

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

## Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes

Sometimes I think the books that affect us most are fantasy books. I don't mean books in the fantasy genre; I don't even mean the books we fantasize about writing but don't write. What I'm thinking of here are the books we know about—from their titles, from reading reviews, or hearing people talk about them—but haven't, over a period of time, actually read. Books that can therefore have a presence, or exert a pressure in our lives and thinking, that may have much or little to do with what's actually inside them.

Again, I don't mean here the books that, rightly or wrongly, we minimize and dismiss without having read them—whether from competitive anxiety or anticipatory boredom. No. Instead, at least for me—and you can tell that over the years I've developed a commendably rich and varied spiritual practice of failing to read books—there are a few special titles that persist as objects of speculation, of accumulated reverie. Far from minimizing, I seem to enhance and enrich them over time, investing them with my own obsessions and the fruits of my varying thought and self-relation. Except of course it's not "them" I invest in this way, but their titles or their authors' names as valued, phantasmatic objects internal to myself.

South Atlantic Quarterly 106:3, Summer 2007  
doi 10.1215/00382876-2007-020 © 2007 Duke University Press

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user

on 09 February 2021

626 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

If this sounds like part of a Melanie Kleinian kind of dynamic of projection and introjection, it is exactly that, and in some ways it especially characterizes my difficult relation over time to the work of Melanie Klein. One odd feature of this history is that I can't remember when, in this decades-long process, I did start actually reading Klein rather than just brooding over her. I don't know what it says about her writing or my reading process, either, that it hasn't been so much the actual experience of rereading Klein that has kept dramatically punctuating the great attractions I've repeatedly found in her work. Instead it's been encounters with other writers' persuasive paraphrases of her, notably those of R. D. Hinshelwood and, more recently, Meira Likierman.<sup>1</sup>

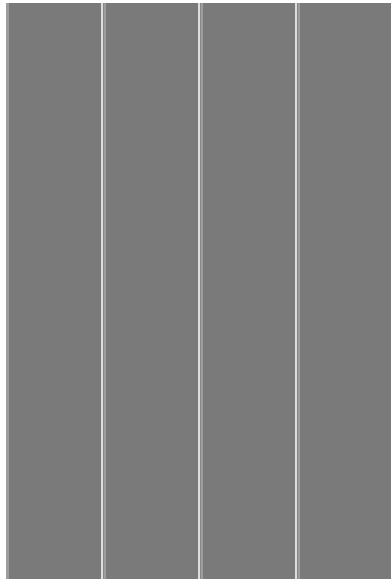
Here's another, less sunny story from my personal history that I also, for some reason, think of as very Kleinian.

For this one, picture me around age three, in Dayton, Ohio, where my grandmother has come from New York to visit our family. Today's outing: we're going to Rike's, the local department store, where my six-year-old sister will get to pick out a new doll. I, in turn, am the recipient of her current doll, an eight-inch or so plastic doll representing a girl of about her age. And at Rike's, too, I'm supposed to pick out a new blanket for my "new" doll.

Except that I absolutely don't want my sister's doll. Characteristically, I have a well-reasoned account of what's wrong with it: it's not big enough for me. I need—and somehow feel emboldened to demand—a doll that is bigger, baby- or toddler-shaped, and new. A doll on the smaller and grown-up scale of the one I've been given, I'd simply lose. (And it's true, small-muscle coordination is about the least precocious thing about me, if you don't count emotional maturity.) I can remember offering this explanation to my parents with the calm confidence of someone quoting a well-known adult dictum: younger children need larger-scale toys. An argument that apparently didn't persuade, since the next thing to happen seems to be my descent into the

awful whirlpool of tantrum mode. What I remember better, though, is the aftermath: me later abject, flattened by the ordeal of my rage, trailing through the innards of the department store in a state of apparent social death. Also the numb shock of finding, before the end of our afternoon there, that the smaller, inappropriate doll I was carrying had indeed disappeared.

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user



on 09 February 2021

I could go on for ages about this story—which, while it’s remained accessible in my memory for a long time, is the kind that nonetheless rearrives on the scene with a fairly ferocious new vitality when I’m really engaged with Melanie Klein. Along with the sense of access to vivid insight, these periodic reengagements with Klein are accompanied by painful dreams and painfully crabby days. Also by series of uncontrolled flashes in which many aspects of my life, including those I’m especially fond or proud of (call them Buddhist ones), appear in the light of fragile, exhausting, sometimes impoverishing, and barely successful defenses against being devoured by my own cycles of greed, envy, rage, and in particular, overwhelming anxiety. There isn’t even the comfort of self-pity, since Klein makes so very palpable the exacerbated grain of psychic lives that are much less tolerable than one’s own. And even though for me everything in Klein resonates with issues about vocation, thought, reading, and especially writing, I also don’t have the Romantic consolation that these upsets are the extremities of genius. Rather, they’re testimony to the almost grotesquely unintelligent design of every human psyche.

