The Shapes of Fancy

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Conclusion

The Persistence of Fancy

I don’t think that anyone reads anything with more than the most cursory utilitarian attention, let alone closely ponders any text as an aesthetic object, without loving it ("love" in this instance encompassing a full range of intense and irrational responses to texts, including the distinct pleasures of the “hate read”). It is surprising (though perhaps it should not be) how embarrassing, how threatening, it feels to make such an assertion, in an academic and political climate arguably even more constrained and hostile than that in which Eve Sedgwick wrote “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You” (the Introduction to the collection Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction, in 1997). Sedgwick’s essay intervenes on behalf of responses of readerly love and readerly need against a critical climate in which readerly suspicion, trained on anticipating and exposing systemic and historical violence, had come to seem “entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry, rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds.”

One of the things that has happened since 1997, which bears on the affective and methodological constraints felt by those of us who read and write and teach in the humanities, is the wholesale disinvestment and top-down imposition of austerity conditions in American colleges and universities (private and public) in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. A set of decisions made over the past decade by state governments and university administrators have so profoundly restructured the conditions of teaching and learning as to amount to a politically self-inflicted version of what Naomi Klein
calls “disaster capitalism”—that is, taking advantage of an adverse event to gut preexisting institutions and replace them with a new, radically privatized order that serves the interests of capital, rendering all labor precarious and making it difficult to impossible for those institutions to function as checks on capitalism’s stratifying force. The political denigration and destruction of spaces for full, nuanced, creative thinking and reading was underway long before 2008, of course; Sedgwick pled eloquently for such spaces her entire life. But at this dark moment, when it can feel impossible to see any queer, circuitous route around, athwart, or beside paranoid reading’s foregone conclusion that “things are bad and getting worse,” the overarching affect in academia (including but not limited to the occupants of the three quarters of all instructional positions that are fixed term or part time, often paid by the course with no benefits or job security) is one of anxiety.

In literary and cultural studies, these conditions have real methodological consequences. The rising demand (in higher education systems worldwide) to quantify and justify the market utility of our teaching and scholarship imposes the language, and the value system, of the science and technology sectors across the whole enterprise of higher learning. In the humanities, this means that instructors and scholars competing for increasingly scarce resources are incentivized to narrate what we do in terms of concrete solutions to practical problems, useful invention, and the production of verifiable new knowledge. These austerity-driven pressures dovetail in an unfortunate way with the best impulses of Marxist/materialist, feminist, and historicist scholarship to uncover and expose, via a hermeneutic of suspicion, the lived material and discursive conditions of specific places, times, and cultural contexts. One of the urgently needed things that can be reliably produced, and used to satisfy the proliferating institutional metrics of value and relevance, is concrete knowledge about how terrible things have been and how terrible things are.

Thus the habits of paranoid reading that Sedgwick described have morphed over the past two decades into what I call an anxiety of empiricism, a privileging of materialist and historicist narratives, with their causal explanations and deterministic shifts. This is still
a paranoid reading practice, one that attaches prestige to “exposing and problematizing” the hidden, violent structures conditioning the production of texts, cultural objects, and historical subjects, and to assessing how language voices (resists, or perpetuates) the ideological constraints of its moment. But there is an additional kind of preemptive, anticipatory pain avoidance layered into the current anxiety of empiricism in the humanities: a terrible alertness to the real, material, institutional, and professional dangers of being seen as “merely” literary—as being motivated, I think definitionally, by a dynamic of love (complex and ambivalent love, to be sure) and the seeking of pleasure, both as an end in itself and as an intrinsic element of knowledge production, in relation to texts. We are looking at a different version of the problem Sedgwick articulated in 1997: “The vocabulary for articulating any reader’s reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it’s no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintances with such motives.”

