rethinking the familiar but historically specific relationship between the injunction against homosexuality and the patriarchal production and sustenance of masculine bonds. Sedgwick’s key focus was the “erotic triangle”—a figure she drew from René Girard’s well-regarded study *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, which explored the plot lines of major European texts in which two men enter into a rivalrous relationship with one another for the attention/love/devotion of the same woman (21). What engaged Sedgwick was *Deceit’s* “insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved. [. . .] In fact, Girard seems to see the bond between rivals [. . .] as being even

stronger” (21). Hence, the social relations produced through “the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and ‘love’ [. . .] are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent,” thus raising important issues about the circulation of desire, the psychic work of identification, and the power relations produced, reconfigured, and confirmed in the erotic triangle (21).

According to Sedgwick, such issues could not be fully answered from within Girard’s framework, as his analysis suffered from an inability to consider the ways in which gender and sexuality were always pertinent to the calculus of power through which the erotic triangle functioned—not simply in literary narratives but in the Oedipal scenario that informed his project as a whole, where the familiar triangle of father-mother-child was importantly differentiated by the child’s sex and by the routes of attachment and identification that produce or prohibit sexual object choice.¹⁹ *Between Men* resituated the erotic triangle to contend with these issues, addressing the interplay of gender and power that structures modern patriarchal formation, first by giving the relationship between the rivalrous men a name, “homosocial desire”; second by establishing that desire as on par with, if not at times more socially valuable than, the heterosexual bond that was otherwise taken to found the triangle’s erotic life; and third by undermining the structuralism of Girard’s account by engaging the historical variability of gender and its meanings, especially as it shaped radically incongruent conceptions of homosexuality across time (1). Sedgwick thus made visible what Girard’s analysis of the erotic triangle could not: that the structuring prohibition that barred the men from choosing one another as sexual objects existed in dramatic tension with the priority afforded masculine bonds in Western modernity—and further that this tension was routinely defined by, if not organized through, relationships to women, whether real or imagined, rejected or pursued. As she put it, “[T]he status of women, and the whole question of arrangements between genders, is deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women—even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships” (25).²⁰ In developing this claim, Sedgwick argued for the importance of addressing the historical variability of the meaning of “men’s genital activity with men” (26), noting that the “virility of the homosexual orientation of male desire seemed as self-evident to the ancient Spartans, and perhaps to Whitman, as its effeminacy seems in contemporary popular culture” (26–27). In chapters that moved from Shakespeare’s sonnets to the novels of Laurence Sterne, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens, among others, *Between Men* argued convincingly that “the etiology and the continuing experience of male homosexuality [. . .] [is]

inextricable from the changing shapes of the institutions by which gender and class inequality are structured" (27).

Today, *Between Men* can be read as a generative contribution to what was a decade-long feminist reconsideration of the structure, history, and operation of *patriarchy*, perhaps the most important term in the feminist theoretical lexicon in the 1980s. But in 1992, when Sedgwick wrote a new preface to accompany the book's post-*Epistemology* reprint, she had ample reason to believe that its distinctly feminist commitments had been underappreciated, if not completely obscured. This was a book, as she wrote in the preface, that "has evoked rage [. . .] on a continuing basis," especially from "other feminist scholars"—the very readers that Sedgwick imagined as her primary audience (x, vii). But in the environment of her everyday critical passions while *Between Men* was being composed, Sedgwick "was very involved with lesbian-inflected feminist culture and critique"; in fact, "I actually knew only one openly gay man" (viii). In this context in which identity, identification, and object of study were unaligned, Sedgwick was keen to consider the critical limits of a "feminocentric field [. . .] in which the subjects, paradigms, and political thrust of research, as well as the researchers themselves, might all be indented [sic] with the female" (viii). Addressing these limits in language that is now familiar, she explained her need "to keep faith [. . .] with an obstinate intuition that the loose ends and crossed ends of identity are more fecund than the places where identity, desire, analysis, and need can all be aligned and centered" (viii). *Between Men* was meant "very pointedly as a complicating, antiseparatist, and antihomophobic contribution to a feminist movement with which, nonetheless, I identified fairly unproblematically" (viii). As I read it, the preface thus performs its own commitment to an analysis of triangulated desire by foregrounding the transferential relations that mobilized Sedgwick's critical practice, where optimism, disappointment, and prohibition marked the complexities of the contingent identifications she claimed: feminism, lesbian-inflected critique, and male homosexuality. In these terms, the triangle becomes much more than a structure of conventional narration; in parsing Sedgwick's retrospective reflection on the controversy surrounding *Between Men*, it offers a conceptual framework to engage the affective intensity of the response her work repeatedly generated, confounding the story that has been told about the complexity of her own identifications.²¹

