Hypothetical Focalization and Queer Grief

The critical paradigm we call “queer” insists that the identity it names is always in relation to, a conviction that finds its theoretical roots in Lacanian psychoanalysis. The term queer can be used as a noun or an adjective, and increasingly has morphed into a verb, as in queering narratology. The term’s diffuseness reminds us that queer continually names and performs a relation to something other than itself. By emphasizing the social and performance aspects of sexual identity, queer, as a critical concept, makes claims that are collective, contingent, and multiple, rather than singular, absolute, or rooted in an individual psychic subject. While much of the affective force of “being” queer—a being made manifest through performance—is, of course, reflected in individual lives and narratives, the ideological and social force

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1. The signature is mine but the ideas and feelings expressed herein have many sources. In addition to the citations formally included in the text, I would like to acknowledge the help of Lauren Berlant, Ann Carlson, Sue Lanser, Celeste Goodridge, Angela Farr Schiller, Monika Greenleaf, Melissa Boyde, Amanda Lawson, and Peta Tait. Frederick Luis Aldama led a rich seminar at the 2011 Project Narrative Conference devoted to the first version of this essay and I am grateful to him and to all participants for that inspiring discussion.

2. Lacan’s most significant contribution to psychoanalysis is his contention that the psychic subject is necessarily a social subject, and therefore a split subject. See Juliet Flower MacCannell, Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986) for a concise summary of this aspect of Lacan’s work.
of the critical term queer derives from its capacity to function as a response to a collective call. The self-appellation queer derives from a perpetual two-step between disidentification with heteronormativity and identification with other queer persons and objects. Since queer names something discovered and encountered in relation to, it dramatizes the ongoing improvisational performance that constitutes identity-making tout court.

The emphasis on collective identity, and its attendant conception of social-sexual identity as performance, has made the fit between queer theory and narrative theory uncomfortable. The narratives often extolled by narratologists often concern individual quests and are often shaped by singular voices, and narrative theory has sought to discover and discern concepts that apply to fixed, even at times universal, narrative structures. Emphasizing formal structures rather than thematic content, narrative theory’s dedication to discerning and disentangling concepts such as discourse and story, author and reader, character focalizer and narrator focalizer, is itself in some ways antithetical to the collective, contingent, and relational force of queer thinking more broadly. Influenced by both poststructuralism’s focus on the blurring of subject positions and psychoanalysis’s rigorous validation of affect as meaning-maker, queer theorists are sometimes skeptical of the arduous effort made by narratologists to pursue systematic precision and fine parsing of structural concepts.

In her 2001 essay on narrative ethics, Lynne Huffer contends, “One of the hallmarks of queer theory is its rejection of traditional narrative in favor of a more liberatory performativity” (6). Huffer cites Judith Butler’s provocative speculation that “performance may preempt narrative as the scene of gender production” (Butler, “Gender Trouble” 339). Butler’s argument is rooted in a Lacanian psychoanalytic axiom that sexuality, the aspect of subjectivity most intimately tied to the unconscious, exceeds “any definitive narrativization” (Butler, “Imitation” 315). These are turbulent waters and worthy of far more attention than I will give them here. But suffice it to say that Butler’s philosophical interest in performance has led some queer theorists to assume that narratology, with its emphasis on the heterodynamic structure of narrative, is not a promising topic for the advancement of queer thought. But those who

3. For more on the performance epistemology at the heart of queer disidentifications, see José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999).


5. Huffer takes pains to complicate a too sturdy opposition between queer thinking and narrative theory and praises the work of Butler and Sedgwick in particular. But she also
study queer performance and those who study narrative have some mutual interests, although on the surface these may seem less strategic than unwitting. Indeed, it seems to me that the concept of performance has particular valence for forging queer narratology.

Take, for example, Susan Lanser’s “Sexing the Narrative,” a reading of Jeanette Winterson’s 1992 novel, *Written on the Body*, one of the earliest and most promising attempts to link narratology and queer theory. Lanser notes that Winterson’s decision to leave the narrator’s gender unmarked raises significant questions about the ways in which gender and sexuality function as narrative markers within narratives more broadly. Winterson’s narrator is deeply in love with Louise (a woman), who is married to Elgin (a man). The reader may, therefore, read the narrator as a straight man or as a lesbian woman. But as Lanser points out, the introduction of the narrator’s boyfriend Crazy Frank in the second half of the novel disallows the first two hypotheses about the narrator’s gender and sexuality. The narrator can neither be an exclusively straight man nor an exclusively lesbian woman. Lanser spells out some of the consequences for narrative theory:

Might we now have to include in narratology two markers (or absence of markers) of the narrator’s identity—sex and sexuality—along with the marker of gender that mediates these two? [. . .] My point in raising these various possibilities [. . .] is not to suggest that narratology can decide these questions [. . .] My point is that gender, sex, and sexuality constitute narratologically significant elements. (89–90)

