TRAUMA AND THE ELSEWHERE OF QUEER:
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE EROTICS OF HAUNTING

by

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Abstract

This dissertation is an inquiry into the future of queer theory after the death of Eve Sedgwick. A founding scholar of the field, Sedgwick radically changed thinking about sexuality in history in ways that have critically defined queerness not only in relation to but also as temporality. Commenting on the brevity of a future that sees, too frequently, “the brutal foreshortening of so many queer life spans” (2003, p. 148), Sedgwick anticipated an end not of queer theory but rather of her own life. This dissertation argues that Sedgwick’s death, far from signalling that queer theory is over, marks an occasion for re-evaluating the field that can be at once a return and a movement toward a future. In mourning and memorializing her, queer scholars enact a return to the politics that gave rise to Sedgwick’s theorizing. At the same time we turn the focus inward, narrating in various forms of personal voice what her loss has meant.

This dissertation continues and begins again the queer work forged by Sedgwick by drawing connections between the personal and the collective. Intervening into theories of negativity that have become pervasive in the field, it turns to her reparative mode of reading while still acknowledging the damage and aggression that are at the heart of psychic life. Weaving memoir and critical essay in ways that methodologically reference Sedgwick’s innovative use of form, this dissertation queerly disrupts medicalized and pathologized accounts of illness, sexuality, and trauma. It brings into public view and connects to other histories accounts of my personal experiences of anorexia and self-harm in ways that mark a continuation of and, critically, are permitted by an engagement with Sedgwick’s work. In this sense the question emerges: Might the future of queer theory be found in a reading of Sedgwick after Sedgwick?
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Acknowledgements

I was around three years old when I learned to read. Not coincidentally, that was also the
time that I first fell in love. When I started to write, my feelings were channelled into letters to
my favourite authors. “Dear Judy Blume, I LOVE YOU!!” “Dear Beverly Cleary, YOU ARE
THE BEST!!!” Bold, direct, effusive, uncensored, this kind of writing seems to me, now, to be
the best, most inspired kind. In coming to my dissertation, it was the kind also that seemed the
most inappropriate but that I wanted to create and I imagined my reading of Eve Sedgwick could
make possible. Because I learned from her an appreciation for stating the obvious, I feel
compelled to point out (as she might also do) that a dissertation is not the same as a letter, and
most especially perhaps not a love letter. Yet I hope that something about it will still register the
incoherence, confusion, and chaos of that affect. After all, this was how Sedgwick described
“the work of love” – a theory whose aim was to disarticulates one’s rehearsed relation to
cognition and frameworks of mastery. For Sedgwick and in Sedgwick’s terms, then, this
dissertation was written with love. Within it dwell the energetic and inchoate desires of my five
year old self: “THANK YOU!!”

Living with and writing in relation to the dead author for the past two years has proven
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In addition to my supervisory committee, I have had the tremendous good luck of forging influential and sustaining relationships with remarkable professors at every stage. While at UBC I’ve had the privilege of learning from and working with Drs. Lorraine Weir and Janice Stewart. I’ve also received immense support from my department chair, Dr. Deborah Butler. At The University of Western Ontario, where I completed my B.A. (Honours) in Women’s Studies, I took courses from and found early intellectual inspiration in the thinking and teaching of Sonia Halpern and Leslie Thielan-Wilson as well as Drs. Helen Fielding, Monda Halpern, Julia Emberley, Carol Moore, Christine Roulston, and Kim Verwaayen. In important ways my journey to graduate studies began when I met the late Joan Mason-Grant, professor of my first Women’s Studies course at King’s College. Three years after her death I still think of her often and mourn her loss, knowing that it was she who helped me find a language through which to give voice to unarticulated suffering. In the short year that I was at York University completing my M.A., I was fortunate to cross paths with and find support for my work in Drs. Andrea Davis, Kamala Kempadoo, and Gerda Wekerle. It was Gerda in particular who, recognizing the hazardous potentials of the perfectionist in me and my tendency to push myself to the brink,
cautioned me against burnout and gave me, at the tender age of twenty-eight, some of my first critical lessons in self-care. So foreign to me and so utterly indigestible were these ideas then that I failed to listen to her. I am happy to say that over these last years I’ve become more attuned to and accepting of her wisdom even as I continue to have the odd lapse, enacting failure in the form of forgetting.

Many times throughout the Ph.D. process I’ve wanted to quit and in every instance it has been the unwavering support and love received from friends and colleagues that has kept me going. I wish to thank especially Bianca Rus, Cristina Delgado, Melissa White, Mehre Khan, Valerie Triggs, Lynn Fels, Nane Jordan, and Kelly McGillivray. I admire each one of you in your singularity. As academics and writers, I have come to think of you both in relation to and apart from me in the way that Jacques Derrida conceives so beautifully in The Eyes of the University. “It is true,” he writes, “that the living thinkers who gave me the most to think about […], are not among those who break through a solitude, not among those to whom one can simply feel close […] It is thinkers such as these to whom, strangely enough, one may consider oneself closest, and yet they are more than others, other and they too are alone” (2004, p. 120).

My parents, Michael and Mary Beth, have provided me with a wealth of emotional support throughout my post-secondary education. I am grateful to you, I love you, and I thank you. Staying true to his belief that the best investment in life is an education, my father-in-law, D. Miles Price, has been a constant and invaluable source of support over these last many years. The immense generosity, love, and graciousness you’ve shown me means a great deal and has made all the difference. Finally, Jeremy M. Price, my more-than-a-match of a husband of eleven years, it is to you whom I express my deepest gratitude. You have been with me every step of the way, willing me to finish, and I cannot thank you enough for your endless patience, your grace, and your good humour. Never before have I known such fierce and incendiary love or such a genuine, brilliant, and creative human spirit. Early on, when it seemed that we had all the time in the world, we performed on our flutes together and you challenged me to become a better
player. Throughout my Ph.D., when we’ve had so little time, you’ve claimed to know nothing about what I do and yet still you have managed (at all the right times) to push me in my thinking. If I didn’t know of your strong wish to remain critically distant from academia, I might be tempted to think of you as one of the finest examples I’ve come across of Jacques Ranciere’s “ignorant schoolmaster.” Instead, however, I will think of you in your terms – as a musician first and foremost – but also as so many other rare and wonderful things that defy classification.

Final, final thanks go to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding both my M.A. in the form of a Canada Graduate Scholarship and my Ph.D. in the form of a Doctoral Fellowship. I am grateful for these awards since they have allowed me to live and thus to perform the real work that a graduate student must do as a thinking subject.
Chapter One
Queer Theory After Sedgwick: On the Erotics of Loss

This dissertation begins with an assertion, a feeling, and still, less perceptibly, a knowing, that the recent death of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to breast cancer on April 12, 2009 matters. A scholar who was widely regarded as a founder of queer studies in North America and whose critical daring and conceptual acuity was eclipsed perhaps only by her very real and tenacious commitment to advocating queer survival, Sedgwick inspired, continually and sometimes surprisingly, even as her illness threatened for many years her own expiration. Reading Sedgwick today, there are glimpses, to be sure, both poignant and ephemeral, of the kinds of effects the diagnosis of breast cancer had on her life and the way in which, most critically, it prompted a new gender identity formation far removed from categories of essential femininity and femaleness. In a haunting (1993) essay entitled “White Glasses”, for instance, she wrote: “One of the first things I felt when I was facing the diagnosis of breast cancer was shit, now I really must be a woman” (p.262). Yet if this realization was disappointing, it nevertheless invigorated her thinking about the complex places where sexuality and gender identity really happen and prompted an initial articulation of what she would later famously theorize as distinctly “queer” forms of self-fashioning and performance. It was an enlivened Sedgwick, then, in the early 1990’s, with the publication of her revolutionary texts, Epistemology of the Closet and Tendencies, and amidst articulating a groundbreaking conceptualization of “queer” as “the criss-crossing of the lines of identification among genders, races, and sexual definitions” (1992, p. viii), who, ironically, revealed a subjectivity fraught with loss and haunting, having declared
womanhood a distant, forgotten country.

How to reconcile at the outset of this dissertation, in thinking about Sedgwick’s death and in my endeavours to make contact with her ghost(s) and to find a writing location hospitable to such a haunting, the seemingly hard evidentiary “fact” of her biology – her being woman – with the elusiveness, the relative undefinability of “queer”? That queerness and ghostliness have a long history of association is likely not news to anyone working within the field of queer theory today. Frequently referenced in the clichéd and homophobic phrase, “the spectre of homosexuality,” for example, there is an abiding sense of the immateriality of queerness, as something not quite there but sometimes discernible nevertheless, and as that which threatens to emerge from clandestine locations to pounce on unsuspecting victims. A great deal more perceptive, however, is Sedgwick’s opposing view which pivots on an analysis of the kind of politics of non-recognition and wilful ignorance that pervade culture and ensure the immateriality of queerness through dangerously obliterative effects. Against the real and pathologically violent demands of western society that “queer [people] conform or (and this is not a figure of speech) die” (1993, p. 2), Sedgwick raised the spectre of queerness and steadfastly avowed survival in the writing that she understood to be the continuation of a kept promise made to herself as a child and to other queer children. She wrote:

I think many adults (and I among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer eradicating impulses where they are to be so challenged. (1993, p.3)

Sedgwick was speaking eerily about queerness it might seem from our perspective today, as we confront her absence and begin to articulate thoughts of her afterlife, in terms of inventing
possibilities of life that depend on death, on one’s relation to death. Given that, as she once remarked in an interview, queer theory emerged in the United States at the end of the twentieth century most impressively and not coincidentally from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibility were severely curtailed by the AIDS epidemic, it is not surprising that much of Sedgwick’s writing over the years has been preoccupied with loss.1 Long theorizing survival as a matter of surviving into threat, whether of AIDS, stigma, or the violence of gay and lesbian bashing, Sedgwick hinted at a kind of spectral quality about queerness and, indeed, paid subtle but precise attention to what was no longer or not yet present. If there was any one defining characteristic of her work, it was quite likely the not unrelated aspects of devotional love and caring of others and an openness to otherness and death. “My own real dread has never been about dying young,” she once wrote, “but losing the people who make me want to live” (1993, p. 264). When she considered her friends and colleagues doing lesbian and gay work she felt that the survival of each one was a miracle. How astonishing, she marvelled, that they, like herself, existed at all especially considering what she viewed as “the profligate way this culture has of denying and despoiling queer energies and lives” (1993, p.1). Still, if some survived, many others did not, and it was for this reason, in the face of important living promises not fulfilled in time, that Sedgwick sought to define through her writing an ethics and a model for a

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1 While not denying the magnitude and impact of the loss felt by Sedgwick in the wake of so many AIDS-related deaths of gay male friends and colleagues, part of what I want to also explore is whether and to what extent Sedgwick’s disavowal of her own femininity in coming to identify “with and “as” a gay man constituted an equally important if less expressible loss. The broader context for this observation is an analysis of queer theory’s tangled and productive but commonly elided relations with feminist theory and the way in which its “forgetting” of its history of thinking alongside feminism has resulted both in limited and impoverished accounts of gender and in the loss of a queer conceptual space in which to theorize sexuality and gender together. By turning to feminist theory’s articulation of the early processes of gender identity acquisition that imbue femininity as a deep and intractable loss, for example, my dissertation endeavours to examine more fully the interrelationship between gender and sexuality and to broaden out queer conceptual analyses that risk positioning a universal male subject at the centre of their theorizing.
keen and unearthly attentiveness that queer survivors might have to what is not present but still appears as “a figure, a voice, or a spectral kind of materialization” (Freccero, 2007, p. 196).

After her death, how will Eve Sedgwick be remembered? Does queer theory have a future now that she is gone? This dissertation proposes that Sedgwick’s death, in addition to or more accurately because of the loss it has engendered, has prompted a critical re-evaluation of an entire field of scholarship. It has ushered in a return that has moved many of us to consider again the central questions and themes provoked by her work and to reflect on how they helped shape and define queer theory’s earliest articulations. For a field that has recently been dominated by theories of negativity that destabilize queerness by emphasizing ethereal entities, such as the Symbolic order, the death drive, jouissance, and the sinthome, the return to thinking about the foundational categories of, for example: illness, dying, trauma, reparation, community, memory, activism, affect, and the role of feelings in public life represents a kind of recursion that is another way of going forward, and a future of having a future. Today – with AIDS transformed from cultural event to chronic illness, with gay marriage, with the rise of neoliberalism, with the morphing of queer studies into affect studies, temporality studies, geopolitics, and other things – queer theory, according to some critics, has come to represent a form of “after-ness” (Halley and Parker, 2011) that suggests perhaps an increasing irrelevance. More than anything, worries about the projected demise of the field have emerged as scholars have struggled to come to terms with Sedgwick’s death.

And yet, if on the one hand, Sedgwick’s passing has signalled the end of queer theory, then on the other hand, it has, as my dissertation argues, created an important opportunity for thinking that can move toward resurgence. Queer theory scholars in mourning and
memorializing Sedgwick’s death have begun reflecting not just upon the public and collective histories of activism and the organizing around human rights that influenced the growth of academic queer studies but also are turning the focus back on ourselves and so chronicling in various forms of personal voice what Sedgwick’s death has meant. My dissertation continues this queer work of drawing connections between the personal and the collective. Indeed, in the wake of Sedgwick’s death, it reasserts queer memoir as a distinct and powerful form of collective witness. Combining memoir and critical essay in ways that pay careful attention to Sedgwick’s creative use of form, my dissertation makes a queer intervention into pathologized and medicalized accounts of illness, sexuality, and trauma. By bringing into public view my individual experiences of anorexia and self-harm, my dissertation seeks to continue Sedgwick’s work. In this sense it argues that reading Sedgwick after Sedgwick is the future of queer theory.

In the wake of Sedgwick’s death – and, indeed, three years later, given the depth and profundity of the loss it has effected in people everywhere, it does still feel recent – what new understandings might be obtained, particularly for those working in the field of queer studies, from an inquiry into haunting not merely as a “historico-ethical practice” (Frecerro, 2006, p. 8) but as, in fact, the very foundation of thinking and writing? When Sedgwick observed in the introduction to her stunning (1993) collection, Tendencies, that “[e]veryone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of [queer] adolescents” (p. 1), she was offering more than simply a poignant comment on the difficulty of investigating a particular living social reality or a theory of “the near seamlessness that irreducibly obtains between the living and the dead” (Barber and Clark, 2002, p. 6). Rather, she was beginning to articulate a different way of knowing and writing about the world, one that conceived of the ghost – “that special instance of
the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present” (Gordon, 1998, p. 24) – as, precisely, a social figure, one with whom making contact meant, for Sedgwick, something absolutely transformative: a refashioning of the self and the social relations in which one was located.

Certainly, the intense intellectual production that has taken place within both mass culture and contemporary critical theory that has sparked inquiry over the last many years into the return of the “living-dead” and the ghosts, crypts, and spectres that tie present subjects to past histories suggests that a scholarly preoccupation with haunting, whether feminist, literary, psychoanalytic, or philosophical in nature, is today not new and thus not linked in any obvious or deliberate way to the death of Eve Sedgwick. One needs only to perform a perfunctory review of the available literature on the subject, for instance, to ascertain that such pre-eminent and highly regarded intellectuals as Sigmund Freud (1915), Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1986), and Jacques Derrida (1994) were already some years ago attempting to conceive of a language through which to comprehend the life of others and other things within us and to define as methodological practice the historical and psychic power of haunting. And yet, if it was these individuals who first introduced to us such rich and enduring concepts as the unconscious, the phantom, and the spectre as a means for identifying hauntings and considering what other modes of understanding might be made possible through the negotiation of “the always unsettled relationship between what we see and what we know” (Gordon, 2008, p. 24), then it was Sedgwick who called attention to haunting’s decidedly queer effects.

Of all the various nuanced and conceptually complex articulations of haunting we have inherited in the modern West from scholars trained in psychoanalysis and philosophy as well as
other disciplines, the clearest and most straightforward comes, surprisingly perhaps, from no one other than the supremely cryptic Derrida, for whom it involved openness to the possibility of living with and being inhabited by ghosts. Haunting, he suggests, underlines the persistence of the past in the present. It is a language and an experiential modality by which one attends to the repressions, disappearances, absences, and losses compelled by modern life, and through which one hears the echoes and murmurs of what has been lost but is still present in the form of intimations, hints, suggestions, and portents. Haunting, Derrida (1994) tells us, denotes those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when one’s bearings on the world lose direction, when the dead and buried come alive, when what has been forgotten comes into view. Most distinctly, haunting raises spectres, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. What haunting brings into being, then, is what Sedgwick would call a queer temporality, a way of relating to the past where the past is not nevertheless an origin tied to the logic of development but rather an affective and erotic commingling of times from which pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments might also be staged. Thinking alongside Derrida, Wendy Brown (2001) writes: “The spectre reverses the usual understanding of history as origin (and the present as the teleological fruit of the origin) by virtue of its always being a revenant, a coming back...The spectre begins by coming back, by repeating itself, by recurring in the present. It is not traceable to an origin nor to a founding event [...] yet it operates as a force.” (p. 149-50)

That force, even as it would appear to both operate and acquire meaning at the level of fantasy, however, is patently social since the ghost arrives from within and from without as a part of the self that is also – and foremost – a part of the world (Freccero, 2006, p. 101). Further,
although typically conceived of in negative terms, and thus linked, for instance, to trauma, to inciting disturbed feelings, and to registering the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a particular social violence done in the past or in the present, it is yet precisely also what mobilizes desire and identification for/of and with an other. It is a force which, as Elizabeth Freeman (2005) contends, involves pleasure, “[producing] form(s) of time consciousness, even historical consciousness that can intervene upon the material damage done in the name of development”2 (p. 59).

Against the pain and loss that prescribe haunting mainly as a frightening experience, the force of the ghostly return surprises in its suggestion of desire. In Derrida’s conceptualization “the crypt” which bears the force of the return is “the vault of a desire” (“Fors”, p. xvii). Desire for – and of – the other, he implies, is part of what is hidden in the crypt, part of what arrives or comes back as insistent and persistent phantom. It is a queer spectrality, to be sure, this haunting, ghostly apparition of Derrida’s, for not merely does it confound in its untimely returns the apparently discrete and sequential temporalities we call past, present, and future but it does so through its engagement with desire, through the deviant concept of time it thus introduces as “nowhere existing outside of bodies and their pleasures” (Casarino, cited in Freeman, 2005, p. 58). Being haunted is, as Derrida intimates, a profoundly if partially erotic experience.

2 Yet pleasure, as Lauren Berlant (2002) suggests, may also tend toward the negative, for example, as “a reiteration that makes a form, not necessarily something that feels good” (p. 86). Pleasure, in this view, works precisely as a force, binding individuals to objects and processes that, despite being harmful, still offer up a sense of self-continuity and coherency, and a way of being in the world. In a 2010(a) essay, Berlant suggests that pleasure comes specifically in “surrendering to the return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities” (p. 93), and in moments of suspension that “mark a possibility that the habits of history might not be reproduced” (p. 111). In my dissertation, I am calling on my own and others’ experiences of anorexia and self-injury to trace the queer-feminist implications of Berlant’s articulation of pleasure, illustrating how it both uniquely applies to women and reveals something specific (that is, specifically masochistic) about the construction of femininity under patriarchy.
Apprehending it thus demands – and this is what Sedgwick obviously understood – a queerly spectral approach, “one that can make room for or leave itself open to the materialization and voicing of desire so that it might thereby appear and speak” (Freccero, 2006, p. 86).

In an age of scholarship that has grown stale, in the arts and humanities to some degree and in the social sciences pronouncedly, in its conventional view of what counts as living social reality, in its restrictive commitment to an empiricist epistemology and its supporting ontology of the visible and the concrete, queer theory, bolstered by all that it has inherited conceptually from Sedgwick, has initiated other methods and forms of writing, ones that are more attuned to the task of conjuring up the appearances of something that is absent. One form this work has taken in recent years, both as a direct result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and as a consequence of queer theory’s close conceptual linkages to psychoanalysis and deconstruction and the categories, terminologies, and modes of theorizing it has thus bequeathed, is a kind of thinking about and critical engagement with concepts of trauma and loss and the incompletion of the work of mourning.

Reconsidering the spatial and temporal dimensions of specifically queer traumas, including AIDS, queer scholars have suggested that the incorporation of lost others need not be haunted by melancholy and depression only. Rather, they have argued, residues of “positive affect” – erotic scenes, utopias, memories of touch – “must become available for queer counter-histories of space and time, alternative narratives of development that have become central to the notion of queer subcultures, counter-publics, and utopias” (Eng, Halberstam and Munoz, 2005, p.5). These views, by no means shared or espoused by all queer theorists today, are indicative of a recent queer critical intervention into certain conceptual legacies of psychoanalysis, most
particularly, its model of pain and ego formation and the idea that a wound or an originary bodily discomfort creates the individual. Equally, insofar as they suggest a turn towards a politics of pleasure and relationality and an understanding that “queers survive through the ability to invent or seize pleasurable relations between bodies” (Freeman, 2005, p. 58), they signal a disruption of the anti-relational mode of queer theory which, over the years, has come to predominate the field, having found an early articulation in Leo Bersani’s (1995) book *Homos*, and acquired widespread critical attention and startling analytical force in Lee Edelman’s brilliant (2004) polemic *No Future*. Further, the recent broadening of the scope of affectivities for queer theorizing indicates, at least potentially, recognition on the part of some queer scholars of the legacy of feminist ideas in the historical development of queer theory and the ways in which, as Judith Halberstam (2008) has shown, the feminist archive of negativity might serve as a model for a more explicitly political framing of the anti-social project in queer contexts.\(^3\)

If part of what has propelled the move to, again, invest queer with positivity, to make of it a kind of essence and to inquire into sex as bodily practice, not sexuality as identity, is a desire to focus on the “here and now”, to counteract the deconstructive sense of queer as immateriality and the way that it disaggregates identity, then the part that has impeded the facility of such a

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\(^3\) Halberstam (2008) argues that the affectivities expressed by feminist writers, theorists, and artists such as Jamaica Kincaid, Shulamith Firestone, Valerie Solanas, and Toni Morrison differ substantially from those preferred by Edelman and Bersani, that they are “associated with another kind of politics and different forms of negativity – rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, over-investment [...] and so on” (p. 152). From the vast archive of anti-social feminist work, Halberstam identifies performance artist Marina Abramovic’s work as representative of this other kind of negativity, as a particularly sophisticated and powerful feminist statement on the productiveness of self-destructive behaviour, of “cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate” (p. 151). Classifying Abramovic’s live performance as a form of “radical passivity,” an extreme restaging of the artistic encounter in which the artist performs her own act of unbecoming by inviting audience members to use objects on her in any way and to whatever uses they please, Halberstam articulates an understanding that the impulse for self-destructive behaviour, for women, signals a refusal, that it arises when we realize we are at odds with the symbolic, a system of representation and meaning making in which our participation would mean symbolic death.
movement is a stubborn inflexibility to thinking about the relation of sex to temporality and the ways in which queer practices of pleasure and bodily enjoyments complexly exceed the present. In a (2005) article provocatively entitled “Time Binds”, Elizabeth Freeman calls forth precisely the productive sense of alternate times in a term that she conceives of as erotohistoriography – “a politics of unpredictable, deeply embodied pleasures that counters the logic of development” (p. 59). According to Freeman, “binds” suggest “the queer touch of time” (p. 60), “attachments in the here and now but also those forged across both spatial and temporal barriers” (p. 61). “To be bound,” she hypothesizes, “is to be going somewhere” (p. 61). Yet even as it suggests connectivity, “binds” also names a certain fixity in time, a state of being timebound, belated, incompletely developed, left behind or not there yet, going nowhere. She explains: “This nowhere has everything to do with sex, for “binds” is the present-tense English of a German verb employed by Freud, *Binden*, meaning to contain otherwise freely circulating libidinal energies” (p. 61). In addition to this Freudian significance, however, the “nowhere-ness” of sex is important for as Freeman goes on to explore, it registers in its suggestion of a trace of the pleasurable in what is absent, and of past bodies palpably connecting to present ones, a haunting structured as much by ecstasy as by loss.4

This is a haunting that, for Sedgwick, bespeaks queerness and queer childhood especially, for it is a trace of a past pleasure, a long-ago scene of erotic contact interrupted, lost, repressed, or otherwise disavowed by a heterosexist culture that has refused to acknowledge the eroticism

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4 The aim of Berlant’s (2010a) essay, to politicize Freud’s argument that “people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them” (p. 96) resonates with my interest in trying to articulate sexualized relations to (self) wounding and how it is that women in particular become erotically invested in anorexia and cutting, practices that ultimately assist us in our own undoing.
of children and how they never “quite conform to the wished-for ways that they are supposed to be in terms of gender and sexual roles” (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004, p. x). In A Dialogue on Love, Sedgwick’s remarkable (1999) account of the psychotherapy she entered into some eighteen months after she experienced a recurrence of the breast cancer that was first diagnosed at the age of forty, these expressions of haunting find their clearest and most affecting articulation in the child Eve’s suicidal wish “not to be” (p. 18). Faced with what she as a child perceived to be an impossibility of being, a state of not-quite existing occasioned by her parents’ insistence on childhood innocence and their persistent inability to attribute to her a sexuality and to recognize her as queer, Sedgwick fantasized yielding to death not as a timeless void or nullified space but as an interruption of strange plenitude in the present, as a memory or a premonition of something wonderfully erotic. In a passage which curiously parallels both the description of the affective transference bond she shared with her therapist Shannon and her obsessive and routine solitary childhood practice of masturbation, Sedgwick describes the feeling behind the wish: “[The] thought of dying young was/ a good friend to me often / Sure it sounds funny / but to think of death / brought me a sense of safety / Rest / Of being held” (p. 16).

There is a pleasure for Sedgwick in thinking about death and sex that directly and complexly refers to what is concealed and immaterial, whether a ghostly presence, a lingering past, or luminous presence of the seemingly invisible. Commenting to Shannon on the degree to which as a child she was plagued by a nebulous sense of self, she states: “It’s awfully striking how much the thread of a self, for me, seems to have been tied up with all this masturbating” (p. 75). And then: “A summer morning / waking up in my own good / time, with my cool skin, a writing project waiting when I get around to it: for me, these are the real elements of heldness on
a day-to-day basis. More even than being held by another person” (p. 76). The sensuousness of being held intimately by absence, the subtle pleasure made from contact with the incoherent, with that which remains inexplicable, shadowy, ghostly because not properly “seen,” figures persistently within Sedgwick’s memoir, precisely, as a way of referencing the ambiguities of sex and its affective dimensions. For all of Sedgwick’s talk about sex, for all of the various depictions she offers – whether precocious, urgent, incorporeal, ambivalent, lazy, languid, sustaining, aggressive, torturous, hostile – there is still an unintelligibility about it, a sense that the more carefully she tries to describe it and discipline it with language, the more quickly it retreats to “nowhereness” and dissolves into nothing.

A touch queerly perhaps then, the account that she gives that seems the most fitting is the one that, on the surface of things, has nothing to do with sex at all. Though an ephemeral encounter, its placing just two pages from the end of the memoir implies something significant, an important discovery. In an email that she types to a friend, Sedgwick describes an occurrence in which, unobserved, she stands at a distance and watches as an unknowing Shannon bends over and picks up the mulch – the very same that she has dislodged in an unexpected fall earlier that day. She writes:

I write to Tim that there may be something inexhaustibly pleasing in the tight, light knot of space, time, and seeing. How the small extent of Ninth Street, our wide-skied, midwestern-feeling little college town, turns into a time-lapse graphic that lets Shannon occupy the place where I was, encountering my ghost without recognition, unmaking my mistake – me, turning back, seeing it. And I love that his care for me was not care for me. (p. 219, emphasis in the original)

More than a simple or straightforward account, Sedgwick’s narrative, insofar as it comes
in the form of an autobiography, a genre whose links to death have become increasingly explicit over the last two decades, and have found various and sustained expression in Derrida’s proposition that one “writes as the (still living) dead” (cited in Castricano, 2001, p. 20), provides a language for identifying haunting, for negotiating between what can be seen and what is in the shadows. In this dissertation, quite as Sedgwick implies, it is sex and sexuality that live in the shadows, that hover queerly between materiality and immateriality, that are and are not there, which not only readily and peculiarly lend themselves to autobiography, but also illuminate and in important ways define it fundamentally as a practice and a method of writing with ghosts.

Key among the profusion of criticisms of autobiography that have emerged within contemporary scholarship are ideas about the instability and the incoherency of the self-representational “I” at its centre. As Leigh Gilmore (1994) explains “definitions of autobiography derive from the reference between the person who says I and the I who is not a person but a function of language” (p. 6). The implication is thus that there is a multiplicity of selves that invariably figure in the writing of “a life.” And yet, in Derrida’s view at least, these selves are never simply the effect of, for instance, a postmodernist agenda that aspires to decentre and recontextualize the autonomous subject of traditional autobiography and to call attention thereby to a dynamic subject that changes over time, is situated historically in the world and positioned in different discourses. Rather, to the extent that autobiography marks a

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5 Exemplary perhaps of the kind of contestations that surround the genre, Sedgwick herself seemed hesitant to categorize A Dialogue on Love as autobiographical. In a piece from 2006 entitled “Teaching/Depression,” she noted that her interest in writing reflected less a desire to reconstruct “childhood material [...] or even adult motives” than a wish to make tangible and available “the quality of a specific listening space” (p. 3). Thus a text that weaves Sedgwick’s own reflections and poetic renderings with case notes recorded by her psychotherapist, A Dialogue on Love resists too frequent usage of what Sedgwick referred to as the primordial first person singular but instead provides a space for a multiplicity of voices to be heard.
dissimulation of the subject – as he says, “writing for the dead, departed is the subject” (“Cartouches,” p. 190) – it admits and indeed inscribes the “unspeakable” names of those “altogether Others” – phantoms or the “living-dead” returning as inheritance in place of the “subject” (Castricano, 2001, p. 20).

Equally attuned to the phantom structures of subjectivity, Sedgwick, while less emphatic than Derrida perhaps in articulating the linkages between autobiography and death, nevertheless acknowledges them and, strangely, invests them with material substance in memoirs that centre on and powerfully elicit the work of identification. Commenting that “part of the motivation behind my work [...] 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” (1993, p. 177), Sedgwick invited readers to take a detour through the other, and to enter into a space where the self might relate to itself as a self, a self that was perpetually other. Thus an invitation and a call to forge a relation of self to other, to invoke phantoms at those strangely indeterminate sites of writing and reading, Sedgwick’s words startle all the more for the context in which they were articulated.

The particular site is, as it happens, also a starkly sexual one, a naughty personal essay called “A Poem is Being Written” in which Sedgwick, playing transparently on Freud’s famous essay “A Child is Being Beaten,” traces her early masochistic pleasures back to an obsession with language and its rhythmic unfolding, and her fascination with spanking, first as a child and later as a woman, to her passion for being a student of poetry. It is a tale that both is and is not her own for it is a figuring of the nine-year-old Eve through the textual production of another child – the imaginary “pupil” of nineteenth century American writer Henry James – a queerly
desirous boy whose sexual pleasures are distinctly verbal in nature and whose pain thus derives from torturous discussions with male tutors on the rituals of spanking and beating.

Characteristically Sedgwick, the writing of the sexual and of masochism specifically is a task that within the contours of the essay concerns itself less with the physical components of the scene and turns more towards imaginary, and even verbal, intrigues. Still, more than imaginary, there is, yet, also the trace of something ghostly, a haunting not so much of the queer child Sedgwick whose pain, shame, and desires, while disguised, are nevertheless articulated, but of an encounter that in all of its familiarity bears no recognition.

In composing this dissertation and accepting Sedgwick’s invitation to explore and inhabit the place of the personal in theoretical writing, I want to begin thinking about the queerness of autobiography, about how it could be that a genre inextricably bound to the task of revealing the self conspires, through the strange unsettling of time and space, to keep the elements of “a self” at a distance from the self by inciting misrecognition. For several years, ever since I first read it, I carried with me, that is to say, I harboured the intensity of a feeling that the essay “White Glasses,” Sedgwick’s loving (1993) tribute to her dying friend Michael Lynch and her account of the fierce identifications they forged around matters of illness and health, life and death, gender and sex and sexuality, not only reflected back to me my own desires and preoccupations but also queerly enunciated them into being. Desperate at the time of those first readings to formulate coherent thoughts around what seemed my own confusing emergent identifications, and to put into language a feeling that my body, while desirously feminine, shapely, and for the first time in a long time, completely healthy, was somehow not my own, I held tight to Sedgwick’s poignant and urgently articulated desire to forge “habitable” identities that in no way corresponded to “the
self as whom we are seen” (1993, p. 266). It was an essay that in its entirety was about seeing and not seeing, an extraordinary inquiry into the symbolism and the fantasy of two matching pairs of white glasses and the impossibility of an identification that could allow one friend to see herself as she believed the other saw her, and as she saw him, through his white glasses. About her identity as and her love for a gay man, Sedgwick would write:

When I am with Michael, often suddenly it will be as if we were fused together at a distance of half an inch from the eye [...]. When I am in bed with Michael, our white glasses line up neatly on the night table and I always fantasy that I may walk away wearing the wrong ones. (p. 256-57)

Who was this writer Eve Sedgwick, I wondered, as, hungrily, I turned each page, and as the images I found there, of a self-described fat, marshmallow shaped middle-aged woman inexplicably dissolved, bringing into focus in their place the impression of a frail, thin, and sickly AIDS infected man. Of little significance to me then was Michael’s relative absence and invisibility in the text. The essay, after all, was written as an obituary of sorts, in anticipation of his death which Sedgwick imagined surely would come by the time she delivered the paper at a conference that same year. Yet, as I read on Michael’s was rather the only image I saw, blazing, quite like the author’s description of his white glasses. It was an intense identification that she shared with Michael, made from a particular history of close alliances in friendship, illness, activism, work, and love, yet it was also, somewhat curiously, I thought, my identification, a feeling and a force that while mostly incomprehensible, resonated with my thoughts and experience of certain other “identity-implicating” illnesses and with the strange discomforts of normative femininity. So compelled by Sedgwick’s description of the symbolic linkages between whiteness and femininity and “the corrosive aggression that white also is” (p. 255), I began, in
some vague continuing effort at self-healing, I suppose, to inquire into the more conflicted and sadistic elements of female subjectivity and the ways in which they get disguised in stereotyped expressions of feminine gender identity.  

Unconvinced, similar to Sedgwick, of “the defining centrality of [a woman’s] breasts to her sense of gender identity and integrity” (1993, p. 262), I had, over a period of several years, through a practice of self-imposed starvation known in clinical terms as anorexia, whittled myself down to virtually nothing and thus erased any outward signs of femininity. I was sick: I was cold all the time, even in the sweltering summer heat; my body lost its voluptuousness; my hair fell out in clumps, and a fine fuzzy coating of hair began to grow like fur on my arms and legs. Mine was obviously a self in disrepair, but while my body struggled literally to function and to hold itself together, it still bespoke a desire that, incoherent in the present, must have issued from another time. It was this desire that I thought I recognized in Michael, and yet so plainly did I misrecognize it, its contours and shapes unfolding in the light of Sedgwick’s narration. My identification was with Sedgwick, whose identification was with Michael. Thus whatever new understandings of queerness she offered me, and however compelling her analysis of the unruly surprise of desire, fantasy, and attachment, it seemed important for me, suddenly, that I maintain clarity about this issue, and that I keep this newly acquired fact, as it were,

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6 Psychoanalyst Louise Kaplan (1997) has examined, in a clinical context, a range of compulsive female behaviours, such as self-mutilation, extreme submissiveness, theft, bulimia, and anorexia, which she labels “female perversions.” For Kaplan, perversions, or performances of exaggerated femininity function as a disguise, masking aggressive and sadistic impulses as well as cross-gender aspirations. The masquerade of femininity, she says, covers over the wish to be masculine. In a personal and less pathologizing account, Caroline Knapp (2010) outlines her experience of anorexia as both a symptom and a pernicious effect of patriarchal culture’s denial of women’s appetites. She suggests that the staunch refusal of women’s desire, not just for food, but for sex, work, love, and success has resulted in a deep and sustained confusion about what we are hungry for and an "ancient, aching emptiness, a gaping hole so vast that it could kill you, a longing for comfort that [...] cannot be filled with food and objects" (p. 174).
straight. This did not stop the images from coming, however, and like Sedgwick, and indeed *through* her, I protected myself with language, with the subtleties and the ambiguities that obtained in her play with words and from which it seemed she could transfigure any experience into pleasure.