We do not need Sedgwick's 1992 ruminations on the reception of *Between Men* to understand the force of the triangle as a theoretical lever for attending to her work's broader interventions into the complexities not

simply of identity but of identification. The final axiom of *Epistemology of the Closet* is devoted to the matter at hand, albeit in a different rhetorical key and with a much fuller rendering of the complexities of identification both across identities and within them: “The paths of allo-identification,” she writes, “are likely to be strange and recalcitrant. So are the paths of auto-identification” (59). To explicate this axiom, Sedgwick begins by citing her earlier discussion in *Between Men* when she first took on the question of what it means to be “a woman and a feminist writing (in part) about male homosexuality” (*Epistemology* 59). “[M]y account was, essentially, that this was an under-theorized conjunction, and it was about time someone put her mind to it [. . .] [T]he intervening years have taught me more about how important, not to say mandatory, such an accounting must be—as well as how almost prohibitively difficult” (59). One lesson entails rejecting what she calls the “abstractive formulations” used in the introduction to *Between Men* in favor of attending to “the way political commitments and identifications actually work. 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” (*Epistemology* 59).²² Additionally, because the routes of attachment and investment move in multiple directions, the reader is likewise bound to critical desires and analytic animations that arise from her own particularities. Hence, while “it takes deeply rooted, durable, and often somewhat opaque energies to write a book,” it also takes them, Sedgwick contends, not only “to read it” but “to make any political commitment” at all (59).

To illustrate this point in the critical idiom she implicitly calls for, Sedgwick recalls a graduate seminar she taught in gay and lesbian literature that fractured on the impossibility of the female participants to cohere as a group. “Throughout the semester all the women, including me [. . .] attributed our discomfort to some obliquity in the classroom relations between ourselves and the men. But by the end of the semester it seemed clear that we were in the grip of some much more intimate dissonance. It [. . .] was among the group of women, all feminists [. . .] that some nerve of individually internal difference had been set painfully, contagiously atremble” (*Epistemology* 61). Sedgwick describes this nerve as arising from “differences among our mostly inexplicit, often somewhat uncrystallized sexual self-definitions,” such that “each woman in the class possessed [. . .] an ability to make one or more of the other women radically and excruciatingly doubt the authority of her own self-definition as a woman; as a feminist; and as the positional subject of a particular sexuality” (61). From this scene of “intimate denegation,” Sedgwick engages the familiar but intensely unresolved feminist dilemma

of identification where the possibility of identifying “*as* must always include multiple processes of identification *with*. It also involves identification *as against*” (61). These multiplicities interrupt and confound investments in identity as a source of collective political relief by making apparent the very challenge that identification raises to the security and authority of identity itself. No one in queer studies has attended more fully and forcefully to the pedagogical implications of this than Eve Sedgwick.