It doesn’t have to be this way. One of my reasons for writing this book has been to recenter the affective relations between readers and texts, not only to the discussion of where and how to define queerness, but also to how we theorize reading at all, particularly reading across historical distance and other vectors of difference. I want to revivify reading—its purposes and uses—at a moment when rearticulations of what the humanities can do are urgently needed. In this climate of political revanchism, both in the United States under the Trump administration and worldwide, the achievements of inclusion and citizenship wrought by a so-called modern, liberal era (from higher education for nonelites to reproductive and sexual autonomy) are revealed to be extremely fragile and under reversal. At this moment, my call to restore attention to love, identification, and other affective wounds and burdens in our teaching and scholarship is a call to turn toward, not away from, the complex politics and histories of interpretation. As Sedgwick says, it is not the case that reparative reading practices will yield a sunnier account of the brutal realities of the present: “In a world full of loss, pain, and oppression, both epistemologies are likely to be based on deep pessimism—the reparative motive of seeking pleasure, after all, arrives, by Klein’s account, only
with the achievement of a depressive position. But what each looks for—which is again to say, the motive each has for looking—is bound to differ widely. Of the two, however, it is only paranoid knowledge that has so thorough a practice of disavowing its affective motive and force, and masquerading as the very stuff of truth.” This disavowal is one of the reasons that I do not believe paranoid reading alone is doing, or will continue to do, the jobs—historical, political, or institutional—we have set for it.

Instead, we need a full reconsideration of the functions of critical love and desire, both in how we read and how we model techniques of reading. Sedgwick’s radical claim is that in relation to literary and cultural texts, we are as Melanie Klein’s infants, ingesting and incorporating fragments of others’ psyches into ourselves. In reading, as in object relations more broadly, the reparative position is a hard-won achievement, that the infant or adult “only sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting; this is the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though not, and may I emphasize this, not necessarily like any preexisting whole. Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn. Among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love.” My aim in this book has been to reassemble the texts I have treated thus into new objects, not necessarily like any preexisting whole, in order to ask what new forms of nourishment they might have to offer, not only to me, but to others.

People use literature, particularly the literature of the Renaissance, in myriad ways. We perform it, teach it, identify with it, share it, marvel at its strangeness, and love it with a variety of messy, complicated, and not always logical passions. We analyze its form and style; and we read it as a record of material conditions, ideas, social structures, artistic practices, and sexualities, in all of the ways that sexualities leave traces. The histories we tell about sexuality—much like the colonial voyage histories and reports treated in the last chapter—contain an ambivalent mix of empiricism and fantasy, desire and loss, identification and alienation. They bear tacit affective loads about their own strategies of representation and interpretive
frameworks, investing too much, reversing ends and means, and betraying pleasures and priorities that run athwart of their stated imperatives of knowledge production and political intervention. And, often, they are shot through with moments of queer recognition that confound the supposed conditions of historical and cultural difference. I submit that it is part of what Bruno Latour calls the delusion of a “modern critical stance,” a fantasy of purification, to imagine that the writers of any history or theorizers of any literature (especially those of sexuality) today are entirely more objective, more enlightened, freer of biases and blindesses, less powered by not-always-flattering desires and motives, than Jean de Léry, Thomas Harriot, or John White. Nor should we hold the conditions of knowledge production in academia today separate from the projects of colonial conquest in which those writers were engaged; they’re not. Describing the queerness in a culture without such a category is no less dense an object, no less temporally and epistemologically convoluted an undertaking than early modern projects of representation and description—and, at a fundamental level, just as impossible. That there can be no definitive, morally rehabilitating solution is not a reason to abandon the problem.

