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# TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES: ON PARANOID READING AND REPARATIVE READING

Heather Love

Perhaps the most common description of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work is *enabling*—I have used it myself many times to describe her effect on me. But I sometimes wonder whether I know what this word means. The problem could be overdetermination: there are so many things I might mean. Insofar as Sedgwick helped to launch queer literary studies, she played a significant role in allowing me to have a job that I could tolerate in academia, or even in a profession at all; along with a handful of others, she helped to make it possible for me to live a queer life that I could never have imagined. In addition to this most direct sense in which I have been enabled, there is also the fact that Sedgwick in her work explicitly sought to clear intellectual and affective space for others—to grant permission. She really knew how to reach out and touch someone. Reading her work tends to open unexpected conceptual possibilities, ways of thinking, gestures, and tones. I think this sense of opening or enlargement is what Judith Butler has in mind when she observes that an encounter with Sedgwick's work has “made her more capacious”: she writes that reading and teaching Sedgwick “has moved her to think otherwise . . . and . . . it has demanded that I think in a way that I did not know that thought could do—and still remain thought.”<sup>1</sup>

Sedgwick's readers describe being pushed—pleasurably—to the limits of what is knowable for them and then over the edge. Her writing allows for an encounter with forms of knowledge that depart from the keyed-up, confident pronouncements of professional critics. Drawing on a phrase of Sedgwick's, Deborah Britzman writes that Sedgwick's work allows her readers to spend time in “theory kindergarten,” which she describes as “a fun fair of experiments, thrilling surprises, mis-recognitions, near-missed encounters, and phantasies that lead, in the strangest directions, to our games of ‘let's pretend.’”<sup>2</sup> In two late essays on affect and method, “Para-

noid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" (2003)<sup>3</sup> and "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes" (2007), Sedgwick associates this realm of experimentation and pleasure with reparative reading. This kind of reading contrasts with familiar academic protocols like maintaining critical distance, outsmarting (and other forms of one-upmanship), refusing to be surprised (or if you are, then not letting on), believing the hierarchy, becoming boss. Sedgwick's readers have been fantastically responsive to the gifts she has transmitted through her writing: for many readers, including myself, her criticism holds out the possibility of being in some "other" relation to the academy, which, despite everything, can still make you feel very bad. This is, according to Britzman, the new "work of theory" that Sedgwick proposes: "The work of love."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the whole point of the "work of love" is that it would dislocate one's habitual relation to cognition and forms of mastery, but I admit to some persistent and not necessarily productive confusion about what the work of love is. I am enabled—but to do what? That's sort of like being in kindergarten, too, or at least that's how I remember it: a sense of endless, churning potential, and a half-painful sensation of not knowing how to live it out. I get that feeling reading Sedgwick's reflections on paranoid and reparative reading: perhaps in this case it can be explained by the oddness of the direct address in the essay's subtitle: "You're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you." It's true, I do. So what next?

I don't think I am wrong to take this title as an invitation—albeit an ironic one—to the kind of paranoid, reflexive, and mimetic thinking that the essay is about. I also take it as an act of aggression. Part of the thrill of the title is the suppleness of the address: she could be speaking to anyone. But it's also an address that endlessly produces its own bad objects, readers who take the "you" of the title personally. In my case, I am hailed as one of the latecomers to queer theory who picks up paranoid habits of mind as critical tools or weapons but is detached from the living contexts in which these frameworks were articulated (primarily, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s). I also find myself hailed in another less damning, but more embarrassing way. In this scenario, I am not the master theorist-exposer but the exposed: my misrecognition of myself as the essay's addressee is in the longing, absurdly hopeful mode of the amorous student—looking for love in all the wrong places. Those places are even more wrong now that my teachers are gone, and I can't indulge my early habits of waiting around cafés and doorways and empty lecture halls hoping for chance encounters—my pedagogical crushes have finally migrated inside the text. If I

remain unwilling, unreconciled in my heart to a world this empty, still, I've learned my lesson. I'm the teacher now.

