Beginning with *Stigma*

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"Queer Performativity: Henry James's The Art of the Novel,"
by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. GLQ 1.1 (1993).

*I*n her essay "Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993: 4) proposes replacing the ordinary-language philosopher J. L. Austin's example of a statement that does rather than describes ("I do") with the phrase "Shame on you." By shifting from the marriage ceremony to a scene of childhood shame, Sedgwick questions the heteronormativity of Austin's account. What would it mean, she asks, to "begin with stigma" (ibid.), that is, to understand performativity in the context of unauthorized or debased social experience— for instance, in the context of "gender-dissonant or otherwise stigmatized childhood" (ibid.)? Sedgwick, too, knows how to choose her moments: in the lead article in that inaugural issue of *GLQ*, she takes the opportunity to respond not only to Austin but also to Judith Butler, the author of what was then the most influential account of performativity in queer studies: *Gender Trouble* (1990). Sedgwick declares that, for her, "the deepest interest of any notion of performativity . . . is not finally in the challenge it makes to essentialism," thus citing, negatively, Butler's central argument. Sedgwick (1993: 14) points to the limits of parody as a framework for reading queer culture: "I'd also—if parenthetically—want to suggest that shame/performativity may get us a lot further with the cluster of phenomena generally called 'camp' than the notion of parody will."

 Gender Trouble ends by articulating the possibility that the proliferation of genders will "expose [the] fundamental unnaturalness" of gender, and so weaken the violent hold of the sex-gender system (Butler [1990] 1999: 190). Sedgwick pursued a similar approach in her 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, using the tools of critical genealogy to denaturalize sexual orientation and thus to "render less dangerously presumable 'homosexuality as we know it today'" (48). But "Queer

Performativity" marks the beginning of a transition in Sedgwick's work, away from the strategy of denaturalization to an emphasis on affect and embodiment. Focusing on the significance of shame in forging identity, Sedgwick redefines performativity as a social scene, and a form of attunement; rather than rely on exposure as the basis for social change, she imagines a queer collective of "those whose sense of identity is for some reason tuned most durably to the note of shame" (ibid.: 14).

Sedgwick's attempt to reorient queer studies away from its post-structural antecedents and toward that bio-psycho-social hybrid now known as "affect studies" was remarkably successful. I was deeply influenced by the "affective turn," and especially by Sedgwick's assertion of the political value of negative affect. Like many others, I was moved by the moral seriousness of this account of queer life, which dignified experiences otherwise deemed simply abject. At the same time, I struggled to reconcile Sedgwick's pronouncements about queer feeling with more pedestrian accounts of gay, lesbian, and transgender identity. Would the focus on feeling, particularly childhood feelings, displace rather than supplement attention to sexual practices and communities? "Some of the infants, children, and adults in whom shame remains the most available mediator of identity," Sedgwick (1990: 13) writes, "are the ones called (in a related word) shy. ('Remember the fifties?' Lily Tomlin asks. 'No one was gay in the fifties; they were just shy.')." Riffing on Tomlin's joke about the closet, and the recoding of homosexuality as shyness in the McCarthy era, Sedgwick goes on to suggest that shyness—but not homosexuality— might *define* queerness: "Everyone knows that there are some lesbians and gay men who could never count as queer, and other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism, or without routing their same-sex eroticism through the identity labels lesbian or gay" (ibid.).

The sentence is a master class in performativity. The locution "everyone knows" alludes to the emerging distinction between homosexuality and queerness as if it were self-evident, and creates desire to be "in the know," part of an emerging consensus. Redefining queerness as an affective disposition makes space for people who do not identify as gay or lesbian; at the same time, it institutes other exclusions. I read these words as a young—but not particularly shy—lesbian, wondering whether I belonged in this new queer world. Sedgwick reconciles queerness with homosexuality by suggesting that shame-based practices emerge from and live near lesbian and gay social worlds. She writes: "Many of the performative identity vernaculars that seem most recognizably 'flushed' . . . with shame-consciousness and shame-creativity cluster intimately around lesbian and gay worldly spaces: to name only a few, butch abjection, femmitude, leather, pride, SM, drag, masculinity, fisting, attitude, zines, histrionicism, asceticism, Snap! Culture,

diva worship, florid religiosity, in a word, *flaming*" (ibid.: 13–14). This tribute to queer culture is at once *scenic*, in the sense attributed to Henry James, and *sceney*, in the sense attributed to queer theory. Refusing to define queerness, and flaunting it instead, Sedgwick not only argues with Butler—she upstages her.

"Queer Performativity" was a bold first move in a campaign to seize queer studies by the root—a campaign Sedgwick (2002: 6) later described as stepping "to the side of the deconstructive project of analyzing apparently nonlinguistic phenomena in rigorously linguistic terms." Shifting the terrain of queer studies involved a disciplinary defection and a historical return. Sedgwick turns to psychology in "Queer Performativity," analyzing the work of the figure she calls "the most important recent theorist of affect," Silvan Tomkins (Sedgwick 1993: 7). Sedgwick also turns to the 1940s–1960s, a period that she, along with her collaborator Adam Frank, went on to call "the cybernetic fold" (Sedgwick and Frank 1995). Midcentury psychology and cybernetics were distant from Sedgwick's preoccupations, and those of queer studies in the early 1990s. As it turns out, however, it was Tomkins's difference, and his *indifference* to the "queer/deconstructive legacy," that made him valuable. Tomkins is a key figure for Sedgwick because his work is "sublimely alien": for this reason, he provides "a different place to begin" (ibid.: 503).