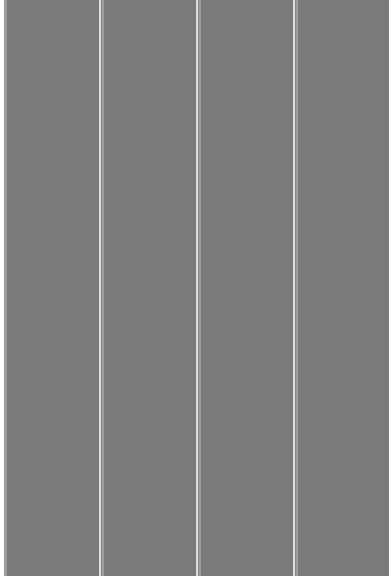
I’ve always taken to heart Thoreau’s guess that quiet desperation characterizes the majority of lives. The question of whether or not mine is part of that majority—though I have plenty of questions about the question itself, including who’s asking it—nonetheless still feels crucial to me and many times frighteningly unsettled. Klein is one of the people who most upsets me by unsettling it—vastly more than Freud or Lacan does, for example, and even more than the Marxist or anticolonial perspectives from which my preoccupations are so effectively made to feel marginal, even to me.

I keep remembering that there’s nothing so special about the incident with the doll, but the clanging emotional and intellectual vibration it evokes, when I’m deep into Klein, effortlessly traverses not only the different areas of my life, but the whole range of scales on which the life is lived, from its microirritants to love and work to abstruse theoretical activity to investments in death or even enlightenment. In fact, that’s why I started out telling the story: I think I meant it as a fairly simple story about scale. Just to say how the right scale of doll for my older sister was the wrong scale for me, how I needed something chunkier. I needed,

or thought I did, something with decent-scale, plastic, resiliently articulated parts that I could manipulate freely and safely (safely for it as well as me): this seemed to be

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user

Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes 627



on 09 February 2021

628 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

the condition for my loving or identifying with the creature, even just not abandoning it.

And, I was going on to say, as an adult that's the way I now am about ideas. I like them pretty chunky. Not dramatic or caricatural, certainly not dualistic (never dualistic), but big, big and palpable; big enough so there's no swallowing risk, and also so I won't forget them, which hasn't become any less of a danger as I've gotten older. I'm happy with ideas where you can do a lot of different things with them and be in many relations to them, but they'll push back against you—and where the individual moving parts aren't too complex or delicate for active daily use.

In some ways Melanie Klein is perfect in offering ideas on just this scale. Her work has a reassuring groundedness, a sense of reality. I realize that remark may sound implausible to anyone unwilling to sail through sentences about the cannibalistic defense of the good partial breast against the devouring invasion of the feces. But as someone whose education has proceeded through Straussian and deconstructive, as well as psychoanalytic, itineraries where vast chains of interpretive inference may be precariously balanced on the tiniest of details or differentials, I feel enabled by the way that even abstruse Kleinian work remains so susceptible to a gut check. It may not be grounded in common sense, but it is phenomenologically grounded to a remarkable degree. A lot of this quality is owing to the fact that Klein's psychoanalysis, by contrast to Freud's, is based in affect and offers a compelling account of the developments and transformations of affective life. Likierman helpfully uses the word *qualitative* to distinguish Klein's approaches, and I think *qualitative* in this context translates neatly as "affect-based." Likierman writes, for instance, that in contrast to Freud's undifferentiated notion of primary narcissism, in Klein "the infant is . . . equipped from birth to apprehend a qualitative essence in different kinds of life experiences" (55).

About Klein's theoretical formulations Likierman also identifies her "tendency to use a term both to describe the subject's internal experience and, simultaneously, to offer a technical psychoanalytic designation of a phenomenon . . . while Freud's thinking distinguished between theoretical definitions and subjective descriptions" (108–9). This tendency of Klein's, again, while reflecting a sort of Ferenczian refusal to conceptually privilege the supposed objectivity of the psychoanalyst over the patient's subjectivity, also seems to reflect a difference between the kind of distance involved in theorizing about drive versus theorizing about affect.

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user

on 09 February 2021

But the invitingly chunky affordances of Klein's thought probably have most to do with a thematic aspect of her view of psychology: it's she who put the objects in object relations. In her concept of phantasy-with-a-p-h, human mental life becomes populated, not with ideas, representations, knowledges, urges, and repressions, but with things, things with physical properties, including people and hacked-off bits of people.

If this almost literal-minded animism makes Kleinian psychic life sound like a Warner Bros. cartoon, you might think it would be far too coarse-grained, too unmediated to deal with adult creativity in ambitious intellectual or artistic modes. Even Freud, after all, who, unlike Klein, invested so much of his best thought in issues of representation, had to either interpret actual creative work in diagnostic terms or bundle it away under the flattening, strangely incurious rubric of sublimation. Paradoxically, though, this is one of the areas of Klein's greatest appeal: she makes it possible to be respectful of intellectual work without setting it essentially apart from other human projects. That our work is motivated—psychologically, affectively motivated—and perhaps most so when it is good work or when it is true: with Klein this is an extremely interesting fact, much more so than an ignominious or discrediting one. If anything, Klein presents the course of very ordinary psychological development in terms that will be especially recognizable to ambitious or innovative thinkers.

