I met Eve Sedgwick on a bridge in Chicago in 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 before, once, at a conference at Yale the year before when her session erupted in a contested shout-out about her sexuality. “Are you a lesbian?” Audience members demanded to know. That was Eve 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.

The Eve on the bridge was risking much less walking across it than the Eve at Yale, no matter the fact that we too would prioritize our need over her privacy, pretending that our friendliness was not an intrusion, not a grasp...
at her emerging fame, not a desire to become close to whatever she was close to. That was because we were then, like now, already after Eve—aft er her in the sense of trying to find a way to be connected to her because she had gotten so far ahead of many of us. The “us” I am speaking of here comes not from professional or personal intimacy. Like most people, I was never Eve’s friend, nor her student, nor a colleague. By the time I arrived at Duke, she had already moved to New York. I became friends with some of her friends only after they had been transformed by knowing her. Even the first psychotherapist I met in Durham had already belonged to Eve. The “us” I deploy then is aimed at anyone for whom the distance to be traveled between Sedgwick and Eve is a potent grammatical formulation for marking proximity to queer theoretical inquiry. That’s Eve.

I talked to Eve 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*—did not arrive into print until 1997, right around the time when the genocidal emergency of AIDS was “downgraded” in the U.S. 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 history as a medical possibility. Today, the transformation of the disease remains grossly incomplete and in many parts of the world a mere fantasy, 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 popular and public health discourses as a chronic disease.3 This transition brought hope and a new kind of mourning to many of the communities that were struggling to survive it. Hope: that the present would be the scene of a collective “out living,” such that the “Why me?” of the one with AIDS and the “why me?” of the one who would survive it could be united by new kinds of future-formulated questions. And a new kind of mourning: for everything—everyone—who had not lived to feel the political texture, the psychic density, the grip of possibility that the normalizing of AIDS as a chronic disease promised to deliver.

I use the word normalizing on purpose, because it is a strange feature of our present that the route that so much of queer theory would take after Eve

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3 Some of the controversy over this book can be found in the different arguments advanced by Hanson; McBride, especially 94-98; and Reid-Pharr.
turned its political gaze increasingly against normalization of every kind, becoming less and less exacting about which norms a despised community can and cannot live without, and why the choices are never its alone. In this, the field that has emerged to claim an interdisciplinary domain called Queer Studies can seem oddly unsure at times about the very impulse that generates Sedgwick’s work: the deep regard she has for the ways that people struggle imperfectly to negotiate a world that is inadequate for what they need from it. To read Sedgwick in this affective register is to remember the simple thing that she never forgot, which is that homophobia’s cultural ambition in the modern west has been distinctly genocidal. It is this knowledge that underwrites Sedgwick’s ability to take seriously the whole spectrum of responses that homophobia has induced, including the way it fractures the political utility of identity even as it makes identity necessary to think with and through. It also begins to explain why she would never have denied, no matter how much it might have personally hurt her, what others needed when they asked her to define herself in their terms. Are you a lesbian? Refusing to refuse the question, she offered on more than one occasion a simple, resonant no. 4

By understanding both the emotional intensity and the political density of such a question, Sedgwick might well have added an eighth axiom to the seven field-defining ones that open Epistemology of the Closet: that it is impossible to know in advance how anyone will need to travel the distance between her desires and the world in which those desires must (try to) live. 5

I read this unwritten axiom as crucial to the pedagogical power she invested

4 Numerous scholars have discussed Sedgwick’s relation to the lesbian—as object of study, personal identification, or political affiliation—from a variety of different critical perspectives. See Castle; DeLauretis; Edwards; Jagose, “Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick” and “Feminism’s Queer Theory”; Solomon, and Vermeule.