The introductory chapter of *Epistemology of the Closet* thus ends, fittingly, in the classroom where several new triangles emerge—the first being Sedgwick, her female students, and the men in the class; the second being Sedgwick, her feminist readers, and the gay male subjects that populate her text and define its most powerful attachments. To the extent that her feminist readers are also lesbian ones—and it is this that I hear in the charged language of the classroom where the “positional subject of a particular sexuality” is put under stress—it becomes possible, even necessary, to learn to read *Epistemology of the Closet* again, against the accusation that has shaped a great deal of its distinctly lesbian-feminist critical reception (*Epistemology* 61). For it seems to me now, twenty years since Yale, that the book’s address, like that of *Between Men* before it, emerges from within the deep identificatory lineages of the kinds of triangulation that Sedgwick taught us to explore as precisely a response to the interpellation of Yale, if not also an exercise in its inhabitation. “[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” (*Epistemology* 60–61). If this is the case, as Sedgwick’s work repeatedly asserts, then the point is not that the itineraries of auto- and allo-identification live apart or separate from one another, but rather that their interaction, their diffuse and powerful intersections, their hesitations and deferrals are complexly, indeed intimately, interwoven. We might even say, following Sedgwick, that there is no epistemological grounding from which to adjudicate them, no matter the importance, in her work and elsewhere, of accounting for the ways that identifications generate the substance—and raise the stakes—of both intellectual and political commitments. This is what it means to think of the triangle not simply as a narrative convention, but as a means for engaging the relational, one that can attend to the various ways that identity can be disrupted, confirmed, congealed, doubted, rebuked, and celebrated but never simply outpaced or overcome—not even in queer studies. *Are you a lesbian?* The import of the question lies in the value its answer continues to deliver.

The last time I spoke to Eve was in the book exhibit at a conference in a year that I cannot decisively identify. We exchanged a few words, including my thanks for her help with Tom's book, which had been out for several years but with few reviews and increasingly sparse sales—the dim reality of nearly all academic work on AIDS in this century. People vied for her attention, but I stood there awkwardly, not moving away when I should have, as if some other conversation was about to be had, given how much I thought I knew about her: from reports about the advance of her cancer offered by friends we shared to my own engagement with the increasingly acute reflections on embodiment, identification, and affect that characterized all of her writing after *Epistemology of the Closet*. I want to say—though I have no idea if this is really true—that in the moment before she appeared, I had been thumbing through *Touching Feeling*, fixated as I still am by the textual interruption, “Interlude, Pedagogic,” that sits both before and imaginatively *beside* the arguments of the five chapters that comprise the book. The piece opens with an excerpt from a poem by Randall Jarrell called “Hope,” the same title as a poem of Tom's that I included in *AIDS and the National Body*. In it, Jarrell's narrator describes a childhood scene in which his mother faints.

*Mother's [. . .] face no longer smiled at us
Or frowned at us. Did anything to us.
Her face was queerly flushed
Or else queerly pale; I am no longer certain.
That it was queer I am certain. (qtd. in “Interlude” 27)*

In the pages that follow, Sedgwick rather uncharacteristically says nothing about the poem.²³ Instead, it hovers evocatively over the scene she narrates in which she, too, faints—at a rally against the North Carolina Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) that had refused in 1991 to air Marlon Riggs's important film on black gay male life, *Tongues Untied*. “[T]his was a fight,” she writes, “about blackness, queerness, and (implicitly) AIDS: properties of bodies, some of them our bodies, of bodies that it seemed important to say most people are very willing, and some people murderously eager, to see not exist” (29).

In the space of eight pages, Sedgwick tells the story of the protest by meditating on the insecurity of referentiality and the unsettling work performed by a series of “displacements” that not only accompany but *circulate* meaning, as her faint enacts a health emergency in the midst of a protest aimed in part at representing one (“Interlude” 33). As a collaboration