I agree with Lanser, but I also believe that these narratological markers are, fundamentally, contingent. That is to say, Lanser’s contention that gender “mediates” the reader’s interpretation of the narrator’s sex and sexuality is also a claim that presupposes the belief that erotic expression performs and makes meanings that exceed carnal acts as such. Indeed, the narrator’s shifting affec-
tive and erotic performances are what mediate the reader’s shifting hypotheses about the narrator’s gender and sexual identities. Winterson’s narrator’s gender and sexual identities can only be decided in relation to the heteromorphic gender difference between Louise and Frank. If the narrator’s only erotic entanglements were with Louise, the reader could reasonably assume the narrator is either a lesbian woman or a heterosexual man. But the introduction of the narrator’s erotic relationship with Frank, as Lanser rightly claims, “erases the possibility of [reading the novel’s plot as] a straight heterosexual male in love with a married woman, and hence the standard age-old scenario of Western literature” (90). Equally, the introduction of the narrator’s erotic relationship with Frank disallows the possibility of reading the plot as lesbian romance. It is the gender difference between Louise and Frank that dramatizes the interrelationship between gender and sexuality that determines how to interpret both the gender and sexuality of the narrator. While one might argue that Written on the Body has multiple narrators, the similarity in narrative voice and focalization throughout the novel makes that possibility unpersuasive. Rather than creating multiple narrators, Winterson creates a narrator whose gender and sexual identities emerge in relation to heteromorphic erotic objects. And this is what makes Written on the Body an exemplary queer narrative. Winterson’s novel enacts the ways in which queer gains meaning only in relation to characters and things other than itself.

I.

I noted above that the narrator’s focalization does not change in Written on the Body. But it is wise to retrace this comment and to put it within the context of focalization’s broader story within narrative theory. The concept of focalization was introduced by Gérard Genette in 1972. Genette’s new concept was meant to disentangle the frequent conflation of the perspective of the narrator and the character. By creating the critical category of focalization, Genette called important attention to a discernible difference between seeing and speaking in narrative. Some characters saw and therefore knew things that other characters did not. Genette elucidated three types of focalization: zero, multiple, and internal; he argued that focalizers were independent of narrator types because, at least initially, he did not attribute focalization to

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narrators at all (see 185–211). Following Genette, Seymour Chatman and Gerald Prince insist that narrators are never focalizers because they are elements of discourse, whereas focalization belongs only to story.9 James Phelan and Mieke Bal (among others) argue that both characters and narrators can be focalizers.10 These arguments are more than local skirmishes. They help illuminate the difficulty, and perhaps even the impossibility, of disentangling seeing from saying. For within written narratives seeing is also saying—even if what one sees is that one cannot say. Although Genette attempted to sharpen the distinction between point of view and focalization by restricting focalization to answering the question “who perceives?,” these tweaks did not solve the larger problem with the concept as a whole.11 Monika Fludernik points out that the “extensive debate on focalization has really demonstrated that the category is an interpretive one and not exclusively a textual category” (258). I agree and further suggest that, pace Genette, focalization exposes the deeply entwined relationship between perceiving and saying in written narrative.

Recognizing the trouble with focalization as Genette and his adherents employ it, but still interested in the general issue of doubt produced by discrepancies in perception across a written narrative, David Herman introduces the term hypothetical focalization (HF) as a “(partial) classification of the ways uncertainty can enter narrative discourse via focalization” (244). HF, Herman argues, “entails the use of hypotheses, framed by the narrator or a character, about what might be or have been seen or perceived—if only there were someone who could have adopted the requisite perspective on the situations and events at issue” (231).

While the critical reception of Herman’s concept has focused on whether or not it is helpful or redundant—some suggest that hypothetical focalization is the same as Genette’s zero focalization, or that zero focalization enables HF—less attention has been given to Herman’s motivation to find a term for what he calls a “grammar of doubt.”12 Insofar as narratology is dedicated to meta-understanding, to describing how it is we come to understand narra-


tives, it necessarily comports with the might have been that haunts reading fiction as a mode of cognitive and affective action. Queer theorists, to speak very broadly, have been all about the epistemological and affective consequences of doubt and uncertainty: indeed, some of the most subtle and influential work in the field concerns shame, trauma, optimism, love, and grief, emotional fields that emerge primarily through grammars of affective doubt. 