The method I have offered here is one possible approach. The previous chapters represent an attempt to use the artifacts of the past—texts that archive a complicated load of desires for transformation, instrumentality, lack, alterity, annihilation, and other objects less amenable to being put into words—to hone an affectively invested, reparative reading practice that can make visible new eruptions of erotic energy, mediated through word and image, in a text. But this particular book’s project is by no means the only one to which this method can lend itself. My approach retheorizes the relationship between the past and the present, history and literary studies, readers and texts, desire and scholarship. It asks (and offers some answers toward) what else, besides mining and narrating the past, literature and literary criticism can contribute to the study of how the world works. How else can we use them? What else can they do? What can the desires we uncover in past archives do; what do they mean for readers, critics, teachers, artists, and activists in the present? To me, any rethinking of what literature is and does must
take place through attending to the play of affect in literary form. *The Shapes of Fancy* is at its heart an inquiry into the complex systems of desire of which literature and reading are made. Valerie Traub has been eloquently teaching us for years that sex in any period or archive—very much including notions of what has been legible as “sex” to people in their own time and culture—has always been constructed by acts of reading.\(^{12}\) Desire is obviously a matter for, and a practice of, interpretation. But what I have endeavored to explore here is the other side of the intrinsic link between reading and desiring: the idea that reading itself is a practice of desire.

We must make the case for the centrality of love and desire to the teaching, reading, and criticism of literature; and we must make it without apology, if we want to revitalize and sustain humanistic inquiry in colleges and universities. I think it is a grave mistake, born out of the paranoid defensive posture in which both literature and gender and sexuality studies departments find themselves at this moment of institutional and political threat, to think that empirical learning about past and present structural problems will furnish all of what our students need from texts and cultural objects—or that such a program of paranoid knowledge production will attract students, draw them in, or outfit them as thinkers, dreamers, and citizens with the energy to make the world they will need. “The monopolistic program of paranoid knowing,” Sedgwick objects, “systematically disallows any explicit recourse to reparative motives, no sooner to be articulated than subject to methodical uprooting. Reparative motives, once they become explicit, are inadmissible within paranoid theory both because they are about pleasure (‘merely aesthetic’) and because they are frankly ameliorative (‘merely reformist’). What makes pleasure and amelioration so ‘mere’?”\(^ {13}\) I hear this as a call to reclaim some of the ground we are at risk of ceding in the humanities. There is *nothing mere* about pleasure and amelioration; they are two of the survival and world-making techniques that literature, and literature classrooms, are best equipped to offer.

University students today are brutally, intimately acquainted with structural violence: student loan debt; sexual assault; pathetically inadequate and expensive health care, including mental health care, for themselves and their family members; addiction; disenfran-
chisement; exploitative low-wage labor; the crushing contraction of their economic horizons in this upwardly redistributive economy; and the void where the state social safety net should be. I think of my public university students when Sedgwick rails against what makes pleasure and amelioration so “mere”: “Only the exclusiveness of paranoia’s faith in demystifying exposure: only its cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people’s (that is, other people’s) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn’t have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions).”¹⁴ My students are quite conscious of the pain they and their loved ones endure under capitalism and patriarchy. Without the tools to access pleasure in literary and aesthetic forms—to dismantle and ingest and worry about and feel heartbreak over texts; to love them with a demanding, depressive, reparative love—they are being systematically denied their full humanity. They will miss half of how the psyche creates a livable world, for it’s only from the depressive position that one can extend resources to others in relations of ethics and care. And we as scholars and teachers will miss the chance to give what we uniquely can give them: the painstaking, rewarding practices that are the wellspring of human beings’ capacity to imagine it could be otherwise. “Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates,” says Sedgwick. “Because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.”¹⁵ I exist in a fairly constant state of rage, so badly do I want this for my students, even as institutional austerity-driven policies make it ever harder for them to access it, or for us to offer it.

Rita Felski’s manifesto *The Uses of Literature* is helpful here in its insistence that making the case for the text as an object of desire is a theoretical undertaking, for “theory simply is the process of
reflecting on the underlying frameworks, principles, and assumptions that shape our individual acts of interpretation.” In the pedagogy and reading practices that I am advocating for, readerly desire is not apart from this process of reflection; it is one among many kinds of meaning available to be theorized. Felski, in her recent work, including The Uses of Literature and The Limits of Critique, takes up and joins in Eve Sedgwick’s project, begun in the 1990s, of thinking about alternatives to symptomatic reading practices that know in advance what they will uncover, arguing that criticism needs to be alert in a more capacious way to the needs and uses readers bring to literature. (Even the words “criticism” and “critical reading” assume a totalizing hermeneutic of suspicion—and we don’t have other words.) The questions that matter to students and nonspecialists—to the vast majority of readers—Felski says, and I agree, are the questions we can no longer afford to sidestep by holding up the production of historical knowledge or political critique as self-evidently sufficient goals, the questions that reveal the mysterious, always personal, and always political affective encounter between text and reader: “Why has this work been chosen for interpretation? How does it speak to me now? What is its value in the present?” And “What of its ability to traverse temporal boundaries, and to generate new and unanticipated resonances, including those that cannot be predicted by its original circumstances?”

