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You Are Probably Completely Oblivious That This Text Actually Is About You

Reconsidering Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Reparative Reading in an Age of Paranoia

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In «Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,» [b-n-l/paranoid-reading-and-reparative-reading-or-youre-so-paranoid-you-probably-think-this-essay-is-about-you/] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes to task Western critique for its tendency to be based on, even be synonymous with, suspicion. She characterizes it as foremost aiming to expose, believing – as does paranoia – that such an exposure will protect it from threat. Sedgwick laments the loss of other affective modes in theory that might aim to repair. She observes that these often aren't taken seriously, are seen as naïve or complaisant. In her essay, Sedgwick attempts to expose (paradoxically, she herself admits) paranoia, to describe and understand its mechanisms, and asks what a critique would look like that would turn around the logic of the sentence: «Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean you don't have enemies» (based on a quote by Henry Kissinger) to «Just because you have enemies, doesn't mean you have to be paranoid». I was intrigued by the notion Sedgwick names «reparative reading,» a concept that remains obscure in her text, but involves a turn away from protocols in critique such as maintaining an «objective» distance, subsuming phenomena under one term or rehashing well-established theories. The text resonated with questions I had around the politics of positioning oneself – for, alongside, against another, perhaps even against oneself – in critical practices such as writing.





In 2003, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick published the essay «Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading. Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You» as part of the anthology *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. The mode of paranoid reading she defines could perhaps be summed up, quite plainly, as: a critique that attempts to sum up, but also a critique that looks for and wants to own truth, keeps its distance, attempts to define and implements structure. This is the type of critique we are probably most familiar with. The mode of the reparative is a little harder to grasp. That the paranoid can be understood easily, while the reparative remains difficult to wrap one's head around, is telling: I had no problem writing about what I've become accustomed to, and even Sedgwick divides her text into chapters headed by the different traits of paranoia – «Paranoia is anticipatory,» «Paranoia Places its Faith in Exposure» – mentioning the reparative always only within and in relation to these chapters. Indeed, this essay took me a very long while to finish because I kept going back to the text, trying to extract a more definitive concept of a reparative reading. But it was forever slipping away. It was this slipping away from definition I then became interested in, realizing more and more that a.) Sedgwick's reparative reading is not about clarification but is performative, it is not only about what is being said but how it affects the reader and in what way it bridges this gap, and b.) I had perhaps put myself in an impossible position writing a critical text about a text that vouches for a move away from conventional protocols in critique. This is where the full title of her piece rings true: I was reading the essay in a «paranoid mode,» with a learned framework that looks for fixed definition. I seem to be the ‹you› in «You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,» falling for paranoia's greatest trick: it appears anywhere it is sought out. Perhaps it is unavoidable then, when writing about paranoia, that one's own becomes evident. The feedback I got from the editors at Brand New Life after handing in my first, second (and third) draft was – where is my voice? They felt I was parroting Sedgwick, keeping the text close enough for me to hide behind it. This hiding, too, is a paranoid structure: According to Sedgwick, paranoia tends to be contagious. It may seem paradox, but paranoia gains scope in that it fails to protect, whereas it would stay weak in remaining dormant. A conspiracy theory, for instance, has more impact the more people believe in it. The only protection paranoia can promise is a

