

## The Queer Faces of Eve: Witnessing Theories in Sedgwick's *A Dialogue On Love*

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Trauma theorists emphasise the necessity of “witnessing”: the speaking, writing, or otherwise conscious acknowledgement of a traumatic event<sup>1</sup>, in order to overcome it. To endure and prevail, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub claim, the wounded subject must face his or her “buried truths,” “piece together” an individual history, and voice a “fully realized narrative” (qtd. in Farrell 1998, 1). “The survivor,” Laub maintains, must “tell his story in order to survive” (Felman and Laub 1992, 63). Suzette Henke substantiates that the authorial effort to witness offers the speaker the “potential for mental healing” (2000, xii), and Judith Herman adjoins that “the *only way*” a survivor can take “control of her recovery” is to witness it (1992, 97). Autobiographical critics also uphold that the need to witness; to speak and write<sup>2</sup> one’s life stories, applies not only to those survivors of particularised trauma but to the masses. Everyone is called to witness. “Refuse to write your life,” Patricia Hampl declares, “and you have no life” (1999, 34). H.D. agrees: “write, write, or die” (Doolittle 1972, 7). To these theorists, writing is not a luxury but a necessity. One who does not witness does not live.

In her memoir, *A Dialogue on Love*, the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick underscores the necessity of witnessing to reflect and inform life. Until she translates her

thoughts into language, she confides that ideas “don’t quite exist” for her (1999, 115). A written record enables her to “keep hold of what happens,” to “steep [her]self” in herself (1999, 116). Musings such as these inspire Sedgwick to witness her life, but what, precisely, does *A Dialogue* steep Sedgwick and her readers in? As Eve’s therapist, Shannon Van Wey, probes: “What’s it all about?” (Sedgwick 1999, 61).

Given Sedgwick’s account of breast cancer – her ensuing therapy, mastectomy and chemotherapy – readers may classify the work alongside Audre Lorde’s *Cancer Journals* (1980) or Lucy Grealey’s *Autobiography of a Face* (1994) as a typical illness narrative. Sedgwick’s account differs from these however, in that, while she acknowledges that her medical diagnosis is her memoir’s “triggering event” (1999, 3), her disease seems less *A Dialogue*’s subject than its pretext. Instead, Sedgwick uses her *Dialogue* to work through her prior academic interventions into the field of queer theory. That is, *A Dialogue* witnesses not only personal illness but also queer performativity; particularly in its treatment of intersubjective relationality, hybrid sexuality, and the Japanese mode of *haibun*.

A critique of queer theory is that the “theory” element of the discipline has usurped its “queerness.” In *Gay Shame*, David Halperin and Valerie Traub maintain that by “privileging the theoretical register of queer studies,” the field has “restricted its range of applicability and scaled down its interdisciplinary ambitions” (2009, 13). The adjective “queer” is sidelined to the centrality of the noun “theory.” In writing *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick implicitly responds to this concern, offsetting the dominance theory has taken in her own work to witness queerness. “What I’m proudest of,” she upholds, “is having a life where work [theory] and love [her queerness] are impossible to tell apart” (1999, 23). Thus, although she spent her career engaging with theory, in her memoir, Sedgwick elucidates the imminence of queerness in her life. Fittingly, the book was her first to be published by a non-university press.

In order to ally life, love, and theory, Sedgwick first demonstrates how the “I”

of her memoir, the “Eve” who speaks, is in fact queer. “Queer stuff,” she writes, “is so central in my life ... It’s at the heart of just about everything I do and love” (1999, 9). When she published *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick had been married to her husband Hal for over forty years. Her statement thus troubles essentialist notions of what it means to be queer; to have “queer stuff” lie at the heart of everything an otherwise “straight” woman does and loves. Accordingly, *A Dialogue* prods the reader to reevaluate one’s sense of queerness. If Eve, a woman who has sex with men and is married to a man, considers herself “quintessentially queer” (Sedgwick 1999, 9), what does queerness mean to Sedgwick? What, in fact, does her *Dialogue* witness?

In her academic work, Sedgwick defines queerness so openly that her sense of the term is difficult to grasp. In *Touching Feeling*, she describes queer as “a free radical that ... attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of – of almost anything” (2003, 62). She extends her notion of queer performativity to include “all kinds of practices, not to be named exactly, but to afford an epistemologically unstable shimmer of allusion and ... possibility” (2003, 79). Sedgwick’s definitions highlight one of the difficulties in discussing queerness. Queer delineations are often so inclusive as to mean “almost anything” and thus risk being reduced to nothing.

According to Sedgwick, the word “queer” stems from the Indo-European root “twerkw” (across), which begets the German “quer” (transverse), Latin “torquere” (to twist) and English “athwart” (1993, xii). In its very etymology, Sedgwick argues, queerness cuts across and through essentialised notions of homosexuality. The term then continues to “spin ... outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all,” for instance, the ways that race, ethnicity, and postcolonial nationality “criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses” (1993, 9). In her work, Sedgwick uses “queer” to represent not only same-sex attraction but a non-normativity that confronts conventional ideologies, so that one may be queer without being LGBT or LGBT without being queer.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* supports this: defining queer as “a homosexual” (2012, sense 2) but also someone who is “eccentric” (sense 1a), “faint, giddy” (sense 2) or “drunk” (sense 3). As a verb, *to be queer for* denotes one who harbours any degree of attraction for someone – or something – else, as in: to be “fond of or keen on; to be attracted to” (sense 1). Finally, “to queer” is to question everything without necessarily receiving answers (sense 1). If those who are attracted to someone or something are queer, as are those who pose unanswerable questions, everyone, at least in some sense, exhibits queerness. How then does one witness this catch-all state?