Moreover, I register a provocative wistfulness in Herman’s definition of HF: “the use of hypotheses, framed by the narrator or a character, about what might be or have been seen or perceived—if only there were someone who could have adopted the requisite perspective on the situations and events at issue” (231). Herman’s use of the word “requisite” suggests that HF brings us close to an omniscient perception that could have occurred had everything fallen into place. Hypothetical focalization, therefore, seems particularly valuable for reading queer autobiographies, especially those concerned with childhood. Indeed, coming-out narratives often recount the drama by which a hypothetical perspective about sexuality becomes a requisite one for the narrator. The idea that queerness might have been correctly recognized if only a hypothetical focalizer had been there to notice it is itself a common trope in such narratives. Equally potent is the “if only I had been straight” hypothetical focalization that often makes queer memoirs comic. In both tropes,
hypothetical focalization is, in part, a function of retrospection, the departure point for memoir generally. Queer memoirists often suggest that if his or her “true” sexuality had been recognized and accepted, if only hypothetically, it may have been lived and narrated in a better key. This kind of reading demonstrates the ease with which focalization slips between interpretive and textual levels, as Fludernik argued.

II.

We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something. This seems so clearly the case with grief, but it can be so only because it was already the case with desire. [. . .] As a mode of relation, neither gender nor sexuality is precisely a possession, but, rather, is a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being for another or by virtue of another.

—Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics”

If memoirs, especially those that concern childhood, illuminate one important affinity between HF and queer narrative, eulogy illuminates another crucial alignment. Butler’s insistence on the strong link between grief and desire also reminds us that just as we wish for a “requisite” perception, so too might we wish for a liberation from the cognitive and affective labor of such fullness. Eulogies and elegies often suggest the many social deaths and microbiological processes that render biological human death an ongoing act, rather than a single event with a clear beginning and end. Perhaps for this reason eulogies have been especially potent genres for the elaboration of HF’s performative reach. Take, for example, W. H. Auden’s eulogy for W. B. Yeats. Auden’s narrator remembers Yeats’s “last afternoon as himself” and imagines it as if he had the “requisite perspective on the situations and events at issue”:

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers. (245)

This becoming at the end of the line registers the monumentality of Yeats’s
death in a clause. Yeats becomes his admirers and Auden underlines the ever-
shifting dialogue between reader and writer, which can ricochet between the
erotic and the cannibalistic. The intermingling of reader and writer, of you
and me, constitutes one of the central performances of written narrative and,
as with any radical jouissance, this porousness erodes the security of the pro-
prietary relation between us. I take up the part of the writer and you are
cast as the reader. But I read this as I write it, and you, no doubt, rewrite it,
 improve it, make it your own as you encounter it here and there. Psychically,
the erosion of this hold on subject position is often treacherous and painful.
For this reason, Freud linked falling in love with suicide in his famous essay
“Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), describing them both as events in which
the ego is overwhelmed by the encounter with the other (see 251–55). There
is something of this same process in the practice of passionate reading and
writing; an inhabitation, however hypothetical, of the voice and sensibility of
the other. For the reader, the other has the writer’s name; for the writer the
other is often simultaneously an interior and exterior addressee. This mutual,
albeit temporary, inhabitation produces both grief for its inevitable ending
and a powerfully immediate resistance to the proprietary claims of singular
subjectivities.18 During the first crest of the AIDS crisis in the United States in
the 1980s, gay men in particular wrote searing elegies that theatrically enacted
both this grief and this resistance.19 It was this work, deeply passionate and
deeply personal, that drove the first generation of queer theorists to imagine a
discursive critical responsiveness to the facts of queer lives and deaths, actu-
ally and imaginatively.

III.

The particular inflection of the term queer in contemporary thought is
indebted to Eve Sedgwick’s critical and autobiographical work. In her two

18. I am using the term “inhabitation” here, rather than “introjection,” or “incorporation,”
because I am interested in the resonance between the former term and pregnancy. To be preg-
nant with the writing voice, for both the reader and the writer, is to become continuous with it
very much in the manner of the merging of two bodies in pregnancy. I am also trying to counter
the logocentric preoccupations of a discourse that routinely privileges dissemination, penetrat-
ing analyses, and so on.

19. Exemplary texts in this genre include Paul Monette, Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for
Rog (New York: St. Martin’s, 1988); Thom Gunn, The Man with Night Sweats: Poems (London;
Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992); Tongues Untied, VHS, dir. Marlon Riggs, 1989 (San Francisco,
CA: Frameline [distributor], 1989); and David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of
groundbreaking books, *Between Men* and *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick wrote passionate essays about male characters in fiction who were in love with each other, sometimes wittingly, sometimes not. But my own interest in Sedgwick’s work stems from the ways in which she infused critical writing with queer autobiography.