shield against pain such as humiliation, against being wrong, for instance, because the paranoid has already thought about and forestalled that option. It attempts to claim ownership over truth. Paranoia, Sedgwick writes, is also anticipatory. There must be no bad surprises. This forestalling of surprise, getting to the bottom of something, is closely linked to our understanding of acquiring knowledge, for it must appear as if all possible gaps have been thought out, that a statement is solid. The thing paranoia fears and wants to distance itself from is always, in fact, kept very close in an attempt to control it. This sets the premise for someone, say, aiming to break with a given theory, to have to take it up and dismantle it first. It must appear and by this is then often repeated, supported and confirmed. Anticipating and stating what poses a threat means it cannot suddenly appear as a surprise. To fully stop it may be impossible, but the wind might be momentarily taken out of its sails. Paranoia would rather try to control the threat on its own terms than to leave it unchallenged. It constructs an order, sometimes by way of forcing connections, and poses as the alterity to counter it, often projecting meaning and coherence onto issues. It plays with the worst-case scenario and uses it as a buffer, a mechanism of self-defense, either to explain away pain or to try to avoid it. It is confrontational, defining a clear separation from another, can be hidden yet obvious disappointment, and it is a way for people to make sure they aren't taken for a fool. This position is: Just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean you don't have enemies – meaning, you can never be paranoid enough.

Sedgwick came from academia; her place was the university. A pioneer in queer theory and professor of literary studies, Sedgwick wrote, among many other things, on different affects and how they impact not only an individual and his or her environment but, consequently, form and intertwine intimately with shared histories. In her texts, which started gaining recognition in the mid-eighties, Sedgwick deals with shame, panic as well as the project of love and happiness that, in theoretical writings, is quickly smirked upon. Her political agenda never wavers: her readings, often of ‹classical literary pieces,› shift the focus away from heterosexual relations. In «Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,» her essay that caused a scandal when it was published in 1988, Sedgwick sets the love-story aside and centers instead the intimate dependencies in the relationship between the two sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* , in contrast to previous readings of the piece. In her essay on the paranoid and reparative, she goes about a similar shift. She takes to task philosophers who have been crucial for a Western understanding of critique, naming Marx, Freud, as well as others. She challenges theirs as an understanding that was too often based on, and has therefore strengthened, heterosexual relations. And, this is crucial, she puts their importance into perspective, even though she does acknowledge these thinkers. For example, in the psychoanalysis of Freud, paranoia is pathologically connected to homosexuality, reasoning it to be an effect of the repression of same-sex desire. Sedgwick shifts focus, scrutinizing the theory as evidence for illuminating not homosexuality but the «mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it.» Sedgwick's shifts allow for systemic, often naturalized violent and oppressive structures in writing to become clear. She reveals political undertones in and repercussions of different forms of criticism and knowledge by focusing on how and why they are performed. Her work sets out to understand the affects driven by phobia, the paranoia that is symptomatic of certain positions or of a certain critique and can be used as a powerful political tool. She positions herself as not only working against fixed notions, notions taken for granted, but also clears a space for others, unacknowledged. Her position entails a resistance to reductive conclusions; at the same time she does not deny certain connections that have been made – she just questions and complicates these connections. Going back to the example above, though the relation between paranoia and homosexuality has in fact, for historical reasons such as the AIDS crisis, been intimate (the horror and fear of not knowing meant «why would you not be paranoid»), this relation has also, Sedgwick argues, time and again been reproduced in writing, ending in reductive, or even oppressive, conclusions. She sees a paranoid reading

practice directing more towards inevitability, more towards normative narrative and dogged structures of knowledge. Her response are readings attuned to a «heartbeat of contingency» found in, for her, many queer practices.

