theories and methodologies

Forgetting Sedgwick

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EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK WAS NOT A HISTORIAN OF SEXUALITY, BUT SHE WAS KEENLY AWARE OF THE HISTORICITY OF SEXUALITY AND EROTIC desire in ways unlike other major figures in queer theory. This fact has gone largely unnoticed in queer studies, a field dominated by literary and cultural critics that has an uneasy relation with academic history. An example of the historicity of Sedgwick's theories of sexuality can be seen in her famous critique of Foucault's Great Paradigm Shift—that imaginary moment in the late nineteenth century when the category of the modern homosexual was thought to displace the category of the sodomite (*Epistemology* 44). The formulation of axiom 5 in *Epistemology of the Closet*—"the historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity" (44)—reveals a deep consciousness of the "irreducible *historicity* of all things . . . discerning the time-and-place specificity of a thing, identifying the ways in which it relates to its context or milieu, and determining the extent to which it is both enabled and hamstrung by this relationship," to cite the historian Hayden White's description of history as critique (224). If Foucauldian genealogy (or a "history of the present") "begins with an analysis of blind spots in our current understanding, or with a problematization of what passes for 'given' in contemporary thought" (Halperin 13), it is vital, as Sedgwick puts it, to "denaturalize the present, rather than the past" (*Epistemology* 48). Sedgwick's vantage point on a queer past pivots around "homosexuality as we *conceive of it* today" (45), a phrase as resonant now in sexuality studies as was Foucault's reference to the homosexual as a species (Foucault 43). So entrenched are the modern categories of identity that Sedgwick repeats the phrase over and over in her cogent analysis of our current conceptions of sexuality. Such insistent differentiation between an alien past and an equally—if not more—alien present, the distinction between "them" and "us," reverberates across the history of homosexuality. Consider, for instance, Matt Houlbrook's discussion of men who refrain from using "'gay' in the way we would use the term today" (xiii) or Jonathan Ned Katz's un-

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derstanding of the presentness of our present standpoint—"what we today recognize as erotic feelings and acts" (6).

Sedgwick's historical consciousness can also be glimpsed in her scrutiny of Foucault's "act of polemical bravado"—his suggestion that 1870 might serve as the birth date of the term *modern homosexual*—which informs her discursive analysis of the epistemological consequences of a "unidirectional narrative of supersession," the proposition that any emerging sexual type necessarily effaces earlier models (*Epistemology* 44, 46). In an elaborate and stunning account of problems that have arisen as a result of queer theory's colossal misreading of Foucault's phrase "the homosexual was now a species," the historian David Halperin clarifies how queer critics invariably "mistake [Foucault's] discursive analysis for a historical assertion" (46). Halperin credits Sedgwick with producing a critique capable of dislodging the category of homosexual, thereby shifting attention away from essentialist-constructivist debates that were going nowhere. In so doing, Sedgwick produces

> an original analysis of homo/heterosexual discourse in terms of what she described as a perennial tension among and between four definitional axes, which she identified as minoritizing/universalizing modes of homosexual definition and as gender-transitive versus gender-intransitive or gender-separatist modes of homosexual definition. (11)

Denaturalizing the present allows Sedgwick an opportunity to reformulate historical thinking and ask the kinds of questions that White links to the practice of history as critique: "what is there about the present that requires revision or reform of the conventional historical 'apparatus'" (224)? But Halperin contends that Sedgwick no sooner initiates this powerful "conceptual move" than she abandons her interest in historical questions and, as a consequence, fails to grasp how her critique falls into the same trap of displacement (11). In other words, while she recognizes that residual elements of the sodomite remain in the creature we would come to recognize as the modern homosexual—an insight that animates a major shift in the practice of sexual history—she neglects to acknowledge how the essentialist-constructivist debates could not be made to disappear. In one of the earliest intellectual exchanges between queer theory and queer historiography, Halperin praises Sedgwick's critique as "magisterial," but he is troubled by what he sees as her reluctance to figure out the "historical reasons" for the "definitional incoherence at the core of the modern notion of homosexuality" (11, 12). Sedgwick, he concludes, "deliberately set aside historical questions about the emergence of modern sexual categories and described those questions as effectively superseded by her own approach" (11). Halperin then positions his own argument as an "overdue and much-needed historical grounding" that he believes Sedgwick's analysis lacked (109). His response in an essay equally magisterial is unquestionably significant, but his insistence on Sedgwick's apparent lack of historical grounding obscures how her axioms might also be read as an engaged mode of history as critique.