This becomes especially true in her writing after 1935, where Klein gives a detailed account of what she calls the depressive position, involving the vicissitudes of relation to a "good internal object": a relation that is conceived as virtually intersubjective, profoundly ambivalent, and a locus of anybody's special inventiveness. If anything, in fact, as I suggested earlier, Klein's account of internal object relations resonates so fully with the structure and phenomenology of intellectual work that it makes a problem for some of the very kinds of thinking that it also stimulates. I think this is why Klein isn't used more explicitly in critical theory, even though so many theorists, queer and otherwise, have drawn important energies and ideas from her. There is a kind of clangor or overload from the intense way these resonances flash out at the reader at so many microlevels and metalevels at once. Engaging closely with Klein often feels like getting stoned, in the sense that the unchecked proliferation of the reader's sense of recognition, endlessly recursive and relentlessly architectonic, quickly turns into a kind of fractal ineffability, resistant to the linear formulations of ordinary exposition. But when deconstructive or Lacanian insight, for example, prolifer-

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user

Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes 629

on 09 February 2021

630 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

ates at different levels in a similar way, an effect of finespun abstraction or even sublimity results; while with Klein, the additional, unmediated charge of all that thematized bad affect—anxiety in particular—can be genuinely disabling to cognitive function. At least I've often found it so.

That's a lot of the reason why secondary studies of her work, like Likierman's monograph and Hinshelwood's dictionary, are peculiarly indispensable in trying to actually use Klein. Both of those books do for readers a lot of the work of abstraction, of absorbing the transferenceal near-chaos that can be generated in learning from Klein's work; both books could be described as being, in a good sense, well-analyzed, a term that one wouldn't apply to Klein herself or to how the reader feels in encountering her. But much more, productive work can be done on Klein at this mediating level. And while that process goes directly against many of my own close-reading, literary impulses, it does hold out the promise of a good new handful of chunky tools and the affordances for using them.

For me there has also been a lot of help, in approaching Klein, from having two other sets of ideas concurrently in mind. One is an understanding of Buddhist psychological thought, especially in the Tibetan tradition, that often diverges sharply from Klein but at other times comes close enough to clarify it startlingly, or vice versa. The other, in which I've been involved almost as long, is the work of Silvan Tomkins (1911–91), an American psychologist who pioneered in the understanding of affect.<sup>2</sup> Though he was interested in psychoanalysis, Tomkins was most influenced by early work in cybernetics and systems theory. His sophisticated understanding of feedback mechanisms—such as the transferenceal and recursive ones set in motion so disruptively in the process of encountering Klein—seems to give him an invigorating theoretical purchase on the workings of affect, one that permits him the rare achievement of doing full justice to the qualitative differences among the affects without triggering disruptive affect spirals in his reader.

Tomkins's systems-theory framework, which Klein was born half a generation too early to be at home with, offers another way of beginning with chunky ideas and using them to get to a lot of different places; and also like Klein's work, it does so without the shortcut of a structuring dualism. And from a feminist and queer perspective I find it helpful to have a second, binocular angle of vision that begins farther outside of psychoanalysis than Klein, that is more programmatically resistant to some of the damaging assumptions that have shaped psychoanalysis in (what I think

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user

on 09 February 2021

of as) its Oedipal mode: the defining centrality of dualistic gender difference; the primacy of genital morphology and desire; the determinative nature of childhood experience and the linear teleology toward a sharply distinct state of maturity; and especially the logic of zero-sum games and the excluded middle term, where passive is the opposite of active and desire is the opposite of identification, and where one person's getting more love means a priori that another is getting less.

Here's one example of the importance of the excluded middle term: a crucial dynamic of omnipotence and powerlessness that emerges from Klein's work. In Freud's view, notoriously, our relation to omnipotence is pretty simple: Bring it on. According to Freud's work, we want as much power as we can get and indeed start out with the assumption that we are omnipotent; everything after that is the big, disillusioning letdown called reality. Yet in a sense, Freudian analytic theory, especially in its structuralist or Lacanian aspects, never does let go of an implicit view that power of any sort or degree can only mean omnipotence. What changes with maturity and Oedipalization is the view of whom or what you have power over, rather than the understanding of power per se as omnipotence. One must give up the infantile fantasy of owning Mother, this formulation says, but as one matures and masters an economy of substitution, one can achieve both ownership of other women and an ownership (however displaced and distributed) of the means of production of meaning itself.

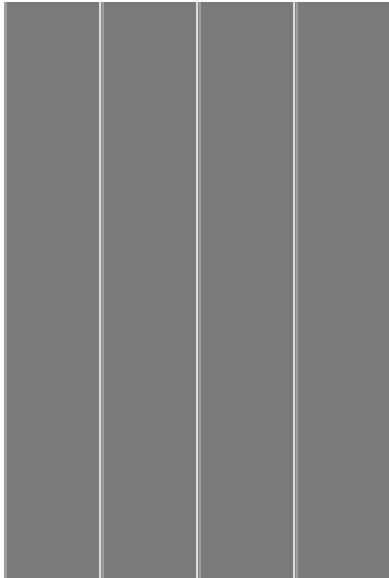
For the Kleinian subject, however, unlike the Freudian one, omnipotence is a fear at least as much as it is a wish. It is true here, as in Freud, that the infant's self and its constituent parts, like others and their parts, can only be experienced as all or nothing, either helpless or omnipotent. The problem is that the infant's desires are passionately experienced but intrinsically self-contradictory. The Kleinian infant experiences a greed—her own—whose aggressive and envious component is perceived as posing a mortal threat both to her loved

and needed objects and to herself. Thus the perception of oneself as omnipotent is hardly less frightening than the perception of one's parent as being so.