Her 1987 essay “A Poem Is Being Written” returns to Sigmund Freud’s essay “A Child Is Being Beaten,” to forge links between poetry, rhythm, and sexuality. One of Freud’s lasting legacies is the use of oneself as a case study; he made it acceptable to build a theory from one’s own desires, jokes, and dreams. This model of theory building was crucial for the early formation of queer studies, and Sedgwick’s work was compellingly adept at enacting the potency of self as case study. In part 1 of “A Poem Is Being Written,” Sedgwick argues that carnal and metric responsiveness share the same psychic and creative root. Part 2 meditates on why anal eroticism seems to be an inconceivable aspect of women’s sexuality. Reading this today, the idea that repeating metrical rhymes and repeated spankings attune a child to the rhythms of erotic life seems, if not exactly commonplace, certainly plausible. But Sedgwick’s call, in part 2 of the essay, to broaden cultural recognition of women’s anal eroticism has hardly been borne out. What interests me about Sedgwick’s essay here, however, is the way in which it pivots between the past and the future and thereby establishes a double voice that alerts us to the voice within or beneath the voice written on the page. The first part of the essay is essentially a memoir: Sedgwick the scholar reads her childhood verse from her professorial point of view. She is concerned with trying to reconstruct her mood, thoughts, and style as a young student and hypothetically imagines herself anew as a writer who is still writing within the voice of the text we are reading. Sedgwick’s essay, then, is a writing that nominates itself a rewriting, a wistful attempt to pay respect to her much-missed younger self. (And I now write of these two Eves, Kosofsky and Sedgwick, in my own wistful attempt to enliven, once more, her now deceased selves.) Sedgwick’s opening proposition exemplifies Fludernik’s point that hypothetical focalization is both interpretive and structural:

This essay was written late: twenty-seven years late, to the extent that it represents a claim for respectful attention to the intellectual and artistic life of a nine-year-old child, Eve Kosofsky. But it would be fairer to admit (and I can testify to this, since my acquaintance with the person named has been continuous) that her claim for attention to her intellectual and artistic life has in fact, exceptionally, persisted through every day of these twenty-seven
years and more, as unremittingly and forcefully as self-respect would permit and very often a good deal more so. What comes late, here, is then not her claim itself, which both deserves and was denied respect because of its very commonplaceness, but the rhetorical ground on which alone it can be made audible, which is unfortunately and misleadingly the ground of exception. She is allowed to speak, or I to speak of her, only here in the space of professional success and of hyperconscious virtuosity, conscious not least of the unusually narrow stylistic demands that hedge about any language that treats one's own past. ("A Poem Is Being Written" 110)

Admitting that her “requisite perspective” on the events detailed in nine-year-old Eve Kosofsky’s poetry has come about because of her professional success as a literary critic, the thirty-six-year-old literary critic goes on to hypothesize a life as a mature poet, a life she both did and did not live under the name “Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.” At the time she wrote the essay, Sedgwick was not then writing poetry “professionally.” The present participle of the essay’s title, “A Poem Is Being Written,” testifies to the act of writing that is the center of the essay’s performance: the essay we read (re)animates nine-year-old Kosofsky’s poetry by bringing Sedgwick’s professional expertise as a literary critic (and not as a poet) to it. Thus, the performance of “requisite perspective” here derives from both Sedgwick’s authority as literary critic and her continuous relationship with the nine-year-old poet whose text she reads (and rewrites).

“A Poem Is Being Written” marks a critical turn in Sedgwick’s work from a clear border between writer and object of study to a messier meditation on herself in relation to the object of study. Sedgwick’s essays are robust inquiries into intersubjectivity, one fostered for her primarily by her love for specific people and texts. Some of her work, as is often the case for writers who publish a lot and often under deadline, feels at times uneven, perhaps even oddly misshapen, meandering, not fully persuasive. As Sedgwick continued to write, her focus moved from considering a particular topic (Henry James, Eve Sedgwick) for a particular audience (oneself, one’s classmates, one’s peers), toward the performance of Writing as primary subject, object, and addressee. In Sedgwick’s later work, she dedicated herself to imagining Writing as a vital performance close to breathing; she crafted arguments carried as much by body as by mind. In her Dialogue on Love, published in 1999, Sedgwick created a prose poem that imagines writing as rhythmic and melodic as breath’s own in and out (7–12). One consequence of this approach was an erosion of her own position as singular author: the dialogue contains some of her
therapist’s notes written at the time of their encounter.20 Influenced by Buddhist practice and thought, the text also contains halibun, short haiku-like poems traditionally used to describe travel, and these, as well as her therapist’s case notes, work against the implicit narrative shape of the psychoanalytic dialogue. Trying to resist the definite pleasures of the teleological successful therapy story, Sedgwick continually underlines her ambition to forge an addressee interested in writing toward Writing, an addressee with the capacity and interest to read for shape, sound, and rhythm; the text is a record of Sedgwick’s decisions about where and how to shape the word that takes its place in the ocean of sentences to come, decisions determined by the echo of sounds that precede that tide.

IV.