But if Sedgwick's turn to Tomkins seems to take her far afield, another citation in the essay suggests that this flanking action may in fact be a return. In "Queer Performativity," Sedgwick cites another midcentury figure, the Canadian American sociologist Erving Goffman. "There's a strong sense," she writes, "in which the subtitle of any truly queer (perhaps as opposed to gay?) politics will be the same as the one Erving Goffman gave to his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. But more than its management: its experimental, creative, performative force" (Sedgwick 1993: 4). Goffman appears to be another "sublimely alien" figure. However, in Goffman's case, his influence, though mostly unacknowledged, was there all along. Goffman's work on mental asylums, prisons, impression management, the performance of gender, and the making and breaking of social norms is tied by many threads, both genealogical and conceptual, to the field of queer theory. However, these interventions did not survive what Sedgwick describes as the "subsuming" of "nonverbal aspects of reality firmly under the aegis of the linguistic." Many of Goffman's key insights about the dynamics of social power were taken up in queer studies and translated into terms more congenial to the deconstructive/queer legacy. As Gayle Rubin (2002) has argued, empirical research by scholars of sexuality laid the foundation for the emergence of queer theory as a discipline centered in the humanities around 1990, but these

debts were often unacknowledged. Sedgwick's discovery of the new territory of the "cybernetic fold" is better described as a *rediscovery* of a landscape that was less unknown than willfully forgotten. The insights of midcentury social science were always there in canonical queer studies, hiding—like the reference to Goffman in "Queer Performativity"—in plain sight.

When I first read "Queer Performativity," I agreed with Sedgwick about the need to *begin with stigma*. Regarding the "experimental, creative, performative force" of stigma, I was not so sure. Are all forms of stigma useful for politics? What, I wondered, about ongoing experiences of stigma, and recalcitrant feelings of shame? What about the bad feelings that persist into adult life, resist our efforts to transform them, and continue to circulate in queer communities? Some feelings, surely, are not ripe for transformation. As if refusing an extravagant gift, I demurred from Sedgwick's characterization of shame as "a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy" (Sedgwick 1993: 4). Would it be possible to pursue a form of inquiry that wasn't about *managing* stigma, or *transforming* it, but simply *acknowledging* it? It was, after all, Sedgwick's acknowledgment of the scene of childhood shame, rather than her belief in its transformation, that changed things for me. I explored this possibility in an early article I wrote about Radclyffe Hall's 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*. It is hard to generate political energy from the bad feelings represented in this book, I argued. "The novel's subtitle," I wrote, "ought simply to be: 'Spoiled Identity'" (Love 2001: 494).

I can see now that I overstated my difference from Sedgwick, kicking up a fuss in order to be part of the conversation. "Queer Performativity" celebrates shame's transformative potential, but without offering any guarantees. Sedgwick writes, "Therapeutic or political strategies aimed directly at getting rid of individual or group shame, or undoing it, have something preposterous about them: they may 'work'—they certainly have powerful effects—but they can't work in the way they say they work." Underlining the significance of identity in making individual and group identity, she continues: "The forms taken by shame . . . are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *trans*figuration, affective and symbolic loading, and deformation: but unavailable for effecting the work of purgation and deontological closure" (Sedgwick 1993: 13). In other words, shame *is* transformative, but we can never be sure *how* it is transformative. One might therefore add, Careful what you wish for. In conjuring such unruly, pervasive, and harmful feelings, it is possible to repeat the violence that you are hoping to ameliorate; antihomophobic inquiry that makes homophobia too central can be complicit with homophobia.

Disagreeing with Sedgwick helped me formulate an approach to queer literary history that centered negative and painful feelings. But if at one time I thought that this was a difference in politics or temperament, I can now see that it emerges from a specific disciplinary history. We might understand Sedgwick's rewrite of the title of Goffman's *Stigma*, away from management toward creative force, as a sign of the times, the updating of a pre-Stonewall text about secret deviants in light of a new wave of queer activism. We can also understand it as an attempt to translate an empirical and descriptive account of the operations of stigma into the terms of an interpretive and prescriptive (or activist) framework. Whether you believe that scholarship's goal is to observe how people respond to the unequal conditions in the world or to contribute to changing them is not necessarily best understood as a matter of courage, resourcefulness, or commitment. Instead, it points to a fundamental difference in the uses of scholarship. Sociology has been critiqued for its static, descriptive view of the world; queer scholarship has been critiqued for its inflated sense of its own power to act on the world. Descriptive scholarship offers a clear portrait of how the world works, but in doing so it risks accommodating itself to social conditions, and treating as permanent a situation that is temporary. Prescriptive scholarship points to potentials that have not yet been realized in the world, and therefore is a source both of resistance and of hope. But scholarship that focuses on the future risks giving an incomplete, distorted, or "hopeful" portrait of the present, including of its own place in the social world.

"Queer Performativity" effectively stages this tension between the descriptive and the prescriptive. "Shame is *performance*," Sedgwick (1993: 5) writes, and later, on the same page, "shame is a form of communication." This account of performativity draws on performance in the work of Henry James, as a translation of the space of the stage into the intimate theater of the novel. But it also draws on the dramaturgical accounts of social life developed in the 1950s and 1960s. It was Sedgwick's essay that first pointed me to this other scene of queer studies, a tradition that has become a kind of obsession for me over the last couple of decades. This process has convinced me that deviance studies is not only a point of origin for queer studies but also a living presence in the field today. The deviance paradigm remains crucial in queer studies because it is the *carrier* of the material and social specificity of gay, lesbian, and trans lives, and of other yet-to-be-specified experiences of stigma.

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