theories and methodologies

Eve at Amherst

ANDREW PARKER

EVE'S TENURE AT AMHERST—SHE TAUGHT IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT FROM 1984 TO 1988—COINCIDED WITH THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF coeducation at the college and the early years of the AIDS pandemic. She found on her arrival a culture that had neither fully welcomed its female students and faculty members nor begun to acknowledge its homophobia. Eve gave early on a witty and provocative lecture to the campus community called "Sabrina Doesn't Live Here Anymore," which enlisted as a feminist icon a nude female statue that had been glorified and abused throughout its long association with Amherst. Known today mostly by Eve's former colleagues and students (and the occasional still-disgruntled alumnus), the talk catalyzed campus activism and lead ultimately to the founding of the Women's and Gender Studies Department, perhaps the first in the country to adopt that compound name. Those familiar with Eve's later work may be surprised by her lecture's full-throated feminism—*Between Men* had yet to appear, and queer theory was hardly a gleam in anyone's eye. Even after a quarter century, however, its inventiveness and turnings of phrase could be mistaken for no one else's. Readers of *PMLA* may appreciate particularly the opening section of the talk, reproduced below, for the window it provides onto an academic culture then on the brink of transformation. It also powerfully conveys, beyond any reminiscence I could provide, what Eve sounded like the moment I first heard her speak in public.[1]

Excerpt from "Sabrina Doesn't Live Here Anymore"
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

I wanted to start by saying a little about the first woman at Amherst. When she arrived here in 1857, she was different from the other students. Not only was she female, but she weighed 350 pounds, she was bronze in color, and she had no clothes. A historian of Sabrina writes:

> For a while she occupied a place of honor between old North College and the Octagon. She remained here for several years and enjoyed comparative peace and quiet. The first prank which was played upon

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> her occurred a few years later when a youth arrayed the goddess in divers garments stolen from a nearby girls' school. Needless to say, the student was dealt with by the faculty and to this day Sabrina's fair cheek bears remembrance of the student's ill-timed vengeance. From this time on, Sabrina was the butt of the undergraduate body. She was whitewashed, indecorously decorated, and often anticipated her future career by frequent changes of color. Many were the humiliations Sabrina suffered at the hands of various blades. After a while the faculty, weary of the students' rude treatment of the gift to the college of such a distinguished man—the lieutenant governor who had donated her—decided to put an end to the affair. Then, too, her appearance was becoming increasingly unattractive. Accordingly, the college janitor was given the task of removing and doing away with the statue. [You probably know the end of the story from Oedipus.—EKS] This faithful servant of the college could not withstand the mute appeal of the goddess for mercy, and accordingly laid her away from the prying eyes of the students in his barn, where she remained hidden for two years as the tradition of the hidden goddess took root.

The history of abuses to Sabrina has been told in many articles. What I'd like you to imagine is Sabrina's point of view on what was happening to her during those years. What I think she mostly felt was confused. To begin with, she is told that she's a goddess, but she's compulsively degraded, humiliated, and treated like property. People pretend to feel awe for her, but they treat her as the most familiar of familiar objects. She is told that she is especially sanctified and spiritual, but she is totally identified with her body. She can't move, but other people's actions towards her are attributed to things she mysteriously "does." In one newspaper article, for instance: "Sabrina eventually *lures* some susceptible Amherst student to slice her off at the base and stick her in a truck" (italics added). Another confusing thing: Sabrina doesn't know her real name. She's never sure if she is Sabrina or The Sabrina. Are there other Sabrinas? Is Sabrina a proper noun or a common noun? Is Sabrina a goddess or a whore?

Then again, Sabrina is supposed to be important and powerful, but she is a completely passive object of violence and mutilation. Any time anybody is angry at anybody, they take it out on Sabrina. And I go back to that sentence by the historian: "Needless to say, the student [who committed an indignity to Sabrina in the first place] was dealt with by the faculty and to this day *Sabrina's* fair cheek bears remembrance of the student's ill-timed vengeance" (italics added). Faculty angry at student, student angry at faculty, student takes it out on *Sabrina*, who has been the problem in the first place. Plus, Sabrina keeps getting thrown down wells, buried in chicken guano, having her arms and her toes carelessly amputated—and everybody is giving her a hard time because she doesn't have a sense of humor! It's confusing.

How do I know that Sabrina is confused? I asked Sabrina. I asked her if she wasn't angry at the treatment she had received. And you know what she said? She said, "I'm not angry, just *confused*." But her teeth were clenched so tightly that it was difficult to hear her.

Why wasn't Sabrina angry? When men get angry, they beat up on Sabrina. Sabrina's immobilized; she can't beat up on anybody. If she got angry she couldn't take it out on anyone else, so she'd fall to pieces. She said, "I'd fall to pieces. *They wouldn't take me seriously anymore*." For a final word from Sabrina, I asked her if she had any advice for undergraduate women. She said, "Don't let anybody put you on a pedestal."

Note

1. The talk was published in *Passages of Time: Narratives in the History of Amherst College*, ed. Douglas C. Wilson (Amherst: Amherst Coll. P, 2007; print; 279–91). I am grateful to the Trustees of Amherst College for their permission to reproduce pages 279–81.

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