It is true, perhaps more so now than I can bear, as I sit at the border of remembering and forgetting, composing this dissertation and attending to the living traces of Eve Sedgwick, that the only thing that we have between us, indeed the only thing that stands between us is language. Thanks to Sedgwick and a host of other queer scholars who facilitated the rise of queer theory as a literary cultural practice particularly in the United States, the focus of attention within the field has turned to the performative linguistic function of *queer* and the way that it names a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity. Following Judith Butler, for example, who, in her (1993) essay “Critically Queer,” argued that the assertion of “queer” must never purport to “fully describe” those it seeks to represent, queer theorists have sought to redefine the term from that which designates an identitarian position (even as it works to undo the binary between *straight* and *gay*) to that which names a force of a deviation from the norm. Thus in an analysis that advocates for queer’s “verbally and adjectivally unsettling force” against claims for its definitional stability [such that] “theoretically anything can queer something, and anything, given a certain odd twist, can become queer,” Carla Freccero (2007a, p. 485) calls attention to the *activity* of queering and what she conceives of as its interruptive effects. In these terms, queerness works, as Carolyn Dinshaw aptly describes, “by contiguity and displacement, knocking signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange [...] It articulates not a determinate thing but a relation to existent structures of power...and it provokes inquiry into the
ways that the ‘natural’ has been produced by particular discursive matrices of heteronormativity” (1995, p. 76-77). Queerness, in other words, is a certain effect in and of language. Although its force may be felt in the work of difference it performs, in its moving in the interstitial space between hetero- and homo-, normative and non-, it functions yet as a “trace” in the field of sexuality, marking, as Derrida (1978) might say, an absent present.

If, detached from actual bodies and from the materiality of the category of the sexual, *queer* aspires not to being but rather designates a conceptual analytic that, empirically irreducible and increasingly prevalent across many theoretical fields, conveys the general work of denormativization, what can then be said of the specificity of queer, of its relation to the specific thematic of sexuality? In a queer theoretical climate now witnessing the institutionalizing of *queer* and so the deployment of the term less as an historically grounded material identity incorporating so-called deviant sexualities, and more as a critique and an object of knowledge, it would seem that we have compromised not only its primary definitional significance, but also and more perplexingly its greater analytical thrust and complexity, precisely, as a deconstructive practice – what Sedgwick would describe as “a mode of thought or theorizing that [values] the

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7 It does seem apparent that recent writings in queer theory, perhaps particularly by scholars working under the influence of Leo Bersani’s (1987; 1995) definition of sex as anti-communitarian, self-shattering and anti-identitarian, read as strikingly asexual. On the one hand, this can obviously be explained by the particular conceptual analytics of anti-social queer theory which view sex, and particularly homo-sex and receptive sex, not as a life-force connecting pleasure to life, survival and futurity but as a death drive that undoes the self and releases the self from the drive for mastery and coherence and resolution. On the other hand, scholars such as Carla Freccero (2007) have remarked that it may well be the project of queering temporality that has dislodged queer from its attachment to sexuality by thinking “queer” “as a critique of (temporal) normativity tout court rather than sexual normativity specifically” (p. 489). Following Freccero’s project on queer spectrality which thinks alongside scholars such as Berlant (2000), Butler (1997), Cheng (2001), Cvetkovich (2003), Eng and Kazanjian (2002), Halberstam (2005), Sedgwick (2005) who all theorize in various ways the force of affect in history, I want to consider affectivity as a key to alternative temporal models precisely because of its close implication in materiality and the way that emotions get written out, sometimes sexually, on the body.
ways in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other” (1993, p. 6).

Perhaps if anything can be queer then nothing is queer, and not least because of a temporality that “at once indefinite and virtual but also forceful, resilient, and undeniable,” has yet to unfold (Barber and Clark, p. 2). Indeed, given Sedgwick’s conceptualization of queerness as temporality, as “an immemorial current” and “a continuing moment” (1993, p. ii), a “non-dimensional verbal mode” that signifies “not a future present but a persistent effortfulness that makes a present” (Spivak, cited in Barber and Clark, p. 2), perhaps it is rather that queer, actually and purposefully, is, that, in fact, it can only ever be in the moment, in the mode of an ongoing performativity. To identify it one needs thus to shift from questioning whether and what to inquiring when it is, to ask, along with Sedgwick: “What if the richest junctures weren’t the ones where everything means the same thing?” (1993, p. 17).

All of a sudden, and without warning, then, we have in this articulation of queer time and Sedgwick’s invocation of difference the spectre of a ghost: the return of sexuality. Writing candidly in Epistemology of the Closet, a work which, published in 1990, preceded Tendencies by some three years and advanced new, key articulations relevant to thinking about sexuality in relation to queer and within a scholarly context of queer theory, she would observe, for instance, that when it comes to sex, “people are different from each other” (p. 23). As part of an emerging anti-homophobic project, Sedgwick was interested in exploring the myriad ways in which sex, as she said, means differently for people. At the same time she was fascinated by the degree to which, methodologically and linguistically, as a culture we were unable to account for even the

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8 At the same time, in the spirit of apprehending the particular aching sensation of hunger that haunts so many women, I will endeavour to shift Freud’s famous question “what do women want?” to why do women want?
slightest difference. Uninterested in categories of identification that she felt had been “painstakingly inscribed in critical and political thought,” such as gender, race, class, nationality, and sexual orientation, Sedgwick was intrigued rather by a sort of difference that “retains the unaccounted-for potential to disrupt many forms of the available thinking about sexuality” (p. 25). It was a project, then, as Deborah Britzman remarked, similar to George Bataille’s (1986) description of “erotism,” “a certain subjective practice that allows for a question, for the self to be called into the play of the question” (1996, p. 5), and where the question, by virtue of its refusal to secure any definite meaning by attaching either to biology or anatomy, to culture or social role, to object-choice or aim, is, always and from the beginning, one of sexuality.⁹

That Sedgwick, working from classic texts of European and American writers, should have begun this inquiry into sexuality from within the confines of literature and literary theory is perhaps not surprising given that these disciplines, along with psychoanalysis, have for some time been considered the “proper” homes of queer analyses focusing on the problematics of subjectivity and desire. That she should have developed the project more fully, if more quietly and elusively, within the haunting context of autobiography and a personal exploration that brings into relation desire and subjectivity with politics, sex, community, living, and dying should be less astonishing still, particularly given that the most basic definition of queer that she bestowed upon us – to defamiliarize, to make strange – corresponds with or otherwise queerly illuminates autobiography as a practice of dis-identification, and a form of writing that compels misrecognition. If autobiography is not a simple matter of looking into the mirror of self-

⁹ See Deborah Britzman’s (1996; 1998) work for an intriguing psychoanalytic account of the linkage between curiosity and sexuality and the continual questions posed by children that identified them, in Freud’s view, as “little sex researchers.”
reflection but rather the production of a story of self that cannot be identified with, and an experiment in “how to become other” (Ruas, 1985, cited in Gilmore, 2001, p. 11), where will we look when we look for the self, when we seek to discern the trace of sexuality? Haunting, within the terms of this dissertation, is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved issue is making itself known, either very directly or more obliquely. Referencing an openness to the possibility of being inhabited by what is unknown, it is a condition in which one lives actively with the spirits of the past and the future, the bearable and unbearable memories of the past, and the weight of obligation toward what is still to come. To borrow from Wendy Brown (2001), we are haunted in the present “not simply by what transpired in the past but also by what was confused or misnamed in the past, what remains unclear in meaning” (p. 152). To be haunted, Brown says, is to experience the profundity or significance of something from the past but not to know what that something was. She writes:

> When we say, “I’m not sure why, but I am haunted by what she said to me yesterday,” we affirm that haunting occurs at the point of uncertainty about the meaning of an event, an utterance, a gesture. The phenomenon remains alive, refusing to recede into the past, precisely to the extent that its meaning is open and ambiguous [...] , to the extent that it disturbs settled meanings in the present. To be haunted by something is to feel ourselves disquieted or disoriented by it, even if we cannot name or conquer its challenge. (p. 152)

Thus haunting, says Brown, “operates as a force” (p. 150, emphasis in the original), an invisible power that, although it makes its first and lasting impression on the psyche, nevertheless also disturbs feelings at the level of the body “to the extent that it entails being touched or suffused by something that one cannot quite recall, feeling the importance of something that one has laid aside or tried to forget” (p. 153). Like the pencil that makes an imprint on the page long after the words have been erased, haunting inscribes the surface of our bodies, carrying the traces of those
multiple lost others whose spirits, though they inhabit us, are not necessarily part of us. In the way that haunting points, in Derridean terms, to the “out-of-jointness” of time, revealing the past as persisting in the present and the possibilities for the future as constrained, circumscribed, and inscribed by the past, it resonates with a notion of *dermographia*, a form of skin writing that is properly a medical term meaning “writing on, or marking, the skin” but which may also be used “to suggest that skin is itself an effect of such marking” (Ahmed and Stacey, 2001, p. 15).

In a complex analysis that investigates the capacity of skin to remember, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in the signification given to the surface, Jay Prosser (2001) describes the linkages between skin and history and proposes the term ‘skin autobiography’ to denote the ways in which skin constitutes a visual biographical record. “In its “colour, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes,” he explains, skin remembers not only “something of our class, labour/leisure activities,” but also “our more intimate psychic relation to our bodies” (p. 52). Proposing that skin memories are phantasmatic and burdened with the unconscious, he examines skin as a site whereupon the present and the past are brought into dynamic relation with one another and where skin disorders that are thus symptomized in the writing of autobiography indicate the subject/author’s attempt at working out difficult if partial and inaccurate histories. Both autobiography and skin disorders involve, as John Updike (1990)

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10 An important contribution to thinking in this area derives from feminist theory and French feminists in particular, who developed the concept of *ecriture feminine* or “feminine writing.” As Helene Cixous (1981) and Luce Irigaray (1985) illustrated, for example, the concept involves the inscription of the female body and female sexuality in textuality and discourse. Where woman’s body has largely been disciplined, marginalized, silenced, and written over by patriarchal culture with variety of derogatory meanings, including lack, weak, disgusting, in need of containment, *ecriture feminine* inscribes an ‘other’ language that affirms woman’s positive difference and articulates embodied female/feminine subjectivity. It articulates the emergence of an innovative textual body that allows women to regain contact with and express our physical selves in ways that defy the oppressiveness of patriarchy and the ‘text’, which, by and large, has read as acute despair and dissatisfaction etched on skin.
puts it, “scab-picking” (cited in Prosser, p. 58-59). In analyzing Updike’s painful writing of his psoriasis, Prosser observes the way in which his skin marks him out as stigmatized and socially untouchable: “It pains me to write these pages. They are humiliating” (Ibid).

Where are shame and guilt remembered in the body but on the skin? “In blushing, in the sudden flushing of the face with colour,” writes Prosser, “skin is indeed the ‘ambassador’ of the psyche, sending the signifier guilt via the skin ego into the world” (p. 58). “The affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation” (Tomkins, cited in Sedgwick, 1995, p. 133), shame conjures, once again, unexpectedly, the ghost of Sedgwick, for whom it was a central personal and theoretical preoccupation, and whose own autobiographical skin reddened almost perceptibly with her body’s interminable memory of “the pink room of childhood masturbation” (1999, p. 81). Far from the negativity of alienation, Sedgwick’s experience of shame was, yet, something extraordinary; it was what “vivified and consolidated the subject in the moment of wincing isolation” (Barber and Clark, p. 26). In the terms of her personal writing, shame shored up the subject in the moment of her individual if embarrassed intervention into thinking about sexuality. Relentless in attending to its complexities and to what she felt was its tantalizing productivity, Sedgwick inscribed shame as a shared present moment of discovery and in that sought not its eradication but rather, critically, its acceptance.11

Refusing to accept Shannon’s somewhat insistent suspicion that she felt shame about her

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11 Of interest to me here is Halberstam’s (2008) argument that the “gay male archive,” such as that preferred by Edelman and Bersani, is “bound by a particular range of affective responses” (p. 152), and a significant emphasis on shame. Thus whatever she views to be shame’s productivity, Sedgwick, in not sufficiently acknowledging the fact that shame has a long history of association with women especially and plays a central role in such body-loathing and predominantly “female” disorders as anorexia and bulimia, seems to implicitly, and not unproblematically, align herself with a contemporary masculinist gay male movement.
childhood masturbating or his view that recovering from her parents’ “neglect” should have meant a return to the scene and the symbolic haling of that child out of her room back into the space of the family, Sedgwick intervenes as if “skinless” (1999, p. 81), the surface of her body thus shed in the endless process of composition and decomposition: “You know I’m very protective of that child’s privacy to masturbate,” she writes. “I don’t think of it as neglect at all.” (p. 81). In an earlier, related conversation, Sedgwick demonstrates for Shannon how unashamed and shameless indeed was her inquiry of sex, holding nothing back in her description of the pleasures it brought: “What makes me remark on it, I guess, is that for me, that is what feels like sex. It’s something that I could yearn toward and be lost in the atmosphere of. To me, a whole world...The aura of this fantasy world. Warm. Golden. Intoxicating. Playful, too; attentive, deliciously attentive” (p. 45).

In Sedgwick’s hands, shame was, perhaps because of what Tomkins identified as its strangeness – the fact that it arises when our anticipated or sought-after acceptance is turned down – a uniquely productive affect to the extent that it provided a potential field of recognition and identification (1995, p. 123). As Barber and Clark explain, shame is, for Sedgwick, “the stubborn and performatively vivid way of being a subject at the instant that the circuit of recognition, of seeing that one is being seen and acknowledged by another, is broken or bent; it is where and how the subject turns when the light of that returned gaze flickers or goes out” (p. 26). To say, as evidence of shame’s demonstrative character, then, that it is stunningly contagious; that “to witness the shaming experience of another renders that witness vulnerable not so much to the other’s shame but to the other’s openness to shame, the sense of his or her answerability to the other’s hopes, fears, and desires” (Barber and Clark, p. 27) is not to
necessarily discount the susceptibility of the reciprocating gaze to collapse and deform but to acknowledge, on the contrary, that “the condition of the possibility of any circuit of recognition is that it can be breached” (p. 27). Thus in the moment that I am sure that I recognize Sedgwick’s shame, that I identify with it in my own surfacing shameful memories of my precocious childhood sexuality and the physical anguish and embarrassment it wrought, perhaps then and there the circuit has been breached and my recognition is only of what I have constructed as “other,” as a split-off, imaginary product of my ego. Perhaps then and there I recognize only myself, separate and alone, burning hot inside my skin.

If in 2005 there was a renewed effort among queer theorists to inquire into the future of queer studies, to map out a new and urgent intellectual and political terrain, and to assess the political utility of queer in the present by asking “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” (Eng, Halberstam, and Munoz) then perhaps in 2012, three years after the death of one of our most prominent scholars, the time has come to cast our sights not only forward but backward as well, to recognize the impossibility of undoing the line between past and present, and to ask the interminable question “what haunts queer studies...?” In many crucial respects this question guides my dissertation, and not least of them is a careful consideration and conjuring of Eve Sedgwick’s life through the writing and theorizing that so richly constituted it. As I hold these worn, torn, lovingly held and feverishly devoured copies of her essays and books, I am aware that she exists after death in them and that her words, beautiful and haunting, are profoundly resonant but also deeply unsettling. Indeed, the feeling, indistinct but pressing, is quite as if something has gotten under my skin. Carefully, and sometimes unconsciously, I take my pen and scratch, looking in the inscription and below the written and corporeal surface for the trace of
some secret shared history.

Haunting, within the terms of this dissertation, is conceptualized as a force. Although it cannot be located in space or time and so annexed in this way to a particular history, it yet makes its presence felt, marking, cutting, and writing into the world through the skin. As such, it is situated and explored conceptually at the intersection of two types of writing: autobiography and dermographia, each of which refuses the presumption and eventual unproblematic revelation of a definable, knowable, interior self, and each of which asks, implicitly but persistently, two interrelated questions: Where is the self in relation to writing? Where is the self in relation to the body’s surface? To the extent that haunting is experienced enigmatically if also continually as an effect of reading Sedgwick’s autobiographical depictions and of the shock of identification, registering in my words and on my body as touch and irritation – a hot flush of the skin surface – there is also a conjuring that marks the queer specificity of this dissertation, a hint of the way in which language and skin are both suffused with the memory of sexual desire.

“To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study” is not, as Avery Gordon (2008) points out, “a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adapt as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindnesses” (p. 22). “Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you” (p. 22), and that disrupts your position relative to the social by forcing a confrontation and a reckoning with what is unsettling, difficult, and sometimes painful. The antithesis of an empirical method that may be thought of as bound to “bloodless categories” and that seeks in its unwavering commitment to a narrow notion of the visible to devise procedures for the application of theories, “following the ghosts” is rather what Gordon describes as “a mode of apprehension” (p. 22). Close, perceptual, embodied,
incarnate, it is a kind of sensuous knowledge distinct from critique or commentary. Whether it happens unconsciously or whether you cultivate and invite its arrival, it is a “discerning moment,” in which “thought presses close to its object, as if through touching, smelling, tasting, it wants to transform itself” (Adorno, cited in Gordon, p. 205).

“Following the ghosts” is a mode of apprehension which, to the extent that it prompts you to notice and comprehend ghostly signals, opens up a different way of seeing, one that is “less mechanical, more willing to be surprised and to link imagination with critique” (Gordon, p. 24). As the principle method informing this dissertation it marks a different way of knowing and writing about the world where the stories that get produced as knowledge neither depend upon or claim the expert finding and reporting of facts nor follow a given logical and chronological trajectory. Susceptible to and yet seeking at the same time to describe and analyze the relations of exchange between the defined and the inarticulate, the seen and the invisible, the known and the unknown, this method, by contrast, endeavours to identify haunting and pursue its path through written and embodied records of experiences that are always partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, and ambiguous.

Each of the four chapters in this dissertation follows the ghosts of queer theory, articulating the problematic of haunting in relation to sexuality, as what is and is not there in contemporary queer theorizing, and as what, on account of the deconstructive push to think the immateriality of queer and to displace its meaning and effects through the transubstantiation of noun into verb, has been repressed, made invisible, and even perhaps forgotten. Endeavouring to preserve sexuality’s importance to the notion of queer, not least because there is any number of “other quasi concepts that convey the work of denormativization, broadly conceived, for other
domains” (Freccero, 2007, p. 485), these chapters confront the conceptual and affective difficulties and discomforts that sexuality presents and acquires in and through language and the challenges that, elusive and ambiguous, it poses for our thinking.

One of the claims this dissertation advances is that our understandings of sexuality, however hazy and undefined, can only obtain in more nuanced, complex and distinctive views when considered in relation to gender since gender in effect shapes sexuality even as it remains a clear and politically separate category.\(^\text{12}\) To the extent that queer theory has frequently been constructed as concerned primarily, if not almost exclusively, with the theoretical investigation of sexuality, producing new and arguably better forms of knowledge as a result of bringing new methods and analytical tools to bear on the subject, it has tended to overlook the contributions made by its precursor, feminist theory, particularly with respect to analyses of gender. The chapters therefore seek to articulate queer theory’s forgetting, acknowledging the input of feminist work into its development yet at the same time refusing to construct feminism as foundational, an ‘originating source’ from which queer theory has emerged.

Chapter Two examines the slipperiness and so the difficulty of pinpointing and defining sexuality in queer theory through an engagement with Lee Edelman’s uncompromising analysis of the anti-relational thesis, which, he insists, refutes any notion of the materiality of the category

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\(^\text{12}\) A more nuanced understanding of the term sexuality comes not necessarily, of course, through tightening up our analyses of it, but in maintaining our broad definitions. A definition that I like is proposed by Stevi Jackson (2006), who suggests that it “encompasses all erotically significant aspects of life – for example, desires, practices, relationships, identities […] and refers to a rather fluid field since what is sexual in the sense of erotic is not fixed but depends on what is defined as such” (p. 42). Jackson insists that there is a difference but still an interrelation between sexuality and gender, and understands the first term as “a sphere or realm of social life while the latter is a fundamental social division” (Ibid). “Precisely because gender pervades all aspects of social life,” she writes, “sexuality is no exception” (p. 43). Thus while, as Sedgwick (1991) claimed, we cannot map sexuality directly onto gender, Jackson maintains “we can and should explore the variety of ways in which sexual desires, activities and relationships are gendered” (Ibid).
of the sexual in relation to queer since queerness is defined as “that which could never denote any actual or substantive identity [but as] merely a relational structure governed by the imperative of figuration” (2002, p. 183). Pushing to the near brink of intelligibility his argument that, figuring nothing and hence always already bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, and to anti-production, queers must not contest this characterization and aspire to be part of the social order but instead give up hope and embrace this negation, Edelman risks complete obfuscation, collapsing into the very meaninglessness he ascribes to the queer.

In a move that aims to intervene into what Judith Halberstam (2008) has identified as the expressly “apolitical” character of Edelman’s anti-social thesis and the pure and self-enclosed critique it performs, Chapter Two asks if queer might be conceived of not as an entirely empty signifier, and whether in fact it does have meanings and positional claims that are shared and recognized. Halberstam argues, provocatively, that the anti-social thesis articulated by Edelman “does not spring from nowhere” but instead has a history, specifically, one that resonates with early versions of anti-communitarian homophilia in early 20th Century Europe and that thus also “coincides uncomfortably with fascist and sexist sensibilities” (p. 143). Her argument, indispensable to any queer critique that contests normative temporal modes by endeavouring to trace multiple genealogies for contemporary lesbian/gay/transgender movements, is also important in so far as the overlapping agendas it describes, of radical queer politics and racialized, masculinist enterprises of the state, open up a space to consider queer theory’s potentially fraught relations with feminism and its somewhat problematic positioning with regard to gender politics.

At the same time that Edelman has been busy in recent years crafting his own clever and
chiasmic polemic against futurity, framing it in relation to what Halberstam noted is an excessively small archive of queer negativity represented by “a select (read: predominantly white gay male) group of anti-social queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts” (p. 152), writers and performers involved in an array of political projects from “anti-colonialism to punk to feminism” (p. 151) have articulated an overtly political negativity in works that, together, comprise an “archive of alternatives” (p. 153). This archive, far from offering formalized and formulaic responses to the ordinariness and predictability of straight culture, consists rather in more undisciplined kinds of responses: “dyke anger, anti-colonial despair, racial rage, counter-hegemonic violences, punk pugilism” (p. 152), that aim both to undo mastery and meaning and unloose speech and desire from their suppression under patriarchy.

As I argue in my chapter, the kind of negativity expressed by anti-social theorists in a feminist context broadens out the thesis proposed by Edelman, Bersani and others and articulates a more complete, diverse, and complicated view. In investigating the negative territory long associated with femininity and the positioning of woman as non-subject and “negative sign,” it confronts queer theorists with their own forgetting in terms of the contributions made by feminism to queer theory on the interrelatedness of sexuality and gender.

Chapter Two argues that despite its omissions, Lee Edelman’s book, No Future,

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13 Yet just as Sedgwick (1993) has written about ignorance not as an absence of knowledge, but “its constitutive and organizing modality” (Britzman, 2003, p. 126), Halberstam (2008) similarly considers that there may be a queerly productive aspect about forgetting that can mitigate against its being categorized as non-knowledge and banished to the realms of absence and passivity (p. 141). Seeking to move beyond the simplistic binary formulation that positions forgetfulness as a failure of memory, Halberstam argues, “the under-privileged category actually sustains purposive and intricate modes of oppositional knowledge, many of which can be associated with and linked to forms of activity that we have come to call “queer” (Ibid). The oppositional politics that describe such “patently queer forms of negative knowing”, she says, have in particular both “anti-racist and anti-capitalist dimensions” (Ibid).
constitutes a compelling statement of refusal against a US imperialist project of hope, and a profound contribution to queer studies’ articulation of an anti-imperialist, queer-hegemonic imaginary. At the heart of Edelman’s analysis is a powerful protest, startling not only in the immensity of its implications and insights for queer theory but also in the way that it intersects with and conjures the politics of Sedgwick, whose recollection of and vision for the queer child is similarly desolate. Where Edelman declares “no future” for the child and so refuses the forward-looking, reproductive, and heteronormative politics of hope that engenders a view of the child as future, Sedgwick portrays the queer child as one whose existence as a sexual subject in the present is denied, acknowledging that only in the strange space of retrospection, and hence, retroactively, is that child ever allowed to be. Eliciting at every turn, through an autobiographical narrative that recalls the queerness of precocity, my own haunted memory of a child who grew up “too fast,” Sedgwick’s personal writings articulate the noisy silences and seething absences of queer, resonating both with Edelman’s commentary on the ‘nothing’ that queerness figures, and with my child ghost who, having grown too quickly to be heavy and tall beyond her years, aspired desperately to occupy a place of non-being.

Chapter Three articulates the haunting of queer theory after Sedgwick’s death in terms that anticipate, with Andrew Parker and Janet Halley (2011), an “after sex” moment and so the end of the field itself. “Now that sex is over, what comes next?” (p. 4) is the strange question posed by the editors in their introduction. My chapter offers a response by considering the different, comprehensive, and often extraordinary and surprising ways that Sedgwick conceives of sex. In particular, it looks to her experimental and queerly erotic works, “A Poem is Being Written” (1993) and A Dialogue on Love (1999), as a way to explore the relationship between
sex and language and to linger on the question of whether language, and specifically writing, can be experienced “as sex.” The eroticism of writing that Sedgwick’s work examines and performs enables an analysis that articulates the complex and unconscious aspects of self-cutting as symbolic language in terms that reconfigure its meaning from an aggressive and harmful act of self-mutilation to an intense and intimate practice of being-with and taking pleasure in the self.

Identifying my perception of being haunted by Sedgwick as a feeling not unlike a sexual tension where meaning, indistinct and urgent, demands a release, this chapter examines the complex significance of cut and scarred skin, finding a trace of pleasure visible in its broken and exposed surface. In continuing my autobiographical accounts of anorexia and self-harm, this chapter looks to Sedgwick’s innovation with form as a way of returning to the body abandoned by trauma’s dissociative effects and of inhabiting movement that does not just mechanically repeat but also seeks beyond and through.

Whereas psychological and literary approaches to self-cutting have tended to emphasize the psychical dimension of the skin, such that material skin damage reflects correlative damage to the psyche, my analysis in Chapter Three investigates the social, cultural, historical, and indeed gendered implications of what it means to be female and to live in a female body, even as it is cognisant of the partiality, fictiveness, or incoherence of the category women (Jagose, 2009). The arguments presented give careful consideration to the tensions and paradoxes which shape the body’s meanings in terms of textuality and/or materiality and the ways in which, as Judith Butler (1993) has observed, “language and materiality are fully embedded in each other” (p. 69). Just as they admit the liberating potentialities of writing the body in all of its material, feminine specificity, so do the arguments propose a certain formlessness about the body, which helps to
dissolve the idea of it as a substantial corpus, an entity lived as flesh and blood. Within my analysis the body takes on still a further and more complicated significance as the phenomenon of formlessness for the female subject compels a kind of repetition compulsion whereby habits and practices – even perhaps especially harmful ones – constitute a “mode of enfleshment” and a way of being in the world that seem premised on the body’s material undoing (Berlant 2002).

Where skin functions as a site of sexual identification it does so through a complex linkage to the processes of mourning and melancholia, processes which, for Freud, underlined the fundamental indissociability of identification and desire. “What is identification if not a way to assume the desires of the other?” And “what is desire if not a means of becoming the other whom one wishes to have?” (Fuss, 1995, p. 12)14 These are questions that guide my thinking in this chapter about the relationship between processes of grief and acts of self-injury, and about how grief works in and through the surface of the body and in relation to others. In an autobiographical rendering that traces the profound and too close relationship I developed with a self-cutting adolescent girl at a group home where I worked one summer, I explore how the work of trauma becomes visible at the intersection of inner and outer surfaces, at the site where the

14 To the extent that female desire remains but a whisper inside the hegemony of what has been called The Law of the Father, it is difficult to say exactly what we are talking about when we are talking about desire, and even how we might recognize its expressions. In contrast to the “indestructibility” and “permanence” that, for psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan characterize desire for the normative (male) subject, female scholars and writers have remarked upon a certain blankness about desire in women and girls. Michelle Fine (1997), for example, has written about the “missing discourse of desire” among and in regard to adolescent girls in public school classrooms. Caroline Knapp (2010) has analyzed the painful and confusing effects of the persistent stifling of female desire in terms of “a story of substitutions, in which each failed attempt to fill emptiness leads to another and another: longings in search of replacements, forever attaching themselves to things to people, to behaviours” (p. 176). See also Deborah L. Tolman, “Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls’ Struggles for/with Sexuality,” in *Gender and Society*, vol. 8, no. 3, September 1994, pp. 324-342. For one of the most influential analyses of how discourse about sexuality can significantly shape sexual experience, see Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).
wound of the mind and the wound of the body meet. Transfixed by the faint trace of a memory and barely able at times to discern where my body ended and where hers began, I became conscious through my attempt to work out the meaning of the experience in writing of the necessary dependence between psychical interiority and corporeal exteriority that describes grief and of the ways in which corporeal effects signify precisely because the body is libidinally invested. With these thoughts, there emerges in this chapter an understanding that trauma, though it is imbued with loss, also bears the traces of ecstasy and pleasure.

Chapter Four extends my thinking about the queerness of trauma to consider the ways in which it articulates not just a personal and private ‘individual’ experience but also connects with broader public cultures and collective histories. Developing from my engagement with key writings by Sedgwick, Ann Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant, and Michael Warner on queer publics, this chapter explores in particular the role that illness plays in the formation of a public culture. As I argue, to think about illness as constitutive of a collective in this sense is to refuse the not so subtle cultural injunction that regards it as “inappropriate” for the public realm but that instead sees physical and psychological suffering as matters best dealt with in a privatized or medicalized encounter between professional and client. It is to return to Sedgwick who, in 1995, remarked upon what she perceived as the close “historical links between the emergence of queer theory and the emergency of AIDS”\textsuperscript{15} in order to ask how illness experience might be rendered visible and politicized rather than disregarded, silenced, and confined to the private or domestic sphere. Where trauma is concerned, to form a public is to take an interest in not dismissing the

\textsuperscript{15} “Sedgwick Sense and Sensibility: An Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” by Mark Kerr and Kristin O’Rourke.
disenfranchised and shamed parts of the self but rather to learn to claim and express one’s suffering within the context of a broader landscape of socio-cultural and historical ills from and against which, ultimately, no one is immune.

Following from Sedgwick and the kind of publicness that she helped create as part of a queer response to the AIDS crisis, Chapter Four theorizes the complexity and ambiguity of illness and its modes of address and looks to my autobiographical account of anorexia as a means to understand traumatic experience which, at once hyper-visible and invisible, seems to address everyone and no one. In particular, my analysis pays attention to and in its own way performs the queer address of the memorial essay “White Glasses” which Sedgwick wrote as an “obituary” for her friend Michael Lynch but ultimately delivered at a conference while he was still alive. Who is the intended audience of this piece, I want to know, given Sedgwick’s statement that memorials are “places where you say as if to someone else the things you can’t say to the people you love” (1993, p. 256). Is there something singly queer about the general or indirect address? How is the reader to make sense of the hesitancy and the compulsive repetition that marks the first few paragraphs and reflects an existential separateness from the intended addressee – “The first time I met Michael Lynch,” “When I first met Michael Lynch,” “The first day I met Michael Lynch,” “And the I who met Michael Lynch” (p. 252-253) – and the purposefulness and directness of the apostrophe to Lynch himself (“Hi Michael!”) that comes at the end? The writing in this chapter enacts the distant and disorienting relation engendered by the “abyssal voice of the obituary imperative” (p. 265) that frames Sedgwick’s memorial writing and the non-confessional, plural, and performative “I” that inhabits her personal/autobiographical writing as a means for reimagining intimacy as impersonal and as deeply pervading the public. In so far as
trauma has been conceived as “an event without a witness” (Laub, 1992), and as that which has been cloaked in silence, secrecy, and shame, it demands for its reparation a publicness that can stand as evidence of queer lives and possibilities.

Throughout this dissertation, my thinking about trauma is then attended by and indeed remains inseparable from an analysis of shame. After all, it is Sedgwick who has written at length not only on its possibilities as a basis for political action but also as a condition of personal and political creativity. Such a position, it is important to point out, stands in stark contrast to widespread and longstanding views that see it as a poison to be purged from queer communities. Thus, where skin-cutting has been theorized in psychological discourse, for example, as conveying the unspeakable trauma of memories of sexual abuse that associate it with the negativity of shame, my analysis, inspired by Sedgwick, conceives of it as saturated with the memory of sexual desire and as the primary site for the body’s recollection of pleasure.

If in psychoanalytic theory shame has been viewed in light of the subject turning inward and the barring of desires and other aspects of self from shared discourse then Sedgwick offers a vastly different viewpoint, one that in underlining shame’s demonstrative character, enables expression and points to the myriad ways in which – under certain (eroticized) conditions – it can and is put to creatively performative work. Thus contrasting the predominant view of self-cutting as a mere repetition of an earlier sexual or physical violation whose full impact has otherwise been rendered unconscious and inexpressible due to the stifling force of shame and trauma, my analysis attends to the intentional and manifest expressions of sexuality which describe the act and the conditions under which wounds and wounding may be given meaning as sexually positive.
Critically, Sedgwick’s acceptance of shame paves the way for my own inaugural unashamed and shameless inquiry into the memory of a depressed young girl who, years ago, holed up in her room to dream about slashing away the suffocating evidence of her untimely femininity. Guided by Sedgwick’s recognition that shame, operating in a circulation of ongoing realization, refinement, and pleasure, no longer signals a brutalizing endpoint, I push my mind back to feel the still sharp edges of pain and self-loathing, while at the same time I propel forward, seeking through words and in the hopeful, generous slant of memory the necessary transfiguration of loss into pleasure. Like a whisper, strong and persistent, I hear the slow pressing calm of one who demands, partly out of love, but mostly out of simple and unabashed kindness, that we go back in time and imagine the ways in which life might have been different for the child. As part of the reparative work thus called for I have but one articulation of such differences, and it startles me, sitting poised and ready, urgent even, on my tongue:

I didn’t put in for a transfer to this planet,

I can assure you. I did assure
my parents of this over and over
when I was a kid, which endeared me tenderly
to them. I’m sure.

It was the most raucous, outraged thing
I owned: the wish not to be
with its course baby sarcasms I treasured,
not to be and not to reproduce.

Did I imagine with the perfect
sneer or shrug that I could buy
myself the privilege of looking
sad? Duh. Like I would. (Sedgwick, 1995, p. 36)

Unashamed, shameless, pulsating, and cutting close to my core, these words, while they speak to
me, also speak of me; they comprehend the elusive concreteness of my ghostly matter. They confirm, though not in any ordinary sense, that you have been heard. Rest assured that you have been heard, Eve. And then, just rest.
Chapter Two
Of Pleasure and Pain: A Queer Autobiography of Anorexia

Queer theory, within the context of this chapter and throughout the dissertation, assumes a privileged and complicated relation to my autobiographical narratives of anorexia and self-harm and to my thinking about the juxtaposition of pleasure and unpleasure that constitutes these behaviours. My primary argument here, is that the “anti-social thesis” in contemporary queer theory, formulated by Leo Bersani in *Homos* (1995) and developed most famously and contentiously by Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) offers a means for thinking about the negativity of (homo)sexuality and the way that it compels a kind of self-shattering or annihilation that calls into question the very possibility of coherent subjectivity. The anorectic subject is, I argue an incoherent subject, and the framing of anorexia in this chapter in relationship to queer negativity helps to describe the complex and paradoxical logic underlying narrative engagements with anorexia. Queer narratives like the one articulated here constitute accounts of self-deprivation and the threat of death from self-starvation that are anchored not just to pleasure, but also, and critically, to an acute attunement to the production of a biographical account of life itself.