One of Sedgwick’s last published essays “about” a writer was her eulogy for Lynda Hart. In it, she remarked:

The last work of Lynda’s that I saw was the notebook of quotations that she assembled, in her careful handwriting, and asked the people who were caring for her in her illness to read to her as a kind of continuing ground of meditation. Although the writing was drawn from diverse spiritual traditions, rather than being Lynda’s own, it was still her book in completely unmistakable ways. […] It had a relation to truth, to truthfulness and to truth-telling, that was clearly of the greatest importance to Lynda herself and to those of us who loved her, and yet never tried to mobilize the Truth into one thing. It was more like a flowing river of truthfulness, and in that sense—in that sense only—it was also a river of consolation. (“Eulogy” 235)

I was both moved and puzzled by Sedgwick’s description of Hart’s last work. By the time of Sedgwick’s eulogy for her, Hart and I had written a book together, many essays, various dialogues, some published some not, and a score of letters, emails, poems, shopping notes.21 In some ways our writing was the most vital part of our connection and in other ways our writing kept

us apart. Our reading–writing relation was such a rich river because we made little distinction between writing and reading. If I read something I liked, or something I didn’t, I’d scrawl something on it and mail it to her, or, after she moved in, simply leave it on the table for her. When we were apart she’d often fax me the marginalia from pages she had read with the published text all redacted; we’d play a game in which I’d have to guess to what text the marginalia belonged. So yes, Eve was correct to note that Lynda’s meditation book was decidedly “hers,” but how could it be otherwise? Why, I wondered, would Sedgwick feel that was something worth pointing out? It was her book in the way it was our communication, a giving and taking that did not trouble overmuch about what was hers, what was ours, what was now, what was then. Or at least not then when we believed in the ocean of sentences to come. But now, now that she’s gone and I have all these papers and books and notes and letters, I sometimes cannot tell which ones are hers, which mine, which are responses, which are initiatives. Our writing was and is sometimes a river of consolation and sometimes a river of grief without end. (A lamentation, a keening, a song.) A writing that was, a writing that is, in relation to each other, but also more fundamentally in relation to acts of reading and writing that obviated the distinction between each act and between each of us.

Lesbians often suffer from “boundary issues,” or so the clinical literature suggests. And yet many lesbians and queers are so accustomed to experiencing the predominantly straight patriarchal world “as if” we are both in it and to the side of it that this blurring itself may be said to produce a constant hypothetical focalization of one’s own queer autobiography. Thus the porosity of “boundaries” may well be a form of potent literacy, a hypothetical focalization that moves the autodiegetic I from the “as if” or subjunctive tense into the indicative, we are. And it may also be the case that falling in love is itself an act in which one hypothesizes that the beloved might have the capacity to adopt “the requisite perspective on the events at issue” in the ongoing drama of autodiegetic narrative.

V.

As a girl, my siblings and I often went down to the small creek that ran behind the school yard. It was mainly a muddy and moist trickle, but we respected it and stayed curbed by its bank. One day, frustrated and lonely, I ventured to the bank alone. There I saw two rocks that were completely, almost theatrically, dry. Lit by the noon sun, the orange yellow stone just under the surface of the dingier brown flickered and flamed. When I picked the rocks up, I felt a thin membrane of dew on the bottom of both rocks
and noticed that the one in my right hand filled my palm entirely, while the one in my left stopped short of my finger-tips. I made sure there were no bugs on them and then I took them back into the school yard and sat at a table and began to rub them together. I was determined to make them spark. It was so much labor: I was grunting and sweating, the sun was in my eyes. The rocks had lost their original appeal, but I carried on. Then finally after what felt like hours but must not have been, a tiny flame leapt between them. Startled, I jumped up and dropped them instantly.

This memory expresses, materially rather than metaphorically, something of what I mean here by “in relation to.” Each rock remained itself as I pressed and panted and forced them into fire but I was nonetheless startled, despite my determined effort, by the fact of the flame they made. The rocks were “dead” but they became alive with the energy of burning when the work of my fevered palms lit them. Perhaps most writing about the dead beloved stems from the belief that if pressed hard enough the tomblike present might be made to coax the heat of their vitality to burn again within the surviving writer. The grieving writer takes up two different modes of consciousness—one in which the beloved is dead and one in which she is not dead. The latter may well be an expression of the wished for and the might have been, but it is also perhaps a version of inhabiting the requisite perspective that only death allows, and thus one that can only be grasped belatedly. (“This essay is late: twenty seven years late . . .” begins Sedgwick’s “A Poem Is Being Written.”) The genre of eulogy often traces the struggle to grasp the consolation within this “requisite perspective” on the dead person’s life.

For both Sedgwick and Hart, the twin experiences of love and grief prompted them toward autobiographical essay writing. Both of them came of age professionally in the shadow of AIDS and both of them had breast cancer. Both women loved both men and women but neither of them considered themselves bisexual. Both of them loved literature, and much of their writing was motivated by the desire to think through the connection between erotic desire and subjectivity. And both came to write their own work as if writing itself might be reparative, if only in a temporary sense. And they both turned from writing the literary criticism that was the core of their graduate training, to writing and art-making informed deeply by their Buddhism. Lynda prepared for her death by consciously framing it as an encounter with the bardo, a way of writing and living a transition that perhaps prose cannot fully allow or convey.