A helpful primer to Sedgwick's key ideas observes that the primum mobile of queer theory "worried that the urgency, reach and power of some of her theoretical paradigms may have been limited by the fact that her evidence was drawn from literary texts" (Edwards 11). Sedgwick also worried about the presentism of queer criticism and called on critics to forge new methods to "access . . . these rich and varied histories" (Deb Schwartz, qtd. in Maynard 73). Queer literary critics such as Scott Herring and Heather Love, both highly influenced by Sedgwick, have shown a willingness to approach queer narrativity within a historical consciousness in ways that counter the popular misconception of queer criticism as a useful framework primarily in the analysis of contemporary cultures. That queer

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historians have overlooked the historicity of Sedgwick's theories of modern sexual subjectivities seems more surprising, but queer history's negotiation with queer theory is anything but straightforward. A cursory review of recent historical work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century sexual cultures suggests that Sedgwick's status as a theorist has already been forgotten, since it is mentioned only in passing in works as wide-ranging as Houlbrook's *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957*, John Howard's *Men like That: A Southern Queer History*, Morris B. Kaplan's *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love, and Scandal in Wilde Times*, Regina Kunzel's *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, Katz's *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality*, and Martha Vicinus's *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778–1928*. We should be wary, however, of locating influence merely in footnotes and indexes, which are often a poor guide to assessing the impact of a scholar like Sedgwick on queer history making. Indeed, I would argue that the influence she exerts is so profound that it has become a new orthodoxy.

I have already suggested that Sedgwick's acute sensibilities of the historicity of sexual taxonomies constitute history as critique, for "if by history we mean not simply 'the past' but the relation between the 'present' understood as a part of 'history' and the 'past,' then it is incumbent upon us to think about the possibility of the present *as* history" (White 224). Historians remain perplexed about how to speak of past sexual subjects without lapsing into the language of the present. It is all very well to call, as did Sedgwick, for the dismantling of the enforced linkages between gender and sexual object choice, but in the absence of a new lexicon that allows us to speak about any number of possible sexualities, how can new epistemologies evolve? Sexuality's power—drives, feelings, acts, identities, desires—is poorly harnessed by those arbitrary neologisms first coined in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the dominance of binary thought—hetero/homo, normative/deviant—has hardly receded, and there is no straightforward way of managing in historical writing Sedgwick's unwieldy notion of sexuality as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning . . . [in which] the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 8). What "queer" teaches us is that no matter how many new words we invent, none will ever adequately capture the contradictions and confusions of individuals as sexual beings; simply put, according to Sedgwick's first axiom, "people are different from each other" (*Epistemology* 22). The problem for the historian of sexuality is how to explore the sexual past, even the modern past, without falling back on those seductive-in-their-simplicity terms. Sedgwick's thought thus trickles down into the history of sexuality in oblique ways, as evident in Robert Aldrich's explanation that "no single term encompasses the variety of same-sex attitudes and behaviors . . . that have existed from antiquity to the present. Nor can one label capture fully the changing perspectives of those who felt emotional and sexual preferences for their own sex, and the ways in which society reacted" (12). Recognizing how *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, *queer*, and *heterosexual* are terms locked into prescribed structures of identity exposes the blind spots of attempting an excavation of the queer and always alien world of the sexual past. New methodologies in the practice of the history of sexuality will need to determine the usefulness of Sedgwick's notion of "*nonce* taxonomy, of the making and unmaking and *re*making and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world" (*Epistemology* 23).

Queer history has been in no rush to think through the consequences of the Sedg-

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wickian critique in historical analysis, which is perhaps why it remains an emerging field of academic inquiry, its promise unfulfilled. In the meantime, the historian in Sedgwick understood the historicity of queer theory itself, and as early as 1998 she predicted its demise: "In the short-shelf-life American marketplace of images, maybe the queer moment, if it's here today, will for that very reason be gone tomorrow" (*Tendencies* xii). Even so, she strenuously advocated an ongoing sense of queerness and envisioned its persistent and enduring usefulness as a theoretical framework across the academy. She would surely have appreciated how new developments in queer history have only now—at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century—begun to flourish, well behind literary and cultural criticism. Sedgwick regarded "queer" as much more than a passing phase—on the contrary, queer might also be a "continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*" (*Tendencies* xii). It would seem, then, that any worries about the limitations of her literary examples were only partly justified. Far from forgotten, Sedgwick has radically changed how we think about sexuality in history, and any historiography of LGBT/Q studies will need to acknowledge more explicitly the intellectual force of her arguments.

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