This chapter analyzes and seeks to complicate the autobiographical articulation of accounts of experiences of anorexia as exemplary of queer negativity or being-for-death that expresses, as well, a unique logic and form of queer temporality. Situating my autobiographical narrative as a queer coming-of-age story that references both the temporal logics contained in Edelman’s calls for voiding the question of the future and Eve Sedgwick’s complex rendering of
the shifting and haunted relationship between past and present selves, the chapter questions the normative trajectory of accounts of development and their constitutive articulation of a continuous, coherent subjectivity. It advances an analysis of the alternate, anti-linear times of the “interruption” (Berlant, 2010a) and ‘growing out’ (Sedgwick, 1999) as a framework for narratives that explore the queerness of anorexia, and imagines the potentials of queer time for subjects who self-harm to intervene upon or repair the damage done in the name of development.

**Queer Theory Meets Autobiography**

Recent work in queer theory inspired by Leo Bersani’s book *Homos* and its theorization of the so-called thesis of antirelationality which defines sex as anti-communitarian, self-shattering and anti-identitarian has seen a proliferation of projects articulating positions that oppose ideas about redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation. Commonly referred to as anti-social queer theory and queer negativity, this division of queer critique represents, as Judith Halberstam (2008) has observed, a “counter-intuitive” approach to theorizing queerness in so far as it collapses our understanding of “the interconnectedness of intimacy, romance and sexual contact and replaces it with a harsh but radically realistic recognition of both the selfishness of sex and its destructive power” (p. 140).

In contrast to critical approaches within queer studies which emphasize the relational, life-generating and contingent value of sexuality as a category, the anti-social thesis conceives of the sexual instinct as a death drive that “undoes the self and releases the self from the drive for
mastery and coherence and resolution” (Ibid).  

Queer negativity, for Lee Edelman, centres on not-becoming because the notion of becoming is perceived as following the forward looking logic of capitalist production and heteronormative reproduction and models of success that are tied up with hegemonic constructions of time and space. In No Future, he describes the rejection of futurity as the meaning of queer critique and associates queer theory with the death drive in order to propose a relentless form of negativity in place of the heteronormative politics of hope that enlivens numerous political projects today. The queer subject, he argues, has always already been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to anti-production, to unintelligibility, and instead of contesting this characterization by attempting to bring queerness into recognition, he suggests that queers wear the cloak of negativity that they anyway structurally represent. Implicitly positioning queers as a no(n)-thing and as an empty signifier, Edelman conceptualizes queerness as that which “could never denote any actual or substantive identity [because it is ] merely a relational structure governed by the imperative of figuration” (2002, p. 183). The radicalism of queerness he says, is signified by its non-meaning, by its refusal to mean according to the

16 While it has not been uncommon, perhaps especially since the 2005 MLA roundtable debate on “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” for queer theory scholars to reference the thesis in ways that seem to point to its apparent uniformity and singularity (what some have noted is its “over-identification” with Bersani and Edelman), it may be that the theorizing of queer negativity is actually more complex and ambiguous than the positioning of it as “against relationality” suggests. In Cruising Utopia (2009), Jose Munoz counters this binary logic of opposition by endeavouring to demonstrate how theories of the negative can be key resources for envisioning a queer utopianism. Along related lines, Tim Dean asserts that the antisociality of queer desire is not purely or even predominantly negative but instead engenders unconventional forms of erotic connectivity. The conflicts these theorists point to around thinking about a “purely” negative analysis are further evidenced by the way in which writings by theorists such as Sedgwick, Berlant, and Cvetkovich have alternately been taken up as either demonstrative of the “turn to affect” or as antirelational, depending on the viewpoint of the author and the particular arguments at stake. Contemporary queer theory is, then, marked by conflict and yet such conflict may have less to do with the finer points separating one division of queer critique from the next, and instead relate more to questions about what theory or theories will ground the subject. The debate involving Halberstam and Edelman, for instance, relates in large part to psychoanalysis and so to concerns about the extent to which psychic life and political life can be usefully articulated together, whether negative affect can be put into the service of a politically progressive project. Another part of the debate is about gender, which Halberstam advances in arguing for a distinctly queer female negativity that could broaden the narrow gay male archive.
language of the Symbolic.\textsuperscript{17}

If the positing of queer subjects as foundational lack or negativity frustrates attempts to conceive of the subject and to imagine how it is to proceed with negotiating a livable life for itself, then the intervention into the normative logics of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction that such theorizing also represents harbours potential for opening up thinking and making connections in a different register. Indeed, it is the radical rethinking of the figure of the child that Edelman’s analysis performs that seems to brush up against and queerly articulate into being some haunting aspect of my own childhood and to shed light, as well, on Eve Sedgwick’s (1999) autobiographical rendering of the queer child she was but wished “not to be” (p. 18). Different in aim and yet similar in expression of urgency and despair, Sedgwick’s seemingly suicidal wish and my own desperate and perhaps contrary wish as a precocious six year old, precisely, to be, to exist in the present as a child ignorant of adult worries about my early physical development and how I might one day turn out, find a certain perplexing resonance in Edelman’s queerly negative argument, that there is “no future” for the child.

In Edelman’s view, one of the troubling aspects of accounts that emphasize longevity and futurity under any circumstances while disregarding the ways in which time may be experienced differently as compressed, belated, arrested, cyclical, and reversible, concerns the heterotemporal logics of succession that not only naturalize sequential relations between past, present, and future

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\textsuperscript{17} Edelman’s account of queer antisociality advances a reading of negativity through a Lacanian lens. According to Lacan, the Symbolic designates the order of language, law, morality, religion, and all social existence which is held to constitute the identity of any human subject who enters it. One of three constituted orders, the Symbolic is the realm of distinctions and differences. The infant’s entry into it is associated with the breaking apart of the subject by language, which allots distinct subject-positions (‘I’ and ‘You’). Important to Edelman’s analysis is also the order of the Real, which consists of antisocial and rebellious energies and is figured by Lacan as a locus of the kind of drive energy and bodily jouissance that cannot be disciplined by the symbolic network of signification. Edelman associates queer sexuality – what he calls sinthomosexuality – with the real, as that which does not communicate meaning but merely gratuitous enjoyment.
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but also prioritize and idealize the future over the present. The result, he says, is that the future comes to be figured as a site of almost limitless potential, as a thing not yet written and therefore unblemished and innocent and curiously “childlike.” Against a discourse that engenders a view of the child as future – as one who is pure and good and who, in her essential purity and goodness, does not deviate from the path to maturity that promises her the respectable, proper, and timely entry into heterosexuality – Edelman proposes a distinct politics of disrespectability, one that recognizes the queerness and sexual desires of the child. “Fuck the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized,” he writes. “Fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the net’” (2004, p. 29).

More than a metaphor, the child as innocent – and here of course the image is not of a material flesh-and-blood child but rather an abstract, an idea of the child – becomes formulated as fact and reduced to a kind of basic and absolute equation through a narrative strategy that consists of a complex means of “editing out or avoiding the kinds of sexuality children are not supposed to have” (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004, p. x-xi). Refusing to simplify the child and evacuate him or her of sexual desires, Edelman’s narrative provokes anxiety. It opens up a story that, far from confirming and delimiting in exact terms the inherent nature or ontological truth of the child, creates uncertainty by inviting readers to offer their own interpretations and so to provide what may turn out to be some unusual and unexpected conclusions.

The narrative of development, so queered by a writer like Eve Sedgwick, for example, for whom children are always already sexual and queer in the sense that they “never quite conform to the wished-for way that they are supposed to be in terms of sexual and gender roles” (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004, p. x) authorizes and gives shape and expression to an eroticism that has stayed
inchoate in dominant discourses of moral panic and age-of-consent laws. Implied in Sedgwick’s narrative, it seems to me, is, then, this startling provocation: Fuck the child who does more than just allow or endure it but who wants it and hence actively and desirously seeks it out. For Sedgwick, as for Edelman, there is a queerness about the child in so far as he or she does not fit neatly or easily into the normative construction of time/space designated as “childhood” but disrupts and disorders it so that the experience of being a child is one of being out of time or in time with some moment that is not that one. Sedgwick manages to articulate some aspect of this queer asynchrony when, in her memoir, she attributes her despair and contemplation of suicide as a child to an impossibility of being that stemmed from her parents’ and other adults’ inability to recognize her as queer. Yet, significantly, she also positions such a refusal as an effect of the way in which subjectivity is itself a narrative matter, meaning that it is always defined in time after the fact.

That queer children are, she says, created only after they have survived into adulthood, highlights the problem of narrating experience in the present when the immediacy of what is felt but not yet known or understood remains unassimilable into language, and so, consciousness. Only in the belated or deferred time of narrative and with the elaborated view of hindsight is it possible to reconstruct the events of a life and settle on their significance. And yet Sedgwick’s point, precisely, is that insofar as what defines the life of any queer child is, however subtle or pronounced, a certain precocity, or the interruptive and disorienting experience of having arrived ‘too soon’, there is a sense in which the narrative will never quite catch up and the queer subject will always be torn apart in the time of consciousness and of chronology between a too-early and a too-late.
While the space of retrospection or the ‘too-late’ that is narrative, for Sedgwick, appears to bestow a gift, opening her awareness to the fact of survival and supplying comfort with the idea that events might have turned out differently, and if interpreted differently, might still be capable of changing her understanding of her life and herself, the ‘too-early’ of queer signals a loss that is essentially a missed encounter with the death that has already occurred and is inherent to her survival. As Peggy Phelan (1997) explains “queers are queer in the sense we have already survived our own deaths. The law of the social has already repudiated us, spit us out, banished us, jailed us and otherwise quarantined us from the cultural imagination it is so anxious to keep clean, pristine, well-guarded” (p. 16).

That dying can and does therefore, in some instances, precede living, suggests, as Edelman argues, a different order of time, one that is experienced not as some sort of natural progression but as mixed up and out of joint. Queers who survive the death accorded them by the law of the social face the unimaginable task of having to create life out of an experience whose existence lies beyond and outside of language and symbolization, and of finding a way to encounter a death that was missed yet somehow must still be told. In reading Sedgwick, there is a hint of the insufficiency of narrative, a sense of missed timing in the language which nullifies the second thoughts known as hindsight and makes the aim of reconstructing experience seem impossible. When she writes of wanting to bear witness to the trauma she endured as a child, the movement suggested by her narrative is rather more queer than the one that characterizes autobiography – of stepping linearly back in time and recovering a lost or forgotten history. Indeed, remembering, for Sedgwick, seems a practice marked in part by looking ahead, but with an eye towards something other than the future. She writes: “I’m suddenly in mind of the many
moments when, for one reason or another, I vowed to myself to remember something or willed to remember it. Specifically, to remember it into childhood (1999, p. 116).

A symptom, potentially, of the very trauma she describes, Sedgwick’s dislocation in and queer rendering of time brings into focus the complex and transforming relationship between past and present selves. The temporal confusion that defines the project that Eve Sedgwick the child has devised – of remembering into adulthood – evokes a difficult and strangely precocious aspect of knowledge for the memories of the events that she describes seem to precede even her experience of them. In the queer time of Sedgwick, in a time where the lack of possibilities for imagining childhood queerness and avowing at an early age a queer subjectivity mean, necessarily, that queerness is lived always innovatively but still not unrestrictedly in anticipation of retrospection, there can be no genuine and sustained faith in the linearity of knowledge, no looking back to find the origins of one’s present or forward to a certain future.

**Childhood at the Vanishing Point**

As a child, I was never good with numbers. All throughout elementary school, and for many years of high school, math class represented, for me, everything that was terrifying, unjust, and cruel in the world. At the front of the class facing the blackboard, I suffered some of the worst angst and humiliation of my young life. Even if, by a stroke of luck, or perhaps on account of an unusual but particularly wilful effort made the previous evening, I did manage to complete my homework, I would nevertheless stand, dubious and trembling the next morning as along with some other unfortunate
classmates I would be asked to write out the answers to the assigned problems. The problem was – and there were a lot of them in those days, not all of which were necessarily the mathematical sort – I could never seem to get it right. Even if I did end up with the correct answer, there was bound to be something erroneous about either the formula I had used or the steps I had taken during the problem solving process.

And yet, until grade ten, the year I ended up in a class taught by the evil Mrs. Bagga, these small but habitual errors were never so debilitating, for as long as I eventually arrived at the right answer, or if my answer was wrong but some of the steps I had taken were right, it was still possible to salvage a passing grade. Throughout all of ninth grade, I rejoiced in part-marks. Not uncommonly, I viewed them as my salvation. So cherishing my position on the tennis team, I relied on them and the benevolence and generosity of the teacher who distributed them since the rules of my high school specified that students, if we were to participate in extra-curricular activities, had to receive a passing grade in each one of our courses. Out on the court, under a warm sun, on late spring afternoons, I found the one place where numbers made sense to me: Love, fifteen, thirty, forty, ad, and game. More than the sheer simplicity of it, I loved that ‘love’ was used to signify a score of zero, for even if I happened to fall behind in a match, it saved me from becoming too discouraged.
Being down a ‘love game’ didn’t carry the same negative connotation as a ‘zero game,’ didn’t leave me feeling worthless. Having lost a ‘love game,’ I would, by simply saying the score aloud, remind myself that I did love the game, and that while the outcome of that particular game was lousy, the game in general was not. The psychological effects of conceding a love game were for me far less damaging than those that accompanied acknowledgment of a zero game. With the mere mention of zero, any prior concept of the game of tennis would suddenly be lost. I was all that mattered then, and yet, ironically, I didn’t matter at all. In the strange and horrible calculus of my grade ten math teacher who refused to give part-marks and as a consequence also perhaps of her tenuous grasp of the English language, any problem a student failed to solve correctly was not assigned a grade of zero; rather the student was. Holding up my workbook one day in a fit of rage over the homework I did not complete she ignored my pleas to check if my answers might at least be partially correct and in a thick accent screamed: “This is a zero! You are a zero! This is nothing! You are nothing! Zero! Do you understand?”

I understood perfectly, the destructiveness of those words, their ability to gouge a hole where my body had been only a moment earlier. No one perhaps but a child such as myself, a child who, from an early age, whether as a result of an unusually precocious puberty that saw many days spent in hospital for prescribed testing, or on account of the deep sadness I carried
during and long after my grandmother’s awful and metamorphosing illness and death, could have had a more profound understanding of this relationship between holes and bodies and the aptitude of the child’s body in particular to represent, among other things, the fears, furies, and losses of the people around it. By the age of eight, I was deeply aware that, for many of the adults in my life, my body had become a problem. Already nearing five feet eight inches tall, a measurement which far exceeded the “normal” growth of girls my age and which should have been the terminus, my final adult height, I, in the loving words of my grandmother, grew “just like a marvellous weed” – strong, healthy, resolute – and yet always with the nagging reminder from my parents that any growth was too much, that any advance in height, even a mere millimetre, was overgrowth.

“Look at you. You’re getting so big,” my mom would often exclaim, never quite managing to mask the disdain in her voice, as she scanned me from head to foot. “You must be, what, more than one hundred pounds by now?” she remarked, a simple question that, seemingly, was nothing more than a direct statement, a passing observation. Yet concealed within it, we both knew, was something more insidious, a message whose aim was to effect control and command my obedience to an ideal I was not likely to attain. This message, although clearly signalling an alarm, was delivered in just the way that so perfectly typified my mom and her tendency to disregard the damage she inflicted on me. Where she might have said fat, she chose instead to
describe me as “heavy,” as though it might somehow soften the blow, making me feel less like the giant, squishy marshmallow I imagined myself to be and more like the trunk of the sturdy old cedar tree that towered protectively outside our family home.

Even as a very young child, I was aware and distrustful of the falsity of my mother’s and other adults’ claims that sometimes, out of concern for my own best interests, it was better to be too harsh than too forgiving, and that words that seemed cruel were often said only out of love. I could sense almost instinctively then from the silence and awkwardness that hung in the air between us that this was one of those times, but what was my mother’s understanding of love, I wondered, that it could leave me feeling so full of hate?

At eight years old, self-hatred was a feeling that, while not exactly new to me, lingered at the borders of my consciousness resisting naming and representation. In the absence of a language that could access and describe my inner state, my aggression raged, and with each new comment, inquiry and concern expressed by my parents, I wanted to tear myself apart, to rip my body open. At the hospital that summer, I kept vigil at my grandmother’s bedside, as her health began to decline at an alarming rate. Having only been admitted to care in late spring, by mid-July, she lay, small, feeble and unmoving, a miniature and increasingly unrecognizable version of herself, a
woman who had once thrown me effortlessly up into her lap at the close of Sunday dinners.

I remember how I felt: hot, heavy, uncomfortable, smothered by my own girth, as I stood over my grandma’s bed, her diminutive frame offering up a stark contrast to my enormous one. I wanted desperately then to disappear, to fade along with my dying grandmother into a kind of nothing, to be weightless and unencumbered. Yet unlike my grandmother, who, by her doctor’s accounts, was languishing more or less peacefully and painlessly and was ready to let go due to the fact that she had lived a long and full life, I fought myself at every turn with what seemed a sudden, ferocious and urgent desire for destruction. I began to wonder, with the approach of adolescence and as these feelings grew more intense, if inhabiting the nothing space, which I imagined as bringing relief, solitude and a sense of well-being to the living, was not possible while I was still alive and if the wish for doing so was really just an indication that I had already begun working, unknowingly yet compulsively, to achieve precisely the opposite, to arrive at a place of nonbeing that was not so distinct from death.

It is difficult to know in what sense, as an unhappy and anxious precocious child, I conceived of death, if I imagined it as a literal extinction of the self or symbolically, as little parts of the self that had to be given up and destroyed in order to conform to the law of the social. Even as a young child there was something in me that resisted the influence of the adults around
me, who wanted me to comply with their ideas of “proper young womanhood.” Thus, did my refusal to be happy and carefree, to keep clean, to wear skirts and curl my hair, to label as my “boyfriend” the boy who lived up the street, to whom I alternately administered kisses as well as deftly executed kicks to the groin – did all of this suggest a rejection of symbolic subjectivity in the way that Edelman describes? Did my eventual but very deliberate refusal to eat, which ultimately resulted in severe emaciation and a skeletal-like appearance during puberty, a time at which I should have been developing into my “natural,” soft and curvaceous womanly self, signal my desire for real, physical death or rather a denial of intelligibility and embrace of non-meaning in the way the queer, so impossibly theorized by Edelman, has done?

My inclination is to suggest, despite perhaps appearances to the contrary, that the ability to effect my own de-meaning, to be, as it were, meaningless, was not what I was after since that would presume I had or was attributed meaning at some point and thus had both a voice and access to a mode of representation. But the Symbolic refers, after all, as Edelman argues, not just to the order of social and signifying relations, of law, language and exchange but to a paternal, patriarchally regulated order; “it is in the name of the father,” writes Lacan, “that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (Ecrits, p. 67).

In Lacan’s Symbolic, the development of the subject centres on the phallus as the ultimate signifying mechanism, for it is the symbol of that which is not-the-mother and thus the means by which the child learns that all is not one and the same, that distinctions can be made, particularly in terms of sexual difference. It is the female’s fundamental difference from the phallus that makes the Symbolic difficult to access and positions her not just as an outsider to the
system, but as lacking the primary mechanism needed to secure her entry into language. Within Lacan’s Symbolic, the feminine has no inherent meaning. As lack and negative sign, it means only in the terms of what it does not possess. Thus, Edelman’s analysis, to the extent that it acquires its force and articulates a masculine and particularly ferocious view of queer negativity in relation to an understanding of Lacan’s Symbolic, tacitly continues the work of casting aside the feminine and designating it as a lack at the same time that it sets up an understanding that identifies queer, singularly and incontrovertibly, as male. Suffice it to say, then, that my refusal, whatever its meanings and motivations, was not the same as that which Edelman has proposed for the queer.

Development and the Turn Toward Loss

I recall, after my grandmother’s passing, the emphatic and unremitting attempts made not just by my mother and father but by many other adults, relatives mostly, to create something substantial from the hollow left by her body’s disappearance. There was incessant scrambling – to arrange, organize, finalize, tie up loose ends – a kind of hurrying driven less by any real or pressing need to perform these duties and more by a want, heavy and insistent, to fill the silence, to impede that which threatened to nullify. I had many causes for complaint against my parents during that time but chief among them was their proclivity to exaggerate and over-emphasize and to otherwise blow things out of proportion. This was a habit that I reflected back
to them, exasperatedly, and with a longing for far greater facility of language than I possessed, through the not quite coherent question: “Why are you two always trying to make something out of nothing?” It was a kind of reflex response to their constant pestering about a miscellany of issues in my life: school, grades, how I was or was not getting along with my teachers and peers, puberty, my body, my fragile sense of self-worth, my desperate desire to drop out of the gymnastics and figure skating classes they had forced on me in the hallowed name of routine physical activity...the list went on. It occurs to me now, as I consider what clearly was the inadequacy of my question and the disappointment it brought – that being, in the first place, a question, it made no explicit demand, but instead raised a possibility for exchange and understanding that was neither desired nor intentioned – that my relation with words was already coloured by loss, that a void had been created in the absence of everything that language was unable to convey.

“Just stop,” and “Leave me alone” were the simple phrases that came closest to expressing what I most wanted from my parents at the time, but disallowed, they fell into a kind of mystical or incomprehensible discourse. The nothing that I longed for and that I perceived as having a soothing quality was familiar to me mostly as an indistinct feeling of emptiness and a sense of being uninhabited, as if, after a long and torturous meal in which food was sumptuous and plentiful but bites were few and small, I was finally excused from the table, to dine alone and with abandon on the snacks I had collected.
and stored in my bedroom cupboard. There was a curious way in which eating past the point of fullness created a sensation something like a void. Like the hunger that sent me searching for food but was immediately suppressed the moment I sat down at the table and so was converted to another desire, the snacks I consumed compulsively in the privacy of my bedroom were, upon first bite, already on their way to becoming something else: so much waste.

There was both an intense feeling of comfort and a heady sense of power that obtained from these after dinner rituals, for I began to see that whereas I had no ability to control my upwards growth, I could determine my sideways growth. Excessive bingeing or steady grazing on food coupled with days of only the most minimal physical activity resulted, seemingly, in no time at all, in my puffing up like a round and newly inflated beach ball. Intense exercise supplemented with a punishing diet of water, celery, soda crackers, and laxatives, meanwhile, left me thin, willowy and able to slip into the tiniest of spaces.

These wild swings in my physical constitution between fatness and emaciation continued for a number of years, until I was well into my teens, and were thus, not surprisingly, a major cause for concern for my parents who never ceased commenting and questioning or, alternatively, begging and pleading with me to either eat more or eat less, to exercise more or
exercise less. They were elementary commands, and yet, importantly, they belied a complex strategy of manoeuvring and defending in order that my parents could feel at ease in their world. Their simplicity offset the difficulty of my parents’ not knowing or understanding how to deal with my despair and at the same time allowed them the shelter and serenity of not noticing that my sometimes flabby, sometimes skeletal body was the manifest symptom of a child who could not grow up in her family as the self she preferred to be. Fat and bony, however horrifying, were two figurations whose aim was not just to call attention but to narrow my parents’ focus, finally, so that they could look at and contemplate the daughter, the sexual child, they had refused to fully see.

Yet, how is it that they could not have seen me? For years, ever since I was six years old, they had accompanied me every second month on my appointments to the doctor and, like two passive onlookers, sat quietly in the examination room as he measured and weighed me and poked and prodded my developing hips and breasts. I was a spectacle. My body was betraying me. That much was clear. What was not clear, on the other hand, however, was why, after each exam was over, and as the doctor sat, first carefully recording numbers on a chart and comparing them with those catalogued from my previous appointments and then discussing their significance with my parents in hushed and worried tones, no one thought to speak to me or to try to explain things. It was as if through this routine procedure of measuring,
sizing up and evaluating every two months I had disappeared. I had become those numbers. I was no longer knowable or recognizable as myself.

Because I had a vague understanding of what those numbers meant, I wanted desperately to empty them of meaning, to make them *not mean* or, at least, to make them mean differently, so that everything – people's whole lives, as it were, *my* whole life – did not have to continue to be assessed, weighed, assigned value and thus ultimately deemed worthy or worthless. Fat or thin, it didn't matter. I was not acceptable whatever my shape, for the real problem, I discovered, the one that necessitated medical intervention and treatment potentially involving the intravenous injection of experimental hormones was nothing more than the natural occurrence of my growing up. Thus the taller I became and the more those measurements increased, the more I fell, from a medical standpoint, outside the bounds of what was considered to be "normal" and began to cross over into a category deemed "pathological." The ambiguity and the slippage of these categories were marked, oddly and perplexingly, for me, by more frequent and upsetting trips to the hospital, where, despite spending entire days having my arms punctured by needles and being hooked up to and immobilized by IV machines, I was assured by everyone around me that everything was fine and there was really nothing seriously wrong with me.

Since I had neither been diagnosed with a disease nor experienced any sort
of severe illness in my life, I grew confused about the source of this new pathology. In the absence of any apparent diagnosable disease, it seemed I was the disease, a virus to be attacked, fought, stopped. It was a disturbing and needless kind of violence that was authorized and committed against me in the name of prevention, but whatever growth was prohibited physically in that process, another development occurred psychically, and the ‘something’ inhibited became the ‘nothing’ I exhibited, as I learned to be complicit in a difficult and unspeakable system of exchange whereby I traded my body’s violations and abuses for so much pleasure. In time, I learned how to self-soothe through self-cutting such that my body became the medium to express the inexpressible dilemma and trauma of early development, of having to grow up too soon.

It is difficult to say if, and to what extent, at eight years old, I had already determined that masochism and passivity offered potential alternatives to liberal formulations of womanhood and so purposefully had set out on a self-destructive path. Looking back, I am acutely aware of the disruptions of memory and my tendency, now, to frame my narrative of growing up according to what Eve Sedgwick describes as the logic of paranoia and the imperative that “there must be no bad surprises” (2003, p. 130). According to Sedgwick, paranoia’s function is to anticipate and fend off negative feeling. In its resistance to surprise, paranoia is “at once anticipatory and retroactive,” focusing, as Heather Love (2010) relates, on “all the bad things that have happened in order to be ready for all the bad things that are still to come” (p. 237). Standing decades apart from that child as I do, I recognize the impossibility of going back in time to try save her and to
protect her from humiliation by changing the course of her thinking. Yet I am still struck by my desire for reparation. I want to pick up the fragments and construct for her a sustainable life. I want to tell her that even if she thinks she cannot do anything but compulsively repeat her sense of loss, the repetition can set her on her way to gathering up the pieces and assembling them into some new whole. I want her to know that this can be symbolic of another kind of growth, and that the future, whatever trauma she has had to endure in arriving there, can be an arrival, need not be fatal.

**Repairing Being**

That “being” might, however, prove ultimately less damaging to the subject, and yet, still be seen to express suffering and pain, is a possibility productively explored by Sedgwick in her deployment of the “reparative.” In contrast to Halberstam who (like Edelman), relies on negative affects and the performance of an angst-ridden and “paranoid” style of critique, Sedgwick proposes the concept of reparative reading as a less aggressive, less thesis-driven way of accounting for psychic damage while moving towards repair. In Sedgwick’s theorizing there is then the integration of negative and positive positions that, importantly, thwarts the reproduction of more insidious forms of abuse. The idea of non-normative growth, for example, is one that she develops as part of an attempt to repair the damage of homophobia and to explore for queer children the possibilities of a sustainable life, indeed a future, even in the face of unjust discrimination. Contemplating the necessary relationship between childhood and queerness, her essay “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay” stands as one of the most intelligent and provocative treatises on the violence endemic in helping professions that would sooner banish children’s
same-sex pleasure and classify it as an illness or a perversion than attempt to conceptualize other possibilities for growth. Her essay performs the unthinkable: calling attention to and vigorously opposing the “relatively unchallenged aegis of a culture’s desire that gay people not be” (1993, p. 164), it offers a theory that welcomes gay children and holds them lovingly against psychiatric theories that for more than a century have espoused a hatred of their development. While as one scholar has observed, Sedgwick’s essay performs the hopeful work of “imagining a manual that is yet to be written” (Britzman, 2003, p. 143) and, in that writing, cannot help but to presume a certain knowledge about gay children, it nevertheless resists – even in its liberal call for the more dignified treatment of gay people – normalizing queerness and reducing it to merely a type of “sexual expression”

An important part of what Sedgwick’s work achieves is an enhanced understanding and appreciation for the world-making possibilities that attend acknowledgment of children’s queer sexuality and the ways in which childhood gender may be remade beyond clinically valorized binary gender identity codes. In the absence of a conceptual system that views sexuality and gender as two separate and discontinuous categories wherein sexuality cannot be mapped directly onto gender, as it were, society, Sedgwick argues, will not help but be limited in its understanding of child queerness and so see it unvaryingly as pure pathology. That childhood desire might not be recognizable as desire or, indeed, inscribed in any representational project, is painfully obvious to Sedgwick, who, elsewhere (1999) describes her queer childhood as a haunting in which her own fatness signified and bore the traces of the desires that she felt were disallowed her and acknowledged only after she survived into adulthood. Attempting to shed critical light on the efficient means Western culture has for aborting gay kids, for allowing them
to appear only when they can no longer exist and, thus, when they have entered adulthood and parental plans “for their straight destination can be seen to have died” (Stockton, 2004, p. 186) Sedgwick insists that readers confront her fatness as a manifestation of her queerness and see in it a sign of the child that we would otherwise erase.

**Silenced Sexuality**

As far as I can recall, no one ever said the words sex and sexuality to me since, from my parents’ perspective, despite my grown-up appearance, I was still only a child and therefore was innocent and ignorant of the dangerous and corrupting desires that belonged only to adults. By refusing to name sexuality as what was, in some strange and enigmatic sense, I imagined, ‘happening’ to me, and by focusing all of their attention on the future, anticipating and at the same time striving to prevent or prolong what they knew was to come (i.e., my genital maturity and growing up to reproductive goals), my parents engaged in their own earnest practice of denial and so sought to make something mean nothing.

Yet frustratingly, for them, not talking about a thing did not result in it not being so. I needed only to stand in front of my bedroom mirror in the mornings, for instance, to confirm the obvious physical changes: the immense height, the widening hips, the soft, full curve of my developing
breasts, the newly coarse and thickening hair on my legs. “Hello!” I wanted to
scream at them then as, without warning, I began to seethe and was filled
with rage. “Do you see, Mom, that I am taller than you? Do you see these big
fat hips, these round chubby thighs? We are the same, Mom, we are the
same!” For some reason, though, I could not manage to scream or even talk.
In silence I vowed that they would listen and take notice. In silence I vowed I
will just stop eating.

As a young girl, the promise to stop eating, although it sprang as a solution,
bright, fully formed and inalienable in my mind, was still shrouded in
darkness, unable to articulate the complicated and painful emotions, the
unsatisfied needs and out-of-control hungers that burgeoned below its clear
and one-dimensional surface. Gripped by an anxiety that felt both oceanic
and nameless, my promise not to eat brought relief, for in the relentless,
throbbing dullness that was to be my experience of starvation, the
overwhelming uncertainties, the paralyzing complexities of feeling that
haunted me were reduced to a singular sensation (physical hunger) and a
singular obsession (food).

Like an exquisitely orchestrated play, my life, throughout the better part of my
adolescence, was performed precisely in accordance with the order and
timing of the three acts that comprised it: breakfast, lunch and dinner.
Combined, these meals added up on average to a paltry seven hundred
calories, yet the rituals that surrounded them were all-consuming and required the most concentrated precision, focus, patience, and care. There was the careful nibbling around the edges of one plain rice cake, the slow and deliberate slicing of an apple with tiny, translucent slivers of cheese, the endless swirling of a spoon dipped into a single, small container of fat free yogurt. In the mornings when I awoke and lay in bed, I sought reassurance in running my fingers along the sharp edges separating out each rib, the knotty, defined bones in my shoulders, the hollow recesses in my clavicle, the taught tummy, endlessly empty. In the sleepy, quiet darkness of midnight, I learned to listen to the sounds of my own starving body, heard in the snapping of arms, fragile as butterfly wings, and the creaking of joints, aching against mattress springs, the endless, gnawing thrumming of hunger.

‘Matter’ That Matters?

Bodies are marked not simply by sex but by an array of differences – race, class, sexuality, age, mobility status – that all but disappear in a masculinist discourse bound to conventional syntax and logic. In an eloquent critique that both addresses the obviously powerful and unique vision of Edelman’s formulation and subtly underlines the potentially troubling implications of what has been some queer theorists’ over-identification with it, Halberstam argues that above all it is Edelman’s relentless focus on Lacan’s Symbolic and its “unnervingly tidy and precise theoretical contractions of futurity” (2008, p. 142) that registers his analysis not just as constitutive of an anti-politics but as in fact “apolitical” (p. 148). Edelman, following
Lacan, seems inclined, according to Halberstam, “to cast material political concerns as crude and pedestrian, as already a part of the conjuring of futurity that his project must foreclose” (p. 142). Indeed, like Lacan, he “strives to exert a kind of obsessive control over the reception of his own discourse” and employs a “syntax that itself closes down the anarchy of signification” (Ibid). For such an analysis which seeks, certainly, to provoke but not necessarily to engage, and that prefers to proceed by tightening and perfecting a line of reasoning to the point of near impenetrability, it would seem to make sense or be less exhausting in any case to interrogate the figure of the child and not the flesh-and-blood child whose bodily drives are anyway already discharged through language (Kristeva, 1984).

As Halberstam implies, there is a messiness that inheres in an inquiry into the body as a lived entity and that gives meaning to the specific and often intersecting contexts and categories within and according to which one lives beyond and of infinitely greater dimension and complexity than what is connoted by a mere symbol or “sign” (p. 148). The problem with Edelman’s arguments, though they are so compelling in their passion and coherence and so seemingly unparalleled in their fierce rigor and bolted-down logic, is precisely their exactitude, which is enabled by a certain persistent drive to be completely self-enclosed and, thus, to hold at bay any matter or viewpoint that might crack their careful construction and allow unintelligibility to creep in. The sequential logic organized by the Symbolic which offers the subject consistencies of identity, meaning and the temporal ordering of past and future is vehemently refused and yet no alternative beyond that of the complete and improbable undoing of the social-symbolic order is proposed. It seems significant that even Bersani, halted by the nihilist pulse of Edelman’s theory of negativity, is left wondering about “the mode in which we [queers] might
survive our necessary assent to his argument.”\textsuperscript{18}

There is a quiet about Edelman’s arguments, whether they call for the “radical dissolution of the contract, in every sense social and symbolic” (2004, p. 23) or assert that “there are no queers in the future as there can be no future for queers” (p. 30) that feels peculiar, especially when juxtaposed with the driving and practically pulsating force of his argumentative style, the incessant pounding and repetition of words aimed aggressively butoptimistically at making believers of his readers. “Fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (2004, p. 29) writes Edelman, as though in the pronouncement there is dissolution rather than matter that resonates, persistent as a hum. The meaninglessness that Edelman ascribes to the queer as an “anti-symbol” and as a figure of Symbolic refusal assumes meaning, nevertheless, within the context of the semiotic, where bodily drives make their way into language and where the logic of signification is already present in the material of the body. As Kristeva argues, instinctual rhythm passes through symbolic theses and “meaning is constituted but is then immediately exceeded by what seems outside of meaning: materiality” (1984, p. 100).

That signification comes to be out of non-signifying, semiotic, bodily drives suggests perhaps, despite Edelman’s claim to the contrary, that the queer subject may not be after all impervious to meaning since the law from the ‘outside’ can never finally be negated through non-participation in discourse but is from within already continuously destabilized for the purpose of recreating it. In the ongoing process of signification and so, the dialectical oscillation

\textsuperscript{18} Quoted from Bersani’s synopsis of \textit{No Future} written on the book jacket of the text.
between the semiotic and the symbolic, the signified cannot be stable inasmuch as it is merely the effect of signifiers which are themselves over-determined and therefore never stable. The absolute signified of queer, whether it is “nonsense” or “negativity” or “unintelligibility,” cannot be the end point of signification precisely because, as Kelly Oliver explains, “it would put an end to signification” (1993, p. 3). “There would be no need to say any more” (Ibid). But the non-signifying aspects of language – tone, music, and rhythm – are just as important as the signifying elements of language. The continuity that they provide, however, is not in keeping with the (hetero)-normative sequential and future-directed modes of temporality that Edelman contests but is, rather, interruptive in nature, “a hesitation in time that is not in time with the world of drives and is made from a space that is lost” (Berlant, 2010a, p. 103).