While Sedgwick's first books impressed me with their brilliance, looking back I can see that part of what shook me about them was how precisely she balanced the traditional skills of literary analysis, close reading, with the emerging politics of queer sexuality. In her celebrated essay “White Glasses,” Sedgwick chronicles a complicated transition from the one who writes to the one who reads. That transition is prompted by a double health crisis. She began writing the talk about four months before she presented it at CUNY's Gay and Lesbian Studies Conference in May 1991. It was intended to pay tribute, and perhaps eulogize her beloved friend, the writer and scholar Michael Lynch, who had decided to stop all treatment for HIV. She begins her talk with the recollection of a previous talk, one she heard Michael Lynch give as chair of a panel she had organized for the MLA in 1986, where she met Lynch for the first time. And therein begins her remarkable testimony to Lynch, to his white glasses, to their great love affair, and to their mutual grappling with death's relentless unlocatability.

In section 4, Sedgwick's essay turns from writing to and for Lynch to writing to and for herself:

When I decided to write “White Glasses” four months ago, I thought my friend Michael Lynch was dying and I thought I was healthy. Unreflecting, I formed my identity as the prospective writer of this piece around the obituary presumption that my own frame for speaking, the margin of my survival and exemption, was the clearest thing in the world. In fact it was totally opaque: Michael didn't die; I wasn't healthy: within the space of a couple of weeks, we were dealing with a breathtaking revival of Michael's energy, alertness, appetite—also with my unexpected diagnosis with a breast cancer already metastasized to several lymph modes. (“White Glasses” 255)

Jane Gallop has masterfully read the complex temporality at work in Sedgwick's essay (see especially 87–114). My own interest, though, is in the collapse of the proprietary relationship between healthy author and ill subject; the intermingling of the sick and well chronicled and captured in Sedgwick's essay speaks to the difficulty of discerning who says from who speaks. Sedgwick enters her own illness narrative in relation to her intimacy with Lynch's. Sedgwick's original motivation to write “White Glasses,” which stemmed from a hypothesis that cast her as the healthy survivor who would speak lovingly of the dying Lynch, is undone as she stumbles across a different, richer, more complicated set of facts. She receives a diagnosis of breast cancer, and she reads the collectively written logbook of Lynch's caregivers. When Sedgwick visits the surprisingly healthy Lynch the week before she delivers her paper,
and a few months after her cancer diagnosis, she takes “a few minutes to look through the logbook kept by Michael's care team. I leafed back to February, to the time of my diagnosis and mastectomy, and was amazed to find that one caregiver's shift after another had been marked by the restlessness, exhaustion and pain of Michael’s anxiety about what was going on with me in Durham” (“White Glasses” 267). Gradually Sedgwick realizes that what she had taken to be Lynch's near-miraculous return to health was a kind of command performance of love, a love that had him “at my ear daily with hours of the lore, the solicitude, the ground level truth-telling and demand for truth-telling that I simply had to have” (267). What “White Glasses” performs then is the intricacy and complexity of truth and the quite often spectacularly counter-intuitive, indeed queer, flow between the ill and the well. Lynch, ostensibly dying, in fact nurtures Eve as she encounters her cancer diagnosis, but his guidance and love comes at the cost of his own health. Or maybe Lynch is, like Henry James's Milly Theale, simultaneously spectacularly well and dreadfully ill. Sedgwick's essay traces the shifting layers of love's truth and treats it as fundamentally conditional and nonabsolute. Need here, as everywhere, is paramount. To be Eve's witness to truth, Michael concealed his own suffering and pain. Maybe this is what all true love requires, the lie that enables another’s truth. While we do not have Lynch's account of his response to Sedgwick, her record of his solicitude animates something of his love for her. Sedgwick's essay now reads as a eulogy for both writers, who are also readers. Indeed, movements between acts of reading and writing are continually blurred in the essay.

When Lynda was dying, Eve came and sat with her, long after other people who were seemingly closer to Lynda had left. I was impressed with her capacity to sit, to just be, without draining Lynda in any way. I sometimes watched her reading the meditation book, and so when she wrote about her reading in her eulogy for Lynda, I was not surprised. But I think Sedgwick's remarks have stayed with me for so long because underneath the actual words I sensed Sedgwick proposing a radical conception of both belonging-to (“it was still completely her book in completely unmistakable ways”) and becoming (“a flowing river of truthfulness”). My immediate sense that it was odd to point out that the book was Lynda's may reflect my own resistance to the echo I hear across Sedgwick's eulogy for Hart and “White Glasses.” For even as Eve was declaring the notebook Lynda's, she was also reading it in relation to her own belief in truth-telling, a belief she established and defined when she wrote about reading Lynch's caregivers' logbook. In other words, while I think that Sedgwick's remark about all the different ways of composing, signing, and authoring a book is wonderfully open, the echo I hear across Sedg-
wick’s description of Lynch’s logbook as a source for truth-telling and Hart’s last book as a source for truth leads me to believe that even while Sedgwick was declaring Lynda’s book Lynda’s, she was also rendering it her own.