5 This would be added to the remarkable insight with which she articulates the critical positions that have generated the field, that 1- “People are different from one another”; 2- “The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, antihomophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we can’t know in advance how they will be different”; 3- “There can’t be an a priori decision about how far it will make sense to conceptualize lesbian and gay male identities together. Or separately”; 4- “The immemorial, seemingly ritualized debates on nature versus nurture take place against a very unstable background of tacit assumptions and fantasies about both nurture and nature”; 5- “The historical search for a Great Paradigm Shift may obscure the present conditions of sexual identity”; 6- “The relation of gay studies to debates on the literary canon is, and had best be, tortuous”; and 7- “The paths of allo-identification are likely to be strange and recalcitrant. So are the paths of auto-identification” (22; 27; 36; 40; 44; 48; 59).
in queer critique, where every attempt at queer world building requires attention not only to the mobility, volatility, and comfort of identity, but to the painstaking work of trying to repair the damage caused by the contradictions that arise from the unavoidable necessity of inhabiting and resisting identity’s interpellative allure. This is what the anti-identitarianism so lauded as the central maneuver of queer inquiry might best be taken to mean—less a critique of identity’s inability to fulfill the political aspirations invested in it than an understanding of the double binds that shape sexual subjectivity, where what we inherit from the “architects of our present culture” are two spelling binding contradictions, both of which are “internal” to “all important twentieth century understandings of homo/heterosexual definition, heterosexist and antihomophobic” (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 political dilemma that Sedgwick’s founding text so rigorously pursues.

“The purpose of this book,” she writes in its opening pages, “is not to adjudicate between the two poles of either of these contradictions, for, if its argument is right, no epistemological

6 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)” (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 toward 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 definitionally reliant on gender alliances, thereby wedding lesbians primarily to the identity category of women and gay men to the category of men.

In her discussion of Sedgwick’s work, Annamarie Jagose glosses the second contradiction in slightly different terms: “Gender-liminal understandings of homosexual desire posit homosexual as an intermediary gender category, neither wholly masculine nor feminine; gender-separatist understands represent homosexuals as the very epitome, the defining heart of their gender” (“Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” 242). For Jagose, the force of Sedgwick’s point is about what we might call homosexual gender; my reading emphasizes the way that an understanding of gendered object choice produces likeness or difference in defining the relationship between gay men and lesbians. Hence when Jagose writes that for Sedgwick, it is not “that one is more or less correct than its opposite but that, operating in tandem, they produce homosexuality as a profoundly incoherent category,” I would put “homo/heterosexual definition” in the place of the category “homosexual” as a way to maintain the relationality I see as at stake here (“Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” 242).
grounding now exists from which to do so. Instead, I am trying to make the strongest possible introductory case for . . . the centrality for this nominally marginal, conceptually intractable set of definitional issues to the important knowledges and understandings of twentieth-century Western culture as a whole” (2). The significance of these contradictions arises from their collaborative role not only as the productive scene of both homophobic power and anti-homophobic reconstruction, but as the formative agency through which the very history of the present can be known.

It might be hard today to recapture the audacity of Sedgwick’s proclamation 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, announced in the book’s second sentence, follows Michel Foucault’s The History of Sexuality but raises the ante of his historicizing claims by pondering the consequences of the fact that, among the many different figures generated by 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 Sedgwick eschews, as does Foucault, a project that would seek to diagnose the cause of this radical contraction of sexual definition, she revises the contemporary critical uptake of his famous declaration that “the homosexual was now a species” by probing the perspective from which scholars in sexuality studies approach the coherence and legibility of homosexuality in scholarship that founds the field (History, 43). For Sedgwick, the prime motivation for Epistemology of the Closet is thus to “denaturalize the present, rather than the past—in effect to render less destructively presumable homosexuality ‘as we know it today’” (48). In this commitment, Epistemology of the Closet overturns the familiar assumption that politically engaged scholarship fulfills its ethical obligation by offering analytic resolutions to the social crises it names, asking critical practice to do more than render rhetorical remedies for the complexities of living. To be sure, Sedgwick writes to live, which is why I cast her writing in the present tense, in terms of what it is and does, not what it was or did. But her work repeatedly defers any pretense of political mastery over her subject,

7 And later, “the 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” (9).
Robyn Wiegman

a deferral that is crucial to understanding not only her contribution to queer theory but the pedagogical challenge of continuing to learn from her.

