

“REPARATIVE READING” AS QUEER PEDAGOGY

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In the current climate, it is rare to reflect critically on one’s teaching practice. Most thinking about teaching in academic institutions too often takes the form of bureaucratic compliance with “quality assurance” agendas that seem more concerned with the form rather than the content of pedagogical excellence. My own teaching is in that broad terrain called “theory and method in the study of religions.” I offer courses that examine a broad spectrum of critical theory—feminist, queer, postcolonial, disability, and critical race theories—that might be put to work to critique, reform, and remake our complex and variegated discipline(s) in the light of some serious critiques about its grounds and practices. My teaching is overtly political, and I teach in an institution that is well-known for its leftist political leanings and activism. To a degree, such an environment makes taking a political stance toward my teaching and research relatively easy, although not without its dangers pedagogically speaking—how do we convey the urgency, and necessity of thinking through questions of justice, injustice, and the power of intellectual work in enabling inequitable power relations that underwrite our disciplines, without imposing a single point of view legitimated by the scholar’s position of authority as the “subject who knows”? What I hope, however, is to enable students to understand a set of core problematics, to engage with the various proposals for their resolution or complication, and to help them emerge better equipped to negotiate the political stakes that require both thinking and action, knowing and doing.

What such a pedagogical philosophy hinges on is drawing out, in any given instance or context under consideration, the core problematic of the informing and normativizing structures and premises that operate according to a logic of sameness and difference. This is necessary in order to make a case for the

obligation to engage with difference as irreducible to the kinds of dualistic thinking that underwrite the field of the study of religions, where difference operates merely as a point of contrast to that which is normativized as the “same.” And critical theory is very good at not only showing the problematic structurations of binary thought and the politics and exclusions they enable but also making the case for subjectivity as itself infinitely variegated rather than monolithic, and from this stance, to enable a mapping of difference concretely and contextually. So, my work as a teacher is not only to facilitate intellectual reflection on and labor against the oppressive structures at work in our field and those they connect to but also to foster individual investment in the (re) making of our selves that may begin to resist—as an ethical but also intellectual/political project—the violent forms of subjectivity that binary structures demand of us, which place us in problematic relation to others and which impoverish our thinking.

Turning to the concerns that are the focus of this special section, my own interests lie less in the various “religious” orientations to queer subjectivities and questions, or even their potential for destabilizing heteropatriarchy and so on, than in the fundamental assumptions, working practices, and intellectual frameworks that ground what scholars in the field think their task is and what principles might inform the practice and ethos of “queering.” For Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “queer” is “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”¹ Queering’s intentionality, its performative instantiations, are constitutionally, self-avowedly resistant to monolithic modes of articulation and being. Because of its determined connection to everyday politics and intimate life and pleasures, queering lends itself well to the pedagogical task of complicating and deepening encounters with difference. It aids the work of dismantling violent structures and intellectual frameworks that dictate how and what we know without then inevitably reinscribing the violence.

Sedgwick tackles many of these issues in her 2003 book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, in which she takes forward the proposal she made first in 1997 for “reparative reading” to point to the incapacity of “paranoid readings” to account for the very queer pleasures, lifeways, and politics they ostensibly seek to enable. In the aftermath of the impasse that theory seems to have reached in the last decades, circling ever more futilely around a hermeneutics of suspicion, and the aggressive, hypervigilant ownership over truth it has claimed, Sedgwick’s text is an invitation to supplement “paranoid reading” practices characteristic of the interrogative modes of critical theory and its disavowal of affect, especially the “negative affect of humiliation” with

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

"reparative reading."² Reparative reading, according to Sedgwick, is better able to connect learning intimately to experience and affect because it is "on the side," as Heather Love explains, "of *multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity, and love*."³ I want briefly to lay out the hope that I find in Sedgwick's "reparative turn" for bringing learning and action together and for drawing affect into the learning/teaching process. In what will be an all-too-rushed account, I can only gesture toward reparative reading as a practice that is at the heart of "queering," but I want to put it forward as something that may provide one orientation for the pedagogical goals that are our concern here.