In answer, Sedgwick writes an open narrator into her *Dialogue*. Eve’s “I,” a speaker who manifests multiple, conflicting attractions, who poses as many *queeries* as she does resolutions, is rarely encountered in traditional memoir. Leigh Gilmore, for one, decries autobiography for inciting its authors, through writing and refashioning their lives, to construct a fallaciously unitive “I” (1994, ix). Critics who take this view, however, may overlook that memoir, though necessarily self-absorbed, does not automatically perform an essentialised self. Instead, life-writing voices not only Jean-François Lyotard’s “grand narratives” (1984, xxiii), but also hybridity, which Sedgwick terms a “fragmented, postmodernist post-individual,” an “unreliable narrator,” rather than a “simple, settled, congratulatory “I” (1993, xiv). For Sedgwick, to witness queerness is not to speak an essential identity (to say “I am gay”) but, as her title implies, to fashion the self in conversation with others, to work mutually to (de)construct individuality.

Sedgwick upholds that, as “far as [she] can remember” (1999, 45), she has occupied a liminal space. Her difficulty now is containing herself in text, in witnessing a queer speaker. *A Dialogue* is published as Memoir/Psychology, and Sedgwick locates herself in and on that backslash, as Eve found in “the touching of ... utterly separate worlds” (1999, 48). Nor are these parts “separate,” Sedgwick clarifies, but “constantly whirlpool around in each other,” each with the “power to poison” the other (1999, 151).

Situated at the border of self and self, Sedgwick calls young “Evie” “odd” (1999,

151) and “queer” (1999, 36). She seems the embodiment of Kathryn Bond Stockton’s queer child (2009), caught “in bad drag” at the threshold of herself (Sedgwick 1999, 30) literally (by birth order) and psychically (by her liminality) “the middle child” (Sedgwick 1999, 29). Nor does Eve’s queerness quit at puberty. As an adult, Sedgwick writes, “I couldn’t stop go-betweening,” as if ‘middle child’ / *were* [my] identity” (1999, 36). Throughout *A Dialogue*, she continues to refer to herself as the child “Evie,” adult “Eve,” as well as “I,” “we,” and “she” (1999, 21), as if she occupies all these states at once: child and adult, singular and plural, first and third person, often within the same paragraph or sentence.

So too is Eve’s liminality contagious, queering Shannon’s identity, as their *Dialogue* progresses. In her review of the memoir, Jennie Chu calls the “whole book” “unavoidably self-centered.” “Shannon’s voice is always subservient to Sedgwick’s needs; his ‘first person’ is never really more than a therapeutic ‘second person’ for Eve to talk to” (1999). Chu’s appraisal, however, fails to recognise that Sedgwick has written a new kind of memoir, one that does not subjugate her “I” before a master narrative but rather informs and reveals the self through dialogue. From the start, Sedgwick places Eve and Shannon together on the same and middle/liminal line of her haiku: “Eve Sedgwick? Shannon Van Wey. / *Oh!* Maybe I’m found” (1999, 1). Here, all that separates the two persons is a question mark, as if the narrator herself is not sure what divides Shannon from Eve. The two merge into one “I,” are “found” together.

Later, Sedgwick explicates: “The space of Shannon is both myself and not. // The place where talking / to someone else is also / talking to myself” (1999, 115). “They’re intertwined – / his permanence in me – [mine] in him” (1999, 122). Throughout *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick incorporates Shannon’s own notes into her work. By allowing her therapist to speak in her memoir, Sedgwick blasts open Eve’s voice. At the same time, she appropriates Shannon’s voice into her own, by speaking for and through him. In time, the pronouns that separate patient from therapist begin to merge, as if Shannon and Eve denote two overlapping thoughts in the same speaker’s mind. This coupling prompts David Kurnick to celebrate the “urgency and sweetness” of Sedgwick and Van

Wey's "partnership" as one more representative of a "love story" than "case study" (1999).

So Eve's "I" is often celebrated as "we." "It never surprised me that 'we,' in French, means yes," Sedgwick affirms: "The extravagant / rightness of it! Intimate / sanction for us two, / to be sealed with my / favorite pronoun: the dear / first person plural" (1999, 106). Nor is Eve's speaker merely liminal but hybrid. Her "we" is not limited to two speakers but embraces what she (through Shannon's notes) calls "A KIND OF CUBIST THREE-DIMENSIONALITY" (1999, 109), a "perspective, which keeps opening for me" (1999, 117). The move from singular "I" to plural "we" thus welcomes not only Shannon but Sedgwick's readers into her queer witness. When we enter into *A Dialogue*, we read in Eve's multivalent voice, and hear her "I" speaking through ours, we too are simultaneously queered, subsumed into her "promiscuous we! / Me, plus anybody else. / Permeable we!" (1999, 106).

Sedgwick's "we" is a queer incarnation of her first axiom in *Epistemology of the Closet* that we "are different from each other," even from ourselves (2008, 22). Thus, when Shannon presses Eve to explain who she is and how she diverges from other people, all she can "think of to say" is "it's at all the far extremes. All the *contradictory* extremes" (1999, 43). Here, the subject of Sedgwick's sentence is "it," denoting a self so hybrid that it cannot be contained in a singular "I" or plural "we" but transcends localised identity altogether, denoting Eve as "it," both determined and indeterminate, like queerness itself.