While Sedgwick's agenda to turn to a reparative reading is clear, I was not so sure about mine. Artists all around me seemed to be thinking about and implementing strategies of how to show their work without being compromised – by certain narratives, by a critic, by an institution. I wanted to think about a set of tools, perhaps paranoid my own position when writing was at stake, so as to practice a reading new to me that thought about when to ally and when to stand back, a reading that would not compromise what it was writing about (or at least not quite as much as language always does,). In trying to go with Sedgwick's text and not set myself apart from it, the writing of this essay has felt like a slow approach to what it might mean to read reparatively. I thought at first I could do a kind of close reading, but quickly realized I did not have enough distance, somehow too much in awe of this text, it resonating in ways I was not yet quite sure why. I wanted to try to shift my annoyingly persistent focus on finding an explanation, a thesis, a truth, to asking how such «truth» is built up, or perhaps even let go of this fixation completely. It was, I think, also something I felt I needed to unlearn from my years studying at university, had to let go of in order to give more space to the poetic. Writing this essay has also been a testing of Sedgwick's readings – guided by a shifting understanding of my position as a reader while trying to guide my writing to shift in the same direction. To read from the reparative position, Sedgwick writes, would be to surrender knowing, determining an argument fully, perhaps keeping certain points open to interpretation, (good or bad) surprises. Again, the reparative is and remains obscure. It does not mean to clarify. The reparative implies a mending, a step towards another as well as a letting down of one's guard. It could be seen as a turn away from critique as it contrasts with protocols such as maintaining a distance, outsmarting or refusing to be surprised. The importance of mistakes might too be made clear, humiliation no longer so imminent. It seems to me that the reparative reading not only makes visible violent frameworks of arguments (as does a paranoid reading) but opens a space of fantasy in which the poetic, or the speculative, or improvisation can arise, or even a struggle (with one's own opinion, with one's own writing) be made visible. Indeed, Sedgwick leaves such a very gap in her introduction of the notion of the reparative in that she doesn't fully define it. I have often thought this approach of loosening the arguments in a theoretical text an excuse for writing that lacks precision, their wobbliness being passed off as going against a ‹classic structure.› This, again, reveals my deep-seated petty conception (or paranoia) of what such a text should be and do (and proves Sedgwick's point). This gap is the text's weakness but also its strength, for it positions its faith elsewhere. Rather than in exposure as truth, it places its faith in joy. Going back to the example above, though Sedgwick exposes the violence in Freud's argument (and this exposure is definitely not joyous), she does place the blame somewhere or on someone else and relativizes the weight of certain arguments, differentiating between truth claims (which are also always based on preconception) and performative effect, in order to break up (all too) powerful constructs. By this, she frees up space for others, empowers. Truth claims have long been the measurement that brings with it the sticky business of essentializing. Subsuming complex themes under one term or throwing messy thoughts into one pot can be useful, something to hold on to, but also reductive. In a piece of critical writing, arguments are weighted differently by the writer, and accordingly impact a reader: Setting up a strong – as in effective – argument will necessarily have to be on-point, and thus risk being too general. This is why Sedgwick moves from finding out whether something is true to asking what knowledge does, how it performs and what its effects are. Obvious but meaningful, Sedgwick notes: «… to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression.» The only reason the aim of joy might sound naïve or even tacky is that it is only knowledge following a paranoid reading that poses as

truth, truth that is based on reason and denies a possible emotional motive. A theory going toward joy admits to its affective motives, its sentimentality, its subjectivity immediately. And being sentimental often doesn't count for enough. Sedgwick asks whether an appeal to emotion might actually be an appeal to greater intelligence – an approach that seems to contrast with today's facts-at-any-cost, alt facts, instrumentalized facts, facts for those who can buy them, all still rooted in an aspiration to seemingly uphold or get back to some sort of rational discourse, to not become ‹irrational› or ‹too emotional.› She observes also that a large amount of theory is laced with only one or two affects, such as ecstasy, suspicion, abjection, or horror, rather than the more realistic coexistence of numerous feelings being described through, what Sedgwick names, «nonce taxonomies» – the constant «rich, unsystematic resources at play in each human for mapping out possibilities, dangers, stimulations of their human social landscape.» Such a position necessitates a transparency as to where one is coming from and why one is writing something, which also means holding oneself accountable. Sedgwick proposes a complexity that can be irresolute and contradictory. In this complexity, as Heather Love has written on Sedgwick's writing, there is an opening for an «intellectual and affective space for others» or, as Judith Butler has put it, a demand «that I think in a way that I did not know that thought could do – and still remain thought.» I think here of writing by people like Elisabeth Lebovici or Sara Ahmed, whose texts I often find harder to summarize because they skirt definition, avoid stifling either/or structures and go about a more elliptical style of writing. Reading Ahmed, for instance, I could highlight nearly every single sentence as important, because the significance of the text lies within all and in between. It also perhaps occurs in speculative fiction, in the kind of storytelling Donna Haraway, for instance, insists upon, a storytelling that imagines other narratives, and also refuses to be right or smarter than everyone else. I see it in auto-theoretical writings of people such as Maggie Nelson, who, though they can certainly be criticized, at least open themselves up to attack (something I am still terrified of – proven by the fact I kept going back and forth about whether to even make this statement, eventually opting to place it in some comfy brackets). What these authors have in common is an interest in thinking language differently while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of doing so, an age-old concern in feminist studies, among others.