Moreover, because Sedgwick further claims that this notion of truth-telling was something “clearly of the greatest importance to Lynda herself and to those of us who loved her,” I feel an almost reflexive desire to push against Sedgwick’s claim. Fiction was a central love in Lynda’s professional and personal life. She boasted of her theatricality and self-dramatization and took great pride in her capacity to fake it until she could make it. But more than simply saying “ah but look at this and this, it’s more complicated . . . ,” I think my overall resistance to Sedgwick’s naming the book so decisively Lynda’s stemmed from my fear that her pronouncement of whose book it was impinged on my own investment in being Lynda’s co-author and perpetual addressee.

VI.

In recollecting these echoes after the deaths of Lynch, Sedgwick, and Hart, I place my own narrative voice back in a context that inevitably extends the border of the term “last book.” For there were more books after the one Sedgwick named last, and some of these contain the words of Lynch, Sedgwick, and Hart in complex temporal and political frameworks. Insofar as queer autobiography seeks a narrative form exemplifying the in-relation-to, it never fully forms; therefore it resists becoming the last book, the final word, the singular death. Nor can such a queer autobiography be fully or finally or authoritatively signed—the most one can proffer is a performance that enshrines the signature as a ritualized performance.23 As this text slides between surnames and first names—“Lynda,” “Hart,” “Eve,” “Kosofsky,” “Sedgwick,” it seeks to mark the multiple readers and writers still composing queer autobiography.

“White Glasses” is divided into thirteen sections of different lengths. Sections 7 and 8 are composed entirely of quotations. Section 7 begins with a quote from Butler, who is in turn quoting Lacan. I will now quote Sedgwick, quoting Butler: “Judith Butler in Gender Trouble: ‘Lacan remarks that “the function of the mask dominates the identifications through which refusals of
love are resolved.” In a characteristic gliding over pronominal locations, Lacan fails to make clear who refuses whom” (“White Glasses” 252). The Butler quote continues, and without commenting on it in any way, Sedgwick follows it with a quote from Michael Moon, who comments on Butler’s reading of Lacan. Sedgwick’s writing, in other words, theatricalizes her reading. In these two sections of “White Glasses,” writing and reading become an instance of tracking proliferating citation. Intermingling voices, feelings, pronouns, narratives of the sick and the well, Sedgwick’s writing toward Writing blurs the distinction between the beloved and the lover so deeply that it produces a self-effacement to the point of lying, to the point of dying.

What Sedgwick called Lynda’s “last book” was a book of citations, passages that helped Hart enact her own passage from life to death. Most were written in Lynda’s hand, but some pages were copied out for her by me and by others. Michael Lynch’s logbook, entirely written by others, was the book that revealed to Eve, who thought herself his intimate, that Michael’s return to health was a fiction, one Eve may have needed to misread and so did. In suggesting that Sedgwick is the author of both Lynch’s and Hart’s “last books” I am not accusing her of overwriting them somehow and inscribing them with her signature. I am, rather, acknowledging that the appeal of queer writing comes from the porosity between the reader and the writer, and indeed between the slippage between misreading and reading “right”/write. This approach to queer reading and writing may offer narratology a more complicated challenge than it has focused on to date. While Herman’s concept of HF, and the field’s larger interest in the grammar of doubt, holds much promise for queer narratology, it is worth noting that a methodology that has taken clarity and precision as its goals may have significant blind spots in regard to these messier and blurrier textual performances. While pursuing clarity is, of course, useful and valuable, it is not the only task narrative theory might undertake.

Coda

Sedgwick’s eulogy for Hart was the first of two eulogies offered at Lynda’s memorial service in January 2001, and it was published later in the “Lynda Myoun Hart Memorial Issue” of the journal Women and Performance. I gave the second eulogy and was asked to publish it as well. But I could not. For me, the eulogy was meant to be spoken and heard, not to be read. And since I had long been associated with the defense of the live and ephemeral against the published text no one found it odd. But not wanting to be left out, and not
wanting my refusal to publish my eulogy, which was always her eulogy, to be misread as a refusal to give tribute to Lynda, which is the purpose of a special issue dedicated to someone who will never read it, I decided to publish another essay in the volume. I called it “Tenderness.” It included a short coda about Lynda, the last line of which is “Tender is death’s deep sore, tenderness its salve and more” (26). But the essay itself is mainly about “Sea and Poison,” a performance by the Chicago-based ensemble Goat Island. They dissolved the company in 2009 and that ending, coupled with Sedgwick’s death a few months later, led me back to Lynda’s death, and more particularly, to the last months of our time together in the flesh. One of our most potent arguments concerned the title of one of her books. I lost that argument, and many others, and therefore her third published book is called Between the Body and the Flesh. After her death, I wondered if she had been writing a space for death in its spine, a death that was known before it arrived.