Halperin and Traub caution against such an abstract understanding of queer identity. "To despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness" they warn, risks "turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy, nonnormative version of "liberal" or "oppositional," which "radically narrow[s] the scope and transformative power of queer critique" (2009, 17). Their caveat is well-taken, and Sedgwick, who is open to conflicting aporias may not disagree. Thus, though her work opens queer performance to liminal states and spaces, her theory also grounds queerness specifically in

male/male desire (lesbian desire is addressed later). Sedgwick's *Between Men and Epistemology*, for example, both emphasise that all nodes of knowledge are "marked, structured and fractured by the centrality of issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male and dating from the end of the nineteenth century" (2008, 1). In *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick substantiates this insight, linking her queer awakening to an early encounter with male homosexuality.

Before her seventh-grade French teacher was "ARRESTED FOR SOLICITING IN A MEN'S ROOM," Shannon records, Eve was unaware that men existed "WHO LOVED OTHER MEN THE WAY MOST MEN LOVE WOMEN. THIS CAUGHT HER IMAGINATION AND SHE BEGAN READING INSATIABLY IN THE AREA. BUT ONLY ABOUT GAY MEN" (Sedgwick 1999, 75). Eve's "FASCINATION," Shannon notes, was not "PROPELLED" by adolescent prurience but by empathy and queer identification. Upon learning that her teacher had been fired, Eve was overwhelmed with "CHAGRIN AT HAVING MISREAD" him "SO COMPLETELY," sorry she had failed to engage this man's reality. Nevertheless, she also found herself exhilarated, delighted to discover that "THE HETEROSEXUAL DEMANDS OF ADOLESCENCE" were not all that were available, that "THERE COULD BE SOMETHING OTHER THAN THE TRADITIONAL HETERO RELATIONS, AND MEN WHO MIGHT HAVE AN INTEREST IN WOMEN OTHER THAN THE TRADITIONAL ONE" (1999, 75) – even a "middle" child like Eve. This realisation, Shannon marvels, prompted Eve to "ENGAGE AND SHARPEN" her "ABILITY TO TURN A ... RIGID EITHER/OR INTO A NEW INTEREST THAT IS ELASTIC, PRODUCTIVE, EXCITING" (1999, 75). This related memory illustrates the belief that, for Sedgwick, experience is grounded in male/male desire.

Eve relates this early identification with a gay man to the very "essence" of her queerness, to the eye/"I" of her tempestuous self. In *A Dialogue*, she declares "the one true thing about me is that my love is *with* gay men" (Sedgwick 1999, 23). Her assertion exemplifies *Epistemology's* Axiom 7: "The paths of allo-identification [identification with] are likely to be strange and recalcitrant. So are the paths of auto-identification [self-identification]" (Sedgwick 2008, 59). Although Sedgwick herself is neither male nor gay, she identifies with gay men, however "strange," "recalcitrant," or queer the association may be.

The insurgence of her claim could affront “actual” LGBT folk by appearing to misappropriate their experiences, joys, and traumas into an ideological allo-identification. This danger is not lost on Sedgwick. She explains:

Imagine somebody who expends extortionate amounts of energy trying to convince the members of some group (*not* a particularly privileged group, *not* a high-status group, in fact a clannish, defensive, stigmatized, but proud, and above all an interesting group) that she too, is to be accepted as – and in fact, truly is – a member of this group ... Each time it’s in the face of some inherent, in fact obvious absurdity about the claim (1999, 154).

“Why,” Shannon asks, “would she want to do that?” “Because it ‘feels right,’ she responds, feels productive and *true*, too” (Sedgwick 1999, 154). However offensive Sedgwick’s identification strikes those she identifies with, her allo-identification is also her self-identification. Nor is her queerness something she wishes (or feels she can) change about herself, as “all these aspects of my life are so intimately involved with each other” (1999, 24). Here, Sedgwick highlights *A Dialogue*’s witnessing: her life and work cannot be separated from one another but are intimately intertwined, independent of anyone else’s opinion or approval.

Even Eve’s marriage to her husband Hal does not diminish her queerness. She does not live with her husband but with “Michael Moon ... a gay man with a / fella of his own” (Sedgwick 1999, 24). She sees Hal on weekends. In this way, her marriage reads as more heterosocial than heterosexual. She describes the sex she has with Hal as “hygienic and routinized” “vanilla,” scheduled “on a weekly basis in the missionary position, ... with one person of the so-called opposite sex, to whom I’ve been legally married for almost a quarter of a century” (Sedgwick 1999, 44). “In her retelling,” Jason Edwards notes, “Sedgwick seems to make this normative paradigm deliberately uninteresting to her readers, challenging the claim that heterosexuality is equivalent to plot, romance, history or interest” (2009, 65). What *A Dialogue* does highlight, what Eve makes interesting, is her queerness. Her heteronormativity is boring, vanilla.

In fact, Eve treats Michael Moon as her “most significant other”: “there’d be nothing untrue about saying I’m in love with him,” she considers. “Our bond is very passionate... very physical ... and ... the emotional weather of my day will most often be determined by Michael’s” (Sedgwick 1999, 24-25). Eve’s depicted relationship with Hal and Michael defies normative notions of love and marriage. When asked to categorise her non-procreative relationship with her husband versus that of her “roommate,” Eve shakes her head: “I don’t know a category that describes” either, she muses (Sedgwick 1999, 25). After all, we *are all different*. Like Luce Irigaray, Sedgwick appreciates herself as “not one” (Irigaray 1993, 23), because her queer performativity is neither singular nor unified but runs across disjointed planes.

However rooted in male/male identification, Sedgwick’s difference is not entirely closed to women. Though she admits in *A Dialogue* that her relationship to women remains her “biggest unaddressed issue” (1999, 124), Sedgwick’s refusal to categorise herself as strictly heterosexual reflects a parallel resolve not to disavow lesbian proclivities. She is receptive, she notes, to discovering one day, hopefully before she reaches old age, “whether I’m a dyke or not” (1999, 145). In *A Dialogue*, therefore, the memoirist self-consciously documents those moments in her life most open to female/female sexuality.

