The moments in Eve Sedgwick’s writing I have returned to most often are the ones where she is engaged in a palpable, even flamboyant, effort to make her readers not just smarter, but happier, too, to provide them with resources for revising the affect theories that guide their everyday lives, in a way that has an ameliorative, antidepressive, sustaining, or energizing effect on those lives. I think, for example, in “Queer and Now,” of the list of all the elements that are “condensed in the notion of sexual identity” and are supposed to organize there into “a seamless and univocal whole,” but that, upon reading this list, fall apart into a surprisingly wide range of possibilities, as one realizes anew how ridiculously and spectacularly reductive the heterosexual-homosexual binary is. I know I am not the only one who felt recognized by Sedgwick’s shout-out to those for whom “the constituent elements” of my gender and sexuality can’t be made “to signify monolithically” or who felt newly alert to my estrangement from this reductive and reifying notion of “sexual identity.” Moreover, emboldened by the perspective offered by Sedgwick’s critical voice and the nimbus provided by the word queer, I was able (to borrow from Djuna Barnes) “to dazzle my own estrangement.” And, with my estrangement temporarily amazed and distracted, it became itself available for contemplation and consideration, enabling me to see how it was something I shared with others, and how it might be the locus of a politics.

I have battened on many other such reparative passages in Sedgwick’s work, especially in her later writing where the reparative impulse moves to the forefront both as motive and topic. Yet, in my most recent rereading of one of these later essays, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” I found its affective tone to be more conflicted than I had remembered. There is a lot going on in this essay, both in terms of the argument and in terms of the affects that are swirling around. That is, it’s not all friendly and reparative in there; indeed, there are moments when Sedgwick seems...
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angry at paranoid reading and its practitioners, a group (complicating things further) in which she insistently includes herself and in which we, too, may recognize ourselves, or at least parts of those selves. Reflecting on the voluble mix of affects in this essay, however, reminded me that the energy generated by negative affects in Sedgwick’s work has always contributed to the thrill I have experienced in reading it. In “Queer and Now,” for instance, one notices that it is precisely the depressing effects of the Christmas monolith that occasions her reflection on what “queer” is and how it might be enabling. And the essay as a whole is framed by the alarming and depressing statistics about the suicides of gay and lesbian teenagers at the beginning and, at the end, the dispiriting effects of the vociferous journalistic attacks on “political correctness” and on Sedgwick herself. That is, Sedgwick appears to marshal her most reparative prose precisely in response to a hostile environment, where she is aware that she and her friends and allies are unvalued, unnourished, indeed under attack.

The first time I read “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” I found myself vibrating most empathetically to the chords of Sedgwick’s sensitivity “to the psychic expense extorted by the paranoid defenses” (as she describes it in a later, related essay, “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes”). Her description of the logic of paranoia, with its special attunement to the moods of academic departments, helped me to understand why I have found the behavior of paranoid colleagues so disorienting and depressing. In Sedgwick’s description of the contagiousness of paranoia, the way that it tended to “grow like a crystal in a hypersaturated solution” and inexorably pulled one into its “symmetrical epistemologies” and in her communication of the urgency, for the depressive personality, of resisting this pull, I saw news I could use, welcome assistance in understanding an aspect of my own daily emotional life I had previously found convoluted and confusing.

This continuity I found between affect theory as a critical or academic practice and as an everyday one in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” is, of course, something that Sedgwick explicitly thematizes there. Summarizing Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick notes that “all people’s cognitive/affective lives are organized according to alternative, changing, strategic and hypothetical affect theories.” Based on accumulated experience, such affect theories are, among other things, “highly organized way[s] of interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified, and the rest discarded.” As a mode of “selective scanning and amplification,” where certain affects and relevant information are prioritized, this “largely tacit theorizing all people
do in experiencing and trying to deal with their own and others affects” is not so different from the explicit theorizing scientists, philosophers, queer theorists, and other academics do in their work on affect.

Among other things, acknowledging and emphasizing that everyday theory and academic theory are not of different ontological orders opens the door to thinking about how your academic theorizing may resonate with readers’ everyday theorizing. And when a writer embraces this possible reverberation of her writing, it allows for author and reader to enter into a kind of mimetic relation where each is engaged in similar tasks, alongside or together with each other.