**Interrupted Time**

In recent work that takes as its object of critique the ways in which modes of ordinary living presume a mostly numbed and automated way of relating to the present, Lauren Berlant (2011a) introduces a concept of the interruption or “transitional moment” (p. 11) as a method of disturbing time that can also prompt awareness and thinking. Conceived of as a point of suspension “in which the subject can no longer take his continuity in history for granted but feels full of a something ineloquently promising” (2010a, p. 105), the interruption, particularly for those who are caught up in repetitive and destructive modes of being, signals the possibility – and also the threat – of breaking from a habituated life. In a chapter called “Cruel Optimism,” Berlant positions interrupted time as a time for thinking and “improvising unknowing” (p. 106). There, she seeks to elaborate the effects of that as-yet unimagined experience for a negative and non-coherent subjectivity through a method of reading poetry that “sounds out the space of a
moment to measure its contours” (p. 104) to consider what is being stopped, and what changes in that suspension. Her analysis of John Ashbery’s (2005) untitled poem, which notes the subtle differences in sound that separate the words ‘home’ from ‘hymn’ from ‘hum’ and the patterning that marks the ultimate dissolution of a familiar, habituated space (home) and the emergence of something not quite known – “a hum, the thing that resonates around me, which might be heaven or bees or desire or electric wires” – situates the lyric or episodic interruption as “a condition of possibility for imagining a radically resensualized [...] subject” (p. 105).

Opening a window onto a kind of “deadened citizenship” that describes the American Dream, where polite, white neighbours enjoy their privileged suburban leisure with only the slightest, most bearable sense of pleasure and with little regard for their exploitation of labourers, the poem, in Berlant’s view, makes an “interruptive stillness that is ineloquent and eloquent, meaningful and a placeholder for an unformed experience” (2010a, p. 104). The hum that interrupts the home and its dull, somnambulant rhythm of familiarity is not identifiable and cannot be traced to a source but is, rather, suggestive of the opening of a space of “potential

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19 Berlant’s description of her way of working reminds me here of Sedgwick and the ways in which her writing elaborates so beautifully her preoccupation with space and spaciousness. This similarity seems significant given that Berlant often reflects on and indeed undertakes careful analysis in places (see especially her 2002 essay, “Two Girls, Fat and Thin”) of the differences she believes set her apart conceptually from Sedgwick. Her method of sounding out space and experimenting with interruption, in particular, resonates with Sedgwick’s statement about the “quality of a specific listening space” she hoped to create in writing A Dialogue on Love. Berlant, in critiquing Sedgwick’s queer autobiographical work, states that there is an emphasis on interiority that makes her uncomfortable. Yet, it seems to me this isn’t the position, exactly, that Sedgwick takes and that her analysis is on the side of multiplicity, creativity, and emergence. For example, in response to Michael Snediker’s (2009) question about how she understands space, she says “well, it’s what the Buddhists call the sky-like nature of mind, where clouds can scoot across it but it still remains just the sky. When your mind is occupied in conversations among bits of you, where is the conversation? What’s there when the conversation runs out of steam? There’s a there that contains these occurrences, but it’s also an emptiness that isn’t accounted by any of the parties to the conversation. There’s something [...] extraordinarily relieving and kind of exciting about that. About the sense of spaciousness, of internal spaciousness. It’s sort of not a person, and it’s sort of a lot of people, but you can also think of it as pure potential – what it’s like just to be” (pp. 198-99).
liveness” in which ordinary time is suspended and sounds and senses can change (p. 105). As Berlant explains, in the interruption, there is a displacement and dissolution of a habituated life and yet no promise that a particular something will emerge to take its place. “It is a space [...] that is not a space on which anything can be built” (p. 105).

Berlant’s analysis is both incisive and provocative in the way that it helps to illuminate the interrelationship between the symbolic and the semiotic, and the space and time of the semiotic as counter, nonsensical, and still largely unimagined. In attending to the sounds – the hum or incoherent babble – that mean beyond narrative discourse and the prevailing and ordinary modes of signification, it opens up a means for thinking about discontinuity and rupture as a (non-)space of subjectivity and as shaping a way of being in the world that, improvisational and queer, is not yet recognizable as such. Conceiving of the interruption as a “moment of optimism which marks a possibility that the habits of a history might not be reproduced” (2010a, p. 31) Berlant articulates the deadened, numbed, and neutralized conditions of feminine subjectivity under patriarchy that impel acts of undoing through the construction of scenes of self-annihilation and negation (2002).

These scenes, whether they centre on habituated modes of being that are compulsive in their orientations to sex, food, intense intellectual productivity – whatever, are all robustly ambivalent, says Berlant, for they represent, at once, “a process of absorption that is a way of entering and being in the world and a departure from or at least a means of averting it” (2002, p. 81). Optimistic compulsion then produces a counter-temporality wherein the repetition of behaviours that signal the subject’s leaning toward promises contained within the moment of the encounter with their object, paradoxically, “stops time, makes time, saturates the lived, imagined,
and not-yet imagined world” (p. 85). In the interruptive moment in which repetition works not in the service of establishing a regime of self-continuity that amounts to the constellation called “who I am” but aims towards the disruption of self and the subject’s core patterning, we come closest to the heart of the queer, incoherent rhythm of the semiotic.

To suggest that the driving, staccato pulse of repetition that defined my experience of anorexia as a relentless thinking about, abstaining from, and making retribution for the slightest indulgence in food connotes less an overarching, consistent narrative prescribing a specific pathological identity and more “a way of being a something unbound to an identity that circulates” (Berlant, 2002, p. 86) has important implications for thinking about queer (as) space and time. In the face of the dictates of culture that define a girl’s growing up as in accordance with the temporal logic of birth, marriage, reproduction, and death, anorexia initiates an interruption that allows for the opening up of a space for the pubescent subject’s unbecoming a woman, a space that presents no coherent alternatives but still promises the “survival of a scene of hopeless, historical embeddedness” (Berlant, 2010a, p. 113).

In its denial of conventional adult sexuality and as a refusal quite simply to be, anorexia says something about the potentialities of a life unscripted by the conventions of family and child rearing that registers the counter-logics contained in some key contemporary theorizations of queer childhood. Describing sexuality as a disarticulating force comprised of drives, fantasies, wishes and dreams that are the fabric of the unconscious and hence resist knowing, Edelman, for example, contemplates and contests inadequately problematized notions of “the child” and sexuality, arguing that we need to embrace the negativity of queerness over the cultural construction of child-centred futurity and the social hetero-normative order that the child
represents. As cultural criticism, Edelman’s commentary deconstructs the ubiquitous symbol of
the child in contemporary American liberal discourse as innocence, as replete with promise and
hope, and as “destined to fulfillment through whatever norms the prevailing order cherishes and

Of particular issue for Edelman is the current cultural narrative about development which
maintains that children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions yet also
tacitly assumes that children are heterosexual. This contradiction, he says, denies the real
possibility of childhood queerness by framing any deviation from the “normal” as insignificant
and temporary and a mere stumbling block on the road to the child’s official destination of
straightness. Speaking to the deleterious effects of the willful ignorance of adults and the ways in
which their insistence on the blank innocence of childhood ensures that certain desires remain
unrecognizable to adult heterosexuality, Edelman denounces the hetero-normative assumptions
of culture that generate a “murderous disidentification” with children (Ohi, 2004, p. 82). His
analysis, though reluctant to admit a description of the child beyond that of a mere signifier,
calls, importantly, for an interruption in discourse that might be read optimistically as opening a
space of “potential liveness” (Berlant 2010a) that is a non-space for the child to enter on their
way to becoming other than who they are historically. Figuring, in Berlant’s terms, an “impasse”
or “a holding station that doesn’t hold but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a
space whose contours remain obscure” (Berlant, in Halley and Parker, 2011, p. 80), Edelman’s
analysis references not quite the nothingness of the queer child that resists recognition but the
development of “a something that isn’t yet, but could be” (Ibid, p. 85). Given Edelman’s
insistence on constructing queer in terms of ‘vagueness’, as a signifier emptied of content and
immaterial to identity categories, we might perhaps not unreasonably wonder if queer’s unimaginable becoming could constitute something like a “mode of enfleshment,” a space of being and embodiment “not yet organized as a convention or an identity” (Berlant, 2002, p. 72).

Sedgwick’s reconfiguring of growing up as ‘growing out’ for the queer child infers a revision of the relation of past to present that supports an understanding of development not as a progressive march forward through history but as time expanded, recessed, suspended. In attending to how queerness is rendered unintelligible and uninhabitable by the child, Sedgwick proposes fatness as a strategy of time and space-making that absorbs the subject on her way to recognition, whatever its terms turn out to be. Of significance, then, is that while such a strategy, to Berlant’s mind, seems substitutive in nature and, thus, suggests, potentially, a new site for attachment towards which the subject optimistically and compulsively gestures in the hope of circumventing the personal and securing relief from herself, from Sedgwick’s perspective it functions, on the contrary, to keep intact the person that she knows herself to be. Made impatient by her psychotherapist and his refusal to acknowledge the fact that she was a fat child, for instance, Sedgwick insists “the issue was never fat or not fat but – given fat – worth something or worth nothing?” (1999, p. 68). “I seemed acceptable to myself,” notes Sedgwick, studying an old photograph of herself and speaking about what she felt was her parents’ perception of her. “I thought they saw me as infinitely malleable – as some perfectible thing – putty. But I knew I was a person already; quite simply I was not malleable in that way. There I just was” (Ibid).

There is a perplexing contradiction that characterizes Sedgwick’s description of queerness as, on the one hand, ghostliness and immateriality and, on the other, persistent corporeality that covers over a more critical problematic for an inquiry seeking to elaborate an
incoherent subjectivity and the interruptions into selfhood that articulate queerness as a site of unimaginable becoming. In particular, what Sedgwick’s analysis seems to preclude is a consideration of the way that fatness or the expansion of a self symbolizes not just an alternative mode of embodying queerness and, thus, a reification of the person she knows herself to be but, by contrast, an unravelling, a release that takes her out of her old way of being whether or not she finds a place elsewhere. Fatness, on this view, is not continuous with queerness but rather interferes with it. As an episodic abandonment of the hurt or diminished self, it marks a practice of self-interruption that indicates a struggle to change the terms of value in which queerness as life-making activity has been cast.

**Theory’s Queer Development**

So far, I have been trying to establish the usefulness of queer theory as anti-identitarian and anti-normative critique for conceiving of the subject less as an essential self and a privileged interiority and more along the lines of what Barber and Clark (2002) have described as “a body without organs” (p. 33), “charged sites of desire and symbolic exchange that cannot unequivocally be attributed to personalities and yet are not simply machinic in nature” (Ibid). These comments spring specifically from the authors’ analysis of Berlant’s queerly negative theorization of subjectivity in terms of a self born of agonistic forces that leave the personality empty and depleted (p. 32). Yet the context in which they are articulated suggests the undeniable significance of such an inquiry to queer theory as a whole. In their introduction to *Regarding Sedgwick*, an anthology that pays tribute to Eve Sedgwick as the founder and the “*primum mobile* of queer theory” (p. 1) in North America, editors Barber and Clark attend to the complex arguments made by Berlant in favour of a queer politics that resists the “consolations of selfhood
and that [fervently] attaches to “impersonality” (p. 32). In so doing, they claim to identify an important difference that separates Sedgwick’s thinking from Berlant’s and that pervades the wider queer and feminist political and theoretical landscapes, marking a key tension in debates about the nature of subjectivity.

That queer theory as a field of inquiry could be seen to have originated and organized around an *individual, a person* – Eve Sedgwick, for example – and to grow and develop from there, is troubling, according to Berlant, in so far as the focus on the inward experiences of queer subjects unwittingly returns us to the political detachment, the insularity of the private body that so signalled the advent of modernity. “Individuality,” she writes scathingly, “that monument of liberal fantasy, that site of commodity fetishism, that project of certain psychoanalytic desires [...] is to me a contrary form, a form that needs interruption by a contrary” (2002, p. 74). Thus, where the project of queerness under Sedgwick’s influence focuses on the filling in and gathering of a unique “self,” the negative side of queer theory has introduced a contrast whereby apparently harmful strategies of time- and space-making organize a perception of self-continuity that does not equate to “selfhood” but still gestures toward and operates in a sense as a resource for survival.

In the automatic and repetitive gestures that enable one’s survival of cruelty, suffering, and just plain boredom as “a way of both being and not being in the world” (Berlant, 2002, p. 83), the question of *who* is being loses something of its explanatory power. Yet, *who*, for some queer theorists and for feminist theorists particularly is, still, arguably, one of the most pressing questions for a politics that fought in the first instance for the recognition of women, precisely, as *persons* under the law and seeks, still, to understand social inequality relative to the specific
contextual materiality of the body and so as predicated on sexual difference, racial difference, class difference, and differences due to disability. Indeed, for many feminists, the material body is what matters most. To the extent that women have been cast in the role of the body, associated with it and largely confined to a life centred on it (both in terms of the regulation and beautification of one’s own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others), “culture’s grip on the body,” according to Susan Bordo, is “a constant intimate fact of everyday life.” “There is nothing more personal,” she writes, “than the life of the body” (1997, p. 17).

Given these personal politics, it seems fairly obvious why theorists of negativity, both feminist and queer, would then have chosen the body as the primary site for intervening into culture and so theorized negation largely in terms of a disembodied state. In a culture in which being a woman means being intimately acquainted with bodily suffering, shame, and trauma of various kinds, the possibility of not being or of finding relief from being may seem compelling, to say the least. But why must negation mean necessarily, for women, an attempt to deny physiology, and an annulment of the female state? Might there be a means of performing acts of unbecoming that do not take the body as a target and an object of hatred and abuse? Can matter still ‘matter’ within a framework of negativity?

The relative inattentiveness to gender and the materiality of the body on the part of queer theory in general in its analyses of sexuality has, to my mind, contributed a great deal to the astonishingly coherent and seemingly inviolable arguments of queer theorists of negativity such as Edelman. As feminists from all different schools of thought have observed, there is a “messiness” about the body, and the female body especially, not just in the way that it has been
constructed culturally as “a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid” and “formlessness that engulfs all forms” (Grosz, 1994, p. 203), but also in so far as it enters unpredictably into discourse, its rhythms and pulses playing havoc with and sometimes rupturing the intelligible, seamless narrative.

It seems in a sense that it would be less gruelling somehow to try to imagine a subject that, numbed, neutralized, or driven crazy with habit and the conditioned norms of femininity, might welcome an interruption and, indeed, perceive it as relief from being “that ordinary person with that failed history” (Berlant, 2002, p. 81) when consideration of what it means to actually live in that body, to inhabit it sensuously and not just as corpus, is less of a focus. The relentless, ritualistic, and excruciating routine of anorexia, for instance – the measuring (of food, body, weight), the eating, the not eating, the strategizing of ways to avoid eating, the making retribution for eating – is propelled, to some degree, perhaps in addition to the anesthetizing that it also performs, by affective energies so strong that the experience is, for some, near hypersensitivity. If an anorexic can recall spending much of her childhood feeling disgusting, then she is also apt to remember, as Elspeth Probyn (2000) does, “the splinters of pride that accompanied the disgust; pride at the beautifully prominent set of ribs, the pelvic bones that stood in stark relief, causing shadows to fall on a perfectly concave stomach” (p. 125).

In Western culture and philosophy, the fleshy or fat body has been conceived of primarily as a female body. At the same time, it has also been constructed as a locus of shame, associated with out-of-control passions and appetites and with something dirty and defiling. To the extent that a host of fears and fantasies surround the female body, generally, as matter that, uncontained and uncontrollable, threatens to violate order and space, the fat body in particular has been
rendered abhorrent and disgusting and “made to bear the full horror of corporeality” (Kent, 2001, p. 136). According to Le’a Kent, the fat body “represents the corporeality and inevitable death of all bodies – a condition that, like plaque in the arteries, is universal but must be fought constantly and repeatedly, and is projected on to fat bodies” (p. 136).

The ambiguity of the fat body is explicitly revealed by mainstream cultural representations that at once portray fatness as gross, intractable matter – a “thing” through and through – and as caught up in a narrative of erasure, and so, readable only in relation to an imagined past and future as an idealized thinness that existed prior and that can be returned to still. In before-and-after scenarios in weight loss advertisements, for example, the fat woman is depicted “not as a person but as something encasing a person” (Kent, p. 135). In this way, Kent argues, the fat body functions as “a kind of abject,” and is situated as that which must be cast aside for the self to truly come into being (p. 135). She explains the relationship between Kristeva’s concept of the abject as “that which must be expelled” (p. 134) and the fat female body: “The abject sets up the categories of self and not-self, but it is an expulsion of something internal to the self. The abject is that revolting physicality, that repellent fluidity, those seepages and discharges that are inevitably attached to the body and necessary for life, but just as necessarily opposed to a sense of self” (p. 135).

Theorized in relation to the abject, Sedgwick’s rendering of queerness in terms of fatness can be conceived, if not exactly as deliberate, then perhaps as something more than merely coincidental. The role of the abject and abjection helps define and re-define the borders of the subject. In this process, according to Kristeva, “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself (1982, p. 3). For Kristeva,
the abject is that which is cast out in order that “I” may exist. It exists at the borders of the self and continually draws the subject into it. Though it seeks to define a separate, proper, and autonomous subject, the process is never complete since “the abject, from its place of banishment, [of having been “driven away” or cast out], does not cease challenging its master” (p. 1).

As Kristeva describes it, abjection is permeated by a haunting: the abject, as she says, is consigned to a repeatedly retrieved past, placed in a representational “land of oblivion” that is nonetheless “constantly remembered” (1982, p. 8). This haunting, where Sedgwick and the queer-fat body is concerned, illuminates the blurring of the boundaries of two identity categories that are both ultimately intrinsic to the formation and constitution of a “self.” Depicted as a violent, clumsy breaking away, the process of abjection yet reveals that there is nothing inevitable about self-definition or becoming a self. The assumption of self-continuity on the part of the queer-fat subject suggests, paradoxically, then, a haunting and so a profound uncertainty about the meaning of the identity that one claims to know well. Conceived of less in terms of what is grotesque and unclean, and more as that which references the borderline, the abject challenges the limit of traditional notions of identity, revealing the haunted subject as one that “is set literally beside [her]self” (Kristeva, p. 3).

If the metaphor of sideways growth and its mobilization as ‘literary indirection’ has sought to evoke the complexity of queer’s multiple manifestations in twentieth century culture in such a way as to ultimately and definitively arrive upon a meaning, then the casting of queerness within the terms of abjection aims toward something altogether different, positing an always ambiguous subjectivity. In Kristeva’s schema, the abject is perpetually ambiguous: desirable and
terrifying, nourishing and murderous; and, moreover, the process is never simply one of repudiation: “It is something rejected from which one does not part” (1982, p. 4). In this view, there is then no possibility for conceptualizing history as in any sense inevitable: though the subject is confronted with a constant re-evocation of the past and risks sliding back, it is ever moving and productive of new knowledge about the constitution of a proper social body, “the processes of sorting, segregating, and demarcating the body so as to conform but not exceed cultural expectations” (Grosz, 1994, p. 193).

In Kristeva’s analysis, the body that is does not just constitute a container for what it has been. Indeed, the very rendering of the abject in terms of a borderline state calls into question the solidity of the body to the degree that ingested/expelled ‘objects’ are neither part of the body nor separate from it. Fluids, including tears, saliva, blood, and vomit seep, flow, pass with different degrees of control, tracing the paths of entry or exit, the routes of interchange or traffic with the world, which must nevertheless be clear of these bodily “products” for an interchange to be possible. As Kristeva points out, fluids, unlike objects, have no clear borders; they are unstable, which is not to say that they are without pattern. But precisely because they “surge” and “move”, they may be seen as dynamic and living, and so, as contrasting with solid matter.

Disturbing the Present

It may be, then, that fluidity, apart from and perhaps because of its negative associations with femininity and women’s corporeality, and its connotation as formlessness and “disorder that threatens all order” (Grosz, 1994, p. 203) serves as a particularly useful concept for thinking about new ways of being that disrupt the subject’s core patterning and the activities of maintenance, the energies, involved in the reproduction of a predictable life. As Lauren Berlant
(2007a) has provocatively observed, the experience of living, of inhabiting an ongoing present under “global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality” can best be described as a *slow death*, that is, “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (p. 754).

In response to feeling overwhelmed in the present by knowledge and life, we have become absorbed in doing, says Berlant, and so, intent on “following our pulsations of habituated patterning that makes possible getting through the day (the relationships, the job, the life)” (2010b, p. 232). In this way, “life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable,” just as it is hard to discern “modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation from deliberate and deliberative activity,” for they all seem to contribute to and preserve a sense of continuity, composure, and optimism (2007a, p. 754). We do because we always have done. We do because doing is in some sense safer, if not easier, than thinking.

Yet the dissolution of order and the reinvention of life from disturbance that Berlant is envisioning does not consist in a view that simply positions thinking in opposition to doing. Commenting, for instance, on a certain dulled level of awareness that exists in people, that things could be different or better, and that the self need not necessarily be a space of incorporation where the force of history inevitably plays out no matter our ways of positioning ourselves and being in the world, Berlant, speaking as the ordinary, habituated subject, contends: “I want to experience discomposure, yet only the discomposure I can imagine” (2002, p. 93). Thinking, in other words, must not shake up the present *too much*, must not surprise or perturb self and world *too much*, must not interrupt doing, must not move us to a place – mentally or other – from
which we cannot easily return. The presumption is not only that there is something traumatic about the state of being discomposed, whatever that happens to look like (it may be expressed not as disorder, destruction, or agitation but as something more flat, and thus closer to distraction, coolness or apathy, for example) but also that the very notion of thinking as a “forced interruption” of “the usual activity of life” can be in and of itself a crisis (Berlant, 2010b, p. 230).

And yet, to Berlant’s mind, when it comes to thinking, the ordinary and the traumatic are never so far away from each other. Being forced to think as part of an unfolding of the everyday, and the here and now, she says, “exemplifies the affective experience not of a break or a traumatic present, but of a crisis lived within ordinariness” (2010b, p. 231). Thinking occurs and is prompted by a situation that changes the ordinary into something that can no longer be presumed. To think is, first, to be affected at a sensory level, and so, to feel disorganized or distracted by something that, as it is unfolding, causes us to stop, to let things register and sink in. Or to consider what has just happened. Berlant explains:

Amidst the rise and fall of quotidian intensities a situation arises that provokes the need to think and adjust, to slow things down and to gather things up, to find things out and to wonder and ponder. What’s going on? As Kathleen Stewart (2007) would phrase it, why do things feel on the verge – of something (dissolving, snapping, wearing out, overwhelming and underwhelming, or just unpredictably different? (2010b, p. 231)

When time in the present is disturbed, when norms and intuitions suddenly feel off, when we start to notice and feel and focus in on our environment in ways that we have not done previously, it is not just that we are thinking, but stopping to think. Stopping is key, says Berlant, because in the interruption “we are directed to see not an event but an emergent historical environment that can now be sensed atmospherically, collectively” (2010b, p. 232). We are not private, individual, insular selves, but rather part of a shared sociality confronted with problems.
about how to live that, because they are still unfolding in the historical present, may not
cognitively be known but intuited and felt by all those of us who belong to this disturbed field.
Hence, there is a circuit of accountability between persons and political worlds and an obligation
for us all to contribute to the production of a new potentiality and to “develop a practice of
rootedness in processual awareness that can give shape amidst the unpeaceful, uninhabitable and
unknowable state of crisis in which living on is also taking place” (Berlant, 2010b, p. 235).

The (Un) Pleasures of Habit

Of all the things I find compelling and queer about Berlant’s writing, I am perhaps
most taken with her definition of pleasure as “a reiteration that makes a form, not
necessarily something that feels good” (2002, p. 86). I know well the habituated
patterning, the absent-mindedness that makes possible the ‘getting through the
day’, and the numbness that comes from predictability, from not challenging (very
much) the ordinary procedures of living. On mornings when, overwhelmed and
incoherent, for example, I hung my head over the toilet to bring up the scraps of
the food I had eaten at breakfast, or when I held the razor taut, cool and metallic
against my skin, I used to think that this is what I do, the way I manage, how I
live. Amidst the vomit and blood, there was peacefulness and pleasure, a release
so warm and comforting I would sooner die than have these habits denied or
interfered with. When my scars grew thick and indelicate, when my body grew
skeletal and bones jutted and threatened to pierce my skin, I imagined that I
would be forced to stop, that the voice of “reason” – or authority or love – would at some point prevail and descend upon me and that I would be snapped back into the present and made aware, suddenly, of the damage I had been inflicting. For years, I waited, restless and anxious, feeling on the verge of something. I waited but I did not stop.
Chapter Three
Queering Trauma, Disturbing the ‘Ordinary’: On Sex, Writing and Self-Harm

What is sex? What is language? How do we understand these concepts and what is their relationship to each other? Can writing feel like fucking? What does writing – or fucking – for that matter, feel like? How might an erotics of writing relate to wounding? This chapter asserts that queer theory, insofar as it expands and destabilizes popular notions of sex in ways that centre its contradictions, confusions, and inherent strangeness, provides a framework for expressing the potential pleasures (sexual and otherwise) of wounding and pain. Personified by Sedgwick’s important first axiom in Epistemology of the Closet, that when it comes to sex “people are different from each other” (1990, p. 22), and Foucault’s observation that people can “produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of their bodies, in very unusual situations” (1997, p. 165), queer theory prompts thinking about sex that complicates ordinary understandings of it. This chapter aims to disrupt knowledge about sex that is presumed, taken for granted, or in some way rehearsed by examining the “After Sex” moment that describes contemporary queer theory. As Halley and Parker (2011) put it: “Now that sex is over, what comes next?” (p. 4). This curious question haunts my analysis registering the ways that sex confounds the ordinary.

The intersection of sex and language that queer theory brings into focus and that Sedgwick’s work performs leads in this chapter to my re-imagining of sex as a site of interruption for subjects that are seized by trauma and compelled by forms of living through repetition. In my continued autobiographical inquiry into accounts of self-harm, the compulsive
gestures and habituated modes of being involving starving and cutting are posited as a “felt disturbance” (Straker, 2006) in relation to language. These practices, I argue, symbolize an alternative mode of communication that alternately produces and moves between numbness and heightened sensate experience. Examined against the backdrop of Sedgwick’s “A Poem is Being Written” (1993) and A Dialogue on Love (1999), the queer eroticism of self harm and of cutting in particular emerges to describe a release and a slow, intensified, intimate moment of being— with the self that breaks up the automated rhythm of routine and ordinary encounters with the world. Sedgwick’s work and the unique innovations in language it performs provides a framework for analyzing self harm at the junction of sex and language. As a queer experiment with form, it offers another means for articulating bodily crisis and conceptualizing trauma in less cynical terms, as something other than the mechanical repetition of the horrors of the past.

**Disturbing the Ordinary: Writing About/As Sex**

If dissertation-writing life were anything like “ordinary life,” by which I mean to suggest a thought of the kinds of activities – the work – of daily living that, predictable and repetitive, make a form of life at the same time that they distract from its meaning, there would be little time to pause, to be curious, to wonder or reflect. Dissertation writing might then feel stressed and under pressure, like a thing that needs to be hurried along and not accomplished in any sense, but just gotten through, done, like the work day, the nine-to-five and the endless list of routine tasks; like filing, for example. But the space of writing is not like the nine-to-five, even if it requires one to perform on occasion similar administrative-type tasks. (I recently discovered the joy of organizing my own system for filing papers and books at home after a frustrating day spent in the library trying to track down a list of articles I had misplaced). The difference, it
occurs to me, is perhaps precisely the joy, a something pleasing that felt different and caused me
to take notice. If there was anything urgent about the task, it was not that completing it marked
my getting through the day, but rather that it allowed me to return with renewed clarity and focus
to the enlivening but slow work of thinking.

On the shelves by my desk books were filed alphabetically by title. Coincidentally or not,
the one I wanted to read most was first in line. *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory*
seemed an interesting title but the sexy image of a woman in bed smoking a cigarette on the
cover did not cohere in my mind with the title’s suggestion of a theory that has apparently moved
“beyond” sex. I felt dissatisfied, too, with the question mark and wished for an ellipses in its
place. I wondered, to the extent that time/temporality appeared to be the key issue at stake,
shouldn’t the use of punctuation in the title help readers to slow down and dwell a bit in our
thoughts about sex rather than helping us to proverbially gather up our things, get dressed and,
dishevelled and a touch embarrassed, bolt for the door?

Queer theory, having preferred for the most part analyses of sexuality over sex and
having exhibited, at the same time, some difficulty articulating the relation between the two, has
been, to my mind (though it would likely profess otherwise) not entirely skilled in the matter of
‘foreplay’. That is to say, but for a few notable exceptions (yes, they were *that good*, or else
relentless, reckless, frantic, funny, chaotic, brilliant, quirky, thoughtful, cruel, withholding,
disorganized, which might still only be other ways of classifying their ‘goodness’ – or not –
inasmuch as any and all of the above may be felt and experienced as something else entirely;
‘good’ sex may be, after all, not always the most memorable sex or even the least plodding)
queer theorists have not been particularly keen to put themselves in the middle of sex unless, of
course, it is fraught with negativity, and so, the scene of drama, annihilation, and death. They have had trouble, it seems, trying to imagine something in sex, something that *maybe* is attached to life and that could ground strong accounts of sociality at the scale of the personal and the political, however aggressive, deluded, destructive, and incoherent they know the effects of sexual desire and sex acts themselves to also be.

It may be inevitable that one feels vulnerable in sex but this seems less true with respect to what may be said and imagined for and about theory. Still, I am trying to find examples and ways of envisioning the latter as something other/more than a defence against what feels messy, muddled, humiliating, and even downright unbearable about the former. To have sex is not the same as to write about it. And talking about it? Somehow that seems even further removed. (I am familiar with the joke that the friend or colleague who talks about getting it all the time is most likely the one not getting any at all. Does it matter that I am also becoming suspicious, however, of the friend or colleague who keeps telling the joke?) But to the extent that sexuality takes place in the real time of encounters and in contradictory structurations of desire (the possibility of coming undone in sex, while becoming more possible in/with another) it assumes perhaps a greater proximity to the scene of writing than what has tended to be articulated from within queer theoretical contexts.

In reading Halley and Parker’s (2011) introduction to *After Sex?* we learn, for the

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20 This kind of theorizing of sex within queer theory typically goes under the rubric of ‘queer negativity’ or ‘anti-sociality’. Writers such as Leo Bersani (1987), Tim Dean (2000), and Lee Edelman (2004), for example, portray sex, if not as an outright threat, then as a significant problem for managing and imagining sociality. Sex, for these writers, is in some way conceived of as inherently destructive, inhuman, monstrous, evil, abject, or narcissistic and, thus, has tended to be examined in relation to cannibalism, imperialism, barebacking, and the death drive. Writing that equates sex and sexuality with loss, melancholia, and shame is also representative of queer negativity. See, for example, Douglas Crimp’s *Melancholia and Moralism* (2004) as well as Judith Butler’s “Critically Queer” (1993) and “Melancholy Gender” (1997). See also Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011).
contributors to the volume, that sex is variously “a source of delight and trouble” (p. 4) as well as “a subject of serious inquiry, a political conundrum, and a spur or occasion for writing” (Ibid). If, on the one hand, the question mark represents an invitation to erudition and the higher pursuit of thinking, it serves, on the other hand, a rather basic function: to separate visually if not also conceptually ‘sex’ from ‘writing’. In this way, we apprehend from the title that after sex comes the writing about sex, which, when all is said and done, might feel rather anti-climactic but for the consideration of two small and queerly astute observations: 1) as Leo Bersani (1987) once remarked, people don’t much like sex; and 2) as Foucault said, the best moment of the affair comes at the point at which the lover departs in the taxi, leaving one to the pleasures not only of memory but also anticipation, to imagining the lover’s return, and the repetition of the act, perhaps a better one (1997). Admittedly, neither one tells us much about what sex is or is not like. And yet, Foucault’s account, in so far as it describes a kind of intimate and complex interrelation between sex and thought where sex, as it were, constitutes a space for reflection, suggests the possibility that language may not merely or solely be a means for representing sex but also what imparts feeling and so essentially feels like sex, to the extent perhaps that its practices are rhythmic, repetitive, and ritualistic in nature.

Eve Sedgwick’s essay “A Poem Is Being Written” is a particularly brilliant example of the confluence of sex and language which, for its readers, gives the effect of being done to. A meditation, chiefly, on the relation of poetic meter and form to spanking and being spanked and

21 A sense of this is captured by the surprise and delight that was not uncommonly expressed by Sedgwick’s colleagues and students upon the occasion of hearing her read her work aloud. Lauren Berlant (2009a) recalls, at Sedgwick’s reading of “A Poem is Being Written,” “the gasp in the room – of aversion, surprise, and sheer pleasure” – when she invited listeners to rethink sexuality through considering their own anal eroticism and how utterly “delightful and unprecedented” it was in her own experience of academic performance (p. 1089).
to sadomasochistic experiences and imaginings of pleasure and pain, the work is an exercise in disciplining, simultaneously, language and readers, in slowing down reading by producing a kind of enjambment at the level of genre through the insertion of poetry into prose. Against the backdrop of Sedgwick’s memories of being spanked as a child, enjambment, a “physical gesture of the limbs, of the flanks – la jambe – “the ham” – jambon,” is visualized as a poetic gesture of straddling lines together syntactically, but also a pushing apart of lines which interrupts the reader and forces them to give up control and submit, as it were, to a literary spanking. The essay, Sedgwick said, “is about the relationship between art and sex, between poetry and those for whom spanking fantasies, or spanking behaviour during sex, are part of their sex life.”

Symbolic not only of a bold attempt to revisit and redirect the humiliation and pain of being spanked as a child into a poetic text, which can itself be disciplined and humiliated, spanked by the author who is reclaiming some of her lost control, the essay, importantly, is also an inquiry into the relation of being and beating and the ways in which beating functions as a form of writing imbued with ecstasy.

The pleasure, as Sedgwick describes it, is one, distinctly, of writing, since it comes in the experimentation with poetic form and the interference with the beat and “the hammering iteration of rhythm” that characterizes traditional poetry and her own childhood scene of spanking. There is both an erotic attachment to and a resistance enacted by the writer’s preferred style of enjambment in the way that it presents a certain piece of writing as having gained or exercised control over “some earlier, plurivocal drama or struggle” (1993, p. 187). Sedgwick

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22 See the article from The New York Times, “‘Queer Theory’ is Entering the Literary Mainstream,” authored by Dinitia Smith and published January 17, 1998.
writes:

Among the powers to be won was the power...to identify with [the body of one’s own humiliation], creating with painful love and care, but in a temporality miraculously compressed by the elegancies of language, the distance across which this body in punishment could be endowed with an aura of meaning and attraction – across which, in short, the compelled body could be chosen. (1993, p. 184)

The lyric, more than any other genre, was the one that she identified with the compelled display of her youthful body and subjectivity. Yet, the innovations she introduced – forcing apart individual poetic sentences or themes by line breaks, as well as rejecting the final couplet and the genre’s traditional romantic themes – imbued it with an undeniably queer eroticism inasmuch as what was resisted was the heterosexual coupling as a paradigm in favour of the potential masturbatory pleasures of being one short of a couple. An account of a new and exemplarily complex sense of sex and sexuality was thus beginning to emerge. And yet, the extent to which Sedgwick’s stated intent for the work was to address the absence of a discourse on female anal eroticism, any notion of sex would still ultimately be beholden to and reliant upon this ‘text’, however imperfectly developed, to be made manifest. But can’t writing itself be the sexual act? Might writing be viewed, that is to say, not in relationship to sex in the terms of being about, coming after, or the vehicle for its transmission, but as, indeed, sex itself, the thing that makes it come?23

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23In “Syringe (At the Point)”, a chapter from Peggy Kamuf’s (2005) Book of Addresses, the connection between sex and writing is elaborated by Derrida’s view of writing that proceeds “only by letting itself be contaminated in its most proper desire” (p. 210). He dreams of writing as the thing that might relieve an unbearable tension and wishes for “a pen that could write the living body in warm red blood” (p. 212). He writes: “I always dream of a pen that would be a syringe, a suction point rather than that very hard weapon with which one must inscribe, incise, choose calculate...once the right vein has been found, no more toil. Cruor, Confiteor: to let the blood of the confession be drawn toward the exterior by this instrument for taking blood, an instrument manipulated by the other, always the other, it must always be an other” (p. 208).
The Pleasures of the Wound

There is currently a commonly held assumption that self-cutting as a kind of literal inscription of the flesh enacted on and through the surface of the body through the cutting and marking of skin, is synonymous with “self-harm” and so inherently destructive or counter-productive. This view predominates in the West in the literatures of psychology and medicine but is present also in varying degrees in more abstract fields such as trauma studies and psychoanalytic theory. As Angela Failler (2008) explains, “self-harm,” though it encompasses a variety of behaviours including eating disorders and substance abuse, and references numerous types of injuries administered directly to one’s body such as cutting, burning, pulling out hair, and swallowing dangerous objects, is defined primarily within conventional frameworks according to “intentionality” and so with respect to the question of whether an injury can be seen “to result from a deliberate or intentional effort to damage the self” (p. 13). Limiting in so far as it obscures important issues related to recognizing and understanding motivations for self-harm, the definition causes further damage, Failler argues, by rendering unintelligible persons who self-harm by positioning the behaviours as basically illogical, absurd because “Who would do something like that to themselves on purpose?” (p. 14). In turn, this unintelligibility becomes the justification for disregarding self-harm or the self-harming subject as “beyond sympathy or warranting interest” (Ibid). Further, in its assumption that the purpose of self-harm is solely to cause damage, the definition forecloses questions about what may be accomplished psychically by the behaviour and, thus, why it is carried out at all.