In fact, this all-or-nothing understanding of agency is toxic enough that it is a relief and relaxation for the child eventually to discover a different reality. The sense that power is a form of relationality that deals in, for example, negotiations (including win-win negotiations), the exchange of

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user

Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes 631



on 09 February 2021

632 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

affect, and other small differentials, the middle ranges of agency—the notion that you can be relatively empowered or disempowered without annihilating someone else or being annihilated, or even castrating or being castrated—is a great mitigation of that endogenous anxiety, although it is also a fragile achievement that requires discovering over and over.

Clearly, one of the main cruxes for such issues is the status of repression. For Freud, “the theory of repression is the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests,” and of course its importance extends far beyond psychoanalytic thought.<sup>3</sup> To offer a reductive paraphrase, Freudian repression is an internal defense mechanism—the prototype of defense mechanisms in general, as Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis note—that is modeled on and in fact originates with external prohibition.<sup>4</sup> Civilization, in the Freudian view, cannot coexist with the individual's uncorrected sense of omnipotence, with the untrammelled satisfaction of the individual's inherently insatiable desire, or with its uncensored expression or even self-experience. To internalize societal prohibition in an effective but not paralyzing way is, for Freudian psychoanalysis, the maturational task of the individual. While different kinds of psychoanalytic politics may be more or less invested in the repressive needs of civilization as opposed to the countervailing claims of individual desire, such arguments have the almost uniform effect of reinforcing a single structuring assumption: that psychic activity is ultimately, definitionally constituted by the struggle between intrinsic desire and imposed or internalized prohibition. Other defining concepts, such as the unconscious itself, with its inaccessible topography and distinctive hermeneutic imperatives, are founded on the absolute primacy of

repression. In Freudian psychoanalysis, repression is both entirely necessary and largely sufficient as a determinant of the nature of psychic life.

Melanie Klein, like Silvan Tomkins, works not so much against the concept of repression as around it. Without contesting either the existence or the force of repressive mechanisms—both external and internalized—Klein views them in the context of other, earlier and more violent conflicts and dangers that, by contrast, result directly from the internal dynamics of the emerging psyche in what Klein came to call the paranoid/schizoid position. The whole Freudian dialectic between desire and prohibition is only a secondary development for Klein, and one among several such. Moreover, the structure and importance of repression as a secondary defense mechanism vary according to how the individual has already dealt with

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user

on 09 February 2021

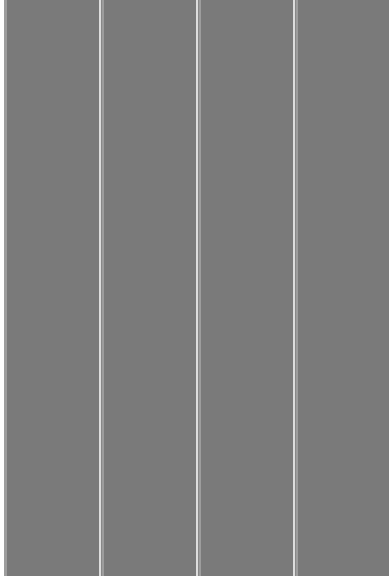
Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes 633 such primary defense mechanisms as splitting, omnipotence, and violent

projection and introjection.

What defines the paranoid/schizoid position into which we are born, in all its terrible fragility, are five violent things. The first is the inability of the self to comprehend or tolerate ambivalence—the insistence on all or nothing. The second is its consequent, “schizoid” strategy of splitting both its objects and itself into very concretely imagined part-objects that can be only seen as exclusively, magically good or bad—where those are not in the first place ethical designations but qualitative judgments perceived as involving life or death. Third, as we’ve mentioned, is that, in the paranoid/schizoid position, the sense of agency, too, occupies only two extreme positions. The self and its constituent parts, like others and their parts, can only be experienced as either powerless or omnipotent. Fourth is a kind of greed for “good” things that is figured in terms of ingesting them and holding them inside, where they are liable to remain distinct and magically alive, doing battle with “bad” contents and vulnerable to being devoured or fatally contaminated by them. And fifth is the mechanism of projection, classically that of attributing to other people the unacceptable parts of oneself, but given, as we’ll see, a new immediacy in the work of Klein.

Overall, perhaps the crucial difference from Freud is that in Klein, what these primary defense mechanisms have to defend against is not prohibitive external impingement, as in Freud, but instead the devastating force of a largely endogenous anxiety. By analogy, in Tomkins, the conflict of substantive affects with other substantive affects is at least as basic and consequential as any conflict with outside forces, however intimately internalized.<sup>5</sup> It is not mainly “civilization” that needs the individual to be different from the way she spontaneously is. The individual herself needs to be different, insofar as her intrinsic impulses conflict with one another even more drastically than they conflict with the claims of her environment. Instead of the undifferentiatedly blind, pleasure-seeking drives of the Freudian infant, which encounter no check but the originally external ones of prohibition or lack, the Kleinian infant experiences a greed whose aggressive and envious component is already perceived as posing a terrible threat both to her desired objects and to herself. The resulting primary anxiety is an affect so toxic that it probably ought to be called, not anxiety, but dread. It is against this endogenous dread that the primary defense

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user



on 09 February 2021

634 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

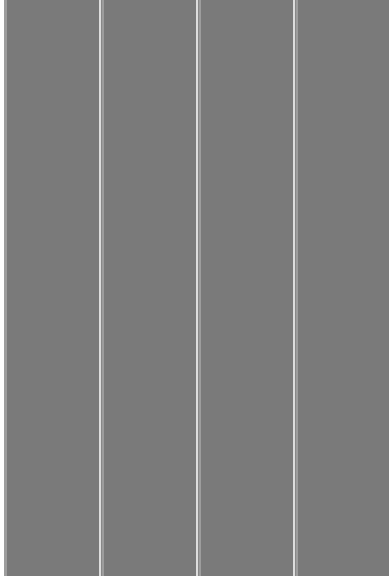
mechanisms are first mobilized—the splitting, the omnipotence, the violent projection and introjection.