Sedgwick understands the paranoid and the reparative as positions that revolve around defense and empowerment, protection and vulnerability, making a connection or putting up a guard. Admittedly, Sedgwick too structures in that she terms solely two categories. But I understand these positions to be two sides of the same coin. They befall one another constantly, the fine line between them that will tip one position into the other might be a certain context, a different aim, a shift in perspective – these positions are relational. At their core is their correlation to pain and joy, the avoidance of hurt and the pursuit of happiness. Whereas one implies suspicion and thus distance, the other attempts repair via identification and nourishment. The flexible to and fro from a paranoid to a reparative position might occur in everyday exchanges such as accusing someone of something they did not do, to admitting that fear may have mushroomed from a completely different circumstance. It might also occur in larger phenomena such as the current climate of unease re fake news in not knowing what or who to believe to a reading that focusses on what the effects of the claims are, and therefore what they are grounded on. It is not that paranoid readings are wrong per se, they do, after all, expose hidden violent structures, and by exposing, can make these structures vulnerable. They too involve an imagining of alternative kinds of relations at their core. But these are often dead ends. The frequent charges against critics are those of too much authority – especially speaking on behalf of others – too much judgement, and too much separation from what is examined. These charges have come about because critics are all too often driven by a will to power. Sedgwick tries to understand the mechanisms that lead to one or the other type of reading, foregrounding what we have become accustomed to. She focusses not

only on what is being written, or said, or done, but also on the how and to what end.

Though I find Sedgwick undoubtedly a master of the shifts in position she herself presents, there is an example in her text that bothers me, a snag in the reparative position. Sedgwick goes into how Camp is interpreted as a practice. She writes that while these practices are often seen as positions mocking, and thereby exposing, the presumptions of a dominant culture, she reads them as being driven by a desire for the reparative. By this reading, the underlying desire of Camp's criticism of dominant culture is one of nurture, nurture of the culture that rejects it. To think about why things are performed instead of just reacting against it, to take on this responsibility of attempting to repair what has been hurtful – does this not leave out the possibility of leaving things irreparable? Certain situations necessitate the formation of an opposite, even if that opposite has the potential to become a threat by this very structuring. This more radical position does not insist on reconciliation and asks whether the reparative is a position that abolishes any potential of the subversive. In their book *The Undercommons*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney take up this position of refusing to be fixed in the figure of the subversive intellectual: «The critical academic questions the university, questions the state, questions art, politics, culture. But in the undercommons it is ‹no questions asked.› It is unconditional – the door swings open for refuge even though it may let in police agents and destruction.» To be sure, Moten and Harney's position has a lot in common with Sedgwick's: both think against what is considered the real terrain of politics, imagine alternatives and attempt to re-work its established terms. They insist there are moments and gestures that are unruly, in a different relation to rigid structure. Both also take up a position that does away with critical distance or the idea of being outside of things it comes into contact with, and they practice other forms of knowing. Both already implement these other forms in how they write. They work against master narratives, are interested in improvisation, in a possible loss of control, in opening up language laden with specific context and familiar meaning, in play. Play is important, as is joy, pleasure, fun. Miserable is what you are supposed to be when engaging in intellectual work, miserable about everything you suspect and are figuring out is going on. But while Sedgwick tends more to a reading in which things come together with the aim of them wanting to be, Moten and Harney insist things come together that, perhaps, do not want to be.