Paranoid readings, for Sedgwick, are predominantly focused on avoiding surprise and thus are paradigmatically the sign of the knowing subject, one never caught unawares: the "first imperative of paranoia is *There must be no bad surprises*."⁴ It is both "anticipatory and retroactive" inasmuch as it turns from the injustices—the bad surprises—of the past, to foreseeing their repetition in the future. As Love astutely puts it, "the image of the paranoid person is both aggressive and wounded, knowing better but feeling worse, lashing out from a position of weakness."⁵ Paranoia keeps the scholar in a state of indecision, unable to *act* for fear of forgetting to *know* the horrors that await if vigilance is surrendered. Thus, as a response to the acute injustices enabled and disseminated through the academy, critical theorists have necessarily engaged in paranoia as a means of avoiding absorption into the dominant paradigms of oppressive knowledge production but as a consequence are unable to attend to life and love, those things for which we think we are fighting.

As Sedgwick lays it out, a reparative reading position is "no less acute than a paranoid position," that underwrites the genre of critical theory, "no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic." Its value lies, rather, in the "different range of affects, ambitions, and risks" it affords the critic. "What we can best learn from such practices," she proposes, are "the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them."⁶ In the opening paragraph of *Touching Feeling*, she moves to consolidate the case for connecting reparative reading to learning/teaching, describing her project as the exploration of "promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought and pedagogy," in order to resist the paranoid preoccupation of theory with subjugation and emancipation.⁷

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 145.

³ Heather Love, "Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," *Criticism* 52 (2010): 235–41, quotation on 237.

⁴ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

⁵ Love, "Truth and Consequences," 237.

⁶ Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 35.

⁷ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 1.

As such, it is already marked by “queerness.” What motivates Sedgwick to pursue this line are two main ideas: first, the recognition that in order to break out of the self-perpetuating cycle between repression and liberation, there must be better ways of thinking about knowledge and its relation to desire, sexuality, subjectivity, and politics; and second, a view derived from her reading of Buddhism that perception “involves neither intrinsic identity nor a split between perceiver and perceived.”⁸ The Buddhist view is a provocative one not only for thinking through our relations with our students but also for recognizing the tenuous nature of our roles as the “subjects who know.”

What I appreciate about Sedgwick’s work is her willingness and determination to move beyond what is all too often the impasse that results when critique is the product of paranoid readings. I recognize well her description of her students as “dab hands at unveiling the hidden historical violences that underlie a secular, universalist liberal humanism.”⁹ Like Sedgwick, I have come to question the value and potential of repetitively “arriving on this hyperdemystified, paranoid scene with the ‘news’ of a hermeneutics of suspicion.”¹⁰ Sedgwick’s hope to replace paranoid reading with that of reparative reading, one that brings learning and action, knowing and doing into proximity appeals to me. I agree that the paranoid readings provoked by the hermeneutics of suspicion can resemble a “monopolistic program” that “disallows any explicit recourse to reparative motives, no sooner to be articulated than subject to methodical uprooting.”¹¹ She retrieves instead an important pedagogical tool that enables us to take our students beyond simply critique folded on critique and ask together “Can we read again reparatively?” What would such a reading do for our relationship with our fields, our subjects, our students? What learning from the other (radically different, radically ourselves) is given here? And what might such a reading enable, queerly speaking?

In a humorously titled chapter in *Touching Feeling*, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” Sedgwick both demonstrates the tremendous power wielded by paranoid practices of critique that are pervasive in critical theory as a means of resisting hegemony but which in turn have taken on the character of unchallengeable articles of faith, and acknowledges its potential to hold out hope for change in difficult times. However, its paranoid nature can result in stagnation and circularity, where the critical gesture gets locked into monopolistic, self-defeating repetitions of orthodoxies. As the following passage shows, however, from the exhaustion and paralysis of paranoia that attended many analyses of this moment, Sedgwick draws the possibility of reparation:

⁸ Ibid., 171.