As an inquiry that seeks to articulate the meanings and motivations – the internal suffering – that gives expression to self-cutting as a practice, literally, of writing on and through
the body, Failler’s analysis offers a profound and generous view of the complex means by which subjects live incoherently in the wake of psychical trauma. In positing the thesis that something is psychically accomplished in self-cutting, that it bespeaks in some way an attempt to represent psychical trauma and to compensate for it, Failler, drawing deftly on the conceptual tools of psychoanalytic theory, opens up an alternative understanding of self-cutting as that which brings pain but also pleasure, and as that which inflicts damage but also gestures toward repair. And yet, to be sure, the pleasure of self-harm, even within an account as thoughtful and incisive as Failler’s, does not seem in any specific or significant way related to sex and sexuality. Compulsive or repetitive self-cutting, she argues, for instance, “tests and re-tests the skin’s capacity for containment” (p. 16). The pleasure consists, thus, in probing and defining the limit of the self and the self’s boundaries and in experimenting with/on the skin: “Will it hold this time?” (p. 16). Equally, she says, compulsively inflicting a wound upon one’s skin may create an occasion to care for the self, whether by cleaning or subsequently trying to secure the wound, which may itself be experienced as a pleasurable repetition necessary for the production and maintenance of a subjectivity. In a similar vein, anorexia, though it carries the capacity for self-destruction and even death, may also be read, according to Failler, in less pathological terms, as, for example, “an experiment in living” (2006) in which desire or appetite is not eclipsed but rather refused precisely because it reminds the anorectic of her “hunger, desire, neediness, and dependence on others” (p. 106).

In both examples, there is, then, the indication that desire is indeed present at the scene of self-harm and, to greater and lesser degrees, operative in its subjects. But to the extent that it is treated in the literature generally as a symptom of the broad category of ‘appetitive disorders’
and in this way interpreted as encompassing a range of nonspecific wants or hungers, the issue of desire, that is, of an expressly sexual desire, has been given relatively limited consideration in theorizations of self-harm. Yet, the fact that the behaviour is so habituated and repetitive, that it centres on the body as, arguably, the locus of feeling and sensuousness, and that it is, for many people who do it, an intensely private and solitary practice, suggests that there is a certain and, it would seem, undeniable (auto)erotic dimension to wounding. To the degree that cutting both feels pressing and urgent and, ultimately, provides relief and a release, it has a distinctly masturbatory quality.

In light of the way that it registers a quite particular, carnal type of hunger, a need so basic and grossly base perhaps as sex, the claim about non-specificity, the constant searching and belaboured questioning by professionals – “What is she hungry for?” – seems something either like a diversion or maybe pretense. If we can presume to know anything, it’s that she is hungry for sex. If there is one thing we cannot claim to know, however, it’s what sex is. The slipperiness of the term, the surprise, for instance, that queer theory scholars, Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, could compile and edit an entire volume on the topic of sex only to boldly state, four pages into their introduction, that they know nothing of its meaning, has the effect, potentially, of inspiring in readers fidelity to their own incoherence. Until we know any different or better, and as long as it feels good, makes us numb, connects us, disorganizes us, breaks us open, apart, whatever, we will keep doing what we do, which may mean having a lot of sex or having none at all.

In either case, there will be little to remark upon since having and not having, though they are states that may be perceived variously and quite specifically according to individual
thresholds of feeling and fluctuations in bodily feedback, as a lot, too much, or an empty, lacking void are nothing, really, out of the ordinary but only part of what constitutes the scene of everyday life. Generally, this confusion or ignorance about sex and our tendency to speak about it obliquely in terms of a container emptied of its contents works in our favour since it prevents us from thinking or caring too much (unless we are in the throes of it ourselves) about what bodies can get up to when they are left by themselves behind closed doors. But when razor blades and shards of glass become our preferred toys, when the deep, moaning pains of starvation begin to feel like rapture, and when the pen appears, newly, as much an instrument now for rupturing as it once was for writing, it seems about time that everyday life stops and we begin to get clear about its meanings.

The Crush of Intellect

Eve Sedgwick states in “A Poem Is Being Written” that “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” (1993, p. 177). I did not know that child and yet I feel a certain fierce and indestructible faithfulness to her. Like the gasp that escapes my lungs when the first brightly coloured drops of blood appear, or the awareness, the pulsing, fermenting sensation that feelings of admiration and curiosity about somebody have suddenly become a crush, I want this writing to claim a shift in your attention, to hold you there where you feel discomfort, where the edges soften gradually to ease the blow. Holding is not the same as anaesthetizing and fantasy is not the same as real life. I write because it stops me from cutting but then, softly and quietly, the text bleeds as well. How much of pain is authorized, nurtured, nourished, numbed by the spaces of ordinary living? How much of it can be interrupted...
or dissolved by the imagining and seeking of alternatives? I am bound to the everyday. I live and breathe its promise. But my attachment to this life is resulting in my own “slow death.” I want to be jarred, to be forced into desiring and become disorganized, on top of all that. I want to bleed, to eat, to lick, to starve, to think, to do, to retch, to break, to burn, to fade and I want theory – I want writing – to let me in on the secret and to tell me why I want it. Can a theory of self-harm contain or engender a theory of sex/sexuality?

There are some things I think I know only in writing. In the two years that have passed since Eve Sedgwick’s death there has been a stunning outpouring of scholarship, remembrances, tributes, and testaments, all of which speaks not only to the formative role she played in the shaping of queer studies but also to who she was and what she meant to people as a writer, a theorist, a critic, a teacher, a friend, and a mentor. Her death has seen the creation of various panels, symposiums, websites, books, articles, special issues of academic journals, as people from different walks of life – activist, artist, spiritualist, scholar – have sought to celebrate and honour her memory. Among those who consider themselves her people there has been debate and dialogue – convivial, intense, energetic and alive; all of it has had the effect of holding her ideas close and keeping the buzz going. After her death, many of us, it seems, still want to be with Eve. We want to meet her again in her texts, to feel the reverberation of her high-pitched laughter, to be surprised and embarrassed anew by the boldness and generosity with which she

24 This is the phrase that Berlant uses to describe “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (2007a, p. 754). In her article, “Risky Bigness,” she conceives of it in relationship to the obesity epidemic in particular and the “self-medicating” activity of over-eating that tilts toward self-destruction because it provides “a rest from the exhausted self” (p. 26). Inasmuch as exhaustion, she argues, “shapes the reproduction of life at home and at work” (p. 26), people eat to “maintain equilibrium and optimism in everyday life” (p. 27). If we think, as well, about the phrase in relationship to any activity that has an absorptive effect on the subject and generally involves “pleasure-spreading,” then it is possible to open up her discussion even further.
invited us to open ourselves up to the wide range of possibilities condensed in the notion of sexual identity and to inject the academy, finally, with a good, healthy dose of the erotic.

**Theory’s Queer Desire/A Queer Desire For Theory**

I was in my mid twenties when I first met Sedgwick. It was a purely textual encounter (all of our meetings were) but the force of it, the way that it got hold of me and made me think and feel so hard was something I had not experienced up to that point. I did not anticipate it happening and yet once it did, it was, decidedly, the thing I wanted. The kind of thinking I did in my first readings of *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Tendencies* felt good: it was raw, sharp, piercing. There were edges to it, jutting and jagged. Conceptually, I was approaching this work with intensity and yearning similar only to that with which I engaged life at a physiological or bodily level. Starved, it was as if I was walking around and around and around a set of problems, burning every last ounce of energy to get inside them, to know their contents, to scrape them smooth, to change their contours. I was exhausting myself, wearing out, on the one hand, from wanting to be crushed so completely by ideas and, on the other, from being absorbed by a crush that, daily, kept me charged, exhilarated, anxious, mad with feeling.

Before I happened upon Sedgwick and became absorbed in her work, I used
to think about theory as a kind of refuge, a space that I could escape to, that could hold or contain feeling or help create distance from it. I imagined, despite evidence to the contrary, that theory was a bit like the classroom: a mostly safe and innocuous space where nothing too exciting happened, where feeling and emotion were muted, where the primary things that circulated were words and ideas, and maybe, less frequently, provocations to stop and pay attention. I didn’t much think, indeed, couldn’t tolerate the thought of, either one as a space for love and desire. Mostly, I looked upon them as amorphous and empty, filled with potential precisely to the extent that they could dissolve as quickly as they seemed to have taken shape – when papers that needed writing were finished and books and classroom doors were closed.

In my personal life, I could not close the door on anxiety and, thus, while I dreamed that I would die from a specific strain of feeling or desire that, yet, had no recognized form to hold it, I wished in my intellectual life that a space could be opened up and filled with countless characterless objects. I wanted things spread out but enclosed. I wanted to lie with someone intimately but be familiar with their shape rather than their smell, to remember their eyes – not their expression but their colour – hazel, brown, or maybe dark blue. Before reading Sedgwick I had very little idea that masochism could be a distinctly mental matter or that the verbal could be the scene within which my fantasies played out. I had a notion but few resources ultimately for
apprehending how learning could feel like lust, or how robustly ideas could
attach to people, or how and why I could want a professor to want me when
the gift of her knowledge and praise was such teasing – a lavishing before a
swift and brutal withdrawal. All of this desiring involved bodies and yet
physicality, I was to learn from Sedgwick, wasn’t the half of it.

Of the many lasting and profound contributions Sedgwick’s theorizing has made to the
field of queer studies, it is the rethinking and broadening of the term “sex” to include an “array
of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women
and men, that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not
adequately defined by them” (1990, p. 29) that is, arguably, the most moving and deeply
disorienting. Defined in this way, Sedgwick’s notion of sex, though it resonates perhaps with
some of our most basic concepts, differs quite substantially in that it does not presume that sex is
a predominantly singular or easily identifiable, knowable thing. By opening up and expanding
the possibilities for sex, Sedgwick’s definition, importantly, has made room for a multitude of
individual differences and experiences and permitted new questions to form about what sex is or
might be and also about what it feels like. Among scholars of queer theory, it has prompted
careful and renewed consideration of queer as an identity category, and so, for example, has led
Elizabeth Freeman (2011) to ask: “Wasn’t my being queer, in the first instance, about finding sex
where it was not supposed to be, failing to find it where it was, finding that sex was not, after all,
what I thought it was?” (p. 32).

Cheeky and brilliant and resplendent as she was, Sedgwick often stated that one of her
main ambitions as a writer and a teacher was to make her readers and students “smarter.” It is
difficult to know what she meant by that exactly or how, indeed, she imagined that transformation might be measured and tracked. Certainly, the ambiguity of the definitions she provided could not have helped many of us to feel much smarter since a characteristic effect of her work in this regard was one of weakening our hold of the things we thought we knew and the axioms by which we proceeded to live. And yet, it does seem significant that the intellectual referent of the word “smart” derives, as Lauren Berlant has astutely observed, “from its root in physical pain” (2002, p. 87). This was Eve’s S/M paradigm: whether in theory or pedagogy, she was compelled to whip us intellectually into shape. As her readers and students we needed to be desirous and willing.

But the writing of all of this, so far, feels like delayed pleasure. Or, perhaps, too much like beating around the bush. The point, as it were, of sex, is not that it hurts but that it produces intensity, a sensation of immense concentration, power or force. It prickles but does not pierce, stimulates but does not slice the body that otherwise has been seized, prodded, and punctured by so much longing. In sex, the body may be awakened or half sleeping but the mind is called to attention. Something is happening that feels different and curiosity, however mild or pressing, is the thing that we turn toward not just because we desire to know but because wondering feels a bit like wandering and there is pleasure in being lost. To the degree that ordinary subjectivity is shaped temperedly and often absentmindedly by the pulsations of habituated patterning that help to maintain equilibrium and make possible getting through the day, sex may signal an interruption, an uncertain, consuming strangeness that forces focus and awakens us from the mostly dreamy activity of living. In sex, hunger may fade for a time into the background as touch and texture become more alluring than taste. If the pressure of it is too much, we may become
fierce, fuelled by the sudden and unremitting demand to cry out rather than wilt disconsolately, as is our habit, under its weight. Bestowed with the new gift of articulation, we may laugh, shriek, wail, or weep as we are made strange and our voices sound discordant and half our own.

**Trauma and the “Voice” of Non-coherent Subjectivity**

Within the vast and various literatures produced in recent years under the umbrella of contemporary trauma studies, there has been seemingly both a consistent and remarkably uniform approach to understanding self-harming behaviour as a voice or a language, a communicative strategy that attempts to articulate in a bodily way experiences of trauma that resist narrativization. In accounts such as Janice McLane’s “The Voice on the Skin,” for example, the stifling force of trauma is examined in relationship to the specificities of self-cutting, which, the author argues, testifies to the experiences of childhood sexual and physical abuse and so speaks where ordinary language fails to do so. Writes McLane: “When hidden pain starts to speak, it will speak silently. Its voice may appear as a cut on the leg, a burn on the arm, skin ripped and scratched repeatedly” (1996, p. 111). Similarly, Kim Hewitt (1997) describes how in an act of self-mutilation gesture replaces language: “What cannot be said in words becomes the language of blood and pain” (p. 58). Framed according to an understanding of trauma as an overwhelming event that is experienced as a loss of language and cognition, both analyses presume a link between trauma, narrative, and the body and suggest that where traumatic experiences cannot be assimilated into the mind, they are instead encoded on the body, recalled in bodily sensations rather than words. Hunger in the case of anorexia functions in just this way, as the growls, screams, and pangs of the body represent the anorectic’s desire to symbolically re-enact the trauma and exert some control over the situation. In both behaviours a
different mode of storytelling is enacted through the body. Unable to speak, sufferers of self-harm use the body “to work out psychological conflicts, to obtain relief from overwhelming feelings of tension, anger, loneliness, emptiness, and self-hatred, and to physiologically manage such post-traumatic symptoms as dissociation, flashbacks, and hyperarousal” (Strong, 1998, p. 117).

No matter how harrowing, gruesome, or close to death it may appear, the bodily speech enacted by anorexia and self-cutting represents, unequivocally, according to many theorists, the sufferer’s desire for life and a “will to survive” pain and trauma (Kilby, 2001, p. 127). The statement commonly voiced among individuals who self-cut that “I’d always thought I’d die if I didn’t cut” (Strong, p. xviii) describes the perceived dangers of breaking completely with language, not the least of which is the erasure of the subject. To the extent that anorexia is defined by specularity, it issues most forcefully perhaps the demand to be heard that Judith Butler (1997) and others assert is vital to securing the viability of the subject. Yet, where these behaviours test too persistently the limit of discursive possibility, there may be little opportunity for hearing their pleas for recognition or identifying their “will to taste power” (Probyn, 1999, cited in Anderson, 2010, p. 24) since the narrative that speaks unambiguously also speaks loudest. In this respect individuals who self-harm seem destined not to be heard but only to be seen as the sad, suicidal figures of “mute victimhood” (Kilby, p. 126).

Supposing for a moment, however, that contradiction might be tolerated and we could thus hear in the interminable roar of hunger and the slow wasting away of human flesh the anorectic’s voicing of an attachment to life, what would it sound like? Would it ring loud and awaken the subject to move her beyond the deadening touch of trauma? Would it vibrate softly
with a longing to be held, needed, possessed? Would it sigh at the wants of another? Whimper at its own crazed desire for contact? Laugh with delight at sex’s weird tastes and tones? More than the horror and feelings of disgust it engenders, anorexia remains a source of intense fascination in the West to the extent that self-starvation as a form of cultural practice overflows with meanings, many of which appear to directly conflict with one another. Whether regarded as a disease, a symptom, or an individualized practice, anorexia as an expressive and extended refusal to eat, performs, paradoxically, the subject’s simultaneous undoing and becoming. As Peggy Phelan (1993) has remarked, self-starvation “becomes itself through disappearance” (p. 146). In other words, “it becomes itself most fully, and becomes meaningful in the logic of its own image most vividly, at the moment of death of the anorectic [...] Death is both the reason and the limit for whatever powers self-starvation may claim as action, idea, or sign” (Anderson, 2010, p. 12). Oscillating wildly between “perversity and pleasure, devotion and resistance, hope and despair, love and loss,” self-starvation moves, evocatively, in Freudian terms, between fort and da and what we know more commonly as the conflict between life and death (Anderson, p. 23). Above all, it is this central conflict and the anorectic’s curious embodiment of wilfulness and anguish that announces anorexia’s incoherence and reveals it literally in that sense as “disordered.”

But is the anorectic’s incoherence in some way also not our own? Isn’t the skeletal figure (she whose legs could not possibly be thinner, whose constitution could not appear more fragile) still ultimately held together by the very tissue the disease as compulsive, frenzied, sustained starvation desires to waste? Doesn’t the meaning of anorexia as self-consumption and the “falling away of the Flesh every day more and more” (Anderson, 2010, p. 49) become realized precisely in observing the body that does not succumb but that lives and thrives, rather, on the
sheer throbbing intensity of insatiety and unbearable hunger? The tendency, as much historical as it is current, to portray the anorectic as emblematic of a particular kind of limit case, is more than just that: it speaks of a certain intent of declaring her freakish so that a definition of “normal” may be secured by the cataloguing of dissimilarity. Centrally, the difference archived, then, will be the few, vigorously normative positions imagined and articulated as possibilities for having “a life.” Where convention delimits thinking, starvation will be conceived of as constituting something quite other than the grounds of living even as living itself, for those who presume to inhabit its rare recognizable forms, will nowhere be made the grounds of questioning.

But in a society such as this one, where everyday life has become so fatigued by all the stresses placed on it and where making a life, thus, has come to resemble less a deliberate and deliberative activity than an experience of coasting, a rather careless shifting between pleasure and numbness that facilitates one’s getting through the day, the week, and the month (Berlant, 2010b) it is easy not to notice how incoherence is as much tied to feeling as it defines a problem for thinking. Self-harm engenders disquiet: to come into contact with it is to witness in a most extreme and perhaps visceral way the persistence with which humans stay attached to lives that do not work. Failler (2006) notes psychotherapist Em Farrell’s reaction in this regard to meeting an anorexic patient. She says: “To see a skeletal figure walking and talking is deeply disturbing. Skull’s heads, death, torture, concentration camps and starvation are some of the thoughts that instantly come to mind” (Farrell, 2000, cited in Failler, p. 99). Yet notwithstanding the obvious drama of the visual that surrounds the anorectic, what is, we may ask, the difference between eating nothing and eating too much, between wasting flesh and wasting time in “ordinary” practices of drinking, television, sports fandom, video games, and drugs, that, equally, it seems
make “life” not from movement but from fixing people in their relation to things, in binding them to thing-oriented circuits of repetition?

In the narrative of the everyday there are so many people, says Berlant (with Prosser, 2011), yet only one plot that counts as “life.” To the extent that this is true, the possibilities for imagining otherwise for certain types of people – the anorectic, the queer, the single, the something else – appear foreclosed, for seldom is it that they find their way into that story. Trauma theory, for its part, though it has found a way to deliver a more generous account of self-harm as a coping mechanism and a form of living with loss, accomplishes little in the way of broadening out possibilities for other emerging plots in so far as it has established trauma as a genre whose particular job it is, is to represent immediacy amidst disorganized affective/bodily experience (Berlant and Prosser, 2011, p. 185). Thus, no matter that an event experienced as traumatic for one person may not necessarily be so for another, or that what trauma actually looks like is not always what it will seem, the genre of trauma will continue to deliver to us an account of the “proper” way of thinking about a compromised subjectivity even as it “under-describes the range of practices, knowledges, impulses, and orientations that people do have while they are foregrounding being this or that kind of thing at a particular moment” (Berlant and Prosser, p. 187). The singular genre of trauma endures while “bodies wear out from the pleasures that help them live on” (Berlant, 2010a, p. 27).

What conceptual modes and resources do we have and what forms may we draw from or invent still in attempting to track rather than articulate the problem of impaired, non-coherent being? For no other reason perhaps than the fact that trauma theory appears to be invested in performing its own unique version of being stuck and, in that, insists on converting disorganized
bodily memories into conventional, linear narrative memories (see, for example, Culbertson, 1995), it has become less useful for a project such as this, which seeks to dwell in the anxiety and chaos of unintelligibility and get close to how that feels as opposed to actively courting clarity and moving towards asserting an idea about what, finally, it reveals. In this work I am both indebted to and inspired by Sedgwick, whose persistent and uncommonly brilliant experimentation with form facilitated new ways of understanding bodily crisis and provided at the same time a profound and astonishing statement of the many possibilities available for queer conceptual work; where, indeed, “the richest junctures weren’t the ones where everything means the same thing” (1993, p. 6).

In *A Dialogue on Love*, a book that she referred to as her “texture book” because of the way that the writing unfolds through a technique of weaving multiple layers of (formal, thematic, subjective, and temporal) threads, Sedgwick described how the uniqueness of the form came from wondering about what genre the “writing of Shannon and me” should take and whether it could be spacious enough to hold the various and contrasting voices that emerged from their collaboration and from the back and forth between therapist and patient (1999, p. 194). Recalled Sedgwick: “What I wanted to make palpable – and available – was the quality of a specific listening space, a space that is open to every anxiety but resists propelling onward its fatal...

25 In my view, Sedgwick’s unique contribution to understanding trauma is reflected in her use of queer and diverse forms that, significantly and undeniably, mime the arguments themselves. Her turn away from “paranoid” to “reparative” reading outlined in *Touching Feeling* (2003) makes possible thinking about trauma in terms of recursion, which, as Tavia Nyong’o (2010) notes, “includes but is not reducible to repetition” (p. 247). According to Nyong’o, recursion holds “reparative potentiality” for trauma narratives because “it is a way of going forward, nonteleologically but without committing in advance to being stuck in the past” (Ibid). As Sedgwick anticipates in her earlier (1996) analysis of Gary Fisher’s work, reading recursion reparatively enables a relation to, for example, racial trauma that does not simply repeat the position of “internalized self-hatred” in the manner ego psychology would hold, but allows one to “take control of the time and rhythm of entering, exploring, and leaving the space of” trauma (p. 283).
itinerary” (2006, p. 6). The listening space created comes from her adoption, then, of an uncommon seventeenth-century Japanese poetic form called *haibun*, where prose is interspersed with haiku. When Sedgwick weaves haiku into her prose, the white space between lines, between poetry and prose become the empty spaces through which many meanings pass. According to Katy Hawkins,

the “use” Sedgwick finds for “all the white space” is in an almost *counter-poetic* gap in her text’s momentum. The poems break up the strikingly regular rhythm of the prose, relaxing the beat of intellectual and emotional working through. Much more effectively than enjambment ever could, the white space arrests the rhythms Sedgwick associates with childhood punishment. (2006, p. 255)

The effect of the haiku is, however, more than strictly textual. While, as Hawkins points out, “each haiku stops the rhythm of narration to unfreeze a moment of cognition” (p. 255), the greater impact, it seems, is made at a sensorial level. The poems physically slow us down as readers. They change the way that we pay attention to aesthetic and affective dynamics. Because of the gap in the rhythmic prose, we have time to look for the areas that may convey multiple meanings. Yet, equally, we have in them the opening of a space in time for encountering feeling. Thus, in the elongated absorption of aesthetic time, we may become attuned to the distance and difference between words and emotions and awaken to what it feels like to be met with the confusion that though the language of emotion appears to name the specificity of feelings, in actuality our felt states are likely to be rather more uncertain and perplexed. In reading Sedgwick’s prose, then, we find, not uncommonly, a stunning contrast in scenes that mark, on the one hand, “a moment’s realization, startlingly clear” (1999, p. 69) that to feel comfort is to feel love, and to be consoled by the relinquishment from suffering:
That’s enough. You can stop now.

*Stop:* living, that is.

And *enough:* hurting. (Sedgwick, p. 69)

On the other hand, they register immense confusion about the ways in which her relation to that phrase may also and simultaneously be sensed as bitterness, anger, hurt feeling, despair, disappointment, frustration – and maybe not only that. Thinking about some of the other meanings of the phrase “that’s enough, you can stop now,” Sedgwick notes that “aside from yes, you don’t have to live anymore” (p. 69), there are those that feel decidedly less loving. She describes a different scenario:

A kid getting a bit hyper, showing off, talking loud, acting funny or something, who is – no, *not* told to cut it out – but instead, rebuked (deliberately or absent-mindedly) by being, after a certain point, ignored. So the kid is somehow stuck in this behaviour without having anyone to let them know: that’s enough you can stop now. (pp. 69-70)

**Repetition With A Difference**

Supposing, in reading *A Dialogue on Love*, that we did not apprehend a thing about love’s content but instead could only conceive of something relative to its form (as “an environment of touch or sound that the subject makes so that there is something to which she turns and returns”)*26*, might we not still be

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capable of feeling how generous and deeply loving is Sedgwick’s expressed wish that people not be stuck? In various but vaguely remembered ways, I was the child that she portrayed and though I could not possibly have felt her grief, I did nevertheless know a kind of rejection that registered mildly as hurt but bore down deep as desperation and delirious longing. For every time my parents subtly turned away, for every time they refused to acknowledge my truth and my pain, all those things with sharp and pointed edges – the nail file, the shard of glass, the sewing needle – grew more and more alluring. What I would have given then to hear from the depth of that void a voice that reassured me that there are ways, if not to negate traumatic repetition, then to break its stride. What I would have given to hear and submit to the wisdom of a writer, a queer theorist of immense proportion and a clever and compassionate scholar of Buddhist tradition and philosophy, that “the subject is structured as a patterning that can be shifted when new objects enter into the circuit of belonging or the dialogue on love” (Berlant, 2009a, p. 1090).

That it is possible not to be stuck.

That we can repeat things, yes.
And in that there can
Be a difference.

Love Knows Bounds

To say that there can be variation in a subject’s patterning and new forms for old habits is not to say, however, that one can ever really get beyond something. A new holding pattern is
still a holding pattern, after all. But if it holds us now in a different way, in a way that, say, feels more like wanting and less like obligation then perhaps the difference between then and now is that we notice that we are being held. There is something both optimistic and perceptibly anxious about the half question that comprises the title of Halley and Parker’s book and I imagine that it relates somehow to a question of form. After Sex? the editors explain, is as much preoccupied with thinking about the denormativization of temporality that has come to predominate in recent years in queer intellectual projects as it is with carefully reflecting upon what this new predominance means for a field that has defined itself historically by its primary attachment to the specific thematic of sexuality. Further, they ask, what if the even broader shift in focus among some of the first writers in the field represents not just a change in the trajectory of queer theoretical work but the end of the field as we have known it? What holds queer theory together, they want to know, now that Judith Butler is “writing about justice and human rights, Michael Moon about sermons and secularism, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick about Melanie Klein and Buddhism?” (2011, p. 2). What, if anything, is still recognizable about queer theory? Or, to put it in another way and, thus, restate in a new context an old question, “what’s queer about queer studies now?” (Eng, Halberstam & Munoz, 2005).

It does something to my form – makes it seem more solid and composed – to think that Sedgwick performed with keen awareness, or maybe unconsciously, along with the rest of us and right up to her death her own queer scholarly version of being stuck. To suggest this is not to wish that she stalled – ever – in a place of feeling bad, but to attempt, rather, to honour the thing that she did so consistently and well, and that made many of us feel good. Of her writing she once said: “Problems present themselves to me, it might be fair to say, less as conceptual
problems than as writing problems, how to organize a piece of writing, how to make something interesting happen generically. It’s never been an option for me to be less than a writerly writer” (Barber and Clark, 2002). In so far as her writing not only described but also performed (and was essentially indivisible from) the particular definition of queer that she so shamelessly asserted and nurtured as her own – the notion, for example, of “being available to be identified with” (1993, p. 15), and the (re)formulation of subjectivity as an open space for multiple temporary positions – Sedgwick was never in any sense “beyond” queer theory even though thematically her interests did change. It is therefore still possible today, for those of us who continue to hold her work in high regard and find our inspiration there, to select from a stack of variously brilliant and yet unidentified and distinctly unfamiliar pieces of writing something that sounds characteristically like Sedgwick. It is still possible to call this work “queer” and notice how things hold together rather than fall apart, to observe how hearing something differently can lead to feeling differently or, as it were, to feeling at all.

The wish not to be stuck and to be beyond it all registers the anxiety that being burdened with too much feeling hinders or in some way breaks up the continuity of the person one imagines herself, ordinarily, to be. When sex is conceived of as a thing to get beyond, one effect, potentially, is the perhaps surprising realization that the ordinary self is one who mostly is not having sex, while still another effect may be that of recognizing the things that are either too intensely enjoyable or intolerable about it. In any case, to be stuck on sex is to be, in a sense, in the continual presence of it, reminded of the ecstasy but also the strangeness and discomfort, the discovery that people are different during sex, different because so pressing and close and so utterly inescapable.
When Lauren Berlant proposes an idea for thinking about sex as an “impasse” in Halley and Parker’s book, she is endeavouring to arouse questions not only or even primarily in regards to what feels difficult about sex but also or rather about what about it, in our historical present, still cannot be thought or imagined in so far as every activity of human living moves at a startlingly accelerated pace, hurrying unabatedly toward a future. An impasse, says Berlant, is “decompositional – in the unbound temporality of the lag one hopes to have been experiencing all along (otherwise it’s the end), it marks a delay” (p. 80). Rather than hurtling forward and attempting to move beyond, an impasse marks a space of painstaking affective and intellectual engagement, a slowing down of “the encounter with the objects of knowledge that are really scenes we can barely get our eyes around” (p. 80). As method, she explains, “this perspective turns the object x into an impasse, a singular place that’s a cluster of noncoherent but proximate attachments that can only be approached awkwardly, described around, shifted” (pp. 80-81).

Berlant’s careful and unorthodox cataloguing of the excess of unusual phrases, thoughts, things, relations, feelings, experiences that she imagines make up the sexual impasse is stunning.²⁷ Reading the immense list while being familiar with the exquisite brilliance behind its composition²⁸ makes me feel small by comparison and also, unexpectedly, sad. In this story

²⁷ She writes: “Sex is not a thing, it’s a relation; it’s a nonrelation in propinquity to some kind of recognition; it’s a sock drawer for the anxious effects; it’s a gesture cluster that can be organized in an identity for the purpose of passing through normative sociality; it’s an event, an episode; it feels so good, or not; it’s an experience of becoming disorganized that, at the same time, can be lived through, assimilated, talked about, tracked […], and forgotten, while also being a threat to well-being and to fantasies that in the good life people ought to be protected from being too chaotic, unstable, ambivalent, or enigmatic” (Halley and Parker, 2011, p. 81).

²⁸ My sense is that the depth and profundity of Berlant’s thinking is also, importantly, a reflection of the extent of Sedgwick’s influence. About Eve, she writes, for instance: “She wasn’t technically [my teacher] – she was my brainstorming friend – although “storming” isn’t quite right, it was more like brain-nudging, the way cats push at legs. But her position was fundamentally as a teacher – the kind who helps you find your sea legs while encouraging you to appreciate being wobbly in knowledge” (2009a, p. 1090).
about impasse, what feels disconsolate is the way that it throws into sharp relief how little we seem to be attuned to the lives that we are living. In this contouring of the sexual impasse what makes my heart hurt is the thought that although I am living it, nevertheless, I cannot tell whether this life builds or destroys.

In an entry from her blog, Berlant writes that she has been thinking about “having a life” as “the noise you create around yourself; affect finds its forms of rest and excitation.” This observation, evocative of much of her work, springs from an affected scene of writing that does not so much aim to explain as to contour, to move around and move the edges of what is hard about a thing. In an earlier and seemingly related entry she writes that the context for working from home has lately become unbearable, upset by the continuous distressed howls of an upstairs neighbour suffering from Alzheimer’s. She describes how the cries provide a “soundtrack” for the everyday that causes her to lose focus, and that she feels confused about what she should be listening to, her own noise or her neighbour’s. Such disorientation, inasmuch as the blog itself may be interpreted as generating a kind of counterpoint to the formal published work, importantly and somewhat methodically orients us to reading Berlant’s article in a way that registers its complex texture and busy countermelodies.

The name of the article is “Starved” and, as it begins with one author’s observation about the “epidemic of celibacy” that, apparently, is affecting the United Kingdom and the United States at present, it marks the confusion of ambiguity made from the word: has sex for the celibate become like food to the anorectic, a necessary but still inconvenient and mostly unendurable aspect of living? Has abstinence put a lock on desire in the way that refusing food dampens appetite? Are we suffering from deprivation of a thing that makes life possible and
ensures its duration or are we wasting away from yearning, from wanting to want it? In my most intensely anorexic phases I have known intimately how starving can feel like thriving, and how the body delirious from lack of sustenance can become enraptured by the precariousness of chugging along with nothing in the tank. If there is one thing that feels good about wasting in this way it is the relentless internal clang and clamour of hunger that drowns out the muddled noise manifested from the activities of everyday living. Starved, one is overwhelmed, consumed by the din of a single, undeniable want. Because hunger that vast and deep is its own distraction, there is nothing to pull you away from yourself, nothing that can so securely envelop and hold you from your own wants, the wants of others, or the world. In ways that feel both pressing and difficult, this resonates with Berlant’s explication of sexual impasse. She writes: “we want to want and want to have had, but [we] do not actually want to be in the same room for too long with an intimate. Being-with is too hard” (2011a, p. 84).

The starved body is, then, it would seem, a remarkably solitary and sovereign body. Wanting for nothing, it closes in on itself and chooses not to pay attention to the outside world. Its time is now; it does not desire to move beyond but rather prefers the cold arresting hand of habit. Nothing, no one can interfere with a life that hell bent on its own destruction.

Starve me, fuck me and
Forget
Me/and you. End want
and feeling want. Now.

There is no way out of the impasse and no relief from this longing. Yet, there is, on the occasion of reading and hearing and feeling starved in a different context, a sense of space spreading out before the anorectic subject who, predictably, is wearing out. In her story about
impasse Berlant explains that “what is starved for is not sex or romantic intimacy but the emotional time of being-with” (2011a, pp. 85-86). Because being-with is, she says, open to interpretation, the possible forms for practicing intimacy are limited only by one’s capacity to be inventive and to think and counter the normative conception of time as linearity. In the impasse, angles are not exits. There is no point to the story but there are dulled sites from which to hang suspended and wonder for awhile. In the gesturing toward new possibilities for being-with there are other living forms of relation that might still come into view. The process, however, is not one of a simple unfolding since it requires thinking about how conventional life modes might be interrupted by accounts and practices that allow subjects to stay attached to a sense of unimpeded aliveness without creating so much distance and damage. Can we imagine how it might be to live, then, in the absence of the modes of being and relationality that have caused us to hurt so much? Can we develop an account of new ways to attach to the world that will see neither the body nor life punctured and punctuated by so much longing? Can we ever stop wanting to be longing?

**Intimate Forms of Life**

A number of years ago, I was hired by a social services agency near Toronto to manage and coordinate a summer employment project for distressed youth. At the time of my hiring the youth were living in different group homes around the city and, as many of them had suffered abuse while growing up in their families, they had been placed in the care of Children’s Aid. There were four group homes in total, two each for the boys and the girls, and my office
was located in a central spot, at the girls’ main residence. The residence housed fifteen girls aged thirteen to seventeen and was run by two managers, a staff of ten or so youth workers, and one certified special education teacher who taught classes from a regular high school curriculum in a separate building behind the house.