To think about Eve Sedgwick in this way is to encounter her from another distance, one that locates her loss—or more properly our loss—in the context of queer theory’s own institutional present, where the interdisciplinary field that has emerged, Queer Studies, might be said to have secured its anti-identitarian identifications by following the critical impulses that lead from Foucault to Judith Butler, neither of whom was ever asked to produce their sexual object choice as the authorizing condition of their own critical speech.8 I am speaking of course about the tradition of anti-normativity they helped to establish, and the ways in which queer critique has always been less anxious about its anti-identitarian aspirations when the move against identity was tacitly confirmed by the authority that identity confers.9 This is not to split the field into camps, as if the contributions of Foucault or Butler could ever be reduced to those parts of their work that, respectively, historicize or politicize normativity, no matter how central they both are to the citational histories that prioritize anti-normativity as the field’s primary political commitment and critical rule.10 But it is also to establish my own belated need to deliberate on the itinerary that Eve’s work offers—of analyzing the force, endurance, and difficult challenge of the

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8 My point is not that these scholars encountered no resistance to their work on the grounds of identity. Foucault, rather famously, was pressed to answer questions on various occasions about his theorization of homosexuality as well as his sparse attention to issues of gender and to political action, while Butler was called to defend her rendering of performativity in relation to trans identities and identifications. My neither had to produce an intimate narrative of sexual identification in any way akin to that which Sedgwick developed in response to challenges to her authority vis a vis her objects of study.

9 To be sure, critics other than Butler have wrestled with the problem of norms and normativity in what is now widely narrated as the founding generation of queer scholarship. Michael Warner is the most important figure here, whose introduction to the 1991 special issue of Social Text used the concept of “heteronormativity” for the first time in print (3). Two years later, an edited volume under the same title, Fear of a Queer Planet, appeared, followed at the end of the decade by his influential The Trouble with Normal.

10 A quick survey of the mission statements of various programs in Sexuality Studies, Queer Studies, and LGBT Studies supports this contention that the claim to anti-normativity is now the governing language that underwrites the institutionalization of the field in the U.S. university. Other evidence can be found in any number of collections aimed at representing the interdisciplinary ambitions and political culture in which the study of sexuality proceeds.
scenes in which “contradiction” and “incoherence” found twentieth century
discourses of sexuality, including those that seek political refuge in the
itinerary that antihomophobic inquiry offers. To follow such a need is to
find oneself being after Eve once again, trying to touch what she touched, this
time by imagining not only the critical consequences of the place she first
cited, where “no epistemological grounding now exists,” but everything else
she took on when she violated the rules of identitarian voice to challenge the
equation between who she was taken to be and where she understood herself
to belong.

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. I must confess, because speaking of Eve demands it,
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 my closest
friend grew increasingly ill such that AIDS hit home in ways Sedgwick had
already experienced exponentially; even as her 1985 book, Between Men:
English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, had been central to my
dissertation in the late 1980s because it had taught me how to read the
asymmetry of homosociality in patriarchal social orders as a precursor for my
own investment in charting the racialized nexus of masculine bonds in the
U.S.\textsuperscript{11} 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. Instead I feared it: feared attending to the way that black male

\textsuperscript{11} The book that would emerge, American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender,
followed Sedgwick by taking up the figure of the interracial male bond in U.S.
literary and popular culture. But while Sedgwick focused on the erotic triangle in its
paradigmatic formula, with male homosocial bonds being solidified through the
circulation of heterosexual desires marked by the narrative presence of a woman, I
was interested in how the history of white supremacy produced different narrative
configurations. Most notably, the American celebration of homosociality required
women’s banishment—think here of Leslie Fiedler’s influential study, Love and Death
in the American Novel, that reads the U.S. literary tradition as the story of interracial
masculine democracy founded in the flight from civilization to the territory. By
charting the ways in which representations of these bonds were bound up in
narratives of the nation, I wanted to understand how contradictions between
patriarchy and white supremacy were negotiated by discourses of sexual difference.
Several chapters thus read the incoherence of the social construction of black
masculinity in the cultural imaginary by engaging the interplay between
hypermasculinized and distinctly feminized depictions.
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; feared what it might mean, then, to inquire into the very triangle I had staged in studying black masculinity as a vehicle for answering black feminism’s anti-separatist lesbian call.

It was easier then and I must say it would be easier now simply to concern myself with the question of the legibility of the lesbian in Sedgwick’s work or in sexuality studies in general where the authority of my claim to the category could mediate much of the difficulty of trying to think about 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 critically seek. To be sure, there is much more to say about what people sought to know when they asked Sedgwick to identify, either personally or critically, with lesbians as her object choice, but in truth Sedgwick was never unaware of the issue. In the early days of institutionalizing identity oriented knowledges, where discerning an identity object of study from the vantage point of “being it” was what identity studies meant, Sedgwick understood well the complex terrain on which her first book, *Between Men*, maneuvered. In the introduction she writes, “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 seeks 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-