These defenses in turn, which may be mitigated but never go away, can impress their shape on the internal experience of repression as well as the social experience of suffering from, enforcing, or resisting repression. The complex developments that later characterize the depressive position will also have an impact on the shapes ultimately taken by repression. It remains true, however, that endogenous primary dread, whose corrosive force varies from person to person for essentially constitutional as well as environmental reasons, takes the central place in Kleinian thought that desire and repression occupy in Freudian psychoanalysis.

Of course this issue of repression is not a question of interest only within psychoanalysis. The primacy of repression structures a near-universal, dualistic Western view of politics and, for example, religion as rigorously as it does a Freudian view of the psyche. Foucault demonstrates as much in volume 1 of his *History of Sexuality*, in his justly famous though ultimately circular analysis of what he calls the repressive hypothesis. According to the repressive hypothesis that Foucault attempts to disassemble here, which is entirely of a piece with Freud's own repressive hypothesis, the history of sexuality could only be that of the "negative relation" between power and sex, of "the insistence of the rule," of "the cycle of prohibition," of "the logic of censorship," and of "the uniformity of the apparatus" of scarcity and prohibition: "Whether one attributes it to the form of the prince who formulates rights, of the father who forbids, of the censor who enforces silence, or of the master who states the law,"—or, we might add, that of the internalized superego—"in any case one schematizes power in a juridical form, and one defines its effects as obedience."<sup>6</sup> In other words, Foucault describes the whole range of Western liberatory discourses—those of class politics, identity politics, Enlightenment values, and the projects of sexual liberation, including psychoanalysis—as being congruent and continuous with one another precisely in their dependence on the centrality of external and/or internal repression.

More disturbing, Foucault demonstrates a devastating performative continuity between the diagnostics of these projects, the way they analyze the central problematic of Western culture (repression), on the one hand, and on the other hand their therapeutics, the ways in which they propose





on 09 February 2021

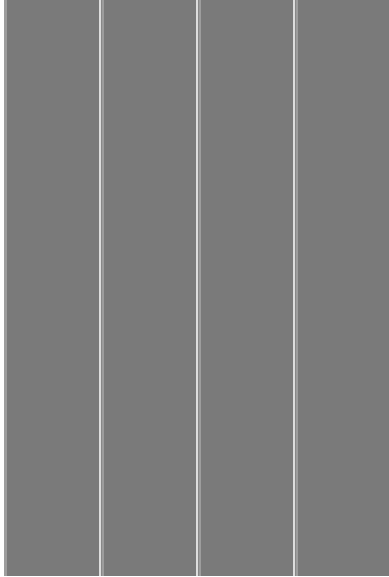
to rectify it. For if there is some problem with the repressive hypothesis itself, if in important ways repression is a misleading or even damaging way to understand the conditions of societies and individuals, then the main performative effect of these centuries-long anti-repressive projects may be the way they function as near-irresistible propaganda for the repressive hypothesis itself.

Perhaps inevitably, Foucault in turn seems to me to be far more persuasive in analyzing this massive intellectual blockage than in finding ways to obviate it. The moves demonstrated in volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, at any rate, like much of Foucault's work before that book, might instead be described as propagating the repressive hypothesis ever more broadly by means of its displacement, multiplication, and/or hypostatization.

The structure of this kind of conceptual impasse or short circuit is all too familiar: where it is possible to recognize the mechanism of a problem, but trying to remedy it, or even in fact articulate it, simply adds propulsive energy to that very mechanism. For one example: in Buddhist psychology, *samsara*, the treadmill-going-nowhere of death and rebirth to which lives are bound within history, is driven ever harder and thus made ever more exhausting, not only by striving for personal advantage or even progress in altruistic pursuits, but by spiritual striving as well. Such vicious circles work like Nietzsche's analysis of resentment, which he diagnoses as a self-propagating, near-universal psychology compounded of injury, rancor, envy, and self-righteous vindictiveness, fermented by a sense of disempowerment. Nietzschean resentment is not only epistemologically self-reinforcing but also contagious at a pragmatic level. Its intrinsic relationality is spontaneously generative of powerful systems. What is the most defining act, the conclusively diagnostic act of resentment? It is accurately accusing someone else of being motivated by it. Where then to find a position from which to interrupt its baleful circuit?

If I've correctly identified an important, damagingly circular dynamic of Foucault's influential volume, then I also understand better the source of an inveterate impatience I've felt with critical work conducted—as it seems to me, rather blindly—under the aegis of the “Foucauldian.” By now there seems to be a near-ineradicable Foucauldian common sense structuring the routines of work in the fields of cultural studies, literature, history, and others. But arguably, the formative queer theory work of the 1980s, some

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user



on 09 February 2021

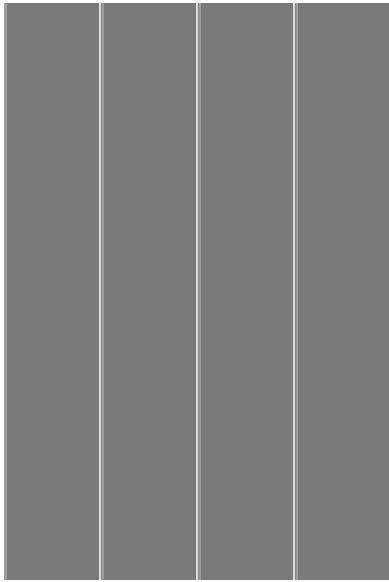
636 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

of my own very much included, has generated a disciplinary space called queer, where those circular Foucauldian energies inhere with a strikingly distinctive intimacy.