On my first day of work I arrived early in the morning to a nearly empty house as most of the girls and several staff had taken a special day trip to mark the end of the school year. Upon being greeted in front by one of the managers, I entered the house via a side entrance and was led directly into the kitchen. There, at an old oak table that spanned nearly the entire width of the large eating area, a girl sat writing in a notebook. She barely looked up and said nothing in response when I introduced myself to her. As the manager and I proceeded on a tour of the residence she explained that the girl was angry at having been banned from going on the trip due to recent bad behaviour. Just last week, she said, Alicia had left dinner without permission and taken off with an older boy to spend the night drinking and having sex in a hotel room. This, in any case, was what she and the staff presumed since, apart from sharing the small detail regarding location, Alicia refused to speak about it. They knew that whatever had happened at the hotel was bad because when Alicia finally returned to the house the next evening she spent the night locked in an upstairs bathroom throwing up. In the days that followed,
several small cuts began to appear around her wrist and on her forearm.

Thus, in preparation for the interview they knew I was planning to conduct as a requirement for her acceptance into the summer program, the staff advised Alicia to cover her cuts with bandages, to present herself professionally and greet me with a smile. They explained to her that I was not obligated to find her a job placement and that if she was serious about the opportunity then she needed to get control of her nervous habits. I suspected then that we were headed for trouble but I did not know how much.

Within the first two weeks of starting my new job, I became familiar with the girls in a way that I did not anticipate but that seemed unavoidable given the intimate setting of the house and the fact that I was so quickly and seamlessly integrated into the many aspects of living there. Passing by the common room on my way from the office to the classroom on any given day, for instance, I would be greeted by the excited noises of a small group of girls gathered there watching a daily soap and their intermittent cries of “ooo” or “that’s gross” during sex scenes. Sometimes, if they sensed that the occasion of my passing by might also be an opportunity for a quick visit, they would stop me by calling out my name and demand that I come and look and pronounce my judgment about which male character was cutest.

At lunchtime, I helped to prepare meals for them and sought their
participation through stirring soup, plating sandwiches, and setting and
serving the table while I looked after slicing meat, chopping vegetables for
salad, and heating oil in the pan. I made sure that they complied with the
house rule that sharp knives be locked away in the cabinet or otherwise
handled by an adult, and I readily doubled the provision of raw and leafy
green vegetables when one or two of them worried aloud that their blood
sugar levels would spike and leave them hungry again after eating grilled
cheese sandwiches doused in ketchup. I encouraged them, as did the other
staff, to at least try eating the “sick” looking mushrooms on their homemade
pizzas, and I stifled my laughter as one of them dissolves into a fit and was
sent away from the table after exclaiming that a plain hotdog resembled a
penis. When more than a few of them complained that they were getting fat
from so many desserts, I returned the ice cream to the freezer and agreed to
low fat raspberry jello instead. I was quiet but persistent in the way that I
humoured them, reserved but fierce in the way that I cared for them. They
frustrated me to no end and made me furious at times but I never, ever took it
upon myself to punish them. The staff, I was pretty sure, resented me for it,
but as the lines between discipline and abuse were often blurred in my mind,
I preferred being careful. Mostly, I wanted to find a way to honour my sense
that already, for many of us, the world felt like too much.

One morning while I was working at my desk drawing up contracts for the
new summer hires, I heard a light tapping on my door. I turned around and was surprised to see Alicia. She looked pale and small standing in the doorway. I asked her if everything was okay, and joked that I hoped she hadn't suddenly changed her mind about her placement which was to be at a day camp assisting young children. She shook her head no and said softly that she was only hoping to fill out the paperwork. I responded that I would be happy to help her get that completed but that I hadn't yet gotten to her file. A look crossed her face then and she took a few steps forward into my office and promptly lowered herself into a chair. It occurred to me that perhaps she was just being stubborn but as she had neither come to see me previously nor spoken to me very much at all, I was curious to know if there was something more significant on her mind.

“Will I be in trouble if I get sick at work?” she asked then. “If I call you, will you be able to come and pick me up or will I have to stay until everything is done?”

“If I am available and have the time, I don’t see why I couldn’t come and get you,” I said. “But what do you mean about being sick at work? Do you get sick often, when you are at home or at school?” I looked for her eyes but they were trained on the floor.
“It’s nothing really. Just sometimes my stomach hurts and then my head starts hurting and I feel like I can’t get my breath. I told my caseworker about it before and she said maybe I was having a panic attack. But I have had those and they aren’t the same. I feel different with those.”

“Alicia, whatever the problem is and however you are feeling, I will be here for you this summer, along with the rest of the staff, to try and help. If you are at work and you start to feel sick then you’ll have to make sure you tell your supervisor. We’ll go over our plans and precautions for you more thoroughly in the next few days. For now, try not to worry about it. Maybe instead we can get started on your contract.”

Excited, she leaned in and grabbed for a pen. I noticed her wrist then and two small welts that had sprung up next to the bandages. There was the trace of dried blood and the wounds looked fresh. I felt myself gasp and my voice caught in my throat. “Is that what you meant when you spoke of not feeling well?” I asked, gesturing to her hand.

“No,” she replied, quickly. “That’s what makes me feel better. Sometimes it’s the only thing. But I already know that I can’t do it when I am with the kids because they’ll probably get scared. I already know. I don’t need a lecture. I guess I just am wondering what to do instead.”
I looked away and felt an old familiar sensation starting in my gut. “I don’t know that I have an answer for you,” I said. “Maybe that’s something you should try to think more about in the next little while before the project gets going. Then, if you want, we can meet again and talk about it. Can we meet again later and talk about it? I hope you don’t mind but I really do need to finish up work on a few things.”

“What about my paperwork?” she asked, seeming hesitant and standing to go.

“I’ll get it organized,” I promise,” I said, and smiled, but she did not look convinced.

Quickly, she turned her back and her small bandaged hand gripped the doorknob. I jumped when the door shut behind her and felt the weight of years of longing crash down onto my chest.

Over the course of the next few weeks I felt disorganized and distressed. Alicia began her placement and by all accounts was enjoying it and performing well. Nothing further developed from our initial conversation, but feeling worried, I consulted with another staff member to see how things at
the house were going during my off hours. The report was good: Alicia was keeping up with her early morning and evening chores; she was waking up in good time; she was getting cleaned up and dressing appropriately in long sleeve shirts and pants, and she was negotiating the chaos of the public transit system to arrive composed and on time to work each morning. Recently, she had even gone on a fieldtrip to a public pool for a day of swimming and playing in the splash pad with the kids. She kept her cuts and scars covered and there had been no incident of any kind to report. Enjoying her work so much, she had begun keeping an account of it in daily entries in her journal.

As the coordinator of the work project, I was proud of Alicia and felt happy and relieved that she and several of the other employed youth were doing so well. The project had run in previous years but had faced a number of challenges. Where some of the participants were either chronically late, or took too many unauthorized breaks, or acted out, or even stole from their co-workers, this had resulted in their being fired and also in the employer notifying the agency of their refusal to offer any future work opportunities. My job was thus to try to secure meaningful work experiences for the youth by helping mostly sceptical business and store owners envision the potential benefits of the work placements for both their business and for the youth. Once I was successful with that, I needed to continually check in with and act
upon reports from both sides to ensure that all involved were reasonably
satisfied and expectations were being met. In some instances, there was
remarkable success and in others sheer disaster. In any case, the fact that
there were twenty-four youth and twenty-four employers each participating
meant that I had a lot of managing to do. For the most part, the kids made
an effort and that pleased their employers, which, in turn, pleased me. My
efforts, meanwhile, seemed to make less of an impact. Energy was sent out
and yet all that came back was a feeling of emptiness and exhaustion.

Two weeks into my job, and as the youth were all starting jobs of their own, I
began cutting again. The return of this compulsion did not surprise since it
was not the first time. And yet, somehow, it felt incredibly disappointing. It
had been years since I had done it and while I knew that the distance I felt
between me and it was imaginary and so fleeting, I nevertheless persevered
in my belief that time spreading out had enabled old habits to die out. It
started up quietly like an ache that, vast and unspecific, might have just as
easily belonged to either a tooth or a toe, but eventually grew relentless,
shouting at me from that one small place in the same throbbing voice. By
this time I was almost sure that I could tolerate being around someone who
cut without wanting to do it again myself but when it came right down to it, I
discovered, wanting had so very little to do with it. I was taken over, chosen
by this compulsion, forced to do its bidding. In hindsight I can understand
now how the intimacy that developed between me and Alicia felt like too much. Yet, what is also interesting and a bit stupefying to consider is how my cutting did not appear to exert the same effect on her at all. Indeed, as I cut, her slashes healed. Soon, she was wearing t-shirts to work while I was fixing my skirts, adjusting and pulling them down to cover up my marks.29

“Sign here,” Alicia, I said, as I handed her a pen on the morning of our interview. Before her on the desk was the contract I had drawn up detailing our rights, responsibilities, and obligations as manager and participant in the summer work project. Blankly, she stared, while wordlessly she took the pen and signed in small, neat, and exacting letters “alicia” in a lower case a.

“I hope it’s clear to you, the terms of the contract, I mean,” I said, spluttering, feeling unsettled by her signature, her silence and, strangely, as if I had forced her hand. “In reading and signing this form you are acknowledging that you agree, in addition to the pay, the hours, and the type of work and location specified, that you will act appropriately, responsibly, respectfully, and...”

29 I should say too, though, that where Alicia’s cutting did abate for a time, other behavioural issues developed in their place. At the residence we were informed by a “concerned” neighbour for instance that she had witnessed Alicia performing an “indecent” sexual act on a strange man at the bus stop while on her way to work. Bulimia was still another compulsion that reared its ugly head for a time. At the time I read it in terms of the ebbs and flows of particular behaviours and the tendency to replace one devastating habit with another. Now, thinking with Berlant, I conceive of it more in terms of a kind of strategy of foregrounding and backgrounding different elements of a personality according to what feels manageable.
“Yes, I get it,” she said, speaking suddenly, surprising me, and flicking the pen back across the desk. “I’ll do it, but you have to do it too. You have to sign. Where do you sign?” I pointed to a line directly beneath the one on which she had written and signed my name almost as if printed in clear, round, arcing letters. “Let me see,” she said, looking satisfied and turning the form around so that she could read it. “We signed our names together, sort of like a promise.”

“Exactly like a promise” I answered too quickly then, and without hesitation, as Alicia’s focus shifted and she steadied her gaze on the pen. Unbeknownst to me, the blue ball point pen, now back in my hand, was moving slowly in a light scratching motion along the span of my inner arm. I followed her eyes, looked down, and instantly was alarmed and overcome with panic. I checked the signatures again. “Ok, so how this summer do you propose to live out the terms of our promise?” I asked, relaxing my hand and trying for her sake, I thought, to appear calm.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled, her eyes cast downward and her body turned slightly, anxiously, as if preparing to leave. “Maybe you just shouldn’t be my boss and I your employee. Maybe, I don’t know, we could just be friends.”

I nodded instinctively then but caught myself quickly knowing already the
impossibility of what she had proposed. Feeling at a loss for words, I tried to smile but her back was turned and she was up, her small bandaged hand gripping the doorknob. Her copy of the form with our signatures lay abandoned on the desk. I sighed, put the pen back in my desk drawer and made no attempt to go after her.

Building Up, Tearing Down

I feel certain, though still I am not entirely sure why, that life, in the way that I have been writing about it, as a multi-layered and disparate narrative of a blocked and non-coherent subjectivity, references something about the disappointment and indifference that obtains in sex that goes on for too long. The ‘point’ of life writing, as it were, is that it gets to the point. No matter how dazzling the writer’s use of language, no matter how thrilling or intriguing a reader may find their description of the events that unfold, the question that propels the reading and that can never be denied by the distraction of detail, is “what’s the point of a life that the author felt compelled to write about it?” In so far as the story of having a “life” coasts, then, as Berlant (with Prosser, 2011) claims, “on a normative notion of human biocontinuity” (p. 181), another way of putting the question may be to ask what a life adds up to. Correspondingly, what is sex without a climax? Isn’t foreplay that goes on for hours not ‘really’ sex at all but mostly rather frustration and wasted time?

Through the innovations and play with form that Sedgwick introduced into the genre of life writing, she encouraged readers to slow down and take our time. At the same time, she offered something of a lesson with respect to developing a method for living that can enable one
to withstand the frustration that builds from a sense of being teased or withheld from the person or thing that one desires. There are multiple dimensions to a person, Sedgwick’s writing makes clear, but more than that, there are incoherencies, inconsistencies, and things that just do not ‘add up.’ Desire may prompt us to get inside another’s mind and body to know the whole person, yet just as much satisfaction and knowledge may still come from an affair with the fragments. In relationship to the question of what counts as a “life,” the desire to build it up or conversely to tear it down reveals something about our capacity to withstand the sheer force – the pressure, pain, explosiveness, and whatever else obtains – in that encounter. There are whole bodies but then there are also holes in bodies. Autobiography in the form performed by Sedgwick gave us a means to imagine both. It encouraged us to see the former and yet did not allow us to look away from the latter. In that sense we were held at just the right distance from ecstasy and torment.
Chapter Four
Personal or General, Public or Intimate?: On the Queer Address of Trauma

This chapter considers some key insights developed from queer theory’s engagement with trauma studies, particularly the work it has done in thinking about the formation of public cultures around trauma which renders visible and accessible those lived experiences that seem not to exist, as a means to address what I conceive of as the potentially queer-political and distinctly public aspects of anorexia. In particular, this chapter asks:

- How does trauma live within the subject?
- What concept of ‘the person’ remains and/or develops in its wake?
- Must the dissociative effects of trauma equate always and necessarily to disembodiment, to the body becoming an object or thing?
- What are the affective, sensorial, and communicative potentialities of this body?
- What are its modes of address?

Inspired by a host of queer theoretical projects that challenge the distinction between the public and the private in ways that, for example, “[dislodge] sexuality from the bedroom and the intimacy of the couple and make it the focus of collective conversations about S/M, butch-femme [...] and more” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 4-5), my analysis finds certain kindred aspects in the work of Ann Cvetkovich and Eve Sedgwick whose aim is to depathologize trauma, illness, and perversion and imagine new possibilities for social and sexual community.

This chapter develops from my critical observation that much of illness experience is
considered “inappropriate” for the public realm. Like Cvetkovich and Sedgwick who, in responding to the suffering and deaths wrought by AIDS, resist therapeutic models of sickness that are strictly medicalized or privatized encounters between clinical professional and client, my thinking about illness seeks to articulate the connections between the individual and the collective such that “my” experience unfolds and is lived in relation to other histories that are not my own. In attempting to acknowledge those queer traumatic pasts that, unspeakable and unrepresentable, appear at best as fleeting moments and at worst not at all, I turn to the experimental writings of Eve Sedgwick which, in their play with the conventions of address, engender the kinds of misrecognitions that have the potential to make anyone (and everyone) feel implicated. My analysis pays particular attention to and in its own way also performs the queer address of the memorial essay “White Glasses” which Sedgwick wrote as an “obituary” for her friend Michael Lynch but ultimately delivered at a conference while he was still alive. Who is the intended audience of this piece, I wonder, given Sedgwick’s statement that memorials are “places where you say as if to someone else the things you can’t say to the people you love” (1993, p. 256). Is there something singly queer about the general or indirect address? This chapter looks both to the distant and disorienting relation engendered by the “abyssal voice of the obituary imperative” (p. 265) that frames Sedgwick’s memorial writing and the fluid, multiple, perpetually shifting, and performative “I” that inhabits her personal/autobiographical writing as a means for reimagining intimacy as in some sense impersonal and as deeply pervading the public.

The Queer Promise of Things

As it happens, not every tendency is a suicidal one. Personal experience aside, this
statement presents itself to me as a fact since my dictionary lists various, mostly happy sounding definitions that make me think that assuredness and self-determination might be among the special qualities involved in “tending toward some point, end, or result.” Oh, but then there is also this: “the tendency of falling bodies toward the earth.” (“Tendencies,” Merriam Webster). Perhaps one’s purpose and direction are not quite so definite or intentional where gravity comes into play. Then again, perhaps there is no ‘one’ to speak of, no ‘one’ at all that tends toward a thing since pulled by gravity bodies fall, no matter want or will. A tendency, inasmuch as it is defined as “an inclination toward a particular characteristic or type of behaviour,” (Ibid) references nothing specifically about a person. Reading the entry for the closely related word ‘predisposition’, the apparent superfluity of the person to an act or attitude in this regard becomes unmistakable: “to make (someone) inclined to something in advance” (Ibid). Why the bracketing of someone? Does it not matter who one is?

I wonder if it brings out my queerness\(^{30}\) to say that it depends on whom you ask. Eve Sedgwick, for one, never stopped privileging the person who tended toward ‘queer’. Indeed, in an early book called *Tendencies* she argued explicitly that a person’s use of the word his or herself was necessary and that such usage would and should continually shape and alter its meanings. She wrote:

> “Queer” seems to hinge […] on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation. A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which “queer” can signify only when attached to the first person. One possible corollary: that what it takes – all it takes – to make the description “queer” a

\(^{30}\) In an analysis of Sedgwick’s autobiographical writings, which she names “public stories about becoming possible” (p. 74), Berlant (2002) expresses distaste for the “orientation toward interiority” that she says pervades much of queer theory. In putting my question in this way, I am acknowledging this question which informs her critique: “Must the project of queerness start “inside” of the subject and spread out from there?” (p. 74)
true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person. (1993, p. 9)
A term that thus opened itself up to anyone whose sense of the enduring incoherence of gender and sexual identity meant the compelled movement toward identifying “across genders, across, sexualities, across genres, across “perversions” (p. xiii), queer was a tendency that from Sedgwick’s perspective seemed both expansive and optimistic. Why plummet downward, she wondered, when there was room and reason to move across?

Having no basis in reality in the sense that it was never ‘really’ asked, I want nonetheless to answer this question that I have imagined Sedgwick formulating with a statement that, to my ear, sounds as optimistic as can be: I wanted to feel the cool and careless free fall before the hot, split-second crush of impact when body met pavement. As with a tendency, there is a sense of helpless or perhaps rather more voluntary leaning toward that describes the movement of optimism. Yet encouraged by the thought of a promise that may obtain in her encounter with an object, the subject optimistically leans toward it whether or not she is clear about the thing or cluster of things that the object promises. The attachment, then, is optimistic “even if it does not always feel optimistic” (Berlant, 2010a, p.93).31 For Sedgwick, this confusion may have prevailed as a result of a perceived obscured boundary where the close proximity of optimism to an almost defeated subjectivity made it difficult to discern if in that space there was life or something else instead, some mode of existing maybe that seemed more like its opposite. She wrote: “I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects [...] whose meanings seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes

31 Berlant examines optimism not in terms of the emotion of optimism but as the affective structure of attachment that allows people to survive and even flourish amidst the ordinariness of “life-in crisis,” life without foundations, anchors, or footing. See especially the article “Cruel Optimism” (2010) and also her just published book by the same name (Duke University Press, October 2011).
most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival” (1993, p. 3). The enigma or the unknown feature of the object is what secures the attachment; queer optimism is in this sense impersonal. A subject leans toward an object not because she consciously desires to know it better but because it is the thing that she fantasizes will enable her to sustain her world.

In conceiving of Sedgwick’s writing in and on (T)endencies as in this particular, though not quite coherent sense, optimistic, I am endeavoring to bring together and emphasize what seem to me to be two different yet still related concepts and means for thinking about compulsion that together articulate the contours of the personal and the impersonal at the same time that they reveal how the subject’s overarching investment in and fantasy and misrecognition of the personal produces so much (continued) devastation. On the one hand, I am offering this analysis with the specific aim of elaborating further a mode of subjectivity that I have described in previous chapters as non-coherent and disorganized and as leaning toward depression, self-destruction, and repetitive modes of being. By examining more fully the ambivalence that undergirds these forms of attachment but that gets magnetized equally to those that, like optimism, appear by contrast to be “positively” and “productively” oriented to the goal and activity of world-making, I mean to try to articulate how, to the degree that any mode of attachment is understood as being impersonal, it has the potential effect of obscuring an individual or distinctive character and therefore of turning a ‘person’ into a kind or type of people.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{32}See, for example, “On the Case,” a special issue of Critical Inquiry (Vol. 33, No. 4), which critiques the production and uses of the case study among different fields and disciplines, across genres, and in various aesthetic forms. For a concise and discerning summary of the conventions of the case, and how Freud’s case study of the “hysterical” Dora inspired the issue, see especially Lauren Berlant’s editorial introduction. For an analysis that approaches personhood via questions of sovereignty and the need to reframe it beyond normative notions of intentionality and agency, see Berlant’s article “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)” in Critical Inquiry, Summer 2007.
On the other hand, by exploring and teasing out the tension that exists between what I am conceptualizing, in thinking alongside Berlant, as a psychologically-oriented subjectivity (“I am x kind of person”) versus a “desubjectifying position” (“I am not a person, I have no form, I am a negative”) (2002, p. 137), my analysis aims to explore the complexities as well as the ambivalences that inhere in the prevailing construction of autobiography in the West as a “monument to the idea of personhood” (Gilmore 2001).

Queering the Personal: Autobiography and the Affects

Leigh Gilmore writes that in traditional autobiography, “a person, solid and incontestable, testifies to having lived” (2001, p. 12). By contrast, I want to suggest that the task of a keenly unconventional or queer autobiography might be to wonder, first, if the autobiographical is in fact or indeed at all the personal and, second, what the experience of being personal and of having a personality means. It may even pose the unusual question ‘what is a person, after all?’

Despite what I have written, I have not consciously believed in my desire to tilt so perilously toward the edge that a fall to my death would seem inevitable. Yet the gesture, the very thinking and writing of it captures my attention and resonates as truth; it performs a truth-effect in me. Might there be a biography of a gesture, a story of a life made from bodily movement whose meaning is not always or even usually intentional and clear? Where is the person in relation to the posture? If I deny that I am seeking death while still inching perceptibly toward the ledge perhaps it is not simply the case that “I” is an invention or a fiction but that there is also variation, contradiction, and a lack of cohesion in the way that it means. Perhaps the “I” is a

33 For a provocative analysis of autobiography as a writing form that represents “personae” rather than persons, see especially Paula Salvio’s (2007) introductory chapter to Anne Sexton Teacher of Weird Abundance (Albany: State University of New York Press).
subject that is not fully present to itself and that does not always know what to feel.

Autobiography may be one means for exploring and developing an account of how a life is lived, yet to the extent that it authorizes a seamless and intelligible “I” it has the potential to miss the ways in which the subject is constantly impelled to “take up positions of clarity in relation to objects, worlds, and situations” (Berlant and Prosser, 2011, p. 187). To consider the subject disorganized in this way calls not necessarily for other, more clarifying genres of personhood but for new forms of descriptive and critical writing that can attend to how identity becomes tentative through forceful compositions of disparate and moving elements. We are only beginning to discern what it means to have “a life” in less conventional and more sentient terms which, as far as I can tell, means refusing the taken-for-granted associations with continuity, uniformity, and intimacy in favour of an understanding that captures the quality of a “continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences” that catch people up in “something that feels like something” (Stewart, 2007, p. 2).

To the degree that “life” can and does mean, as well, a sensorial life, affect theory, particularly in the provocation it extends to thinking about bodies and what they can do and their “capacities to affect and be affected” (Stewart, p. 4), offers another way of conceptualizing subjectivity in less insular and intimate terms than those that seem apparent of autobiography. Focusing on both the relatedness and interruptions in relatedness that comprise our everyday encounters as well as the swell of intensities that pass between and are put into motion by “bodies,” “human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, p. 1), affect theory points to “the bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements” (p. 2) that permeate and shape what we think of as
Subjectivity is more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than autobiography would have us believe. The queering of autobiography, then, which obtains to some extent at a structural level, in a work’s refusal of the requirement for coherency in a life story and the embrace of a plural and contradictory “I” over the unitary symbol of the self (Loftus, 1997), is also permitted by an engagement with affect, which opens up a view of an erratic, desirous, and illogical subject caught up in the potentiality of a scene of rhythms, folds, timings, and intensities. To the degree that “queer” opens a “potentially genuine alternative conventionality” (Berlant with Prosser, 2011, p. 181) in which people work out how to live amid a multiplicity of identities, genders, and sexualities and a coagulation of intensities, surfaces, sensations, perceptions, and expressions, it multiplies the number of positions and stories that seem imaginable for having “a life.” In the new, queer narrative through which selves and lives emerge, the taking up of a position, however, won’t be so that an individual can be coherent, intentional, agentive, and encounter themselves through their object but will be, rather, an attempt to reflect how situational clarity can be produced without negating the incoherence of the subject. Kathleen Stewart, writing in a way that slows “the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough” (2007, p. 5) so that she can “find something to say about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate” (Ibid), honours just this sense of the subject’s affective incoherence. She writes: “Things happen. The self moves to react, often pulling itself someplace it didn’t exactly intend to go” (p. 79).

“What is the self that it can be represented in writing?” (Gilmore, 2001, p. 15) In the
queer autobiography of affective, disorganized, and non-coherent being it is, I imagine, as Stewart explains, a “dreamy, hovering, not-quite-there thing” (p. 58) that cannot be empirically known and described but sensed in the way that one might walk around listening and looking, touching and feeling for what is missing from a scene. Ephemeral, fragmentary, enigmatic, and haunting, the self is that which may be perceived in terms of a kind of ‘responsive attentiveness’ to the present (Haraway 2007); as a flicker in the corner of an eye, or a gesture that, habitual and repetitive, gives the semblance of a form. Perhaps it is a sound that echoes from an apparent nowhere and yet startles, demanding to be heard. Sensed but not observed, intuited but not known, the self comes into being within the context of an atmosphere in which something vague snaps into place or a pleasure repeats itself before there are words to describe how it feels or even what it means. In this mode of representation, the self is an effect of the attachments it makes to objects in the world. In this sense, it is not personal; it does not consciously reflect an interiority or directly express a subjectivity. Stewart, speaking about the “she” whose engagement with the world brings her book’s stories into being, explains “she is not so much a subject position or an agent in hot pursuit of something definitive as a point of contact; instead she gazes, imagines, senses, takes on, performs, and asserts not a flat and finished truth but some possibilities (and threats) that have come into view in the effort to become attuned to what a particular scene might offer” (p. 5).

In focusing so intently on affect in the scene of autobiographical writing I am endeavouring to understand something more about the complexity and generosity of Sedgwick’s

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For other examples of a kind of queer rendering of autobiography, see Jamaica Kincaid’s The Autobiography of My Mother (Plume, 1997), Lucy Grealy’s Autobiography of a Face (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), and Jeanette Winterson’s Written on the Body (Vintage Books, 1992).
thinking as far as the forms of self-representation that permeated her work and to grapple with the implications of the view, widespread and seemingly axiomatic among contemporary literary, feminist, and cultural studies critics, that those writings were thoroughly and uncomplicatedly “personal.” In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), editors Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg note that the “watershed moment” for the most recent resurgence in interest pertaining to affect and theories of affect came in 1995 with the publication of Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s article “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” (p. 5). This essay, along with subsequent work undertaken by Sedgwick on the concept of shame – most notably, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003) – has played, they suggest, an important role in shaping the “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences and has oriented critical attention therefore toward the ways that continuing political, economic, and cultural transformations are changing the realm of the social (Clough, 2007).

Yet arguably, it was some of Sedgwick’s other work, such as *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), which questioned the relationship between socially marginalized identity categories and modes of psychological or affective subjectivity, and *A Dialogue on Love* (1999), that remarkable multi-thematic narrative, as much about psychotherapy as it was about childhood, illness, Buddhism, an academic career, writing, desire, sexuality, love, and powerful depressive tendencies, that precipitated a categorical shift in her readers’ thinking, from the importance and interrelatedness of feeling to academic theorizing generally, to the creativity, inventiveness, and unruliness of desire in all its mediations specifically. This was the focus of the beautiful, haunting essay “White Glasses” in *Tendencies* (1993), where “non-identitarian identity” was explored as a condition of queer love and allocentric desire yielding a diversity of object-choices.
and a flux of affective attachments. For Sedgwick, to feel and think as a gay man meant reformulating subjectivity as an open space for multiple temporary and often deeply erotic positions. That such an identification was made in the first place, however, through an inanimate object – a pair of glasses – suggests how queerly impersonal are practices of intimacy and relatedness since being-with someone, even in sex, is possible it seems only by carefully managing the distance and proximity of what touches us.

**Whoever You Are, Wherever You Are, I Miss You but I Don’t Love You**

It occurs to me, like a light that has been flickering but that perhaps has just flashed, that this is the first time that I have returned to read “White Glasses” since Eve Sedgwick died. All of the tributes to her, all of the thoughtful and touching essays that reconstruct in exquisite and often funny detail a life that boldly exceeded the bounds of its frame feel disorienting when juxtaposed with the essay that she intended as an obituary for her friend Michael Lynch. At the time that she made her address at the CUNY lesbian and gay conference in the spring of 1991, Michael was dying but not yet dead. Having anticipated in writing the work that Michael’s death from AIDS-related sickness would come before it was completed, the delay of his passing until July of that year meant that Sedgwick had the thrill but also the anxiety of presenting it to him in person. “I thought I would have to – I thought I could – address this to you instead of to Michael; and now (yikes) I can do both” (p. 256). Michael was well (Eve was not), but there was time; it was not too late. It is late now, though – for Eve, for me, for you – and still also for the many others who write to memorialize her death. I did not know her, yet I can imagine someone who did, announcing their surprise and joy at the fact that by some small miracle she was alive in spite of the cancer that was killing her, typing that last startled sentence in the way that she wrote
hers, as a direct address to a friend who is still there but who is supposed to not be. “Hi [Eve]! I know I probably got almost everything wrong but I hope you didn’t just hate this. See you in a couple of weeks” (p. 266). Can I write this in another way? In case you are wondering, I am looking for a mode of address that can hold up and perform something of the feeling of missing someone I never really knew.

Memorials and dedications from Sedgwick’s point of view were “places where you say as if to someone else the things you can’t say to the people you love” (1993, p. 256). The as if part is important, for next to it “someone” emerges, partly weighty but mostly enigmatic. As if: that strange, taunting half phrase that returns me to my youth and to the scene of cold and conspiring schoolyards where girls gathered gossiping and confessing secrets so juicy they seemed destined not to be believed. “She did it with him? Where? When? No way. As if.” “As if,” that simile, that old expression of quietly envious incredulity, connotes in both cases “someone’s” absence, and reveals it primarily and necessarily to be a structure that authorizes the expression of words and feelings that otherwise, in the presence of that person, are bound to remain unsaid. Gossip feels intimate and personal precisely to the extent that it is structured impersonally. As the public circulation of private matters it requires, as a condition of its apparent sensationalism, “someone’s” not being there. Likewise, the “someone else” that Sedgwick conjures for her audience is a placeholder, not a person. The crushing circumstance of her own and Michael’s illness has disabled her wish to share with him more “directly” (p. 256). The essay feels intimate but no one, finally, is addressed by the stifled words that are meant for
Michael. It is, after all, a fluke, she says, that he is alive to read them.\textsuperscript{35}

Yet the movement of “as if” is also in Sedgwick’s description “to” or toward someone; to lean into another is, seemingly, in this sense, a most personal thing. The two matching pairs of white glasses “line up neatly on the night table” (p. 257) while the bodies that lie in bed together are separate, bearing the deep anonymity of sleepers finally disburdened of the weight of having to support themselves.\textsuperscript{36} In the morning, Eve will reach for her glasses but she might walk away wearing Michael’s (p. 257). The intimacy that she describes is a feeling, engulfing and deep; it is personal through and through. But the glasses, that cold “prosthetic device [that] attaches to, extends, and corrects the faulty limb of [their] vision” (p. 257), are merely a symbol of a projected identity (hers? his?) and belong to no one in particular. This is, you may realize, just one way of thinking about the strong ambivalence of the relation that I am calling ‘personal.’ When, where, or if there are persons there are still bound to be some others.

\textsuperscript{35}Yet, importantly, as Michael Warner (2002) observes, gossip and public discourse are not one and the same. Unlike the public speech of an academic lecture, for example, which is, he says, addressed “not exactly to us, but to the stranger we were until the moment we happened to be addressed by it” (p. 57), gossip “is never a relation among strangers. You gossip about particular people and to particular people.” (p. 59) Warner’s discussion of this difference is critical, for it helps to tease out the relation between the general and the particular that is central to queer theory and serves as a frame of reference for a queer method that aims to track “the becoming general of singular things” (Berlant, 2011b). Further, insofar as I am interested especially in what Berlant (2010a, 2011b) calls the “impersonality of attachment,” I am caught up in thinking, not necessarily about the singularities of sex and eating or not eating as forms of attachment, but the similar uses to which they may be put as strategies for interfering with “personality” and perceived self-continuity. As with cruel optimism, I am trying to suggest that there is a feeling or feelings that obtain in the experiences of self-starvation and sex which, while not always intelligible, are still pleasurable, and that it is the vagueness of feeling rather than the specific experience ‘itself’, that the subject desires and that keeps her close and habituated and bound to those scenes to which she always returns.

But how cruel it is to find, upon the severing of the relationship that was everything to me, that none of it was even about me! One winter morning I awake to an empty apartment and find a goodbye letter in familiar handwriting addressed to no one and signed by no one. Yet I know instinctively who the “I” is and who “you” are. The “I” is he, who has written the letter, who has disappeared overnight to be with someone else, someone who loves him (“me”) more than I (“you”) do. The “you” is me who reads the letter, who stands as if paralyzed by the news while sunlight streams in through smudged windows, and thinks to herself that it is probably time that she (“you”) moved on. I don’t want to read this letter, don’t want to acknowledge the convention – normative, dependable, reiterated form – that establishes a shared sense of recognition, making all of these “I” statements coherent and this just an ordinary exchange where you lean in toward me and I toward you. I want to break from the predictability of that form, to be hard hearted rather than heartbroken, to not know what you mean when you say there were “no strings attached.” It’s the “strings” plural that feels especially out of place since the only thing we needed to do, it turned out, was to pull one and then watch as the whole thing unravelled. There is no mention of this and so I turn the letter over and search everywhere for my name. It isn’t there. The writer himself in fact is not ‘himself’ but is everywhere, anonymous. A thought crosses my mind: this isn’t about me. A
second one: am I dead? The letter is profoundly and devastatingly general. It reads as impersonally as an obituary.

Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips write in *Intimacies* that “psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex” (2008, p. 1). It is a funny and candid observation, suggesting on some level, I think, that sex is a most personal and binding transaction between people and also that it has the potential to divide, to drive a wedge where once, seemingly, there was closeness. Yet there is also something more real and resonant about the statement that, deep down, makes me squirm. It’s how it points to the way that sex hovers at a scene, more as a thought than a real possibility, but bears down nevertheless where there is unnamed and confused and dizzying energy between people. Psychoanalysis, with its mess of the erotic transference, the vicissitudes of the unconscious and whatever else, seems an obvious setting within which to try to set limits, if not for desire proper, then at least for its expression. The couch, we will thus need to remember, serves a utilitarian though not necessarily licentious function.

**An Impersonal Intimacy**

Never mind, though, that talk, when it is that hot and flirty and suggestive, can and often does feel sexier than sex. Never mind, too, that you know better than anyone how poorly talk translates into doing. Never mind that I hold this lifeless letter and for once don’t mind thinking about how I was never more excited than when accosted by your words, never more dead than when your hard flesh was on my soft flesh, than when your hands were
on my body like it was your body. This is incidental, after all, to the way that you repeatedly pounded my head into the headboard and fucked my brains right out of my skull, and to the fact that you did not and never could violate me in this way or in any way. I was the (someone) bracketed by the definition, the other whose willed absence from the scene made your commission of the act impossible. Purged and starved, I was already emptied out. It was just a fantasy that you could fill me.

But shall we not talk about this, my love, now that it’s over and my lips are swollen and my back is bloodied and bruised? Won’t it be so romantic if in the morning we can still find things to say when we awaken to each other in this new way? Won’t I love you tomorrow even more when you appear no different in the faint light of early dawn? Won’t I feel validated rather than humiliated when you recognize me now not as a person but as the body that hungrily took you in, that desired to do whatever you wanted, that came hardest despite itself at the things that you did to it that it never wished for you to do. But I am not meaning to point the finger. I am simply looking for a way to describe the unique kind of intimacy that we shared since your letter, in all of its vague generality, appears to have left that out. Bless its (your) heart.