12 In the introduction she addresses the issue head on: “The absence of lesbianism from the book was an early and, I think, necessary decision, since my argument is structured around the distinctive relation to the male homosocial spectrum to the transmission of unequally distributed power. Nevertheless, the exclusively heterosexual perspective of the book’s attention to women is seriously impoverishing in itself, and also an index of a larger distortion” (18).
hating” (19-20). By reading both of these assumptions as false, Sedgwick sets out to develop an analytic that can 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 entails setting feminism’s own analysis of the continuum that shapes 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 underwrites male bonds, where there has 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 are 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 makes 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 is the “erotic triangle”—a figure she draws from Rene Girard’s well regarded study Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, which explores 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 engages Sedgwick is 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).

In subsequent critical discussions, it is this claim that becomes a central point of contention for many scholars invested in lesbian studies, who read Sedgwick’s acceptance of Adrienne Rich’s idea of the “lesbian continuum” as both a subordination of sexual relations between women and a refusal to take seriously the homophobia that lesbians experience. My own sense is that if Sedgwick erred it was by giving greater priority to lesbian feminist discourses in her representation of the structure and force of female social bonds than they might actually wield in the operation of western culture. For a discussion of this issue in Sedgwick’s work, see especially Castle.

In “Capacity,” Judith Butler glosses Sedgwick’s use of Girard and its significance this way: “Her point was to show that what first appears to be relation of a man

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14 In “Capacity,” Judith Butler glosses Sedgwick’s use of Girard and its significance this way: “Her point was to show that what first appears to be relation of a man
According to Sedgwick, such issues cannot be fully answered from within Girard’s framework, as his work suffers from an inability to consider the ways in which gender and sexuality are always pertinent to the calculus of power through which the erotic triangle functions—not simply in literary narratives but in the Oedipal framework that underlies his project as a whole, where the triangle of father-mother-child is importantly differentiated by the child’s sex and by the routes of attachment and identification that produce or prohibit sexual object choice. *Between Men* resituates 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 is 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 shapes radically incongruent conceptions of homosexuality across time. In this way, Sedgwick makes visible what Girard’s analysis of the erotic triangle could not: that the structuring prohibition that underwrites its circulation of desire by barring the men from choosing one another as sexual objects exists in dramatic tension with the priority afforded masculine bonds in western modernity—and further that this tension is routinely defined by, if not organized through relationships to women, whether real or imagined, rejected or pursued. As she puts it, “the 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 who desires a woman turns out to be implicitly a homosocial bond between two men. Her argument was not to claim . . . that the homosocial bond comes at the expense of the heterosexual, but that the homosocial (distinct from the homosexual) is articulated precisely through the heterosexual. This argument has had far-reaching consequences. . . . confounding the identificatory positions for every “actor” in the scene. The man who seeks to send the woman to another man sends some aspect of himself, and the man who receives her, receives him as well. She circuits, but is she finally wanted, or does she merely exemplify a value by becoming the representative of both men’s desire, the place where those desires meet, and where they fail to meet, a place where that potentially homosexual encounter is relayed, suspended, and contained?” (112). In my reading, *Between Men* is vitally interested in how the circulatory dynamics of the erotic triangle confound any simple—indeed singular—reading of the routes of desire and the identificatory positions of the players that comprise it, but that Sedgwick is far more restrained in depicting the value of woman’s circulation than Butler’s use of “merely” would otherwise indicate.
women—even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships” (25). In developing this claim, Sedgwick argues for the importance of addressing the historical variability of the meaning of “men’s genital activity with men,” 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 move from Shakespeare’s sonnets to the novels of Laurence Sterne, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens, among others, *Between Men* delineates this understanding: that “the etiology and continuing experience of male homosexuality . . . [is] inextricable from the changing shapes of the institutions by which gender and class inequality are structured” (26-27).