The day we heard Lynda’s cancer had returned was the first day I was allowed to walk unpatched, after a difficult eye surgery. To celebrate, I went to Lynda’s for lunch. As I walked the short distance from our homes, the streets of New York shifted in and out of focus. One eye was fairly clear; the other though was weeping, squinting, weak from the bright light. Once arrived, I collapsed on her couch. While she was cooking, the phone, which was next to the couch, rang and Lynda asked me to pick it up. It was the doctor and so I beckoned Lynda to come from the kitchen and take the call. The doctor told Lynda that the chemotherapy and radiation she had undergone had not succeeded in destroying the cancer cells. Lynda did not respond verbally; instead, she thrust the phone back into my hand. Startled and off guard, I asked the doctor to repeat what she had told Lynda. Lynda sat next to me on the couch furiously writing on yellow sticky-notes and shoving them at me, making me ask the doctor all the things she wanted to know but could not voice herself. I could not read Lynda’s notes very well: both the venom of her fear and the bruised and swollen veins in my surgically repaired eye made it impossible for me to focus on her writing. But I can still see the swirl of her arm, can still feel the angle of her fingers pressed against her pen and the thrust of her arm as she delivered the sticky-notes across my lap. And I still feel the slow fall of them falling to the floor: derelict confetti, whispering grief.

As I squinted at the lines, squiggles more than words, I remembered the drawings I saw in some caves in Uluru, the outback of Australia. Lynda and I started our walk in the desert together, but were soon fighting about one thing or another and Lynda walked into the hot brisk wind and I retreated toward a cave, which strikes me now as symptomatic of most of our responses
to conflict. When I saw the cave drawings, made with stone or rock that still exerted a pressure centuries later, I thought about the ache involved in expression, the will to be heard, understood, felt. And in the memory of Uluru’s dry desert the memory too of the two rocks I found near the creek at my school as a child was also nestled. The heat that scared me into dropping those rocks seemed to have stayed with me and was now burning my ear as the doctor delivered her deplorable diagnosis.

More than representing something “as old as time” the Uluru drawings seemed to me to be a pure expression of time itself, the achievement of duration. As I listened to the doctor explaining Lynda’s cancer to me on a phone in New York in August 2000, I wanted to be like those pictures in the cave. To be not “on” or “in” time—mortal or immortal, finite or infinite—but somehow of time, part of its unwavering beat. The drawings on the caves in Uluru were probably not created with the idea that they would last for centuries. And probably what I saw was “curated,” at least to a limited extent. And yet the drawings somehow remain visible in the general flow of time, registering still as some granulated sands deliberately shaped and set in a wave that keeps flowing.

But that day in New York on the phone with the doctor I was acting as Lynda’s voice, mouthing the words in a script I could not read but could somehow decipher from the energy of her arm and from the love she had written all over me so many times before. I asked the questions I thought she wanted to know the answers to, even though she could not actually bear to hear a word the doctor said. Neither one of us acknowledged any mistakes—she kept writing and I kept pretending to read. The doctor’s words poured into my ear and I flashed on the Mouse Trap from *Hamlet*—the poisoned death being poured into my ear. But I also thought of the story of the Virgin Mary, impregnated through the ear by the Holy Spirit, who later speaks in tongues. Lynda and I had had so many conversations about maternity, about getting pregnant, about adoption, about domesticity. But we also were in love with writing and reading and with something that flowed between us because of those acts. Like most privileged white women in late twentieth-century U.S. culture, we worried about the relationship between that potency and pregnancy, the relationship between the psychic and material demands of our work in relation to the surety of the demand within the maternal call. All this is in me as I watch Lynda write her sticky-notes that afternoon. She wrote so as not to listen; I pretended to read while not being able to see; and the doctor acted as if we’d all be fine.

Three months later Lynda was dead and my eye was healed although deeply, permanently, scarred. That scar is my gauze, the broken gaze that
ruptured the form of expression of my love for Lynda. Even now, all these years later, I cannot claim to have the “requisite perspective” or even to be a reliable focalizer. All I can claim is that when we both were body and flesh we loved one way, and now that she is “between the body and the flesh” we love some other ways. I was lucky for a time to share her heart.

Lynda Hart: her name is what I offer to you now, a performative signature that is not mine to take or give. Or at least not in the economy of truth-telling most of us recognize. But I do it anyway, while inviting you to take it or give it too, as you like, as you love, as you breathe.

Works Cited