Some of the questions I have probed to these ends are about reception. Why have the erotic dynamics of this particular literary canon proven so irresistible as an object of speculation, identification, and interpretation across so many changing sexual regimes and material contexts? Why does the Renaissance persist, in popular cultural fantasy and academic inquiry, as a site of investment in the history of sex, love, and desire? There are many, important materialist answers to these questions, having to do with Shakespeare, Englishness, empire, class, and capital. But there is also something else—something that innumerable readers, past and present, have felt pulling them back, something recalcitrant and excessive that continues to resonate, weirdly and strongly, in all of the different contexts of reception it has found. “The literary,” Wai Chee Dimock ventures, “might refer to that which resonates for readers past, pres-
ent, and future.” But—and this is the central mystery of the text in history—the “that which resonates” is not a kernel of meaning but “a relation, a form of engagement,” substantively, constitutively in flux even as it keeps resonating, like a human being who somehow remains the same person even though most of their cells have died and regenerated. “For since readers past, present, and future are not the same reader, a text can remain literary only by not being the same text. It endures by being read differently.” One of the ways I would phrase an answer to this mystery is that “literature” is a space of affective experimentation, a chance to enter into the pleasures and problems of identification and other weighty affects. To be in spaces where texts and reading, sex and desire are discussed requires a particularly intense kind of attention and affective labor. But there is an urgent need for it, and that need, like sexuality, isn’t going anywhere. Unapologetically centering erotic desire, the “subject of universal interest” that often consumes students no matter what or how anyone is teaching them, is a winning pedagogical and critical strategy because it is honest about how both reading and the world work. The exciting task before us, then, is to channel the force of readerly desires and investments—our own and others’—to assemble, out of this world’s flawed, inviting, unstable textual objects, the most nuanced, plentifully resourceful, resonant histories—and futures—imaginable.

Such radical ambitions, I believe, are only realized by paying deep attention to very small details. Several years ago, there was a blizzard in New York City a few days before Christmas that half shut down the city. With holiday flights canceled and out-of-town visitors unexpectedly stranded sleeping on our floors, my little extended family of friends went walking in Riverside Park. On our way home, the snow was drifted up inches thick, pristine, in the ledges and recessed corners of the marble colonnades on the old apartment buildings of the Upper West Side. Passing one facade where drifted snow piled around the base of a column right at eye level, I took off my glove and gently shoved my four fingers, horizontally and only up to the knuckle, into the light diamond-white unpacked powder, so that four perfect little holes were left in the snowdrift. Then I looked a few feet over, and saw that someone else, unknown to me, had pressed their fingers into the snow in the exact same, careful way. I had stuck my
fingers in the snow like that before, on reflection; it was something I did occasionally (I do it still in honor of this memory). But it was an urge that, until that moment, I had not conceived of as a predilection, as an urge that could be consummated, or not, and then described as a thing some people want to do. Suddenly, here, in the last place I would go looking for shared desire—in a spot that would seem utterly inconsequential to expressions of desire—I was surprised with evidence, anonymous and ephemeral, that one other person alive on that street on that day shared my predilection, making it visible to me as a desire for the first time. If I had passed by hours later, the wind would already have blown the evidence away. Such surprising resonances, unexpectedly connecting one moment in time to another, revealing things that no one, perhaps, was looking for until they are made visible by an act of queer grace, are what I have tried to capture in this book.