between the Ad Hoc Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays and ACT-UP Triangle, the protest was designed “to discredit the pretense at representing the public maintained by our local ‘public’ broadcasting station” (31). But “our object,” she writes, “was not merely to demand representation [. . .] but [. . .] to *be* representation: somehow to smuggle onto the prohibitive airwaves some version of the [. . .] dangerous and endangered conjunction, queer and black” (31). How this might be done, under the authoritarian gaze of state troopers and the specularizing gaze of local television reporters, when “a majority of our smuggling-intent bodies were not themselves black” is the key question that inaugurates the interlude, marking the distance between Sedgwick’s own political desires and the embodied particularity that simultaneously marks and unsettles her (32). Like the other white protesters, Sedgwick was “haplessly embroiled in the processes of reference: reference to other bodies standing beside our own, to the words on our placards, to what we could only hope would be the sufficiently substantial sense—if, indeed, even *we* understood it rightly—of our own intent” (32). In the end, she makes no claim to resolve the ethical dilemma that ensues, where her fainted body—“a mountainous figure, supine, black-clad, paper-white, weirdly bald” (32)—places her “at the center of the work of protest” (33) but without volitional intent, as the activity of fainting plunges her into “the deep pit of another world” (32) from which she finds herself “surfacing violently [. . .] with a state trooper taking my pulse” (32). She is only certain about one thing: that the meaning of her body—“so dense, too dense” in that place—“was indeed not a usable one [. . .] in relation to the complexly choreographed performative agendas and effects of that demonstration” (33).

In the challenging and disappointing displacements of reference that the interlude maps—white skin, black queer presence; female embodiment, the identity implosions of female baldness; cancer iconicity, AIDS—Sedgwick points in the end toward a “certain magnetic queerness,” by which she means a queerness “productive of deviance” to characterize the events that interrupted the protest (33). This deviance is not destined for celebration, as queer provides no clear compass for interpreting either the critical or political stakes of the scene she narrates. On the contrary, the pedagogical force of the story arises from the unsettling relations that incite it, implicitly revising the “axiom” that governs her work—where “the loose ends and crossed ends of identity are more fecund than the places where identity, desires, analysis, and need can all be aligned”—by demonstrating that such fecundity is as perilous to the possibility and security of meaning as it is inviting (*Between Men* viii). This is, at the very least, how I read

Sedgwick's own complex textual choreography, as she becomes not only the pale fainted figure of Jarrell's poem but also its narrator, the adult who finds in the designation "queer" a way to name the failure of interpretative precision that resides in the memory that continues to haunt him. She is also the writer whose meditation on the centrality of her balded whiteness bears witness to the failure of identification and intention to found even the most cautious and contingent interpretative agency offered by the first-person form that framed her deployment of *queer*.

The meditation ends with what I am inclined to describe as a terminal kind of hope, as Sedgwick evokes the value of her own displacement not only in the protest scene but in the classroom where, finding herself to be "less and less" at its center, she "was also finding that [. . .] displacement [. . .] could provide effects that might sometimes wrench the boundaries of discourse around in productive if not always obvious ways" ("Interlude" 34). In the triangle thus staged between "Hope," the protest scene, and the classroom, the interlude eschews the more familiar argument-oriented and concept-driven itineraries of critical practice to perform the affective densities of its chief concerns: activism, race, gender, sexuality, illness, death. Affective density, not epistemological proposition. A writer's text, not a critic's argument. Touching feeling, not "knowing" it.

Today, of course, I am—we are—reading Sedgwick in the context of the most inevitable displacement. That she tried to prepare us for this is certain, as her work increasingly compelled readers to abandon their interpretative dependencies, along with the resentments that routinely traveled with them. At first this meant learning to let go of the object-orientations that anchored and affirmed feminist criticism's own sense of political agency in order to pursue the circulations of desire that linked male bonds in the midst of monumental prohibitions. If the triangle served as the narrative form that figured this pursuit, its pedagogical impact drew more than my generation of scholars toward a feminist practice far more capacious than the one we first knew. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick challenged the political imaginary of left criticism altogether by honing an appetite for the double bind, which meant learning how to withstand the insecurity of a present that offered no epistemological grounding from which to adjudicate the contradictions that characterized it. Less an intended performance of queer theory than a revision of what theory could do as part of an avowedly "anti-homophobic" enterprise, *Epistemology* reconfigured the relations among sex, sexuality, and gender in order to displace the centrality of identity categories for a deeper inquiry into the scope and complexity of the hetero-homosexual

distinction itself (i). By the time *Tendencies* appeared three years later, she was writing in the midst of both new and ongoing threats: breast cancer and a readership still coming to terms with her insistence on identification, posed more extensively and ever more precisely in the richly contextualized language of “this particular one” (*Epistemology* 59). *Queer* would emerge here as the resonant figure of “now,” as Sedgwick turned what was tacitly a defense of her critical authority into an explication of the profound “pleasure” she found in putting her pleasure in writing on display (“Queer” 1, 19). Retrospectively, we can take much of the work after *Epistemology* as a performance of the genre of criticism she would name “*experimental* critical writing” (“Socratic” 133). Under its auspices, readers have been invited into “the circuit of contagion, fun, voyeurism, envy, participation, and simulation” that such writing promises to deliver as it seeks out “spaces of thought and work where everything doesn’t mean the same thing!” (“Queer” 19, 20).