But, where the “hermeneutics of suspicion” remains a dominant structure of feeling, offering emotional assistance to one’s readers may appear, in its touchy-feely-ness, to be a trivial, indeed unscholarly motive. Even if we all know on some level that the mood one finds oneself in after or during reading a scholarly essay or book contributes significantly to the kind of suspicion or admiration one may then feel and direct toward it, emotional impact is usually not recognized as a valid evaluative criteria for academic work. “Does this book or article make you happier” is not, after all, on the reviewer checklist when one is reading for a journal or press, or writing a tenure report.

I want to turn now to the interactions between the suspicious mode of attunement to which we are most accustomed in the academic profession and the reparative, mimetic one that Sedgwick advocates for. I will do this by way of two anecdotes, the first of which is embarrassingly autobiographical; the other is borrowed from Andy Warhol’s POPism: The Warhol 60s. They both concern moments of failed imitation or, rather, moments of successful and affectionate imitation that were found to be improper by suspicious members of their respective audiences.

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The first year I went on the job market, without much of my dissertation being written, I was lucky enough to get invited for one campus visit, which was at Harvard. The first part of the day, occupied with casual banter and lunch went fine, even well; but the job talk itself was a total disaster. This was in part because the experience was novel to me, and I didn’t know how to handle my nervousness, itself unexpected and new; my case of nerves made it difficult to eat, although I did keep drinking coffee. By the time the job talk rolled around in the midafternoon—actually, just as
I began my job talk—the combination of lack of nourishment and adrenaline and caffeine produced some kind of abrupt plunge in the level of my blood sugar during which I felt my capacity for intelligent thought, indeed simply for performing the basic task of enunciation, plummet minute by minute. In my increasingly panicked state, all saliva seemed to vanish from my mouth, and I had to sip water like every two sentences just to enable my mouth to produce articulate sound. (Seen from a certain perspective, this apparent attempt to set a record for most sips of water ever taken during a talk might have been comical, but at the moment I just thought, “Oh man, this is not good!”) And if I was not doing so well with reading the paper, my downward spiraling resource of calories, dwindling self-confidence, and declining lucidity left me rather defenseless during the question-and-answer period. At a particularly low moment, a certain faculty member asked me something like “[S]ince your talk is a queer reading of Henry James [which it was], what makes you different from Eve Sedgwick?”

I understood the tone of the question to clearly indicate that being similar to Eve (whom the faculty knew to be my teacher) was the wrong thing to be, and that explaining my difference was the only way to demonstrate that I was the right kind of original, authentic, independent-thinking, young (but not immature) scholar who could be offered a job at Harvard. The question was further overdetermined by the fact that the English department was at that moment actively considering offering Eve a position. In any event, for my part, because I so much wanted to be more like Eve than I was or ever could be, my non–Eve-ness ever apparent to me, the possibility that someone could see me as somehow being too similar to Eve had never even entered my head. Nor, for that matter, had it occurred to me that the desirability of imitating Eve could be in question, although I have since learned that being asked to distinguish oneself from one’s teachers is not unusual during a job interview. However, here, when the evidently apparent pleasure I took in imitating Eve was questioned, I was not only flummoxed and flustered, I was ashamed. Like a boy who thought that his dressing in women’s clothes was really quite exciting and likely to meet with the enthusiastic approval of his parents or his friends, only to discover that approval was far from what they felt, I suddenly felt painfully exposed, as though my very being announced an essential wrongness.

In this state, the first thought that flashed into my brain was “Um, I guess this probably wouldn’t be the moment to tell you that I am wearing Eve’s tie”—because that was the thing—I had actually borrowed Eve’s tie for the occasion (just as my friend José Muñoz had the previous year). In
other words, I imagined myself saying, “Not only do I appear to be imitating Eve in my work, but I also happen to be wearing her clothes!”

I didn’t say that though, instead tentatively offering something about how, by way of James, I was interested in historicizing the psychoanalytic account of affect. I wished in the weeks and months afterwards that I had offered a braver answer, a fierce avowal of my desire to be like Eve; not only had I been ashamed, but I was then ashamed that I had been made to feel shame about my imitation of Eve. After I returned to Durham, Eve was a great aid in processing this event. We had fun playing around with the different ways I might have responded to the demand to explain my difference from her. Eve’s favorite was “Unlike Eve Sedgwick, I would take a job at Harvard.”