Given the precarious ways in which knowledge is being produced, performed and distributed, especially online, which seems to coincide with a palpable climate of mistrust, cynicism and/or overstrain in the production as well reception of texts, Sedgwick's essay poses the interesting question if exposing a plot is always the most effective, in the sense of the best affective and empowering way to go. While I think it's surely necessary to insist on truth at a time when knowledge has been delegitimized and consensus on what is true dismissed, it might be useful to focus additionally on the affective nature – oppressive fear, inclusive joy, seductive excitement etc. – of what is being said. I feel that the breakdown in differentiated communication that has impacted levels of trust understandably makes for paranoia as a state of hypersensitivity. This state carries with it a proof of (previous or current) hurt that needs to be acknowledged and accounted for. At the same time is at risk of being repeated as well as repeatedly exploited, for it is also defined by a feeling of external control and powerlessness.

Recently, writing a different text, I found pleasure in two references to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. She is taken up by Audre Lorde as well as by Jack Halberstam. Both criticize Woolf, stating her demand to, respectively, condition privilege, and assume one wants to be «on one's own.» This line of argumentation was not solely to point to gaps in Woolf's thinking – who, in fact, reflects upon financial means as well as collectivity – but a method of distancing oneself from Woolf as a marker for whiteness, the bourgeoisie and/or the idea of writing sealed off from community. Taking up these references in my text, I did the same thing – I used Lorde and Halberstam to support my line of thinking. With

Sedgwick's readings in mind, I could have perhaps differentiated, made it clear that Woolf had in fact thought these points through. Yet, taking up Moten and Harney, not everything needs to be repaired. It can (and at times must) remain irreparable. Certainly though, the attention to affect in critical writing, specifically phobia that drives it, might reveal what has become to be understood as normal. Rather than truth, a text would show how the writer came about his or her, in any event limited, opinion, so a reader might draw their own conclusion. Laying bare one's ideas would mean necessarily also laying bare one's preconceptions, always differentiating, but also perhaps writing in such a way that it performs what one means to say.

In the end, my motive for writing this text is perhaps as simple as an attempt to understand why critical writing can often be restrictive. That I am looking to move more into poetic forms. To try to write faster and freer and funnier. Definitely, I've set myself a ton of traps that I've walked right into – set categories, referencing, using charged terms. Perhaps it was also just that I could not decide where to invest my energies, and Sedgwick's text offered a possibility to think about shifts in certain moments, when to switch from a critique of something to something else, something that is only an undertone. This is something I notice quite often but just as often ignore. For instance, having a nice blatant rant on capital, I'll use economic terms and make blunt statements, arguing something along the lines of «we consume content all the time, therefore we exist always in relation to capital.» All the while, unheard, something inside is screaming silently – really? I am being facetious. Of course, these arguments are legitimate, but they also reduce our relation to that with capital by way of language, playing into its outstretched arms nicely. The unheard undertone is the possibility to perceive a different relation, and perhaps formalize it in a different way, avoiding a certain terminology, or a certain style of writing and, in this way, letting slight stories get stronger and the other way around, then again letting go of concepts as soon as they become too useful.

Annotation:

This essay was written before the outbreak of the Coronavirus. In this moment of publishing it, it is perhaps possible to read it in light of current events. Especially in the first days, the outbreak too evolved around these two positions – on the one side there were those who said we should not panic, that paranoia must not break out, that it is contagious and fear would be the true pandemic. On the other there were those who said we should protect others and ourselves, must keep distance, isolate. This fear has been positioned differently. In the period preceding this country's lock-down, many re-posted the precise and moving lines of Anne Boyer: «We must begin to see the negative space as clearly as the positive, to know what we don't do is also brilliant and full of love.» This is a turn to the reparative.

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