In taking permission from Sedgwick to shift my focus to the density of the relations that her writing engages, I have offered less an argument against the antinormative thesis that now anchors the field’s political self-conception than an exploration of what it means to read her abiding interest in contradiction and incommensurability in a new way: as a pertinent reminder in our own critical moment of the limitations of configuring any dualistic account of the political as a transgressive ideal. My concern with this, the most disciplinary rule in queer studies today, has not been forwarded as an exercise in rescuing normativity from collective condemnation, for even the most basic deconstructive lesson would demonstrate that standing on one side or the other of the prevailing distinction between normativity and its antithesis revises nothing in the larger critical ecology in which we write and think. The issue this essay raises is more simple if vexing precisely because any effort to consider normativity a complex object of study is so decisively at odds with the transgressive fictions that underwrite the field’s sovereign declarations: *this* is what we choose, *this* is what we refuse, *this* is what we/they are. In light of these assertions, it is increasingly the case that a studied approach to the complexity of normativity as it operates across the spheres of social and psychic life is precisely what antinormativity enables the field to most actively resist. While much more needs to be said about the critical costs of this resistance, my essay has turned its attention elsewhere, finding in “Eve’s Triangles” and the anti-epistemological dispositions that shaped her pedagogical reflections a way to hear, twenty-five years after Yale, the impasse that antinormativity now poses as the field’s most stubborn defense. *Are you a lesbian?*

This essay benefited greatly from conversations with audience members at the Dartmouth Institute for the Futures of American Studies and the The(e)ories: Critical Theory and Sexuality Studies Symposium at University College, Dublin.

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Notes

- 1 This was Yale's Third Annual Lesbian and Gay Studies Conference in 1989. In 1990, the conference moved to Harvard and then to Rutgers in 1991. The final "annual" conference—the sixth—was held at the University of Iowa in 1994.
- 2 Critical attention to Sedgwick's relation to the lesbian—as object of study, field of knowledge, and personal identity—has been persistent. See esp. Castle; de Lauretis; Jagose, "Feminism's"; Solomon; and Vermeule.
- 3 It was also during the summer of 1996 that Sedgwick received a terminal diagnosis when her breast cancer, first treated in 1991, "spread and bec[a]me incurable. So my own temporality and mortality came into an unexpected kind of focus—informed by my immersion in the AIDS emergency, but experienced, as it also happened, through a very different set of affective frameworks" ("Melanie" 639).
- 4 On the controversy over Fisher's work and Sedgwick's publication of it, see Hanson; McBride (esp. 94–98); and Reid-Pharr.
- 5 For the most important formulations of these concepts, see, respectively, Duggan; Eng; and Puar.
- 6 In "The L Word": Novelty in Normalcy," Sedgwick similarly reflected on the antihomophobic effects of mainstream projects. While she detailed the show's disregard for contemporary politics, she nonetheless argued that "the quantitative effect of a merely additive change—dramatizing more than one lesbian plot at a time—makes a qualitative difference in viewers' encounter with social reality. The sense of the lesbian individual, isolated or coupled, scandalous, scrutinized, staggering under her representational burden, gives way to the vastly livelier potential of a lesbian ecology" (Bio).
- 7 I use "queer theory" and "queer studies" to indicate two distinct but overlapping formations. *Queer theory* references a genre of critical analysis that emerged largely in U.S. English departments in the late 1980s when a complex brew of identity knowledges, cultural studies, and critical theory challenged the priorities and assumptions of traditional literary study. *Queer studies* names an interdisciplinary project increasingly institutionalized in formal terms, with undergraduate programs of study, faculty directors, and various degree-granting capabilities (certificates, undergraduate minors, and in some cases a major). It typically houses courses in queer theory, but its interdisciplinary