⁹ Ibid., 139–40.

¹⁰ Ibid., 143.

¹¹ Ibid., 144.

to read from a reparative position is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. 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 or 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.¹²

While she commits herself to thinking about a variety of ethical issues in her writing, Sedgwick's convictions are clearest in her desire to think differently and thereby extract, as already noted, "sustenance from the objects of culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them."¹³ We may see here how we might read this desire into the analysis of queer practices and identifications with the normativizing regimes of religious traditions and secularist paradigms, those which are not directed toward the nourishment of queer lives but which may nonetheless be wielded reparatively and then put to work in the labor against oppression and injustice. Sedgwick here gives us hopeful openings, for example, for enabling retrievals from the religious traditions we work on, as well as for thinking differently about difference and sameness from the places where we stand, know, and act. Reparative reading opens up the imagination to an anticipation of a different future and a different past, releasing us from the persistent paranoid imperative to fear the worst, to vigilantly patrol the territory we think we master but are in fact subject to.

Sedgwick's gift of reparative reading is echoed in Robin Weigman's eloquent plea for its necessity for queer feminist criticism, establishing how it might respond to the critical impasse at which "theory" has arrived:

For in the political calculus of the present, where faith in the equation between knowledge and political transformation has undergone enormous attrition, many left-oriented cultural critics, including queer feminist ones, have grown unsure of the self-authorising thesis that has given political motive to decades of scholarly work: that *knowing* is the means for knowing what *to do*. In this context, in which the political claims of criticism have begun to sound hollow to even the most committed of practitioners, it is difficult not to read the turn toward reparative reading as a reparative one. For in the call to eschew the critical sovereignty of critique in favor of a practice of interpretation that privileges what the

¹² *Ibid.*, 146.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 150–51.

object of study needs or knows, reparative reading revises the political meaning and affective environment of the critical act... The current attraction to reparative reading is about repairing the value and agency of interpretative practice itself.¹⁴

Weigman here points to what I think reparative reading offers efforts to queer the curriculum. It is not enough to simply equip our students with the tools to identify inadequate, poorly constructed or grounded arguments (inasmuch as theology and religious studies may not have accounted fully and properly for queer perspectives) or to develop the skills of critique and resistance to oppressive modes of knowledge such that they are dismantled, however important these are (so this is not a call to abandon paranoia: it has its place and purpose); rather, in parallel, we need to cultivate and nourish an ethos that binds together thinking with feeling, connects us and our students to bodies, desires, and lives that may be unknowable without (ourselves) being affected, and staying the course even when confronted with “bad surprises,” choosing instead the risk of hope. In a moment when teaching and learning are subjected to metrics, regulation, and market drivers, hope is not a bad thing to give our students and indeed to embrace ourselves.

To close, I haven't here directly addressed the practicalities of curriculum reform or indeed attended specifically to the *nature* of queering, although I do believe it to balance well the need for paranoia and reparation; instead, what I have tried to lay out is perhaps an underlying principle that might underwrite its intentions and its trajectories: to bring together knowing and knowing what to do—a work of repair that sutures together critique and action—to make a plea for the reparative potential of a queer pedagogy and curriculum. Reparative reading enables complication but resists paralysis; it connects bodies and representation; it is political, hopeful, energetic, but most of all, possible. The ability to connect knowing to knowing what to do, to bind ethics to affect, without losing the acuity and necessity of critical thought, is perhaps in the end what queering should be: an act of love for our students, for ourselves.

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¹⁴ Robyn Weigman, “The Times We’re In: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative ‘Turn,’” *Feminist Theory* 15 (2014): 4–25, quotation on 7.

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