Particularly salient is the summer Eve spent as a teenager at camp, where she became infatuated with one of the female counsellors, was “deliciously fussed over” when she began to menstruate, and shared an “intimacy” with a “baby butch” in her tent (Sedgwick 1999, 72-73). These scenes link lesbian sexuality to focal moments in Eve’s maturation: camp, an early taste of independence from her family; menstruation; the bleeding of girlhood into womanhood; the “intimacy” not explicitly sexual but *intercourse* nonetheless; the “trading stories about grownup things; death, sex” and “early experiments with the pleasure of voices – mine silvery – in the dark” (1999, 73).

Note that Sedgwick’s foray into lesbianism takes place in a camping tent, evocative of the closet (confined, secretive space) but moveable, its walls

permeable, opening for Eve a “lusciously homosocial space” between outside and in (1999, 73). This, she realises, as she did after the arrest of her teacher, marks another queer way to live, a performativity yet unmodeled in “the strained puppet-like heterosexual impositions and self-impositions of junior high school” (1999, 73). Sedgwick’s reflections also support *Epistemology’s* third axiom: “there can’t be an a priori decision about how far it will make sense to conceptualize lesbian and gay male identities together” (2008, 36). Her camp experiences precede the theory she will later devise: it does not “make sense” to “assume that a male-centered analysis of homo/heterosexual definition will have no lesbian relevance or interest” (2008, 39). At the same time, one should not presume “a priori what its lesbian relevance could be” or “how far” such “interest might extend” (2008, 39). In witnessing these memories, Sedgwick opens her heterosexuality to include queer performativity.

One way Sedgwick witnesses queer sexuality beyond its grounding in gay or lesbian desire is through autoeroticism. Masturbation, she contends, is the ultimate unifier in that the act crosses the supposed boundary between homo- and heterosexuality. “One of the right’s favorite critiques of queer theory,” David Kurnick remarks, “is that it’s ‘masturbatory.’” Sedgwick’s oeuvre prompts what Kurnick calls the “obvious response”: “so what?” (1999). Indeed, the theorist appreciates masturbation for the very reason others criticise it. First, the pastime has no relation to procreation. Second, because the masturbator pleasures him- or herself, the act is necessarily same-sex and thus shares a certain “homo” quality with homosexuality (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 100-2).

In her memoir, Sedgwick returns to masturbation as a freeing experience, a moment of intercourse – or *Dialogue on Love* – that the self shares with itself. She remarks that she is struck by “how much the thread” of herself is “tied up with all this masturbating” (1999, 75). She depicts the “hours and hours a day” (1999, 46) she spent as a child pleasuring herself as a “holding environment” (1999, 165), a space almost physical – like her camp-tent or the proverbial closet – in which to explore, absorb, and learn to value her subjectivity, to manage anxieties (particularly early depressions over feeling alienated and

“queer”) and to escape the sometimes stifling experience of family life. “For me,” she writes, “that is what feels like sex,” “something that I could // yearn toward and be / lost in the atmosphere of. / ... a whole world” (1999, 46).

Masturbation also opens queer worlds for Sedgwick as, in fantasy, anything is possible. One can arouse oneself by any scenario without harming others and without hampering one’s sexual imagination with normative or physical restraints. In *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick situates her onanistic fantasies on the liminal backlash of S/M performance. When Shannon asks Eve, for example, how her fantasies help construct queerness, she offers a description of simultaneous pleasure and pain, of an “aura” that becomes “warm. Golden. / Intoxicating. // Playful, too; attentive, deliciously attentive” (1999, 46) and coupled with “Violence and pain – / Humiliation. Torture” (1999, 46). She admits that these “two things” do not “fit together,” but that that very disjunction is also arousing (1999, 46). S/M fantasy, and *writing* about S/M fantasy, enables Eve to straddle another liminal line, to witness queerness, rather than approaching queer studies with a strictly theoretical lens.

In like fashion, Eve’s S/M fantasies focus on the “ass,” highlighting her attraction to male/male eroticism, while opening anal pleasure up to all genders and sexualities. The “ass,” Sedgwick asserts, is a queer paradigm, in that, while one may favour the anus of one gender to another, the “ass” itself is not normatively considered primarily sexual (versus male/female genitalia), nor is it gender-specific; everyone has one. “The ass,” she reminds us, “is capable of being any ass” (1997, 281). Sedgwick thus playfully encourages us to pitch love’s tent “in the place of excrement” (1993, 246), evoking for readers of her life and theory both an image of the tent as closet and Eve’s queer tryst with the “baby butch” in *A Dialogue*.

In her memoir, Sedgwick does not shamefully hide the “ass” from sight but witnesses her own, repeating that her fantasies focus on “butts [and] assholes” (1999, 172) and linking her forays into S/M to her childhood obsession with masturbation and fear of/pleasure in childhood spanking. Shannon notes that

Eve considers “SPANKING ... THE INTRO TO SEX” and that her adult fantasies play out “THE SCENE OF HAVING TO WAIT TILL FATHER COMES HOME TO BE SPANKED AND THERE BEING SOME RITUAL OF COERCED CONSENT WITH HER HAVING TO PULL DOWN HER PANTS AND BE OVER HER FATHER’S LAP WHILE WAITING FOR HIS RETURN MASTURBATING” (Sedgwick 1999, 173). Here, Sedgwick weaves anxiety and anticipation, pain and pleasure, reward and punishment into a tapestry of incestuous child and adult fantasy that culminates in autoeroticism. By having Shannon instead of Eve relay the fantasy, Sedgwick also opens the space between speakers. In doing so, she frees queer theory from the ambit of academia, witnessing liminality in both fantasy and reality, life-writing and theory.