15 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 the concept of patriarchy as a generic, transhistorical description of the social structure that produces and sustains women’s oppression. “[I]t is important—even in the face of a depressing history—to maintain a distinction between the human capacity and necessity to create a sexual world, and the empirically oppressive ways in which sexual worlds have been organized. Patriarchy subsumes both meanings into the same term” (33). For this reason, Rubin claims that “patriarchy” should be restricted to referencing the social organization generated by the “institution of fatherhood,” which establishes and legitimates the patriarch’s “absolute power over wives, children, herds, and dependents” (33). In its place, Rubin offers—famously—the “neutral” concept of the “sex/gender system” through which feminist theorists can track the historical production of gender and sexuality in “specific social relations” (33). Luce Irigaray likewise uses the Levi-Straussian idea of the “exchange of women” but her emphasis locates the commerce in women at the heart of patriarchal practice. “The trade that organizes patriarchal societies takes place exclusively among men. Women, signs, goods, currency, all pass from one man. . . . Homosexuality is the law that regulates the socio-cultural order. Heterosexuality amounts to the assignment of roles in the economy. . . . Why then consider masculine homosexuality as an exception, while in fact it is the very basis of the general economy?” (107). Sedgwick’s argument works in the space of the difference between these accounts, taking from Rubin the insistence on a rigorous historical specificity in determining the organization of patriarchy, while pursuing what Irigaray must sublimate—“the quicksilver of sex itself”—in the “expensive leap of register” that generates her understanding of “the relation of heterosexual to male homosocial bonds” (26).

16 Careful readers will note that this quote identifies the relations of class inequality as equally important to those of gender. My inattention to this aspect of Sedgwick’s argument reflects the identifications around sexuality and gender that I mean to discern and is not intended to subordinate the way her analysis of the erotic triangle is profoundly shaped by political economic concerns. Indeed, *Between Men* is thoroughly attentive to the way that class status—along with ideations about the ethics of genital relations among men—is part of the often stunning historical transformations by which male homosexuality has been represented and understood.
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, one of—if not the—most important critical terms in the feminist theoretical archive. But in 1992 when she writes a new preface to accompany the book’s post-*Epistemology* reprint, Sedgwick is compelled to address the controversy it sparked in “a feminocentric field . . . in which the subjects, paradigms, and political thrust of research, as well as the researchers themselves, might all be indentified [sic] with the female” (viii). The extra *n* that intercedes in *identified* makes clear even before the text expresses it that Sedgwick’s project is “to keep the faith, as best I could, with an obstinate intuition that the loose ends and crossed ends of identity are more fecund than the places where identity, desires, analysis, and need can all be aligned and centered” (viii). In Sedgwick’s view, such an intuition does not put her outside of feminist inquiry, but places her within its frame as the scene of critical no less than political commitment. “I was very involved with lesbian-inflected feminist culture and critique,” she writes of the period during which *Between Men* was composed (viii). “The most immediate audience I had in mind was other feminist scholars . . . I actually knew only one openly gay man” (vii, viii). *Between Men* was thus “very pointedly [meant] as a complicating, antiseparatist, and antihomophobic contribution to a feminist movement with which, nonetheless, I identified fairly unproblematically” (viii). While Sedgwick is sure that “the transferential poetics of identification and address are *never* simple,” she nonetheless writes that “the undertows and opacities that perturbed the address of this book to a variety of women readers seemed, at the time, less weird than its phantasmatic relation to a potential readership of gay men” (viii).

At the time of *Between Men*’s reprint, however, the disarray of the book’s address to its intended audience abounds, as Sedgwick acknowledges that it “has evoked rage . . . on a continuing basis”—especially from the kind of readers who called her to account for her identifications at Yale: “Blockage and frozenness have seemed to characterize its address, in particular, to a variety of women queer readers whose incredulous desire it has also solicited” (x, ix). While twenty years of queer theoretical inquiry alerts us to the distinctions between “feminist audience,” “lesbian-inflected feminist . . .
critique,” and “women queer readers,” it is important to underscore the fact that Sedgwick’s political identifications with feminism brought her to the topic of male homosexuality and its relation to women, gender, and feminism precisely because of the dissonance that these identifications raised. “[L]ike many other feminists,” she writes, “I also wanted—needed—feminist scholarship to be different. In particular, I found oppressive the hygienic way in which a variety of different institutional, conceptual, political, ethical, and emotional contingencies promised (threatened?) to line up together so neatly” (vii). *Between Men* thus performs its own critical commitment to the analysis of triangulated desire it so generatively develops by staging a few triangles of its own, beginning with the circulating and transferential relations that link feminism, lesbian-inflected critique, and male homosexuality through identifications that are marked by optimism as much as disappointment and incompleteness.