Characteristically, Klein's resource in such a situation is neither to minimize the importance of this circular mechanism nor to attack it frontally. Instead she contextualizes it newly—just as she had reshaped the view of repression by framing it as a defense mechanism among others rather than the master key to mental functioning. Klein in fact is fearfully attuned to human relations that are driven by the uncontrollable engines of resentment: *tu quoque*, it takes one to know one, or, in technical terms, “I know you are but what am I?” which have been so fecund for queer thought. She sees this dynamic in terms of the “primitive” defenses that characterize the paranoid/schizoid position: the prophylactic need to split good from bad, and the aggressive expulsion of intolerable parts of oneself onto—or, in Klein's more graphic locution, into—the person who is taken as an object. Klein writes that these projected “bad parts of the self are meant not only to injure but also to control and to take possession of the object”; she calls this mechanism “projective identification.”<sup>7</sup> Projective identification is not only a form of magical thinking found in infants, but virtually coextensive with Nietzschean resentment in adults. It is a good way of understanding, for example, the terrifying contagion of paranoid modes of thought—and certainly seems indispensable in understanding political dynamics as well as many a small-group interaction, including those in the classroom. Projective identification is related to Freudian projection but more uncannily intrusive: for Freud, when I've projected my hostility onto you, I believe that you dislike me; for Klein, additionally, when I've projected my hostility into you, you will dislike me.

Thus for Klein's infant or adult, the paranoid/schizoid position—marked by insatiability, hatred, envy, and anxiety—is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into the world around one, and vice versa. The depressive position, by contrast, is an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult only sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting. And it becomes increasingly unclear in Klein's writing after 1940 whether she envisioned a further space beyond the depressive position.

Not that she saw people as doomed to, at best, a permanent state of depression per se. Rather, the depressive position becomes, in Klein's



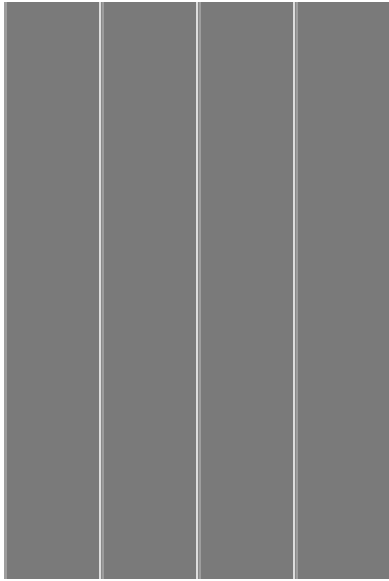
on 09 February 2021

latter writing, a uniquely spacious rubric. Despite its name it comes to encompass, for example, both the preconditions of severe depression and also quite a varied range of resources for surviving, repairing, and moving beyond that depression. It is the site for Klein's explorations of intellectual creativity; it is also the space in which challenges to a normalizing universality can develop.

What makes the depressive position "depressive"? The threshold to the depressive position is the simple, foundational, authentically very difficult understanding that good and bad tend to be inseparable at every level. "The infant," as Hinshelwood summarizes this argument, "at some stage is physically and emotionally mature enough to integrate his or her fragmented perceptions, bringing together the separately good and bad versions. When such part-objects are brought together as a whole they threaten to form a contaminated, damaged, or dead whole object," whether internal, external, or both—what I take to be a description of the experience of depression *per se* (138, emphasis added).

"Depressive anxiety," Hinshelwood continues, "is the crucial element of mature relationships, the source of generous and altruistic feelings that are devoted to the well-being of the object" (138). Only from this position, then, can one begin using one's own resources to assemble or "repair" the part-objects into something like a whole, albeit a compromised one. It is worth emphasizing that Klein's rhetoric of reparation does not assume that the "repaired" object will resemble a preexisting object—there is nothing intrinsically conservative about the impulse of reparation. Once assembled, these more realistic, durable, and satisfying internal objects are available to be identified with, to offer one and to be offered nourishment and comfort in turn. Yet the pressures of that founding, depressive realization can also continually impel the psyche back toward depression, toward manic escapism, or toward the violently projective defenses of the paranoid/schizoid position. We feel these depressive pressures in the forms of remorse, shame, the buzzing confusion that makes thought impossible, depression itself, mourning for the lost ideal, and—often most relevant—a paralyzing apprehension of the inexorable laws of unintended consequences.