- commitments draw on much broader disciplinary traditions, some of which are antithetical to the anti-identitarian and post-humanist inclinations of queer theory. For an elaboration of the issues that attend this distinction, see Wiegman, *Object*, esp. 301–36.
- 8 Various confrontations with the hegemony of antinormativity can be found in the queer theoretical archive. Doan, Lochrie, and Traub each examine the ahistoricism it promotes; Jacobsen explores its inadequacy as a theory of power; Cohen critiques its homogenization of inequality; Martin considers its conflation of social structure and psychic life (“Extraordinary” and “Sexualities”); and both Jagose (*Orgasmology*) and Stephens offer historical accounts of the changing dynamics of normativity in the twentieth century.
- 9 For the discussion in queer studies about Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading,” see esp. Hanson; Love; Muñoz; and Wiegman, “Times.”
- 10 The first contradiction, Sedgwick writes, arises “between seeing homo/heterosexual definition [. . .] as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority (what I refer to as a minoritizing view), and seeing it [. . .] as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities (what I refer to as a universalizing view)” (*Epistemology* 1). The second contradiction exists “between seeing same-sex object choice [. . .] as a matter of liminality or transitivity between genders, and seeing it [. . .] as reflecting an impulse of separatism [. . .] within each gender” (1–2). The transitive view would subordinate the gender difference between gay men and lesbians in favor of privileging the similarity of their same-sex desire, while the gender separatist view would see same-sex object choice as a gender alliance, thereby wedding lesbians primarily to the identity category of women and gay men to the category of men. Jagose glosses the second contradiction in slightly different terms: “Gender-liminal understandings of homosexual desire posit homosexuals as an intermediary gender category, neither wholly masculine nor feminine; gender-separatist understandings represent homosexuals as the very epitome, the defining heart of their gender” (“Eve” 242).
- 11 Later, Sedgwick writes, “[T]he book will not suggest (nor do I believe there currently exists) any standpoint of thought from which the rival claims of these minoritizing and universalizing understandings of sexual definition could be decisively arbitrated as to their ‘truth.’ Instead, the performative effects of the self-contradictory discursive field of force created by their overlap will be my subject” (*Epistemology* 9).
- 12 For a general survey of the lively debate in literary studies about practices of reading, see Best and Marcus; Dean and Wiegman; Felski; Rooney; Stewart; and Weed.
- 13 In the proximity between “thin” and “fatal,” I hear resonances of Sedgwick’s deliberation on her own embodiment as a means to explain, through her lived experience as a fat woman with breast cancer, her identifications with gay men. See esp. her project with Michael Moon, “Divinity.”
- 14 For an important work that not only resists this tendency but forcefully articulates its limits, see Soto, esp. the chapter on Cherríe Moraga. In Soto’s terms, queer theory has largely taken its own