Sedgwick also expands the erogenous zones to include the skin, thereby confronting associations of sex with heteronormative sexual intercourse and exalting other body parts, pleasurably sensitive to vasodilation. In *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick witnesses this theme, detailing the “queer capillaries of her actual pleasure” (1999, 188) in relation to skin, which, as she notes in *Touching Feeling*, swells like a phallus in relation to the “blushing/flushing” of arousal and shame (2003, 59). She underscores her family’s “skin hunger, to handle every rough or silky twist of its passing” (1999, 213) and confesses, through Shannon’s records, “THE FASCINATION EVERYONE HAD WITH HOW SILKY MY SKIN WAS” (1999, 206). Her nanny, Eve reports, was so taken with Evie’s skin that she chased her charge about the room, threatening to “gobble up” her “disgustingly rough skin! RRRrrrr!” (1999, 149). In telling this memory, Eve embodies Sedgwick’s queer theory: silky or rough, inducing affection or fear (the nanny’s pursuit), Eve perceived her skin to be erotically charged, a liminal surface that covers and transcends heteronormative limitations.

In like manner, Sedgwick’s work undercuts the traditionally erotic emphasis placed on the penis and breasts. She contests the crisp homology “breast: femininity; phallus: masculinity” and following a mastectomy and chemotherapy in 1993, asserts that the loss of her hair felt more traumatic than that of her breast (1995, 10). In *A Dialogue*, such non-normative thinking prevails. Just as Eve downplays the sex she has with her husband, she undermines the centrality

of the penis and breast. In her erotically-charged memoir, Sedgwick mentions the penis only once, in a dream scenario, and in this case, the organ is Eve’s own (1999, 89). She mentions the breast, when discussing her mastectomy with Shannon, but she underlines its insignificance, its lack of erotic impact: “I had the two breasts,” she shrugs. “I kept forgetting them. They / weren’t there for me” (1999, 78). In her sexual fantasies and therapy sessions, Eve focuses on the queer.

Thus, when Shannon expresses sympathy at the loss of her breast, she brushes away his comfort, disclaiming: the “breast was *nothing!*” (1999, 64). Compared to the loss of her hair, she hardly noticed the mastectomy, “a good thing, too, of course, since / the hair does grow back” (1999, 64). One can understand why a mastectomy would not affect Eve as it may other women. Although she identifies as female, she also identifies with gay men. She is erotically charged by the “ass” and skin, not breast, and with one breast removed and one intact, her body literally embodies the liminality she witnesses in theory and life. Her hair, however, could be erotically charged, as hair, like skin, is not gender-dependent and is also imbued with sensuality, if not sexuality, in societal discourse. In these ways, as well as those detailed above, Sedgwick witnesses a liminal life, transforming *A Dialogue* from straight autobiography to queer memoir.

In keeping with this theme, *A Dialogue*’s form also witnesses queer theory. Nancy Miller observes that the text is published in three different fonts. Shannon’s notes are printed in small, block capital letters, a typesetting that offers a visual counterpoint to what Miller calls Eve’s “alternating authorial voices” (2002, 218). Her prose “holds the whole structure together” in a standard roman font, and her haiku poetry, printed in a type face that “condenses and expands, highlights and veils” the messages Sedgwick imparts (Miller 2002, 218). In style as well as subject matter, Sedgwick moves beyond the liminal into the hybrid. Her witnessing is not written in two modes (deconstructing binaries) but in *three*, helping to convey a cubist self.

Though Chu believes the “gaudy pageantry” of Sedgwick’s style distracts readers from the “ideas in her scholarly work” (1999) the reviewer overlooks *A Dialogue*’s texture, which Sedgwick weaves to impel her queer witnessing. Sedgwick does not detonate the divisions between poetry and prose and art and theory to *detract* from queer theory (as Chu suggests) but to *witness* queerness itself. *Haibun* is an ideal mode for this kind of work, as its form is already liminally situated, its prose interwoven with haiku. In *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick multiplies this liminality by adding to her poetry and prose excerpts from Shannon’s notebooks and threads of dialogue. In doing so, she adds nuance to the tapestry of her “TEXTURE BOOK” (1999, 207).

The history of *haibun* also suits Sedgwick’s purposes. A manifestation of the linked verse *renga*, *haibun* represents one of the few remaining forms of Japanese collaborative poetry. Historically, linked verse is written in a live setting: in the *ba* in which poets gather to compose orally a series of verses they then fashion into a single poem. With the exception of the first verse, written in advance, *renga*’s text is crafted in *dialogue* among the poets, who either extend an idea proposed by an earlier speaker or deliberately misread the poem’s previous lines to take the work in another direction (Horton 1993, 473).

In selecting this form for her memoir, Sedgwick opens autobiography’s authoritative “I” to include the linked voices of poet, theorist, therapist, reader and patient. She writes a postmodern text in an ancient mode. In doing so, Sedgwick puts into conversation seemingly opposed principles: East and West, tradition and innovation, mutability and permanence (her memoir has outlived its arranger); collectivity and individuality, production and deconstruction. Thus, as Katy Hawkins observes, *haibun* “proves an ideal generic matrix” for performing the “polyvalence and intersubjectivity” of Eve’s queer witness (2006, 254). Sedgwick describes her linked verse as a “vast pleasure” (1999, 205), a style which allows her to “let my // habitual yes / stretch this far there could never / be another no” (1999, 205). Thus, *A Dialogue*’s form enables Sedgwick to affirm all, to remain open to queer possibilities, however disjointed

and contradictory.