My own uncomfortable sense is that, for me at any rate, activist politics takes place—even at best—just at this difficult nexus between the paranoid/schizoid and the depressive positions. Suppose the paranoid/schizoid, entirely caught up in splitting and projection, to be always saying, like



on 09 February 2021

638 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

Nietzsche or Harold Bloom, “Those others are all about resentment.” Or you can translate it into Republicanese: “Those others are all about partisan rancor.” Suppose the depressive to be able to say at least intermittently, “We, like those others, are subject to the imperious projective dynamics of resentment; what next? By what means might the dynamics themselves become different?” As I understand my own political history, it has often happened that the propulsive energy of activist justification, of being or feeling joined with others in an urgent cause, tends to be structured very much in a paranoid/schizoid fashion: driven by attributed motives, fearful contempt of opponents, collective fantasies of powerlessness and/ or omnipotence, scapegoating, purism, and schism. Paranoid/schizoid, in short, even as the motives that underlie political commitment may have much more to do with the complex, mature ethical dimension of the depressive position.

In an earlier essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” I speculated about why queer theory in general seems to display, if anything, a distinctive surplus or overdetermination in its elaboration of paranoid energies and forms of thought.<sup>8</sup> That tendency is fully visible in *Epistemology of the Closet*, for one example, whose rhetorical and polemical energy are so dependent on the projective symmetries of “It takes one to know one”— even as the analysis of those symmetries, in all their tricky performative pragmatics, is also the constative project of the book.<sup>9</sup> “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” also takes up the marked centrality of paranoia in other founding texts of queer theory and activism. But in those speculations I overlooked the crudest, most contingent, and probably also most important reason why paranoia seems so built into queer theory as such. To quite get that, I think one has to have experienced gay life in the 1980s and early '90s, when queer theory was still a tentative, emergent itinerary. That was also the moment when AIDS was a new and nearly untreatable disease—bringing a sudden, worse than Euripidean horror into the lives of urban gay men and their friends. It was not an uncommon experience then to be in a room of vibrant young people, conscious that within a year or two, all but a few of them would have sickened and died.

What's equally hard to reconstruct now is the not knowing what kind of response to AIDS might crystallize from the state and the public sphere. This was the time when, despite the hecatombs of dead, the word AIDS didn't cross the lips of the U.S. president for the first six years of the epidemic, while prominent legislators and complacent pundits busied themselves

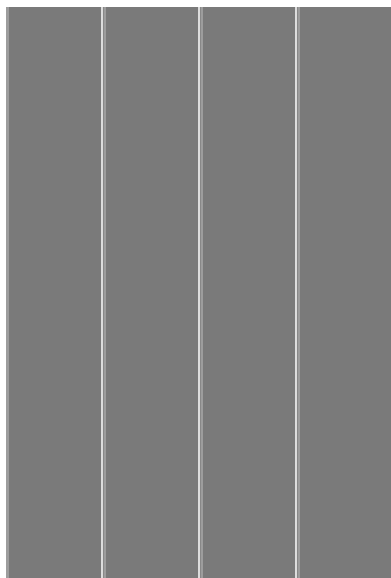
on 09 February 2021

with fake-judicious, fake-practical, prurient schemes for testing, classifying, rounding up, tattooing, quarantining, and otherwise demeaning and killing men and women with AIDS. Now we live in a world in which most of these things haven't happened, at least in relation to AIDS. But they were staples of public discourse at the time, and there was no visible brake on their implementation from any sanctioned, nonhomophobic argument in the public sphere. The congruence of such fantasies—fantasies that never understood themselves to be such—with Foucauldian understandings of how panoptic power gets embodied through the disciplines of bureaucracy, law, psychiatry, science, and public health, was inescapable to those who awaited or fought to prevent their implementation.

Dread, intense dread, both focused and diffuse, is a good name for the dominant tonality of those years for queer people, at least for those who survived. The punishing stress of such dread, and the need of mobilizing powerful resources of resistance in the face of it, did imprint a paranoid structuration onto the theory and activism of that period, and no wonder. The wonder, at least to me, is at the resoundingly vigorous resource of thought and action that many people were able to mine from that otherwise impoverishing, and humiliating, enforced resort to the paranoid position.

In the mid-1990s, developments both public and private came together, for me, to produce some changed relations to paranoid thinking and writing. A nodal point was the summer of 1996, when news from the Eleventh International AIDS Conference in Vancouver indicated for the first time that for many, HIV could plausibly be treated as a chronic disease through the use of cocktails of newly developed drugs. The brutally abbreviated temporality of the lives of many women and men with HIV seemed suddenly, radically extended if not normalized. Along with many, many others, I was trying over that summer to assimilate an unaccustomed palette of feelings among which relief, hope, and expansiveness and surprise set the tone. But the end of that summer was also the time that, in a strange chiasmus, I learned that my breast cancer, diagnosed in 1991, had spread and become incurable. So my own temporality and mortality came into an unexpected kind of focus—informed by my immersion in the AIDS emergency, but experienced, as it also happened, through a very different set of affective frameworks.