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37 The second of four definitions of violate noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “to assault (a person) sexually.”
Identification and Its Others

To the extent that our perception of proximity and distance to someone is, as Sedgwick claimed, always mediated by fantasy and the complex psychical workings of identification, any relation that we take to be constitutive of the realm of the intimate must be seen to obtain not simply between two people but as necessarily extending to and including any number of others. Along these lines Berlant (1998) contends that we have become accustomed to thinking about intimacy in the West in a quite particular and narrow way, as, for example, in terms of real life stories “set in zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form,” and that this speaks to our need to suppress what is difficult or, in any case, not pleasant about it: “the unavoidable troubles, the distractions and disruptions that make things turn out in unpredictable scenarios” (p. 281). Where others enter into the scene of intimacy, the notion of a shared life unfolding beautifully and intact over the long duration becomes problematic to the degree that love and desire (the “traditional” feelings that bind and that we assume produce a kind of emotional clarity) become mixed up with aggression, incoherence, vulnerability, and ambivalence.

Yet implicitly contesting the presumption that we are as complete, straightforward, or fully conscious as all of that, Sedgwick, in attending to the process of identification, opens up a space within which to address the fantasies through which people become attached not just to a person or thing but to the thing or feeling of being bound, to the very processes of attachment. This is what Diana Fuss (1995) speaks of as “the seductions, the terrors, and the impossibilities” (p. 6) that amass in Sedgwick’s theorizing of how identification works in the realm of everyday experience. She comments: “Sedgwick’s sustained interest in the myriad and complex ways
sexuality is experienced by different subjects goes a long way towards demonstrating the momentum of the psychoanalytic insight, “to identify as must always include multiple processes of identification with” (p. 6).

In “White Glasses,” but not only there, Sedgwick challenges the silent presumption that identities wholly correspond to identifications, and that sexuality is a seamless, monolithic, unbroken whole: she identifies, she says, as a gay man. Her identification with women and her identity as a “long-married young woman” (p. 253), while acknowledged, is tacitly refused. Suggesting that breast cancer, the illness with which she has been diagnosed, is a woman’s illness, indeed, that it renders her a woman, Sedgwick steadfastly and uncannily aligns herself with AIDS since it is both the illness which Michael is suffering and the illness that is deemed a man’s illness (mostly, but not only, a gay man’s illness). She writes “as a woman, I certainly could contract HIV [but] I happen to have contracted another, also very often fatal disease that makes its own demands of a new politics, a new identity formation. As a woman, I have been intimately formed by, among other things, the availability for my own identifications of men and of male “perversion,” courage, care, loss, struggle, and creativity” (p. 263).

For Sedgwick, the relation of identification that she feels with Michael is established both through her adoption of a certain type of glasses and via a certain way of looking. She and

38 I could argue that, in general, it is a theme that pervades most, if not all, of her work. Though, to be specific, it is most resonant perhaps in Fat Art, Thin Art (Durham, 1994), and A Dialogue on Love (Boston, 1999). Published within the span of less than ten years, these works, together, map out an important shift that occurred in Sedgwick’s thinking about identification, which moved from a theoretical mode of inquiry in the earlier writings to a more spiritual one by 1999. By 1999, Sedgwick had become a devoted practitioner of Buddhist meditation and, thus, under its influence, her writing about identification was newly shaped by an ethic of generalized, depersonalized compassion. Describing a meditation in which she would look for and find her mother in people she didn’t know, for example, Sedgwick wrote: “Even in a skinhead without any lips to speak of; or in a girl who’s anxious, anorexic, half crazed with all her narcissistic burden – even from her I can elicit and nurture it, the sense of her possible, beautiful care of me. Indeed, of a compassion; of her imagination, or his” (p. 217).
Michael are mirror images of each other: “mirror in the sense that they are opposite but matched, mirror in the sense that they reflect and are the same” (Pearl, 2003, p. 63). When she meets Michael she meets the uncanny: something strange and familiar. He is dying but she is well. She is herself but a man, a gay man. The uncanny effects of the white-framed glasses seem to “fuse [them] together at a distance of half an inch from the eye” (p. 256) in a way that, she says, becomes difficult for others to tell them apart (p. 257). At the same time, though, the glasses reflect their dissimilarities. “I know I don’t “look much like” Michael Lynch, even in my white glasses” (p. 256), she writes, realizing that “the white of the glasses means differently for a woman, for a man” (p. 255).

Glass, or glasses, as barriers, provides a way of being both outside and inside. There is, as Monica Pearl (2003) explains, “mutual ‘seeing’ but not proximity. “In other words, one can be outside something and also be part of it” (p. 63). In her essay Sedgwick describes obsessively “peering in the window of every optician in New York, northern California, and Massachusetts to find glasses that I thought looked like Michael’s” (p. 254). In finally locating the perfect pair and adopting them for herself, the window that she peered through in order to find the glasses is now luminous, allowing for “gazes looking back and forth in both directions: no longer is she an outsider peering in” (Pearl, p. 63). Yet as Sedgwick points out, there are, importantly, always other eyes that are looking. Identification is in that sense plural, porous, and ambivalent. She writes: “When I got the glasses I also learned from watching, through them, the faces of other people looking at me, that although to me the glasses meant (mean) nothing but Michael, to others – even to people who know Michael – the glasses don’t” (p. 255). The intimacy that she fantasizes sharing privately with Michael is, thus, interrupted, intruded upon, and mediated by a
public. There is a collective scene, in other words, that attaches to and forms at the space(s) that are conventionally defined as “intima.” The personal is interwoven with the general: “In the mirror one always sees oneself [and others] looking” (Phillips, 1997, p. 6).

**The Cruel Scene of Feeling**

Can I tell you, though, that the mirror is cracking and for once not have you hate me and hurl malicious words about my vanity that (to you) seems pathological in nature? If you knew me at all then you would realize that there is nothing more foreign to me than the feeling of excessive pride in my appearance. You say that I want others to look, that my body reads in this regard as an “open invitation.” I don’t mean to lead you on but I think you should know, despite your persistent attempts to interpellate me and hail me into being, how insignificant, really, was your influence that I am only just learning now, after you’ve gone, to be a perfect, ecstatic whore. I want you down on your knees, not repentant but defiant and disobedient.

Though I am not in the habit of eating anything, I will gladly and desperately receive your offering. You can make me into your slave, tether me and lead me in any direction. You can tie me up or hold me down, take me into your bed or throw me out of it, make me taste and eat and swallow you or deny me even so much as a drop of water. Whether it’s everything or nothing, I will not care. I will not feel shame. You can push yourself all the way into my mouth until I start to retch and tears roll down my face. I will be happier than I
have been in years, happy that you are force feeding me and subduing my
hunger, finally, happy that you have restored my gag reflex such that I won’t
need to use my fingers or a toothbrush handle ever again. I will think of you
and spew, and spew more when I imagine you feeding it back to me. I will
want it all and if you don’t give it to me then I will happily beg you for it. I will
do what you want and if I don’t want to do it, I will do it anyway, and will be
happy to. Just promise me that you will speak to me again in the way that
you did when we first met, when, at that party I extended my hand to yours
and you refused to take it but instead remarked that as I had the appearance
of a skeleton you preferred not to break any bones. There were eyes on us
from all around and you thought that all those angles and bones meant that I
wanted to disappear and that your humiliating me would help make me feel
smaller. How I wanted you then for your exquisite perceptiveness. How I
wished for you always to be that kind and for sex to bring me closer to your
good feeling.39

39 I can’t tell if my desire to return to this cruel scene, of all scenes, feels masochistic or optimistic, but writing about it repeats
something of the chaos, incoherency, and intolerability that made it an event in the first place and that continues to make it a
reference point for feelings that I still do not always easily identify. There is a lot to think about in this phrase, which captures
the intensity but not the specific feeling of that crushing moment. Most especially, and for now, these begin with Sedgwick’s
thoughts about the contagiousness of emotion (2003) and open up into Sara Ahmed’s related argument that the social bond is
binding not to the degree that we share feelings “in common” but insofar as our “feelings are deposited into the same object”
(2010). To be specific, I am wondering if, when sex is the object, we can even say that there is a feeling that’s been “deposited”
in so far as sex is already in the first place defined by (as) feeling. It occurs to me that we need more and better ways of
describing the feeling(s) of sex, not just as a feeling one has, for example, but as a marker for a whole constellation of things
that one wants to experience extremely. “Shattering” is one description, but it doesn’t really say much about what happens in
sex, or about how strange and out of control and different one feels while having it. For Bersani, shattering is represented as
felt in orgasm (1987), but this trauma of the afterward says nothing about sex’s ordinary sloppiness or awkwardness. It
registers nothing about one’s fear of becoming a mere instrument of someone else’s pleasure, or even about one’s
simultaneous love for disorder and control.
But help me to understand how you keep getting in the middle of this when this is not supposed to be about you. I am trying, after all, to tell Eve, in a way that I hope doesn’t sound reductive or too simple, that her writing of “White Glasses,” so ambivalent, and so full of love and longing and joy, is allowing me to think better about the complexities of identification and the dark and aggressive tendencies that do not so much make up as splinter an otherwise whole and intact subjectivity. For there, she suggested that in identifying with her friend Michael, his illness, and especially the politics and activism that developed around AIDS, she learned how to get on with living with breast cancer and to occupy and deconstruct at the same time “the sick role, the identity of the “person living with life-threatening disease” (1993, p. 261). To the extent that she described feeling estranged from or, in any case, not really at home in a female body, it made sense that she identified with a man’s illness in a way that removed her further from the normative and disciplinary construct of “essential femaleness” (p. 263). Her “breast eroticism wasn’t strong” (p. 262), she said, and this helped her in recovering from the mastectomy. It allowed her to feel more herself despite having lost part of herself.

This was Eve’s optimistic – shall I call it predisposition? Cut down and made smaller by the violence of modern medicine, she managed, still, in writing about it, to make herself seem bigger and to turn the fragments into a whole, telling that story (her story) with such deep and unwavering belief in the continued survival of the author that as her reader you believed in her and felt compelled to root for her to the end. When she wrote that “my own illness hasn’t really even begun to come home to roost – it probably won’t for some years, maybe never” (p. 266), you wanted her to be the person that defied the odds. You wanted to believe, as she did about Michael, that if she could just continue to be there, sick, but still “recognizably [her]self,” that
this would be “an important reason [for you] to be happy” (p. 266). Yet critically, you want to know now, after she’s gone, what happens to that optimism since one of the things that did not occur to her as apt for a lesson of any kind while she was alive was how to encounter the subject literally in fragments.

To identify as anorexic is to identify in some way with what I imagine are some of the most fragmenting, anxious, and ambivalent aspects of being a person. So distorted is one’s perception, not just of oneself, but of all the people and things that enter into and comprise the scene of everyday living, that it can be nearly impossible to distinguish one feeling, sound, or touch from another; it can be inconceivable that the eyes that look may not be only your eyes, and that the gaze that holds or dissolves you may issue from someplace other than your own cloudy and cold reflection. A common misconception about anorexia is that those who suffer from it actually believe they are fat, that looking in a mirror they see imaginary swelling, lumps, bumps, and fleshy curves where there are only bones. According to the professional literature, such a distorted view of the body can, for women, lead to certain pronounced difficulties with respect to intimacy since, feeling and believing ourselves grotesque and fat, we desire not to be touched or sexual with anyone in any way.

Our refusal of sexual contact is then closely related to, if not an infinitely more pathological manifestation of the wish to be invisible, to not be seen, that also characterizes anorexia in these terms. Thus, however chaotic, however fraught or shockingly careless or inexplicably destructive it might seem, anorexia, as an observable pattern or category of behaviour, and a knowable, definable, diagnosable disease, enacts, consistently and unambiguously, a desire or hunger for certain carefully circumscribed things. In addition to the
obvious physiological need for food, an anorectic may be “starved” for attention; she may
“yearn” for love and affection; she may “lust” after power and control. In short, she may covet,
long for, crave, and desire anything other than the one thing that ‘desire’ typically connotes: sex.
Curiously, then, it seems, sex will be so far removed from any formal, clinical discussion of
anorexia that “sexual anorexia,” meaning “a loss of appetite for romantic-sexual interaction” and
“a fear of intimacy to the point that a person has severe anxiety surrounding sex with emotional
content,” (Wikipedia) will appear so distinct as to be a practically separate and unrelated
category. That starved subjects – these subjects – of appetites might feel fragmented, should
therefore not come as much of a surprise to anyone.

But why the persistent and steadfast refusal to confront the irrepressible hunger for sex
that anorexia also, in some instances, performs? Why should it be so difficult to read desire in
this case in the taken-for-granted terms in which it circulates otherwise everywhere freely in
culture, and under whose spell of certainty and coherency we are normally able without much
effort at all to determine and feel absolved in our judgment, whatever harm may have been
committed, that a certain look, a certain teasing flick of the hair meant, unequivocally, that she
wanted it? Maybe it has to do with the fact that an anorexic woman, not unlike a fat woman
perhaps, is, under the sexist and scrutinizing straight male gaze, deemed to be abject in
appearance, ugly and abhorrent to the extent that she does not (and refuses) to
conform to
normative cultural ideals of female beauty, invisible in so far as she makes the very act of
looking feel obscene.
"Nobody wants to fuck a scarecrow," you said once in a way that, singular and perfect, I can only describe as your way, for how charming and sincere you were that I felt compelled to look in the mirror and make sure that I was still me and not that thing. “Look at me,” I told you, and your eyes instantly jumped to my reflection and I wondered if I wasn’t a person or even a thing at all but instead a kind of phantom. Phantoms are ephemeral; they flit from place to place and hover, invisible, everywhere. But I wanted to show you that I was solid and could be seen, and that, if you cared to, you could track my movement from room to room and see an empty space fill up wherever I opened a door and entered. In the mornings, when I awoke and got up from bed, I wanted you to roll over and feel the lingering warmth of my body in the sheets, to touch the imprint of my head on the pillow. I wanted in this way for there to be proof of something even though to the eye there was proof of nothing.

Though a bulimic will almost always try to keep her habit a secret, she can, on the occasion that she gets careless and thus fails, for example, to orchestrate precisely the location and timing of her purge, be found out. She can leave a trail – of vomit, of shit, of laxatives, of bloodied knuckles and swollen glands – that provides some sort of physical evidence, some proof that something is happening. The anorectic, though equally secretive and prone as well to lapses in her own self-monitoring, by contrast, when she is on her game, evinces nothing. Denying herself everything, she does not and cannot demonstrate anything. There are no props, as it were, for
anorexia, no way to perform the non-act of not eating.\textsuperscript{40} Faced, thus, with the prospect of not existing, her drive to be visible, to be out and public in her suffering, becomes extreme.\textsuperscript{41} Where she knows that people find it uncomfortable to look, she wants to force them into doing so, when they tell her that she should cover up, she wants to strip down and be naked. When she stands before you in the privacy of her bedroom and begs you to look, she wants the openness and the sheer intensity of her wanting to make you feel like a witness to something.

Is it sex? Is it love? Or is it desire that has twisted itself into some knotty and barely recognizable form? Not long ago, while visiting home for the weekend, she confronted her mother in just this way. The two of them were standing at the door to her bedroom, and on the pretense of changing into warmer clothes she pulled off her shirt and reached for a sweater. Underneath the shirt, she was wearing a camisole and she stood there for an extra moment, rummaging in the drawer. She wanted her mother to see how the bones in her chest and shoulders stuck out, and how skeletal her arms were, and she wanted the sight of this to tell her something that she could not have begun to communicate herself. Because there were no words, however, the scene had to be repeated. Your looking now is someone else’s looking then and, thus, not intimate at all but instead so promiscuous and so public.

\textsuperscript{40} For an intriguing analysis that offers a counterpoint to this argument and invites readers to conceive of contexts within which it might be possible to “bear witness to disappearance,” see Patrick Anderson’s \textit{So Much Wasted} (Durham and London, 2010) and in particular the chapter “How to Stage Self-Consumption” (pp. 85-109).

\textsuperscript{41} The drive to seek exposure and, paradoxically, concealment, to desire intimacy but also isolation, is a particular response to trauma that Judith Herman (1992) analyzes. Yet, in thinking about the play between visibility and invisibility, I am less interested in the actions that may be complexly observed as denoting a traumatized subject and rather more intrigued by what Jose E. Munoz conceives of, for example, as “invisible evidence” and the queer character of that. In “Ephemera as Evidence” (1996), he describes how queerness is “transmitted covertly” and writes that ephemera is “linked to modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance – all those things that remain after a performance – evidence of what has transpired but not the thing itself” (p. 10).
Intimate Encounters in/as Public

Thinking critically about what constitutes a public is one place from which to begin a project of queering autobiography inasmuch as the question itself, so strange and obscure, brings to the fore any number of unusual observations, not least of which is how seemingly abstract and curiously elusive the concept of a person is. Michael Warner (2002) contends that the persons addressed by public discourse are, as it were, “indefinite” (p. 57). It is not as if in giving a lecture or writing theory or a work of fiction one can ever know for sure who their public is, for a public comes into being, he says, in relation to those texts and their circulation and thus exists only by virtue of the address. Public discourse, in his view, does not address “particular persons in their singularity” as, for example, readers or students or neighbours or “the people who show up in the gay bars and clubs” (p. 59). To address a public, “we don’t go around saying the same thing to all these people. We say it in a venue of indefinite address and hope that people will find themselves in it” (p. 59).

That a person should recognize her/himself in such an impersonal address will be taken as beneficial, then, to the degree that it “gives a general social relevance to private thought and life” (p. 58). Writes Warner: “We might recognize ourselves as addressees, but it is equally important that we remember that the speech was addressed to infinite others; that in singling us out, it does so not on the basis of our concrete identity, but by virtue of our participation in the discourse alone, and therefore in common with strangers” (p. 58). For readers, writers, and critics of autobiography, the force of this argument is to grasp intimacy and strangerhood not in some relation of antithesis (which common sense or intuition would have), but as absolutely intricated. Thus, “the autobiographical is not the personal. “The personal is the general. Publics presume
intimacy” (Berlant and Prosser, 2011, p. 180).

To think of sex in/as public is to acknowledge in a certain sense that sex is everywhere present and not just in those things which seem obviously related, like pornographic cinema, phone sex, or lap dancing, for example. The kinds of publics that are organized around sex but not necessarily *sex acts* in the typical sense are, according to Berlant and Warner (1998) “queer zones” (p. 547), worlds that are estranged from heterosexual culture and whose intimacies “bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (p. 558). Whether as “girlfriends”, “gal pals,” or “tricks,” queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize a variety of relations but also “to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation” (p. 558). Long looked upon as “criminal intimacies” by those who have been averse to and disavowing of the ways in which eroticism, if not sex, is had outside of the couple form, and of the overflow of eroticism into everyday social life, these queer cultural forms of intimacy are key examples, rather, of “counter-intimacies” that are constituted not as “empty release or transgression” but as a “common language of self-cultivation, shared knowledge, and the exchange of inwardness” (p. 561).

It used to be the case, Berlant and Warner argue, that there were many different ways in which people were intimate with each other, and that so-called “normal intimacies” therefore included “everything from consorts to courtiers, friends, amours, associates, and co-conspirators” (p.559). Far from being bound to a concept of the personal or the private, sex – supposedly the most “intimate” area of all – was recognized not only as permeating public space but also as a “transitive act rather than a fundamental dimension of personhood” (p. 555). In this way, the
verb for having sex appeared, according to David Halperin, on a long list of things that were not
done in regard to or through others, and so, included “speaking, singing, dancing, fist-fighting,
competing, hanging oneself, dying, being crucified, diving, finding a treasure, having sex,
vomiting, moving one’s bowels, sleeping, laughing, crying, talking to gods, and the like” (1989,
p. 49). Halperin observes that the inclusion of fucking on this list demonstrates that sex is not
here “knit up in a web of mutuality” (p. 49), and that it is possible to conceive of intimate
relationality without recourse to deep psychological structure, motive, or communication. Thus,
you might think today that your coming is personal and that it is for me in particular, but
tomorrow you are just as likely to get hard from a slow and lingering glance, or the thought of
some girl sitting on a restaurant patio somewhere writing in graphic detail about all the ways
some guy’s dick is changing her life. It is not that one person or thing is a substitute for another
(me for her, eating for sex), but that the unique something that one fantasizes she/it is personally
for them can so readily be projected, with only a modest amount of intellectualizing, into most
any other scene.

The other thing the list does, of course – and I’ve a suspicion that for some of us this may
prove a more difficult and startling realization, even, than our wanting proximity to our objects
of desire for reasons quite other than who they deeply are for us – is that it suggests how utterly
ordinary and unoriginal sex is. Categorized in this way, “having sex” is not really any different
from shitting or spiritualizing, say; if there is a difference, perhaps it is only that fantasy plays a
bigger role in shaping our experiences of sex and feeling sexual, in the way that there are, for
instance, “phrases about sex that one can say; there are sounds that one can make; there are
things that one does and one doesn’t do; [and] there is what one can imagine” (Berlant, 2011b, p.
As Berlant explains, “orgasm may seem to make you shatteringly different than your ego was a minute ago, [but] shattering is not always shattering, just as shame is only one way of coding sexual aversion” (p. 147). Sex, in other words, while it may be at times exciting, is rarely so (singularly) dramatic since it engenders many states which may be experienced as boring, overwhelming, painful, desensitizing, and, really probably, almost anything else. That there is as Berlant says “a difference between the structure of an affect and the experience we associate with a typical emotional event” (2008, p. 5) means, in any case, that what “shattering” looks like will not always be what it seems, and that inasmuch as emotional and bodily responses are not transparent or coherent, it will be hard to distinguish an enlivened and ecstatic subject from a numbed and indifferent one.

There is a good deal of recent critical writing that, in trying variously to acknowledge, describe, remember and perform all of the things that Eve Sedgwick was, gets stuck, focused on biographic detail and the apparent contradiction that this founder of queer theory who claimed to identify as a gay man, was herself not just heterosexual but married for many years. A fact remarked upon even by those who, under her influence, have long held as problematic the positing of a straightforward identity between what one studies and who one is, Sedgwick’s barely habitable identity as a fat woman who loved gay men and, indeed, identified with them, is made to appear extraordinary. So unusual, so outside the bounds of what seems imaginable as far as relational modes and ways of being-with, the identification that Sedgwick describes forging with Michael in “White Glasses” may well have caused her readers to be curious and to slow down and pay attention to the difference but it is also possible that such an effect, to the degree that her story was perhaps taken to be exceptional, has led unnecessarily and mistakenly to the
presumption of both the coherency and drama of its subject.

Did readers, finding clarity in and feeling a sense of connection with the writing, read and accept as truth its every word? Did they identify with the author’s version of that queerly intimate relation and recognize themselves in her expressions of desire, love, bitterness, sadness, and joy? Were they sad in the same way that she was sad, or did they become different, transformed by the contact – messed up, destabilized, and unsure about what they felt and thought? To be sure, there are ways in which Sedgwick’s text seems to speak to me as if only to me, or else to address me as a stranger that, at the same time, is not just ‘anybody’. Yet, I also realize that my feeling this is likely confirmation of the extent to which her work has successfully created a public and, as such, has opened up a space within which people can potentially begin to be intimate with each other in a new and different way. As part of Sedgwick’s queer public, I may not be her most faithful reader but I can and should be perhaps her most promiscuous one. I can do that, I can be that kind of reader, and I can say with seeming certain wilfulness that sex has taught me that. But identifications, inasmuch as they are

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42 One of the challenges in thinking about sex is, as much queer theoretical work demonstrates, how to think and articulate questions about agency and intentionality particularly when the set of behaviours one engages in appear, from an observer’s perspective, to be risky, and so, tilting in some way toward self-destruction. Berlant (2007a) makes the point that it is a kind of misconstrual to depict “the subjects of appetites as always fully present to their motives, desires, feelings, and experiences, or as even desiring to be” (p. 777) and proposes the concept of “lateral” agency as a model for thinking about agency “without intention.” Whether theorized in relationship to obesity and the activity of eating or having sex or surviving trauma, the notion of agency explored is one of self-interruption, a mode of “coasting consciousness” within the ordinary that enables people to survive the stress of reproducing contemporary life by immersing themselves in various absorptive pleasures that amount to “small vacations of the will” (p. 779). Berlant’s thinking about agency in this regard brushes up against Sedgwick’s in a chapter called “Epidemics of the Will” (1993), which argues that in so far as “any substance, any behaviour, even any affect” has been recast as a pathology in contemporary society, we face a denuded set of options for understanding the habits that make up personhood. We are “addicted”, writes Sedgwick, to sex, to food, to the refusal of food, to exercise, to “health itself” (p. 132) and, thus, where the question of agency comes in is in considering individuals’ ways of creatively inhabiting and transforming what can look like a form of excess or else its opposite (denial, self-restriction?) For further treatment of this topic, especially as regards compulsion, see Women, Compulsion, Modernity: the Moment of American Naturalism (2004) by Fleissner. But all of this makes me feel that my thoughts have taken a detour: my compulsion to write this footnote came in the first place from reading Berlant’s and Warner’s (1998) question “what does queer theory teach us about sex?” and wondering how to answer it, since, where sex is, I think mostly queer theory is not, and besides, I don’t actually think that many of us are all that teachable.
unconscious, seem somehow less intentional. Transient, indiscriminate, chaotic, they are filled with all sorts of misrecognition of what one’s own motives are, and the world’s. “People feel relations of identification that they don’t admire, and they have attachments and aversions to things that they wouldn’t necessarily want people to know they have” (Berlant, 2008). While identifications may seem, in one way, to engender the most piercing and unbearable feelings of embarrassment, shame, shyness, and whatever else, on the other hand, there is likely to be confusion and vagueness, since so much of the work of living is caught up in the mess of trying to figure out how to feel, of thinking about how to think, and struggling to make sense of it all.

To think about something as “ordinary” signals a commitment, as Raymond Williams (1961) imagined, to the messy, provisional, and deeply corporeal “whole ways of life” of a community, a culture. In using the word “whole”, however, he did not mean to suggest a kind of consistency or coherency: rather, “the dedication was to life in its fractured, effervescent, unmanageable totality” (Highmore 2010). “Ordinary” in this sense was, then, the world pulsing with life. One could feel it in one’s body in the prickling of one’s skin or as an intense pressure that needed to be discharged. In the atmosphere one could sense it, the “thingness of something” (Stewart, 2007), in the evocation of a meal of awkward exchanges, of embarrassment and disdain, for instance, or as the materiality of disappointment, of condescension received and given, of wishing away time, or of suffering the anxiety of not getting along. At one point in time, the pulse may have manifested as a crush, which may have meant that you were held hostage by feeling or that you had a crush on having (that) feeling, or that whatever the case was, the feeling was one you felt compelled to keep having. Maybe, probably, you tried to repeat being near the thing that stimulated the intensities. Maybe, probably, you mistook pleasure for
pain and so felt that being pinned down was a way of being held or contained. Perhaps at times you felt it to be too much, perhaps at other times you found it not that hard to endure. Yet, the thing was that you sensed it and that you placed yourself in proximity to it, returning again and again to the scene and its object(s) not because you sought cruelty and dissolution in them but for the reason that they kept you optimistic: they kept you whole and living on.

Writing about ordinary subjectivity as “a scene of usually undramatically unstable, incoherent, disorganized activity whose work of being is to assume a form,” Berlant (2010a) conceives of ordinariness in relation to ongoingness, and so wonders and worries if, to the degree that living denotes a mere mode of enduring, it can be considered living at all. Perhaps it seems an ordinary observation to make, that people live in ongoingness and not, for instance, the future. Yet observation, that act or habit of noticing and perceiving things, usually, from a distance, apprehends little if anything about the complexity of a mode of attaching to life that simultaneously gestures toward its dissolution. In the previous chapter I attempted to trace the erotic contours of the everyday that, for the anorectic, enable a fantasy in which starving can feel like thriving. I suggested that sex, particularly the sadomasochistic kind involving, as it were, submission to authority, is one space that, insofar as it demands, especially, the cultivation of a slow and willed attentiveness to the conditions under which the self can withstand abandoning control by allowing the other to take control, may be experienced by the anorectic as more intense and extreme than starving, even, and so paradoxically as offering a kind of relief. Berlant’s point, of course, is that there is much that is still conventional about sex, regardless of how strange and original it might seem, since, usually, “when people consent to inhabiting the potential for change that a sexual event requires, they are mainly consenting to enter a space
whose potentially surprising consequences are kept to a minimum” (2011b, p. 147). Though we may wish to experience discomposure, we still also ultimately want to remain “ourselves,” which is to say, the ordinary if not slightly boring and insignificant type of being that mostly is “not risking very much for the pleasure of a momentarily different body/mind relation” (p. 147).

But another point (or perhaps the same one) is that discomposure wears different and not always so dramatic faces. That is, I may appear quiet and calm and self-possessed to your eyes – indeed, it is important that I do – but the minute I am alone I may be in a heap and unintelligible as I slash and tear at my skin and come undone by my anxiety and aggression. I don’t mean to suggest that the ordinary stories we tell about love and pleasure and identification might somehow be more “true” if in them we appeared a little or a whole lot less loving, but the truth, to the extent that we can say that there is one, is that every identification involves a degree of symbolic violence, a measure of temporary mastery and possession (Fuss, 1995). To be sure, there is a hint of this in Sedgwick’s essay, in the way that she identifies, for instance, white with femininity and also with “corrosive aggression” (1993, p. 255). But, the “bitterness” she says she feels at needing to connect “and of not doing so” (p. 260) references all of her ambivalence about Michael’s imminent death while speaking nothing about her own femininity that she refuses seemingly without mourning.

I love that she is so optimistic, that even when faced with loss, her emphasis is on becoming oriented, on putting attachments back into play and into pleasure, into knowledge, into worlds. I love that she conceives of the anguish of impending death as filled with possibilities for a pedagogy and that her words open up a space within which to move around and to sense and feel and hold the shock and the quiet sadness. Love may be, as she suggests, the most ordinary
“core” feeling of being. It may cause confusion such that we don’t always recognize it. Still, we may know it as *that* feeling that we associate with pleasure, however, and so want to feel it and feel it again. Yet the loss of it, to the degree that it signals a threat of formlessness and a loss of footing in and continuity with the world, need not, indeed, ought not, be experienced as so typically undramatic. In trying to continue being the kind of people we hope we are and have been in the world, we are not just “in relation” to our objects, but in fact (or fantasy, I should say) bound to them: we do not often notice how we hold onto things so hard that we might destroy or kill them. I love that Sedgwick thinks of love as a tendency whose movement is outward and toward making worlds, but isn’t making in this way the same as devouring in some other way? I love her work, but I also see the hard aspects of myself in it, so I’m asking.

I Met Someone and She Was That Person

The summer of the year that I turned eighteen I met a girl. It was hot (it was summer) and I was on my way to take a swim. There was a large group of us, twenty-five girls, to be exact, and we had all met only hours earlier when we arrived at the camp. The camp was housed at a wilderness park in northern Ontario and for eight weeks it was to be where we worked and lived. Headed to the lake, I walked along next to my three cabin mates while they chatted and I kept catching looks from a girl. She was pretty and slight in stature and she had a laugh that was booming and deep. She smiled a lot and when she did her eyes crinkled at the corners. I don’t know how to describe it, but her face to me seemed open, not in a way that encouraged
you to spill your guts necessarily, but that just wasn’t concerned to hide anything. To begin, then, there was obvious interest. In a group of thirty I could feel her look. In a crowd I could find her eyes and see in them a mix of curiosity and coyness. For the first two weeks I didn’t speak to her at all but tried mostly to keep at a distance. In her presence I felt shy and anxious and although these feelings were not new, in this case they felt newly debilitating and also pretty confusing. For the truth was I wanted to talk to her and I was envious of the girls with whom she spent time socializing – how they made it seem so casual and easy. Before long, my roommate noticed how preoccupied I was and somehow she intuited the source of my conflicted feeling. She said: “It’s weird that you guys don’t talk. I know she wants to talk to you. What’s the big deal? Why are you ignoring her? You should go over and say hi.” I nodded in agreement, knowing she was right. It felt crazy to think about how much I liked this girl and why I was being so inexplicably stubborn. Still, I imagined that initiating would feel like caving: I knew that I couldn’t be the one to make the first move. As usual, I was a study in passivity.

One afternoon, on the first long weekend of summer, the entire park staff drove in three big vans for more than two hours to the closest city. It was a short trip, in the sense that we spent less time actually exploring the place than we did travelling to and from it, but it was filled with activity nonetheless and we were all happy for the change in scenery. As dusk fell and a group of
us were finishing a tour of the city’s famed science centre, I felt an arm suddenly link through mine. “Come on,” she said in a whisper. “Let’s go get a seat for the fireworks.” I looked at her disbelievingly and tried to explain that I had plans to meet some of the others in a few minutes. She only shrugged. “Come on,” she said again, this time more insistently. “I have a blanket and I’ve already scoped out a good place for watching at the top of the hill.” She paused then as she studied my face and I thought I saw a look of disappointment or frustration flash across hers. “What, so first you’re so scared that you won’t even talk to me and now that you’re finally being forced to – because, well, I have the courage and you don’t – you’re still trying to avoid me. Why? I don’t care. Come with me or I probably won’t ask you again.” My face flushed hot and I looked around thinking that she was being overdramatic and that I liked it. For the first time I allowed myself to look in her eyes and to not look away. “Okay, fine,” I said, putting my arm back through hers and feeling my head spin with colour, all warm, blue and grey. “Let’s go.”

Driving back to camp later that night, I sat with my roommates in the back seat. Two of them wanted to know where I had disappeared to, but the third, that dear, intuitive friend, looked at me knowingly and asked only if I’d had fun. In the dark, a smile spread across my face and I responded with barely a whisper: “so much fun.” To calm the butterflies in my stomach I steadied my gaze on the lights flickering along the highway. When I fell asleep my head
rested against the hard window pane but in my dream it was as soft as her lap. Almost home, and drifting between sleep and wakefulness I tried to imagine what it would feel like to love a girl. I compared the soft, sweet skin and small hands to my boyfriend’s and thought about how different it had felt to touch and be touched. In bed he was often rough since that’s what I liked and encouraged, telling him, even when he appeared hesitant, that the pain was good because it kept my mind focused and turned away from other things. Also, I was obsessed with burning calories and viewed really raw and physical sex as an extension to and at times a substitute for the maniacally exertive and punishing work I did daily at the gym. Hard and excruciating sex, not unlike the treadmill, was my penance for yielding to appetite and indulging my physical hunger. But the difference was that on the treadmill I was alone. The gym was brimming with people and yet there was not a single person who could put a check on my habit, who could tell me: “That’s enough. You can stop now. Stop: living, that is. And enough: hurting.” I didn’t intend for this girl to be that person, but I did desperately wish for someone to be.

In the weeks that followed the fireworks we grew closer even as others tried, seemingly, to keep us apart. We worked on different crews which meant that we seldom worked together, since typically one crew would be assigned to

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work in the park’s interior while the other’s duties were to maintain the areas in and around the camp. The time we spent together was, thus, limited to meal time, which was a short and highly rigorous and regimented affair, and leisure time, which, although it sounded fun, was similarly organized by our supervisors to keep a handle on just how much of it was being had. Camp rules stipulated that we had to be back on the grounds by eight o’clock each night and retired to our rooms and cabins by ten-thirty. A couple of times late at night she or I would make the short but daring trek over to the other one’s living quarters so that we could lie awake together into the early hours of the morning. Soon, however, jealousies arose, and two of our roommates complained. We were reprimanded separately for our behaviour and warned that a close eye would be kept.

Feeling the unjustness of having had our relationship thwarted, we began trying to invent other, less conspicuous ways of being together. Returning from a week-long portaging trip on a Sunday afternoon, for instance, we might find in our respective mail slots letters in each other’s handwriting containing notes with juicy gossip and reflections for each of the seven days that we had been gone. On a rare afternoon during which I lay sick in bed, I might be roused to hear a light tapping on my cabin door and find on the front step a cassette tape that looked like a special compilation of songs bound by a beautiful drawing. If I listened to the tape the whole way through I might hear, as sleep was upon me, and just before the thing clicked off, a quiet
pause and then her voice, half embarrassed but smiling and deep: “Hey Alyson, I hope you liked the music. [Pause] So yeah, I guess that’s all. Oh, and there’s one more thing [Pause] I love you. But you have to erase this part – promise me – because you know, they’re on to us and this for them would be something like evidence. [Laughs] La, la, la, I love you. But don’t forget to erase this because I want you to think of me and not for my words to be floating out there somehow separate from my body. Sweet dreams, my peach.” When the tape shut off for the third time I had already committed every word to memory.