These two apparently contradictory ways of seeing myself in the essay are actually related according to Sedgwick's understanding of the logic of paranoia. As she argues in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," the "first imperative of paranoia is *There must be no bad surprises*." (130). According to Sedgwick, paranoia works to anticipate and to ward off negative feeling, in particular "the negative affect of humiliation" (145). In its resistance to surprise, paranoia is "at once anticipatory and retroactive," thinking about all the bad things that have happened in order to be ready for all the bad things that are still to come. In this sense, the image of the paranoid person is both aggressive and wounded, knowing better but feeling worse, lashing out from a position of weakness. I recognize this portrait of myself as a shamed and longing student trying to get back her own by being right this time.

Sedgwick addresses herself not just to the aggression but to the losses that inform it, and she offers rich compensations for these losses. But taking up these gifts—allowing them in, allowing them to work on you—is not inevitable. A lot depends on whether you read Sedgwick's essay reparatively or in a paranoid mode. This might sound too *heavy*: you need to get right with Sedgwick so that you can accept her gifts. But I don't mean that. Instead, I want to suggest that question of how best to read her work is not settled. It's true that paranoid reading does not come off well in this essay: paranoid reading is described as a way of disavowing affect in order to claim ownership over truth; it is associated with a highly public and stigmatized manifestation of mental illness; it is described as *rigid, grim, single-minded, self-defeating, circular, reductive, hypervigilant, scouringly thorough, contemptuous, sneering, risk-averse, cruel, monopolistic, and terrible*. Look, you don't have to tell me twice.

In light of these moments in the essay, it seems clear that the "right" way to read it is *as reparative* (and we might see "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" as Sedgwick's attempt to make reparations for her earlier paranoid work, most notably *Epistemology of the Closet* [1990]); but also that we should read the essay *reparatively*, that is to say, meeting Sedgwick halfway. Reparation in the essay is on the side of *multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity, and love*. If reparative reading is better at the level of ethics and affect—and there is really no doubt that it is—it also looks better at the level of epistemology and knowledge. Even though paranoid or, in terms borrowed from Silvan Tomkins, strong theory can organize vast amounts of territory and tell big truths, it misses the descriptive richness of weak theory. Weak theory stays local, gives up on

hypervigilance for attentiveness; instead of powerful reductions, it prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy, and making whole.<sup>5</sup>

Still, despite the methodological gains and affective appeal of the turn away from critique, I just don't think it's possible to read Sedgwick's essay on paranoid and reparative reading as *only* a call for reparative reading. There is no doubt that she extends this call. But that is not all that she does. For one thing, Sedgwick acknowledges throughout the essay the benefits of paranoid reading. For another, the essay itself is not only reparative—it is paranoid. The paranoid aspect of the essay is evident not only in the subtitle but throughout the essay, and Sedgwick says so all but directly.

Sedgwick not only acknowledges the paranoid nature of her earlier published work, at one point she characterizes her reading in the “preceding section of the present chapter” (145) as an example of strong theory. There are also moments of pique in the essay that do not sound a reparative note. I think of the whipsmart exclamations that punctuate the essay. For instance, in a discussion of Michel Foucault's critique of pastoral care, she writes, “As if! I'm a lot less worried about being pathologized by my therapist than about my vanishing mental health coverage” (141). Sedgwick is more expansive about the negative affects that fuel her turn to reparative reading in the later essay she published on Klein (“Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes”); she discusses her “barely successful defenses against being devoured by my own cycles of greed, envy, rage and, in particular, overwhelming anxiety.”<sup>6</sup> The reflexivity and mimesis that Sedgwick identifies as the hallmarks of paranoid thought are evident throughout these two late essays. Perhaps the most striking example is the moment in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” when Sedgwick takes Fredric Jameson to task for the absolute and mandatory quality of his famous injunction, “Always historicize!” “*Always* historicize?” she asks (125). In her essay on Klein, Sedgwick describes her intellectual commitments, adding that they are never dualistic. *Never* dualistic?<sup>7</sup>

I do not point to such moments because I want to catch Sedgwick in her paranoid mode—though I'll try not to disavow entirely the aggressive and self-aggrandizing impulses that might push me in that direction. Still, as far as I can tell, my investment is somewhat different. I am trying to answer a call that I read in Sedgwick's work generally but especially in this essay—the call to acknowledge the negativity and the aggression at the heart of psychic life and to recognize that thinking is impossible without this kind of aggression. As in Klein, the schizoid position and the depressive position can't really be separated from each other: subjects vacillate between these two positions without ever coming to rest. My own reading of Sedgwick's essay vacillates between a schizoid-paranoid mode and a

reparative mode. What the essay argues, and what it performs, is the impossibility of choosing between them. So many of us feel compelled to answer Sedgwick's call to reparation, which cracks us out of academic business as usual and promises good things both for Sedgwick and for us. But I also think we need to answer the call to paranoia and aggression. Sedgwick taught me to let the affect in, but it's clear that by doing so I won't only be letting the sunshine in.