Although some may fear a text as variable and volatile as *A Dialogue* alienates readers (how can we engage what we do not understand?), the reverse is also true. The memoir’s very mutability actually encourages readerly response: the more aporias written into a text, the more liminal spaces blurred, the more easily the reader enters the textual conversation. Sedgwick explains: “we need ... there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learn to invest those sites with fascination and love” (1993, 3). By writing her memoir in *haibun*, she crafts a participatory “I.” As the reader fills in structured blanks and disjointed descriptions with one’s own theories and interpretations, one carries the work of *A Dialogue* forward. One enters the *ba* and helps fashion the memoir’s linked verse. With Sedgwick, then with Shannon and Eve, the reader may reject the reductive reasoning implicit in dualistic thinking, and witness instead queer hybridity.

The silences woven into Sedgwick’s text are equally productive. In *Epistemology*, Sedgwick highlights the textual-historical tradition of connecting sodomy to silence, as gay male sex and homosexuality have been euphemised (or stigmatised) in literature as silence. For example: “that sin which should not be named nor committed,” “things fearful to name,” and “the obscene sound of the unbeseeming words” (2008, 203). Quoting Foucault, Sedgwick also argues that “no binary division [is] to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying things ... there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (2008, 3). In light of this history, silence and secrecy can be used to witness queerness.

In *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick celebrates the queer space of silence. When gaps emerge in dialogue, Eve and Shannon appreciate the moment as an opening that will enable Eve to get ‘inside Shannon’s head’ and him into hers: ‘when he unspools the / breathless hypothesis that / each second is of // each silence in our room – giddily welcoming speculation of // what words may arise and

at what instant they may, / bubbling, between us // – “ (1999, 184). In this explanation, Sedgwick spins silence into her narrative. Eve speaks here in fragments, opening spaces for readers to fill in with her own ideas. Sedgwick writes: “Each second is of ... [pause, gap, silence],” so that the silence of her speakers’ room – their closet? (another room of silence) – “giddily welcom[es]” the “speculation” not only of therapist and patient but of the reader, their words “bubbling between” an inclusive “us” into an extended blank space, “ – ” decisively written onto the page.

Textual white space can also be read as queer, denoting the “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” (Sedgwick 1993, 8). *A Dialogue* witnesses this queer silence, particularly evident especially around Eve’s haiku and Shannon’s non-justified (left-aligned) notes. Sedgwick ends the book with a period, denoting a certain finality, but leaves a third of the last page – and seven ensuing pages blank, offering space for the reader to fill in one’s own thoughts, theories, and analyses. This ending diminishes the authority of memoir’s unitive “I,” opening narrative space to both Eve and Shannon, and, finally, to the reader. “To notate our strange / melody,” Sedgwick confirms, “I have some use / for all the white space” (1999, 194). The silence of her concluding pages allows us to linger in the hybridity of reader, writer, and narrators, so that we may witness queer love together.

This white space also opens for Sedgwick the *bardo*, the liminal state or “fairy-tale opening” in Buddhist theology that follows death, before the soul is reincarnated or born anew (2005, 166). Eve longs to enter this queer suspension, a wish that surfaces in her death fantasies. In childhood, Eve did not dream of heaven nor fear hell but longed to enter the space between, a place, like her tent or bedroom fantasies, that signified comfort, “safety / Rest” (1999, 16). As an adult, Eve romanticises death, confessing that however queer or “funny” her admission seems, the “thought // of dying young” has been a “good friend to me often” (1999, 16).

Sedgwick’s affection for death, even/especially in the face of cancer, marks another reason *A Dialogue* is not a typical illness narrative. Death is not something Eve needs to learn to face. She has sought the *bardo* since childhood. When Eve learns her disease is terminal, she confesses to Shannon that, like all her theories and fantasies, “HER EXCITEMENT AT THE POSSIBILITY OF ... DYING HAS NUMEROUS [queer] FACETS” (1999, 17). When she meditates on her mortality, Eve conveys a “SENSE OF BEING RESCUED BY DEATH ... THE IMAGE IS ONE OF LOSS OF BOUNDARIES AND A MERGING WITH A SILENT FIGURE” (1999, 17). In her death fantasies, Eve unites with death personified; another non-normative merging, which underscores her desire to free herself from even liminality, to embrace the boundless space of death.

A fixation with death does not make Eve suicidal. “I never would or could [attempt suicide],” Sedgwick writes. “Suicide has to be several things at once” (as everything is multiple for her): “a wish not to be, / an aggression against the / living, a message: // ... I meant no message death had / words to deliver // Meant no violence / to others’ lives. Simply this. / The wish not to be” (1999, 18). Like coming out of the closet, suicide affects more than the one who dies. Eve does not wish to hurt others by taking her life. She wants to penetrate queer space, to suspend herself in the beyond-liminality of the *bardo*. Dying, she explains, feels less like a permanent ending than a “great, upwelling flux of mutability // as if, falling in, / you’d emerge ...a / different person – ” (1999, 136). She ends this sentence openly, allowing her words to enter the white space of the page. In contemplating death, Eve is not depressed or suicidal. She wants to embrace all life has to offer, including her own passing.

This passing into the *bardo*, which Buddhists teach can begin even before death, may account for why Eve speaks less and less as *A Dialogue* progresses. By the end of the memoir, Shannon has taken over as primary narrator, and Eve has lapsed into silence. Correspondingly, Edwards observes that the therapist’s capitalised em-block notes evoke the font of gravestone epitaphs, and the so-called “worms,” the typesetting term for the “snaky descending passages” of diagonal white lines between words and sentences educe the actual invertebrates who help corpses decompose (2009, 131). In this merging

of form and content, Sedgwick suggests Shannon eases Eve into a queer space.