I've often wondered why my relation to my own disease hasn't involved



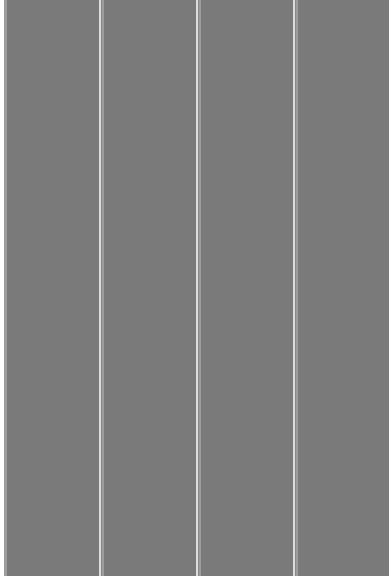
on 09 February 2021

640 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

the emotions of anger, disbelief, or even dread to anything like the degree that I felt them in relation to the AIDS experiences of people I cared about. Surely it has something to do with the differences between a new disease and an old one; a highly stigmatized disease and one that, even then, was much less so; and, more generally, vicarious as opposed to direct experiences of pain and debility. But I'd also invoke my lifelong depressiveness. Among its other effects, it had endeared to me the idea of nonbeing, as well as made me perhaps oversensitive to the psychic expense extorted by the paranoid defenses. Without necessarily being secure in my depressive position, I knew for sure that the paranoid/schizoid was no place I could afford to dwell as I dealt with the exigencies of my disease. This was also the moment when a lot of Buddhist reading helped me find (or construct) an articulated psychological framework that promised to sustain some of the antinomies of my situation.

At any rate, for reasons both private and public, I found myself at this point increasingly discontented with the predominance of the self-perpetuating kinds of thought that I increasingly seemed to be recognizing under the rubric of paranoia. Other first-generation queer thinkers seem to have felt a similar need and moved in different directions with it; while I see my own work since then as a series of experiments aimed at instantiating, and making somehow available to readers, some alternative forms of argument and utterance. Twenty-first-century mainstream gay and lesbian culture and politics, meanwhile, have resolutely pushed the whole AIDS experience behind them with an all but programmatic disavowal of trauma and dread—but with the expensive result that those venues have become affectively hollowed out, brittle and banalized. I also see that a lot of more recent queer theory has retained the paranoid structure of the earlier AIDS years, but done so increasingly outside of a context where it had reflected a certain, palpable purchase on daily reality.

Sometimes I think of the shape of my present life in terms of a flight from that dangerous-feeling, activist proximity of paranoid/schizoid energies—a flight into depression, occasionally, but on a more reliable basis and more productively and pleasurably, a flight from depression into pedagogy (pedagogy not referring, for me, to the academic institution so much as to a mode of relationality—not only in the classroom, but equally around it and, especially, as a writer). Last year at a meeting of my department's graduate



on 09 February 2021

admissions committee, one colleague was complaining about a particular applicant whose personal statement focused on being diagnosed with depression in the middle of college. “I hate it when they use depression as an excuse,” this colleague said. To which another one responded, “Depression is no excuse! Excuse, hell—it’s a prerequisite.”

I don’t know whether it’s true that intellectuals and teachers, especially in the humanities, are more prone to depression than other people; but I strongly believe that, as Klein would have predicted, for the many of us who are prone to it, this tendency is woven as densely into our abilities as into our disabilities, our quite individual creativity as much as our sometimes stereotypical forms of blockage.

Among these and many similar dynamics, there’s sometimes an unexpected psychological leverage from invoking another Buddhist idea: it’s about karma. Not karma as a system of reward and punishment, in which, to be honest, I could not be less interested, but karma as plain causality, exemplified by the inexorable Rube Goldberg physics of those uncontrollable, paranoid/schizoid chains of projective identification; the ways in which what one already is puts its inevitable spin on what one says, does, and perceives—and vice versa. For resentment, then, read karma—the big, sloppy, psychic hurricane-footprint, the interactive histories that make someone difficult to be with or difficult to be. I’m imagining something like this: that the paranoid/schizoid position involves bad karma, lots of it—it emerges from bad karma and, through projective identification, sends more bad karma careening out into the world. And the depressive position involves the endless, heroic, but discouraging attempt to turn bad karma into good karma.

In every religious tradition I know of, though, there is at least one stream of mystical thought that is heading somewhere different from this. In Buddhism you could paraphrase it like this: it’s better to have good karma than bad karma; but the best thing of all, the most liberating and skillful thing, is to have no karma.

I should probably add that, at least in mystical Buddhism, no karma doesn’t mean no action. Instead, it’s the figure without karma, the bodhisattva, the ultimate teacher, who is able to perceive and be perceived clearly enough that the things he or she does are efficacious—and no more than efficacious.

It seems inevitable for us karmic individuals, trapped in the rounds of samsara, that even the invocation of nonkarmic possibility will be karmi-

on 09 February 2021

642 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

cally overdetermined. It will have all too many uses, too many causes, and too many effects. Clearly it can function as evasion, as the notion of the Aesthetic is now commonly seen as functioning. You might even see it as overdetermined by our depressiveness itself and by our pedagogical neediness. At any rate, that these elements can be closely proximate is clear. To me, though, apparently a vision of nonkarmic possibility, however subject to abuse, also illuminates some possibilities of opening out new relations to the depressive position.

#### Notes

1. 1 R. D. Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (London: Free Association Books, 1998), and Meira Likierman, *Melanie Klein: Her Work in Context* (London: Continuum, 2002). Subsequent citations will be given parenthetically by page number.
2. 2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
3. 3 Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953–73), 5:517.
4. 4 Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 392.
5. 5 Adam Frank pointed this out to me.
6. 6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 82–85.
7. 7 Melanie Klein, “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms” (1946), in *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, ed. R. E. Money-Kyrle et al. (London: Hogarth, 1984), 3:8.
8. 8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–51.
9. 9 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

Downloaded from <http://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article-pdf/106/3/625/469979/SAQ106-03-20SedgwickFpp.pdf> by BOSTON COLLEGE user

on 09 February 2021