In borrowing Eve’s tie, not only was I attempting to literalize the sequins we all felt scattered upon us, to remind me of them while I was on my campus visit, but I was also engaging in the kind of imitation, the type of identity play, to which I had become accustomed at Duke, and which made it such an interesting and engaging, at times joyous, place to be, a phenomenon that owed not a little bit to the oft-hilarious and inspiring mimetic talents of Michael Moon. Like paranoia, and indeed like shame, affectionate games of resemblance are also contagious. And Eve was abundantly and enthusiastically available for various practices of resemblance, identification, and imitation.

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I was very pleased to learn, while working on Andy Warhol, that Warhol, too, had run into a bit of trouble involving improper imitation in front of a suspicious university audience. In 1967, a lecture bureau Warhol had signed up with booked him to give a number of talks at various colleges and universities. However, as he put it in POPism, “I was too shy and scared to talk myself,” and so he would bring along various of his “superstar” associates and friends, including Viva, Ultra Violet, Brigid Berlin, Paul Morrissey, and Allen Midgette, and they would answer questions while he sat quietly on stage. Admittedly, this wasn’t exactly a lecture, “it was more like a talk-show with a dummied-up host,” but at least Warhol himself was present at the event. This was not the case later in the year when Warhol decided it would be better to just send out Midgette on his own to lecture as Warhol. “Allen was so good looking,” not to mention younger, Warhol reasoned, “they might even enjoy him more.” Moreover, having Midgette appear as Warhol fit in quite well with Warhol’s persistent interest in identity confusions:
We’d been playing switch the superstar at parties and openings around New York for years, telling people that Viva was Ultra and Edie was me and I was Gerard—sometimes people would get mixed up all by themselves... and we wouldn’t bother to correct them, it was too much fun to let them go on getting it all wrong—it seemed like a joke to us. So these antistar identity games were something we were doing anyway, as a matter of course.

Unfortunately, when “somebody at one of the colleges happened to see a picture of [Warhol] in the Voice and compared it to the one he’d taken of Allen on the podium” Warhol got caught and soon realized that what for him had been a classic Pop “put-on” was “what some people would call fraud.” Warhol was surprised at how upset people got at the identity games he had gotten in the habit of playing, but recognized their unraveling effect when he was on “the phone with an official from one of the other colleges of the tour, telling him how really sorry I was when he turned paranoid and said: How can I even be sure this is really you on the phone right now? After a pause while I gave that some thought, I had to admit, ‘I don’t know.’” He had to refund the lecture fees.17

What Warhol’s story shares with my own is the surprise and disappointment that can happen when there is a collision between different affect theories, in this case between one where imitation and identity games are a regular source of enjoyment and interest and one, identified by Warhol as “paranoid,” where such imitation is suspect and where authenticity and a self-identity are the source of one’s value.

Warhol’s commitment to identity games, which were undeterred by getting caught here (even if he did realize that he should be more careful where contracts and money were concerned), was part of his broader interest in producing all kinds of likenesses, which I understand to be the central component of his self-proclaimed project of “liking everything.” He explains this project in a 1963 interview where he plays with different meanings of the word like, asserting that he wants “everybody to think alike,” that “everybody should like everybody,” and that “Pop art is liking things.” In the Warhol book I have been working on, I argue that Warhol’s capacity for liking operates through the appreciation and production of similarities. Thus, I have been interested in exploring Warhol’s striking proliferation of likeness-producing practices, in his famous serial paintings of familiar images such as Campbell’s soup cans or Marilyn Monroe, but also across the wide range of his aesthetic commitments, from his affection for bad acting and his fascination with drag queens to his promo-
tion of boredom, his imitation of the machine, his late camouflage paintings, and having Allen Midgette impersonate him.