- critical practice toward queerness for granted, approaching what it understands as irrefutably non-normative in ways that flatten the complexity not only of the object of study but of the interpretative act as well. In focusing her discussion on the way that racialized subjectivity serves as a form of “evidence” to fulfill the intersectional and antinormative demands of the field, she demonstrates the importance for queer theory of approaching the nonnormative as a compelling problem for queer theoretical practices of reading.
- 15 As is well known, Butler was asked on various occasions about the capacity of her theory of performativity to describe embodied experience, especially in relationship to forms of gender experience that were not her own. While queer inquiry is now famously anti-identitarian, it remains to be explored how the critique of identity remains most potent when articulated by the subject who has a claim to the category within the prevailing terms of epistemological authority that identity confers. For its engagement with Butler, see Namaste and Prosser, along with Salamon’s defense of Butler’s theoretical position.
- 16 The book that would emerge, *American Anatomies*, followed Sedgwick by taking up the figure of the interracial male bond in u.s. literary and popular culture. Whereas Sedgwick focused on the circulation of heterosexual desires marked by the presence of a woman, I was interested in how the American celebration of homosociality required women’s banishment, as in Leslie Fiedler’s influential study, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, which interpreted the u.s. canon as a passionate story about interracial male friendship founded on a flight from civilization.
- With women paradigmatically displaced, my analysis focused on how discourses of sexual difference framed the contradiction between male superiority and racial hierarchy.
- 17 This failure is not mine alone, but a reflection of the difficulty in left criticism in general of addressing identificatory traffic between dominant and subordinated identity positions—as in white racial identifications with blackness, or straight male identifications with women or the feminine, or bourgeois alliances with the working class. The critical vocabulary for doing so is sparse and most often tuned to suspicion. Much more needs to be said, following Sedgwick, of the complexities of such cross-identifications in their political and psychic capacities.
- 18 Other scholars have found *Between Men* useful for thinking about race and racial formation, whether in conjunction with feminist concerns or not. But racialization was never a primary axis of analysis in Sedgwick’s work, leading some scholars to interpret her understanding of sexuality and sexual subjectivity as predicated on an implicit whiteness. Marlon Ross has been most decisive in this regard, casting *Epistemology* as paradigmatic in its deployment of the “claustrophobic assumptions of (white) queer theory” (182). See Somerville as well.
- 19 While the Oedipal scenario is classically understood as a triangle that orders desire and power hierarchically, many psychoanalytically inclined thinkers find it more useful to encounter its identifications as circulations that produce, narrate, and subordinate multiple triangulations: between father, mother, son; father, mother, daughter; mother, son, daughter; and among the

- siblings themselves. In a great deal of contemporary scholarship, the nuclear structure of the Oedipal has been superseded altogether, whether by considering the fractured kinship relations inaugurated by slavery in the Americas or the emergent forms of family wrought by queer kinship. See esp. Spillers for the former and Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?” for the latter.
- 20 The importance of this insight cannot be overstated, as it pushes the discussion of the patriarchal “traffic in women” first deployed by Gayle Rubin beyond both its originating framework and some of its most potent feminist appropriations. In her now classic essay of the same name, Rubin argues against using patriarchy as a generic concept for women’s oppression, preferring to restrict it to the “institution of fatherhood” that establishes and legitimates the patriarch’s “absolute power over wives, children, herds, and dependents” (168). In its place, she offers—famously—the concept of the “sex/gender system” to encourage feminist attention to the historical specificity of gender and sexual social arrangements (168). Luce Irigaray likewise uses the idea of the exchange of women, but her emphasis takes the commerce in women as the heart of patriarchal practice, such that male homosexuality is not “an exception,” but “the very basis of the general economy” (107). Sedgwick’s argument is situated
- between these two accounts, siding with Rubin’s insistence on historical specificity while pursuing what Irigaray sublimates in her conflation of heterosexual and homosocial masculine bonds, “the quicksilver of sex itself” (*Between* 26).
- 21 It is important to emphasize that these intimacies are loaded with negative affects—aggression, betrayal, anger, hatred—and hence that my argument for reengaging the triangle is in part an attempt to embrace the difficulty it presents to any simple adjudication of right and wrong, good and bad, inside and out, complicity and innocence.
- 22 Here, Sedgwick cites several of her own particularizing narratives, the most lengthy being “A Poem Is Being Written,” which addresses the socially ignored topic of female anal eroticism. See also “Tide and Trust,” which appeared as chapter 4 of *Epistemology of the Closet*, and “Privilege of Unknowing,” reprinted as the first chapter of *Tendencies*.
- 23 “Interlude, Pedagogic” is essentially an excerpt from a longer and much earlier essay, “Socratic Raptures” (1995), which opened with the story of Sedgwick’s fainting as a preamble to her deliberation on “*experimental* critical writing” and the queer performativity of the classroom (133). By reprinting only the first section for *Touching Feeling* in “interlude” form, Sedgwick performs the kind of writing she called for in the earlier essay.

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