For three whole years I loved this girl like I’d never loved anyone in my life. Though we lived in different cities, we were never apart for very long as the bus ride that connected us, we discovered, was relatively short and pretty cheap. At least two weekends of every month I would go down and visit her. Her mom was often away, and even when she wasn’t, she indulged us in an astonishing amount of freedom and the result was that we partied a lot and mostly came and went whenever we pleased. We were having fun and drinking most nights, and the endless comedy of stumbling and forgetting kept things from getting too intense and awkward between us. In spite of my low weight and my waif-like appearance, I found that my tolerance for alcohol was high. I could drink two or three beers very quickly and always at a party this is what I did since the buzz that it gave me was bliss and the shyness that ordinarily gripped me took only that long to disappear. Also, I needed
stamina to deal with the feelings and sensations that I otherwise would not have been able to bear. She was gentle and attentive, two things that normally made me uncomfortable to the point where I couldn’t breathe and that I had virtually no clue how to accept. I was accustomed to and I coveted hard, quick, and brute force, but the alcohol made me less edgy: under its influence I could relax and linger; I could respond to slow, stroking hands as a comfort instead of feeling them as a threat. But the reality was that no matter how I wished for it I couldn’t be drunk and oblivious all the time. The parties were at night but there were still all the hours in the day, so many long hours that I had to fill with being me.

One disadvantage of drinking was how horrible it made me feel the next day. Upon waking, I would feel nauseous and parched, which were the usual symptoms of being hung over, but in addition, there would be the quiet, creeping self-loathing – feelings of fatness, unworthiness, guilt. Lying in bed, I would push the sheets back and look down at my fat, sausage-like legs. In the corner hanging on a chair I would see the impossibly tiny pair of jeans I’d had on the night before and know that I couldn’t make them fit. For hours I would lie like this in bed, anxious, not wanting to get dressed, sick at the thought of seeing my reflection in a mirror and the denim that would feel too tight against my thighs.

During this time I would begin plotting my penance for the next several days:
no drinking anything other than water with lemon, clear tea, or black coffee; no eating anything, period. Meanwhile, downstairs in the kitchen, she would be busy, happily preparing our breakfast. I could smell the eggs cooking and hear her singing one of the songs that she loved on the radio. I could feel my body becoming restless and taste the bile in the back of my throat. Sitting across from her at the table, I would look at her in wonder, wanting to know how she could be feeling so good, how she could be so comfortable in her skin. “Thanks for breakfast, but I’m not hungry,” I would say, feeling instantly ashamed, impertinent, ungrateful, but still hoping for some kind of reaction. In response, she would give me only her slow, sexy smile. “Don’t worry. Maybe you’ll be hungry for something else later.”

But I was desperate to try to explain to her what was going on with me even though I didn’t know myself. One winter, just before Christmas, my older brother was diagnosed with schizophrenia. For years, life in my family had been hell and I didn’t see how living with a schizophrenic – even one who took his medication regularly – could possibly make things any better. Yet, surprisingly, for my parents, this new diagnosis brought with it a kind of strange and twisted optimism. Suddenly, there was a legitimate “medical explanation” for his absurd, reckless, and often criminal behaviour. There was exciting new potential for rationalizing and, worse, forgiving, the deeply irrational and unforgiveable things he had done. I was at a breaking point and so I did the only thing that I could think of to do: I issued them an ultimatum:
“Choose: him or me.” They waffled for awhile, blabbering on that he needed them and they couldn’t just coldheartedly turn him out to live on the streets, and they pleaded with me to understand. But their decision was clear and, thus, mine was made for me. I left home that night. I had no idea where I was going, but finally I ended up at a close friend of my friend’s, who was in town studying at the university. I spilled my guts, telling him everything that I wanted to tell her, that I had never had the guts to tell her. I finished my whole sad mess of a story by informing him that I wouldn’t very much mind hurling myself down from the twenty-third floor where his apartment was to the ground and to my death. He was horrified – this was too much; he did not know me well – but he was kind. He said: “Let’s smoke some hash. And then I’ll get her on the phone so you can tell her everything you just told me. I promise; you’ll feel so much better.”

By the time he called her, I was so high that I could barely stand. In the dark reflection of his bedroom window I hallucinated the scene of my death. My family had gathered hugging and crying in a hospital room and the bed around which they stood lay empty. I was gone and I wasn’t coming back. I told this to my friend over the phone. She tried to calm me down but it was useless and I could hear in her voice that she was becoming increasingly upset. She said: “Let me speak to Chris. I’m going to tell him to drive you here tonight. Don’t worry, my mom will be cool. I’ll just tell her that you’re having some problems and you need to stay for a few days.” I thought that
sounded like heaven. Still, when I arrived at two o’clock in the morning, her mom was upset and clearly not prepared to have me stay during a school week. She advised me that I could stay the night but that I should seriously consider returning home the next day. I didn’t want to. I was already set on spending a few days with my friend, on figuring things out, and telling her what was in my heart. Because her mom was insistent, however, I ended up staying that week at her friend’s place.

She was busy with school and I was far from her house and she didn’t have time to visit. I knew that I had behaved terribly and had made trouble for her and her mom. I wanted to tell her that I was sorry but she would call and say that she was coming and in the end she never did. Pretty soon, whenever I called her only the answering machine would pick up. I was desperate to be with her, and only her, and to tell her everything. Yet, because I couldn’t, I foolishly decided to be with everyone else. I had never felt anything more than friendly towards her close friends, but staying at their place those nights, I slept in their beds and had sex with them if and when they wanted. None of it meant anything to me because she meant everything to me, and I was sure that if she found out and became even angrier with me that I could explain that to her, too.

Taking a long hard look in the mirror, I realized that I would rather go on having the most meaningless, impersonal, boring, dehumanizing sex with
these guys because of the connection that they all shared with her than be on my own and alone, having lost her forever to the world. I wanted to cut my wrists and spray my face with bullets. No death, even the most brutal one, could be torturous enough for me. At the bus station, waiting to go home, and among hundreds of people, I hung my head and wept with shame. I looked up, not when I heard my name, but rather when I heard a voice that could’ve been any voice saying ‘goodbye’ to anyone. Instinctively, I knew to whom the goodbye was addressed and who the ‘someone’ was. In the bus station, there was madness and people everywhere, but those cold crinkled grey-blue eyes, so familiar and sad and so filled with utter contempt, could not possibly have been looking anywhere other than directly at me.

This May or May Not Be About You

A year ago this past Christmas, my husband gave me a book. He had been out shopping one afternoon and had come across it innocently enough, he said. He had read the book cover and he had looked at the title and found it strange, and from this he had decided that this would be a book that I liked. Knowing my habit of sitting down and reading an entire book in one sitting, he decided, despite his excitement, to hold onto my little gift until Christmas morning. When I opened it I was shocked. The cover art was a photograph of a girl who I presumed was the author and beside her sat my friend, at
whom she gazed lovingly. I opened it. My friend’s name was written in its beautiful, distinctive spelling on the first page, the dedication page. It said: “For M...” There was no mistaking it.

I read the whole thing from front to back in not more than three hours. It was an autobiography of sorts, a personal story about writers and artists and friends with whom and in relation to which the narrator worked and lived, and also about the girl she loved desperately but who she had at one time betrayed. I read it and my pulse raced. I read it and my heart broke. I read it and I wept. I read it and read it and read it until I couldn’t bear to read another word. Everything about her story was real to me; it was so raw in places that I had trouble catching my breath. The narrator, loving this girl so much and wanting to discover and possess her individuality and unique genius, had overstepped her bounds. She had loved her so much that she had almost killed her, and she had taken things – too many things – that belonged to her friend and she had kept them for herself. I couldn’t read it and I couldn’t look away from it for somehow I knew that I was in there too. Still, I didn’t want to believe it and so told myself “This isn’t about you.”

The narrator was right; she had screwed up, but that didn’t mean that she wasn’t deserving of her friend’s love, or that there shouldn’t be hope for the writer or the artist, or the person that we don’t know but who nevertheless has a name and that we pass once in awhile on the street. I finished the book
with a renewed sense of optimism. For the first time I felt that I had an idea of
the difference that separates surviving from thriving and that I could write
something about it without committing slow suicide. I wanted to tell my friend
but I couldn’t. But I did love the book so instead I sent an email with a note of
appreciation to the author.

December 27, 2010

Dear S:

In the two and a half years it has taken me to write my doctoral dissertation, I would estimate
that one full year at least has been spent not writing. For the last three months, I have lived in a
world of my own creation in which I have told myself repeatedly that the promise and
responsibility of writing does not matter. I have pretended to myself that I could just as easily not
write for the rest of my life, that the best thing for me should be to end the suffering brought by
not being able to write, that my only chance at sanity must be to quit the dissertation. But then I
read your book and somehow, inexplicably, I am back writing! I am writing to you! And the best
thing is that I have found in your work and its curious question so many connections (big, small,
important, not) with my own academic work about impersonality, nullity, haunting and the
shattering of a psychical self. Thus, I am happy for the following: that I read your book; that it
came to me precisely when it did; that I found in all of its complex beauty, searching and sadness
the very best illustration of what it means to be a writer, a thinker, an artist, and a friend.
As a teenager, for a few short blissful years, I was friends with M. too. We met at a camp one summer and I loved her more than I loved any other person in my life. I think now, that as blessed as I was to have it, perhaps our friendship came too early, that I wasn’t prepared for the intensity of it, that I didn’t know how to accept or return the love that was so generously given to me. Reading your novel, I thought that if you were lonely for the first twenty-odd years of your life, as you searched or waited for that one true friend, then it seemed only right that when you did finally find her that she should be exactly the amazing person you describe. I’m glad that you/your character came back from New York City, that you worked through the hard stuff, and that you didn’t give up. I’m glad that you were/are the girl that M. was looking for. I cheered quietly from the sidelines reading it, wanting you two to be together, to find your missing pieces in each other. I could have cheered SO LOUD but being merely an admiring and still anonymous member of your audience, the best thing, the only thing, I thought to do in this case was simply to keep reading.

Yours,

Alyson Hoy
Epilogue

When I think about what it feels like to starve, I imagine, still, that there are few things that feel more like flourishing, few things that can ever feel as intense or charged or magnetic as the deep pressing throb of physical hunger and the stomach pulling tight and inward, inward, inward. In a second, I can summon it, that hunger that was like air to me, that ache that was my body’s pulse. In recovery I spent years trying to find strategies to cope without it, to get over it and forget it, and to practice other ways of being that didn’t require physical suffering as the single most salient piece of evidence that a life was being lived. That I grieved profoundly the loss of my anorexia and was overcome with feelings of loneliness, emptiness and yearning for the thing that I had given up and that I imagined was as protective and deeply reliable as my closest friend, was just proof, I guess, of how hard I’d fallen for it, how completely and helplessly I’d been penetrated by my desire.

Anorexia wasn’t my first crush but it has been my most fervent and enduring one. If today I can’t have it because for complicated reasons and a deep-seated fear of disappointing and being shamed by others I’ve promised to “be good,” then I am still no less enthralled by the thought of it, still enslaved by the force it exerts in my life and how intoxicating it feels to so determinedly refuse the thing that nurtures me and that I want and need the most. I am envious when I see the signs of it in another for as much as I desire to be bound to it I want even more to experience (again) the feeling of being bound by it, how it simultaneously holds and defeats me, enraptures and destroys me. Daily, I covet it, flirt with it, court it, and solicit it. I want it and I am willing. Writing about it is like issuing an invitation to it – or not – since I am completely at its
mercy. I have no will to speak of when I am in its presence. Its visitation is my absolute surrender. Still.

For a long time now and in coming to write this dissertation especially I have been holding onto a thought about whether writing changes a person, not just the person who writes but the person who comes into contact with the writing as a reader or listener. Eve Sedgwick, I’m pretty sure, thought about this too since she commented once with respect to reading Silvan Tomkins’s theories of affect that “I often get tired when I’m learning a lot” (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995, p. 2). For Sedgwick, feeling tired was never far away from feeling depressed and, thus, the deep and enthusiastic interest she expressed for Tomkins’s writing may well have registered as some kind of reassurance – if not consciously for her then for her readers – that she still cared about the work, still cared enough to continue being in the world. What seemed of particular interest to Sedgwick about Tomkins’s work was, precisely, his writing about interest and what he theorized as its unique and intimate connection with shame. Shame, he argued, “operates only after interest or joy has been activated” (quoted in Sedgwick and Frank, p. 5). The experience of shame, for Sedgwick and Frank, was the experience of a “broken circuit” of attachment and desire that ought to circulate between the subject and its treasured object. Shame occurs when a child experiences the refusal of their attachment. When the child looks away because it feels that it’s been refused by its mother, that is the exemplary moment of shame. Thus, good feeling (desire, interest) gives way to bad feeling (rejection, shame). Shame and writing about shame hurts: it gets into the body; it gets under the skin; it burns with a hot blush (Probyn, 2005). Yet, it also seems possible that interest and writing about interest may operate on and affect bodies similarly, which is to say, on the surface of things, at least, negatively, though
surfaces have a way of warping under a gaze that looks too long and too hard.

To say that it was interest that compelled me in the first instance to write about Sedgwick and her work is not to say that I came to the dissertation filled with good feeling. Mostly, at the time, I was thinking a lot about death – Sedgwick’s because it was recent, mine because it felt imminent – and was haunted by a statement she made some years ago about her experience of depression and her hope for psychoanalysis, that “I thought I’d know when therapy was successful because I’d stop feeling the want of being dead” (2006, p. 8). When, in April 2009, I read that she had died, I remember thinking that I didn’t know how I felt but I did still wonder (fruitlessly) if death answered her long held and frequently expressed wish “not to be,” if the fact of finally ceasing to exist was equal to that wish. I thought about how she had written about being as, in a quite specific and engaging sense, being embodied, being “big” and “fat,” and the ways in which, for her, that figured “plenitude” and “having lots to give” (2008, p. 203). I reread the poems from Fat Art, Thin Art (1994) and felt breathless with disbelief at the idea that there could be uses to being fat, that the body, whatever its size, might serve a satisfying and productive purpose, and that it need not always or even usually be experienced as an object of hatred and abuse: “I used to have a superstition that/there was this use to being fat: no one could come to harm/enfolded in my touch” (1994, p. 15).

In the weeks that followed her death I dreamed repeatedly that I was either falling or flying, yet I had no sense of my direction up or down or sideways and no feeling of being weighted or weightless, which was startling to me because so rare. One night I dreamed that I was dropped from a balcony from fifteen floors up and as I watched as my body hit the concrete floor of the courtyard, I was shocked to see that there was no blood but only bright colours
strewn like ribbons of paint all around me. I awoke with the thought that I should have died then. But instead I was alive, enclosed by all the colours and magnetized by the intensity of the blaze of neon on my retina. Despite the pain, I commanded myself not to look away for fear that I would forget what wanting to look felt like. That I have, then, in the time that has passed, still desired to read and write and study, that I have cared enough about thought to dream and even to have, on occasion, what Sedgwick called the “thinkiest” ideas (1994, p. 160), and that I persist, in spite of the hazards that I pose to myself in doing so, in testing the limits of physicality, in trying to understand what a body can do, what pleasures it can have, and what excruciating deprivations it is able to withstand, is reassurance that I am interested, that I’ve not forgotten. How these elements connect with and contradict each other, are mobilized and articulated and yet still remain elusive in relation to Sedgwick’s life and work in queer theory has been not only an important question for this dissertation, but the thing that has kept me attached, both in an affective and psychoanalytic sense, and just generally: fastened together.

It seems important to say, and I think it should be okay to say that not all intellectual labour and scholarship today is or, indeed, ought to be undertaken in the name of hope, whether for a better and brighter future, or for something else. As my dissertation demonstrates, this point is central to contemporary and especially queer cultural criticism that has sought to think systematically about the relation between emotion and politics, a body of work that incorporates analyses of historical trauma and gender and racial melancholy, for example, and that owes a significant debt to Sedgwick’s writing on gay shame. As Heather Love (2007) argues “feeling bad” has been a key element of modern queer experience, tied to social exclusion and to the historical “impossibility” of same-sex desire (p. 4). While it may be true that queer desire is not
now proscribed as it once was, feelings such as shame, regret, self-hatred, loneliness, bitterness, and isolation persist in the present and are often in themselves the occasion for further bad feelings. Writes Love: “the embarrassment of owning such feelings, out of place as they are in a movement that takes pride as its watchword, is acute” (p. 4). Further, she explains “it is also hard to see how feelings like bitterness or self-hatred might contribute to any recognizable political praxis” (p. 4).

To the degree that Sedgwick’s theorization of shame, then, which clearly underlined its positivity as well as its creative and political potentiality, remains a compelling influence in queer studies, the impulse behind certain recent critical engagement with negative affect from within the field has been to try to understand and make satisfying arguments for the political efficacy of bad feeling, whatever the particular feeling happens to be. From this perspective, it has been crucial to find ways of creating and sustaining political hope, yet as Love reminds “hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future” (p. 29). As I explored in Chapter Two, Lee Edelman’s work on queer negativity goes far beyond expressing mere ambivalence toward hope as embodied in the rosy image of a future to articulate instead its outright refusal. “Fuck the future,” he writes vehemently, by which he means to oppose the relentlessly future-oriented optimism of reproductive heteronormativity (an optimism symbolized by the figure of the innocent child). Asserting the antisocial thesis that rather than trying to deny the homophobic representation that connects queers to the death drive, queers should embrace this negative association in order to undermine the social as it is currently configured, Edelman advances an understanding of the queer subject as not in any rightful, proper or coherent sense a person but rather a site of anti-identitarian and meaningless
jouissance.

As I argued in my second chapter, one obvious effect of such a starkly destructive version of political negativity has been to render not only meaningless but also obsolete a sense of the materiality of queer and, thus, any notion of a queer self and subjectivity, even however fragmentary or fractured. Still another effect, inasmuch as his thesis excessively lauds the negative at the expense of completely denying something (anything) else, has been to reject any possibility for feeling that doesn’t seem somehow intrinsically oriented toward or aligned with death. Not all feelings, and especially perhaps not all negative ones, need to be nor should be put to positive use: as Love poignantly articulates, “sometimes damage is just damage” (p. 27). But for Edelman, who writes as if for death, as if he covets and courts it at every turn, as if he really does believe that all queers might just as well succumb, living as we do a hair’s-breadth away from complete and inevitable destruction, negativity, it seems, is just negativity. Thus, the only distinction worthy of discussion for him is one that, for me, feels so final and so ultimately empty in its finality: death holds the greatest power; even our darkest and most sadistic feelings, wishes, and tendencies must capitulate to it eventually. But, my question is – and it is one that my dissertation considers – what does [this] thought do to thinking and, just as importantly, to feeling? I will be honest: there is still a fairly indistinct way in which Edelman’s writing makes me feel bad, and yet, incoherent and depressed as I often am, even I am aware that my feeling possesses some distinctive quality, something that sets it apart from death, that refuses to collapse into a uniform and useless “negativity.” In a line I will not soon forget, Berlant (2011) writes that even “numbness is not a lack of feeling, as you know: it involves a hum” (p. 83).

Maybe it seems contradictory, in light of the way that I’ve written about my relation to
anorexia as erotic and deathly seduction, to suggest that I am not actually interested in death and negativity so much as I am in the desire for unpleasure. Well, if so, then I suppose that is okay since a claim for consistency has not been one I’ve wished to make, particularly given my attraction to incoherency and my position that a subject ought not be seen as in one state. Part of the work of this dissertation has been to try to sketch autobiographically as well as theoretically, drawing from queer, feminist, affective and, to a lesser extent, psychoanalytic, schools of thought the specificity of certain difficult feelings that throughout the years have animated my experience of anorexia and other forms of self-harm. I call these feelings difficult in so far as they have tended to resist my knowing and articulation and because they seem to so seamlessly get enfolded both within professional (clinical) contexts and in the theoretical literatures into the more familiar and well-rehearsed discourses of depression and melancholia. That is not to say, of course, that anorexia does not contain these elements – certainly it does, and it has been my struggle with depression as much as anything that has, I think, served as the single most powerful, sustaining, and intransigent source of my identification with Sedgwick – but rather that feeling sad is not the same as, is not in any way comparable to or analogous with, the feeling of being starved, of intentionally starving oneself. Sadness is not what makes me desire this punishment. And, it is not what keeps me coming back.

As I argued in my third chapter, starving feels good: it feels alive, forceful, intense, invigorating, all-consuming; it can, at times, feel more erotic, even, than sex. On the one hand, it hurts so much that I do believe it can destroy me. On the other hand, it feels like being pinned down which also can feel a lot like being held. For years I tried to find ways to talk about it, but I was shy. Reading Sedgwick changed that, but mostly only by coincidence. It was not something
that I sought out since the questions I brought to the texts initially were different – less risky, more tolerable (for me), definitely more vanilla – than those that I am asking now. Sedgwick’s writing, while beautiful, is not easy in any sense. As I argued in Chapter Three in thinking about “A Poem Is Being Written” her words and the form in which she wrote could often even hurt. To the degree that her texts compelled, then, pleasurable but also painful relationships between author and text and reader and functioned, thus, undeniably in a queerly erotic way, it has seemed crucial to ask what readers want from reading Sedgwick, whether reading must always mean reading for “knowledge” and “pleasure,” and what exactly we are admitting to and what desires we are acknowledging, if indeed we were to admit that we are (in some instances, at least) reading for pain? If there is one thing that Sedgwick’s writing has convinced me of, it’s that thinking is not all there is – even and especially within a place such as academe.

Haunting as/Haunted by Method

It occurs to me with a force that makes my stomach churn that of all the examples my dissertation has and possibly could have provided of its engagement with haunting as a method, the best illustration of it may well be evoked by the autobiographical narratives I never intended to write. When, in Chapter One I wrote, thinking alongside Avery Gordon (2008), that “following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you,” that it is “a mode of apprehension that opens up a different way of seeing, one that is less mechanical, more willing to be surprised and to link imagination with critique” (p. 23), I couldn’t have known then what surprises awaited me in writing such that I could start out thinking about Sedgwick’s death and the significance it held for queer theory and arrive at an analysis of anorexia that links starving with fucking and S/M. I didn’t anticipate the ways in which writing autobiographically would be
so shocking and so hard, that in trying to write about myself, I would ask where is the self, and find that I don’t actually think I have one. Starting out in my dissertation, I was sure that I had some things to say about the relation between sex and wounding, and I had a thought about how I might articulate these both through my personal narrative of a queer childhood and via an attentive reading of Sedgwick’s more explicitly autobiographical accounts related to spanking and masturbation. I didn’t know that my love for a girl would be interconnected with all of that, or that it would be revealed in such a way, as a narrative of a crushingly and surprisingly empty self longing for but simultaneously refusing closeness, proximity, and touch.

I was keen to pursue and to try to articulate certain gendered and potentially queer lines of identification that I imagined I shared with Sedgwick. I thought, for instance, that I could draw pertinent connections between the discomfort and aggression she expressed about being a woman, particularly one who had survived breast cancer, and my own experience of disordered eating, which developed during a precocious puberty as the enactment of certain vicious refusals and continues still to reflect my abject ambivalence about inhabiting a body with too much flesh. When I wrote, citing Derrida, that “being haunted is a profoundly if partially erotic experience” (p. 6), I imagined that the thinking of haunting as potential in this way should ultimately and yet still sort of vaguely fall to those who persist in identifying themselves as queer theory scholars (“what haunts queer studies...?”), even as so many from within the field have moved to place it firmly within the past. I hadn’t yet experienced (not so fully, anyhow) the eroticism of writing, and yet I did still wonder why I felt compelled to write about sex and pain and masochism when, in the wake of Sedgwick’s death, so many of her people, it seemed, were telling tales of love.

I can appreciate as much as anyone who is or has been a lover of Sedgwick’s work, who
sees or has seen what Michael Warner has recently described as “the potent sense of possibility” (2012) opened up by it, the question she asked in Touching Feeling about what it means to fall in love with a writer (p. 117). For me, what feels right about the question now is not the sense of nostalgia it has evoked relative to her death, but the provocation it offers and indeed the minor scandal it even suggests about falling for someone one has only read. I am not convinced that the feeling is love; in any event it’s not how I prefer to think about it, since mainly love seems to complicate my wish to be less faithful and more promiscuous in my reading, to be open to being crushed by desire for the things, thoughts, and people I never knew I wanted.

More than a conduit for thinking, theory was, for Sedgwick, as I argued in my third chapter, also a space for sex and desire. For readers who had doubts, her task was to instruct them, showing them through her writing how to slow down and find pleasure in the lingering moment, how to build the skills for sustaining an observation. She never asked her readers to be more desirous than we were inclined or willing to be, yet the theoretical concepts she developed were often in themselves a tutelage in the erotic, a tracking of the insistence and creativity of desire in finding form, for instance, not just in attachment to normative sexual objects but anywhere it can. If in remembering Sedgwick, love is the big feeling that endures, then it also seems that she herself would want us to remember that it was attachment that happened first and hard.

**Some Things I Know in Writing**

The question of attachment, of how people keep in close proximity to their objects of desire in spite of everything and in the face of their real or perceived loss has been, in many respects, the central focus of this dissertation, one that, for better or worse, has held or more
accurately bound it all together. To begin with, it was critical to my thinking about the intense outpouring generated by Sedgwick’s death and what her loss has meant for queer theory, but beyond that it offered a useful means also for addressing what seemed more difficult questions related to individual subjectivity. I wondered, for instance, in what sense and under what circumstances do aspects of loss feel pleasurable? And, why are some attachments passionately sustained, even when the result is self-damage? To think about attachment in this way, I discovered, means to neither solely focus on nor fall too readily under the spell of negativity, which initially (in my writing) was, and too often (in living) is, my tendency, but rather to try to be open to a more complex and conflicted view of feeling as the coexistence and ambiguity of negative and positive affect.

Somewhere, in Sedgwick’s prose, I found the permission to feel confused and to be incoherent in relation to desire. Inspired by the generosity of her writing and how it embraced, as Annamarie Jagose (2010) remarked, “things more usually presumed to have nothing to say to each other” (p. 13), I could ask whether writing feels like self-harm or like fucking. I could argue that what appears on the surface as the cruellest, most annihilating impulse to starve and deny and waste the self through racking and incessant hunger and to refuse intimate and interpersonal connection is in a way also oriented to life and not only death. I want to say that in her writing I have all the proof I need that she understood these things, but to my ear that sounds a bit like misrecognition, and, besides, a little (too much) like love. As I have argued throughout, my feeling for her has nothing to do with her personally; it comes through her writing. I’ve no feeling for her beyond what her written words convey. If this sounds ambivalent, well, then, maybe that’s good since ambivalence is negative, but not only: it still has something to do with
love.

The tension that prevails in Sedgwick’s writing regarding the personal and impersonal has served in this dissertation as an important means for addressing the complications of negativity in relationship to queer autobiography, particularly in so far as such a project aims to describe a fraught, disorganized, and non-coherent subjectivity. On the one hand, as Berlant (2002) asserts, the autobiographical, for Sedgwick, defined a certain, fairly uncomplicated mode of “self-reflective personhood” (p. 73) to the degree that, for example, “queer” signified only when it was used in the first person and so was taken to be expressive of an internal orientation. On the other hand, however – and this is an argument that in Chapter Four I’ve endeavoured to make explicit – her inquiry, also autobiographical, into the psychical processes of identification that engender attachment revealed aspects of a self that was deeply impersonal, a self that fantasized attaching to a thing or to a feeling of being bound and not to a person necessarily.

This view, far from proposing and relying on a taken-for-granted notion of a whole and essential self, suggests, rather, an understanding of a fraught and discontinuous subjectivity that achieves a sense of form and continuity through attachment to an object or scene of desire. Within my dissertation those modes of attachment such as (not) eating and sex that appear in particular as habit and, more pronouncedly, as repetition compulsion, acquire an important focus in so far as the seriality of repetition, I argue, protects the subject from experiencing the unbearable pull of her own ambivalence toward what she has attached to. Thus, part of the pleasure of anorexia consists in the fact that it is an attachment to a process, not an object. As has been my argument, it feels safer to open oneself up to reiterated form in this way rather than to a person. Yet, where anorexia provides a sense of continuity and works in the service of
establishing a reliable rhythm and patterning that keeps subjectivity, however frenzied and damaged, intact, sex, I assert, functions differently, as a practice of self-interruption and self-suspension. In those moments of slowing down, of being-with, and of inhabiting the body more intensely through the senses, sex interferes with and, thus, offers relief from the numbing and routine patterning that maintains equilibrium and that passes time and organizes what we take to be the activity of everyday living. If anorexia enacts the despairing wish to not be a person, to not have a form, to be nothing more than negative, sex, by comparison, signals something more optimistic and yet perhaps no less threatening: the potential to detach from the promise of that habituated life (however even momentarily) and so to be radically different – different in a way that cannot be imagined.

**Fuck the Future?**

I am wondering if writing about a thing changes anything and, if it does, whether that change could be, as Berlant (2011) describes, enough to build a world on. Wondering is important; it’s a way of keeping a question open. Slave to conventionality that I am I don’t know how it is possible to know when a change has occurred. Yet I do know that writing, in so far as it happens in the present, offers a space for reflection without simultaneously providing answers and so seems as good a place as any to keep wondering. It also seems like a great place, a nice, warm and sustaining place for compulsivity since a thought is only as good as the words a writer uses to describe it. To the extent that such a big part of writing is feeling blocked, the process is, minimally, one of searching repeatedly for a vocabulary. That is to say nothing of ideas, however, which is the real place where writing gets stuck, stuck in so far as the writer who writes compulsively (who is compulsive in her writing) repeatedly searches for a better explanation, as
if explanation can finally dissolve what is incomprehensible about a thing. Inspired by Sedgwick, and along with writers such as Lauren Berlant, Elspeth Probyn, Sara Ahmed, Kathleen Stewart, Heather Love, and Avery Gordon, I am interested in trying to develop forms of descriptive and critical prose and methods of inquiry that can attend to and describe ordinary feelings, sensory life, and the way that we live now in the “ongoing” present (Berlant, 2010). While Michael Hardt, in his foreword to Patricia Clough’s *The Affective Turn*, observes that the precursors to the (re)turn to affect in the humanities and social sciences can be found primarily in feminist analyses of the body and queer theoretical work on the emotions, this more recent turn to affect as the impetus for queerly experimental forms of writing comes, importantly, as critics have begun debating the end of queer theory.

These debates, as Michael Warner notes, have gained particular momentum since Sedgwick’s death, a time during which, not coincidentally, queer theory appears to have lost something of its distinctive, if still contested, identity, having developed many branches and expanded into other disciplines. To think about the intersections of queer theory and affect theory and the contributions queer theory has made to writing on and about affect is to ask about the future of the field, while to write about it is to endeavour to make a relation to it in whatever form it exists now. In so far as there is reciprocal movement between the future and the present, thinking can be experimental and not a rehearsal of the things we already know. It can gesture towards the future without trying to solidify an idea of it, without treating it as an object that can be f*ucked (with) by knowledge and dismissed as a threat when it refuses to be captured.

I want to know if and in what way it is possible to be unbound without also feeling that I’ve lost my footing or anchor in the world. In some sense I have written this dissertation in the
hope that reading and writing has something to teach me about that, that Sedgwick’s wish for her readers to not be stuck might open up something bigger than a wish. One book which Sedgwick edited that I’d been carrying around and not really reading until recently is *Gary in Your Pocket: Stories and Notebooks of Gary Fisher*. The odd time I’d pick it up, flip through it, and read a few sentences, but mostly the only place I got stuck was on Sedgwick’s afterword. About a month ago I finally realized this and somehow this made me happy. I made a photocopy of the chapter and returned the book to the library. Immediately, I felt lighter. Yet weeks later I feel an ambivalence about it that has weight.

Gary Fisher was Sedgwick’s student in the spring of 1987 when she taught as a visiting professor at the University of California-Berkeley and he enrolled in what was the first explicitly gay literature course offered by her department. By Sedgwick’s account, he was a remarkable thinker and an exceptionally talented writer. He was shy and would seldom say anything during class and often he missed going altogether. Yet the work he turned in was always surprisingly and beautifully resonant. For Sedgwick, it was challenging but also breathtaking in its enormity, perspective, and depth. Throughout the seminar and afterwards, they developed a close friendship, and though admiration is the feeling she describes, her writing hints at feelings that ultimately were more messy, less proper and well-contained. In her writing she’s not shy to say how she felt about him but I somehow hate the thought that it is said after he’s gone. I wonder if, before he died from AIDS-related illness, she said any of that to him. I think that probably she did. I could say that now that they are both dead, why should it even matter? But, really what I mean is that I wish such expressions didn’t come so often after the fact. As with Sedgwick, I wish that death didn’t have to be taken (by some) as the first opportunity to recognize the
brilliance of the work, that it didn’t take that loss to realize that her writing made a difference – and to say that it did. I think another thing that I am ambivalent about is the notebook, how Sedgwick, as the editor, collected and read so much of Gary’s intensely personal stuff. I have strong and conflicted feelings about notebooks. Even as a small child I kept one because I loved to write in it. As I grew older I used to keep things hidden in it. When I starved I kept a record mostly related to numbers: how much and what kinds of food I ate; how many calories I ingested; how much exercise I got; how many calories I burned by exercising, how many pounds I gained and lost. I wrote in great detail about all of it in my notebooks and was terrified that someone would discover them. Maybe at some point they did, and maybe they will discover them still. My point is that when I see someone with a notebook I most often think that they’re probably a writer and also, usually, that they have something to hide.

When I first met Alicia that summer that I worked at the group home she was sitting at the kitchen table writing in a notebook. Later on, when she started her job and was enjoying it she kept a record of it in this way. At the end of the day, when I would be getting ready to leave, it was a common sight to see her sitting on the couch or at the table, notebook and pen in hand. She loved those notebooks. She drew on their covers, fastened stickers to them, painted them with glitter. To me, she always somehow appeared calmer when she had them around. One week, when her father was coming to take her for a weekend she became unbearably anxious and distressed and so not knowing what to do but still wanting to do something I gave her a shiny new notebook and when I gave it to her I told her that I hoped she wouldn’t feel alone. In response, she looked at me confused and said “well, paper is good but it doesn’t help that it’s all bound together. I’ll just end up tearing out pages when I write to you to tell you how it’s going.”
I remember feeling surprised then by her comment, which seemed to suggest that for her a notebook had a very particular use. For me, it didn’t. I had a stack of them and I used them for everything.

All throughout the summer the kids would laugh at me because while I kept my office compulsively organized and tidy, I could never find anything I’d written down. Every last note or reminder I’d written to myself was contained somewhere in one of those notebooks, the pages of which were all unnumbered and the front covers of which were red. Once, clearly frustrated by having to wait for me as I rifled through one for yet another missing piece of information, Alicia remarked, in a way that obviously was meant to teach me a lesson: “You know what I think your problem is? You’re too organized. And, you’re organized in a weird way. My room is such a mess, but I can always find everything. You need another system...like sticky notes. I’m going to get you some sticky notes.” And she did.

On the morning that was to be my last day on the job Alicia asked me if I would leave her with my phone number and my new address at graduate school and if I would give her these things when I came to say goodbye. I remember feeling conflicted about her request, and so, not answering her but I never intended not to say goodbye. I knew as I was getting ready to leave that she had gone outside to sit in the sun. I wanted to go out there to talk to her and wish her well but I couldn’t. Somehow it seemed meaningless and I didn’t know what else I could say. Instead I took one of the pink sticky notes she’d given me and wrote a brief note telling her I’d miss her. I signed it with my initials and stuck it on her door and then I walked out to catch a bus home. It’s something I think about, that feeling of sticking while also being unstuck enough to turn and walk away, about how it feels to be devastated on the inside and yet seem composed on
the outside, and about how all of it – even the gesture that appears strong – is in fact so fragile.

Thinking about something, though, is different from feeling. This, for me, is the feeling of an attachment to life.
Bibliography