If Sedgwick wishes to witness queerness however, she may need more than *A Dialogue*. Just as coming out is more complicated than announcing one is “gay” once and forever, witnessing involves more than writing one’s self. Instead, both acts represent perpetual processes, events that are not isolated but involve and impinge upon a larger community. Thus, although Sedgwick’s memoir encourages readerly response, it does not, by virtue of its existence alone, evoke active participation. If Sedgwick’s conversation is to extend beyond the text, her readers must be willing to witness her *Dialogue* in return.

“It takes two to witness the unconscious,” Felman recalls from the writings of Freud (Felman and Laub 1992, 24). Laub corroborates that a successful witness requires the “intimate and total presence of an *other*” (Felman and Laub 1992, 70). This relational mode is denoted in the very definition of the word “witness.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a witness as both the speaker who *bears* witness “from personal observation” and the “spectator or auditor,” who bears witness *to* the speaker’s testimony (2012, sense 6a). In other words, witnessing is not a one-sided act but interpersonal. The writer bears witness for herself but in relation to another, who, in turn, absorbs the teller’s story and testifies to its veracity, a process Dominick LaCapra refers to as “empathic unsettlement” (2001, 78) and I term *dual-witnessing*.

Too often, readers neglect this opportunity. Instead, we tear through the details of someone else’s life story, with little more than voyeuristic interest. In doing so, we impair the psychosocial value of the speaker’s witnessing. Sedgwick is aware of this difficulty. “Realistically,” she writes, “it takes deeply rooted, durable, and often somewhat opaque energies to write a book; it can take them, indeed, to read it” (2008, 59). In *A Dialogue*, she acknowledges: “it’s hard, this part” (1999, 13). With its shifts in form, font, narrative and genre, Sedgwick’s memoir can take enormous energy to read. If Eve feels “exhausted” occupying a queer space – “like a pinball in the middle of a long game” (1999, 126) – imagine how readers feel perusing it.

Despite the empathy she feels for those who do not want to enter into her narrative, Eve admits that her greatest concern is still those she encounters will not witness her secondarily. She tells Shannon that she was once “ignored for a couple of hours in the hospital” (1999, 88). This memory resurfaces in her fears and fantasies as an instance of denied dual-witnessing. She confides that she was so traumatised by this event that, without warning, she sometimes finds herself “plunged into an incident” where she is once again “naked [vulnerable], flat on my back [as if about to be assaulted], under a sheet on a gurney [as if dead] – tears coursing wretchedly into my *ears*,” unable, despite her wailing, to “get the attention of the horrid nurses” (1999, 88). This scene accentuates Eve’s desperation when she lays herself bare and no one will make contact.

Because Eve is concerned others will dodge collaboration, she repeatedly asks Shannon: “can you *hear* this at all? Are you getting any sense of how these things happen, for me?” (Sedgwick 1999, 49). Although Shannon is trained and paid to witness her, Eve still worries her queerness will be missed. After her therapist suggests she rent pornography or buy magazines to stir up her sex life, for example, she frets that he is just “too dumb or too nice” to develop a “tooth” for her (1999, 51). “Don’t go being all stupid,” she pleads. “You can’t just let me drop” (1999, 51). As her therapy progresses and she still does not feel witnessed, she reflects: “I’m ... convinced he’s *doing this wrong*” (1999, 43). Sedgwick is aware of the concurrent difficulty and necessity of dual-witnessing. If Eve’s testimony is not met, her queerness may not be witnessed secondarily.

To teach through counter-example, Eve cites Freud as the witness’ antipode (what I term an *anti-witness*), imparting: “Freud says somewhere that his patients learn not to mind [talk-therapy] because, first, his manner with them remains ‘dry’ and, second, he convinces them it’s inevitable anyway. I’ve always thought this passage sounds like a // description of rape” (Sedgwick 1999, 43). The connection Sedgwick draws between rape and Freud’s *anti-witnessing* is evocative. To Sedgwick, relationality is a form of intercourse, a “social communication between individuals” (OED 2012, sense 2a) that, like sex (sense 2) represents an “avenue of intimacy” (Sedgwick 1999, 168). Like

the nurses in her nightmares or Freud in his clinical distance, those who meet a speaker's testimony with indifference contribute to the trauma of her experience. A dark irony exists in reading "therapist" as "the rapist." Refusal to witness, Sedgwick implies, marks a kind of assault.

Just because witnessing is difficult, however, does not mean one should abandon its pursuit. "However fearfully," Eve confesses, "I must say whatever's in my head" (Sedgwick 1999, 43). One should not abstain from intercourse for fear of assault. Though the avenues of relationality can be *anti-witnessed*, witnessing itself may still be worth the risk. Eve acknowledges: "if I can't kick this / door open, there isn't hope – / I kick it open" (1999, 39). Witnessing, like coming out of the closet or kicking open the door of oneself, is complicated, dangerous even. Still, the process is one to which Eve is committed.

Thus, although she distrusts Shannon's ability to see and hear her, Eve continues to attend sessions with him. In doing so, she comes to trust her therapist and treats their now mutual witness as the model of empathic unsettlement. For, as the memoir progresses, Shannon not only learns to witness Eve, but she begins to witness him as well, as if he is not mere therapist but close friend. Traditionally, an analyst would pose questions to the analysand to work through the messiness of *her* life. In their dialogue, however, Eve often helps Shannon overcome the difficulties *his* life presents him. In their therapy sessions, the speakers address Shannon's history of depression and, through Eve's guidance, Van Wey begins to feel better about his own life. "I FEEL SEEN BY HER," he notes, "AND THAT IS AN ENCOURAGEMENT" (Sedgwick 1999, 99).