I would suggest that we do Sedgwick a disservice when we read her solely through a reparative mode. A reading of her work as all about love suggests that we are not listening to her, nor watching how she moves. In his recent book *Queer Optimism*, Michael Snediker writes that "Sedgwick's theorizations of shame are incontestably magnanimous and good-intentioned."<sup>8</sup> To which I want to say, *incontestably*?

Sedgwick argues that paranoia, with its aversion to surprises, forecloses not only bad experiences but also unexpected good ones. She writes,

Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones. Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters and creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (146)

In this fracturing of the rigid temporality of paranoia we see the stakes of Sedgwick's turn to reparative reading. Yet, just as allowing for good surprises means risking bad surprises, practicing reparative reading means leaving the door open to paranoid reading. There is risk in love, including the risk of antagonism, aggression, irritation, contempt, anger—love means trying to destroy the object as well as trying to repair it. Not only are these two positions—the schizoid and the depressive—inseparable, not only is oscillation between them inevitable, but they are also bound together by the glue of shared affect. Paranoia is a mode of anxiety about what might happen to you; reparation is also grounded in anxiety. The depressive position for Klein involves anxiety not only about what you may have done to others, but also about the unintended consequences of your actions in the present.

Sedgwick worries about the problem of unintended consequences across these two essays. She invokes a fantasy figure—the ultimate

teacher—who does no harm, “who is able to perceive and be perceived clearly enough that the things he or she does are efficacious, and no more than efficacious.”<sup>9</sup> But that fantasy of doing no harm can only ever be a fantasy, just as there can be no possibility of acting without unintended consequences. Sedgwick tells us that karmic individuals—that is, all of us—will always be more than efficacious, nontransparent to ourselves, and capable of harms that we cannot begin to imagine. Our own actions produce results that will come as surprises, often unwelcome ones.

It seems to me that the final challenge that Sedgwick issues in the Klein essay is the call to deidealize what must be the most idealized relationship for many of us in queer studies: the relation between student and teacher. For me, much more than the mother-child relationship or romantic love, the teacher-student relationship is an ideal, a model of generosity, repair, and union without loss. The fact that Sedgwick embodied that ideal for so many of us should not lead us to diminish the wide spectrum of her thinking and feeling. To read Sedgwick *always* reparatively is to miss the energizing force of paranoia in her work; it also reduces the kinds of relations we might now cultivate with her. Recognizing that it is not only reparation but damage at work in Sedgwick’s late essays will let us begin the hard work of deidealization. And that’s love too.

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## NOTES

1. Judith Butler, “Capacity,” in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, ed. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002), 109–19, quotation on 109.
2. Deborah P. Britzman, “Theory Kindergarten,” in Barber and Clark, *Regarding Sedgwick* (see note 1), 121–42, quotation on 123.
3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–52; hereafter page numbers are cited parenthetically in the text. An earlier version of this essay appeared as “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*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37.
4. Britzman, “Theory Kindergarten,” 137.
5. It is useful to compare Sedgwick’s late turn to reparative reading with a whole range of new methods in the humanities and the social sciences that have stepped back from

powerful but blunt methods of critique. Such methods can be understood as part of what French intellectual historian François Dosse calls “the descriptive turn,” and it would include things like Sharon Marcus’s “just reading” and Bruno Latour’s attention to “matters of concern,” as well as practices of “historical description” and “reading with the grain.” Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus survey these modes of “surface reading” in the introduction to the recent special issue of *Representations*, “The Way We Read Now.” See François Dosse, *Empire of Meaning: The Humanization of the Social Sciences*, trans. Hassan Melehy (1995; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” in “The Way We Read Now,” ed. Best and Marcus, special issue, *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.

6. Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes,” in “After Sex: On Writing since Queer Theory,” ed. Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, special issue, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 625–42, quotation on 627.
7. *Ibid.*, 628.
8. Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 16.
9. Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein,” 641.