To be sure, one does not need to rely on Sedgwick’s retrospective recasting of the identifications and obligations of *Between Men* to generate this reading of her work’s pedagogical interventions. In 1990, she devotes the final axiom of *Epistemology of the Closet* 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’” (59). “[M]y account was, essentially, that this was an undertheorized conjunction, and it was about time that 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 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”; in other words, “what brings me to this work can hardly be that I am a woman, or a feminist, but that I am this particular one” (59). 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

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18 Sedgwick here 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 appears as chapter 4 of *Epistemology of the Closet*, and “Privilege of Unknowing.”
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 . . . had been set painfully, contagiously atremble” (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 [seemed to possess] . . . 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 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 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-critical reception. 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 erotic lineages of the kinds of triangulation that Sedgwick taught us to explore, as precisely a response to the interpellation of Yale, if
It is not only identifications across definitional lines that can evoke or support or even require complex and particular narrative explanation . . . the same is equally true of any person’s identification with her or his “own” gender, class, race, sexuality, nation” (60-61). If this is the case, as Sedgwick’s work repeatedly asserts, then the point is not that these itineraries of identification live apart or separate from one another but rather that their interaction, their diffuse and powerful intersections, their hesitations and deferrals are complexly interwoven. We might even say, following Sedgwick, that there is no epistemological grounding from which to adjudicate them.

All of this is to say that if it has taken me this long to learn how to hear Sedgwick’s address to me, not just as a woman, a lesbian, and a feminist, but as this particular one, it is not simply because I refused to listen. It is more true to say that the price of hearing was too high—and may be still too high, as the risk of trying to account for the ways that identifications across differences are feared, disrupted, confirmed, congealed, doubted, rebuked, or celebrated in relation to those that seek their possibilities and solidities on the ever shifting grounds of sameness requires a daunting project not simply of rethinking just about everything, but of cultivating the ability to withstand the challenges that confronted and compelled her: to use critical practice as the place to explore “the loose ends and crossed ends of identity” (viii). At the very least, this will entail trying to learn how to resist the authorial satisfaction no less than the critical capital that comes from arriving again and again into those “places where identity, desires, analysis, and need can all be aligned and centered” (viii). It will also entail loosening the grip the field has on its own self-definition by unraveling the epistemological security of anti-normativity as the emblem and tool of progressive political commitment. The critical disposition I am speaking of here will by necessity derive its most fascinating and passionate rigor from registering the

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19 Think here of the various judgments—both analytical and moral—that attend assertions of cross identification in contemporary left critique, where dominant group identifications with subordinated social positions and politics are always suspicious, always at risk of being labeled appropriative, paternalistic, or imperialist, as in white racial identifications with blackness, or straight male identifications with women or the feminine, or bourgeois alliances with the working class. Much more needs to be said, following Sedgwick, of the possibilities, no less than the difficulties, of cross-identifications in their political and psychic capacities. The critical vocabulary for doing so is sparse and as far as I can see currently tuned to condemnation. In this context, it is no surprise, as I noted earlier, that the anti-identitarian position travels with enormous critical value when it is formulated from the authority of the identity being questioned.
contradictions and incoherences that arise from identificatory modalities as they fail, just like we do, to arrive into any of the right places.\textsuperscript{20} That's Eve.

\textsuperscript{20} Some readers might assume that this embrace of discordant, anti-identitarian, and divergent critical itineraries is wholly at home in what we might now cast as the field’s anti-normative conventions, where the swerve away from familiar methodological and critical protocols is routinely registered as the core sensibility of queer inquiry; hence Sedgwick’s own identifications with gay male life, anal eroticism, and other forms of queer world making become queer in their failure to arrive into any number of predictably banal or/toxic social and psychic locations. But my contention is that it is a mistake to read Sedgwick as an anti-normative thinker or to render her critical practice congruent with what I take to be the inescapably disciplinary discourse that now accompanies the field’s reproduction. In these terms, anti-normativity is not an agency of disciplinary resistance in a field that founds its disciplinary authority on it—no matter how much or how often scholars trumpet the idea that anti-normativity is precisely the means to counter disciplinariness. Similarly, queer theory is not reducible to a queer critical itinerary committed to anti-normativity. My point in thinking about the unwritten eighth axiom in Sedgwick’s body of scholarship—that it is impossible to know in advance how anyone will need to travel the distance between her desires and the world in which those desires must (try to) live—is meant to foreground the very different political calculus that informs her work, where “no epistemological grounding now exists” to adjudicate the contradictions and incoherences that she seeks to depict.
Works Cited


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