Shannon and Eve's mutual witnessing could be read as "bad" therapy. After all, the patient's job is not typically to heal her therapist. Still, the bond Eve forms with Shannon is in keeping with all her non-normative relationships. Here again is an example of Eve's ability to occupy liminal space, to live and witness, not just theorise about deconstructed binaries. In therapy, she dispenses with the hierarchy of analyst over analysand. Instead, she occupies both roles at once and encourages Shannon to do the same. She tells him: "there's [a] circuit of

reciprocity between ... your ability to hold me inside you and mine to hold you inside me" (Sedgwick 1999, 164-65). This exchange is a model of what Sedgwick prods her readers toward: queer relationality through dual-witnessing.

Although Eve fears her witnessing will not be met, some readers do hear Sedgwick's call and willingly immerse themselves in her queerness. "My review was grounded in identification," Miller allows (2002, 224), and Judith Butler asserts:

I have needed the encounter with [her] literature again and again ... to nudge me out from the tight grip of my conceptual threads. And this possibility for a kind of thinking that moves against the strictures of the rigorously logical has been part of the challenge of Sedgwick's work for me. ... and for that I am grateful. ... in every instance, [reading Sedgwick] has demanded that I think in a way that I did not know thought could do – and still remain thought (2002, 109).

Sedgwick's work, Butler suggests, teaches (queer) hybridity, a new way of thinking and being, and as Miller grants, *A Dialogue* models this mode through personal identification. Sedgwick's memoir, then, incites us to position ourselves liminally or, better yet, to recognise that we are already so situated.

The appeal to join Eve in witnessing queerness is radical. What *A Dialogue* encourages us to realise, however, is that we have *always* occupied a queer space whether we appreciate it or not. Eve may be "different," as all people are different, but she is not an aberration. Despite our myriad disparities, we are connected in queer relationality. "Part of the motivation behind my work," Sedgwick reveals, "has been a fantasy that readers or hearers would be variously – in anger, identification, pleasure, envy, 'permission,' exclusion – stimulated to write accounts 'like' this one (whatever that means) of their own, and share those" (1993, 214). That is to say, a goal of Sedgwick's in witnessing queer theory is to spark her readers to witness our own (theories of) queerness: the personal specificity of *A Dialogue's* witnessing enables our own.

Finally, *A Dialogue's* queer witnessing encourages political activism and inspires social change. In her foreword to *Sister Outsider*, Nancy K. Bereano avers that Audre Lorde's literature gives "new resonance" to the "revelation that the personal is political. We are all amplified by [her] work" (2007, 12). The same could be written of Sedgwick's. In helping her readers to realise their queerness, the theorist prompts us to recognise how we are all connected, not isolated by our differences. In doing so, she helps us develop empathy for *all* others, to move beyond the strictly personal into the political collective. That is, if Sedgwick's memoir reveals that we are all queer, we cannot "round up, classify, tattoo, quarantine, and otherwise damage" those others who are (also) queer (2008, xv). In this respect, if Sedgwick's witnessing is met, *A Dialogue* can countermand the heterosexist thoughts and actions that jeopardise us all.

In merging theory, personal narrative, and political activism in *A Dialogue's* witnessing, Sedgwick circumvents Halperin and Traub's concern that queer studies have divorced theory from activism. Kalí Tal propounds: "The battle over the meaning of ... experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate" (1996, 7). Although one may specialise in any one of these areas over another, for example: politics, culture, and/or academia in order to enact lasting change, the three must function together as one aggregate. In de-disciplining queer performativity, *A Dialogue* aids in the task of witnessing, and helping us to witness queerness, personally, scholastically, and politically.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. What critics classify as 'trauma' shifts from theorist to theorist. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an experience so 'overwhelming,' 'sudden,' and 'catastrophic,' as to penetrate the 'membrane' of the psyche (qtd. in Hartman 2003, 12). Judith Herman defines trauma as 'an affliction of the powerless,' an experience in which 'the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force' (1992, 2). Dominick LaCapra defines trauma simply as a condition of 'incomprehensible pain' (2000, 23). Given these overlapping definitions,

Nancy Miller rightly recognizes that, in literary theory at least, 'trauma' has become a 'portmanteau that covers a multitude of disparate injuries,' states, and experiences (2002, 1). Throughout this article, I also treat the definition of 'trauma' openly as any event or series of events that an author or speaker considers personally shattering, from the ravages of war to rape to that ineffable 'something' that haunts Lauren Slater's speaker in *Lying* (2000).

2. This article considers both oral and written testimony (e.g., both what Sedgwick speaker's says to her therapist, Shannon, and what the author writes in her memoir, *A Dialogue on Love*) as evidence of 'witnessing.' While clear differences exist between speaking and writing, with critics such as Patrocínio Schweickart (2008, 11), I discount these in favour of underscoring the transformative power and potential of both oral and written testimony.

3. The above vision represents an ideal (rather than probable) reading of *A Dialogue*. Because not all readers will engage Sedgwick's memoir, its benefits will be lost for many. 'It could never be a version of 'But everyone *should* be able to make this identification"' Sedgwick admits. 'Perhaps everyone should, but everyone does not' (2008, 60). Eve's witnessing, then, signifies an *idealised* queerness. Still, it is an important one. Since publishing *A Dialogue*, Sedgwick succumbed to cancer. Now, especially that we can converse with her only through the literature she has left behind, our responsibility to witness (her) queerness is all the more immediate. Where she ends, we must begin.

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