I like the idea of liking as a project or practice that one might actively pursue, a strong theory of positive affect (one, perhaps, related to the one that Sedgwick sees in Proust) that could be learned and practiced, and I want to see Warhol’s Pop as at once a series of illustrations of Warhol’s own approach to liking and a pedagogical effort to help us expand our own capacities for liking. It is hard to imagine a practice that is farther from a paranoid hermeneutics of suspicion; it certainly represents a departure from scholarly skepticism, and it is directly opposed to what we usually think of as the exercise of critical taste or political judgment. Yet I do not think Warhol’s self-avowed aim of liking things represents the complacency or simple affirmation of which Warhol has sometimes been accused. Instead, Warhol’s practice has its own utopian impulse: it is an attempt to imagine new, queer forms of attachment and affiliation, and to transform the world into a place where these forms could find a home. Thus, rather than a defense against affect, I see in Warhol’s promiscuous liking a set of attempts to figure out how to engage the world affectively in a world that was not necessarily interested in engaging or nourishing him.

As such, I think Warhol provides a rich series of examples of reparative practices “that emerge from queer experience but become invisible or illegible under a paranoid optic,” as Sedgwick puts it in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.” Indeed, Warhol seems to offer a paradigmatic instance of what Joseph Litvak describes as “practices aimed at taking the terror out of error, at making the making of mistakes sexy, creative, even cognitively powerful.” Few seemed to have known better than Warhol that, as Litvak put it, “mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises” Indeed, Warhol emphasized mistakes and failures again and again as the most interesting kinds of experiences, aesthetic and otherwise. He explained, for example, that

something that I look for in an associate is a certain amount of misunderstanding of what I’m trying to do. Not a fundamental misunderstanding; just minor misunderstandings here and there. When someone doesn’t quite completely understand what you want from them, or when the tape is bad, or when their own fantasies start coming through, I often wind up liking what comes out of it all better than I liked my original idea . . . when you work with people who misunderstand you, instead of getting transmissions, you
get transmutations, and that’s much more interesting in the long run.²⁰

In these examples, or in his insistence that he always wants the wrong person for the part when he has to cast an acting role because “no person is ever completely right for any part, because a part is a role is never real, so if you can’t get someone who’s perfectly right, it’s more satisfying to get someone who’s perfectly wrong,”²¹ it’s not hard to see an attempt at “loosening the traumatic, inevitable-seeming connection between mistakes and humiliation.”²² In fact, even where he sees no mistakes, he imagines them:

[W]hen I see an old Esther Williams movie and a hundred girls are jumping off their swings, I think of what the auditions must have been like and about all the takes where maybe one girl didn’t have the nerve to jump when she was supposed to, and I think about her left over on the swing. So that take of the scene was a leftover on the editing room floor—an out-take—and the girl was probably a leftover at that point—she was probably fired—so the whole scene is much funnier than the real scene where everything went right, and the girl who didn’t jump is the star of the out-take.²³

Such mistakes or failures were compelling for Warhol in part because he saw how they might produce a feeling of sharing, enact a sense of being-in-common. For instance, Warhol suggests that the best thing that can happen on a date is that you wait in line for a movie and fail to get in: “[N]ever getting in is the most exciting,” he remarks, “but after that waiting to get in is the most exciting.”²⁴ Not getting what you want in this instance is not only not something to be disappointed about, it is the most exciting thing that can happen because it produces intimacy, it means you have “shared a whole experience.”

Warhol seemed to see the Factory as a place where certain failures to fit in or act grown-up could be the basis for such a potentially exciting or at least comforting experience of commonality. In *POPism*, Warhol reflected on the aggressive attacks on homosexuality directed at the Factory and speculated that it was not homosexuality as such that was being attacked so much as the way that gays in the Factory were “strong enough to say you were different and actually have fun with it” instead of being “hypocritical and covert.” That, Warhol thought, “incensed a lot of people who wanted the old stereotypes to stay around.” Why, he wondered, don’t these people attacking the Factory “care about all the miserable people in
the world who just can’t fit into stock roles?” Not fitting into a stock role is a particular experience of failure, distinct from waiting in line and failing to get into the movie in that, in line, there are other persons present—indeed they are constitutive of the situation. Not fitting into a stock role, on the other hand, is generally experienced as an isolating and alienating phenomenon, as though everyone has gotten into the movie except you. Warhol’s fantasy about the Factory, it would seem, is that it could be a place where a range of misfits might find a place to experience their misfitting in common.

Not only, then, is my work on Warhol about Warhol’s Pop as a reparative practice, but I am struck by how it is also reparative on my part. It is an attempt to return to and reactivate, create a useful affect theory out of, and argue for the values and pleasures—values and pleasures generated precisely in relation to the shame or potential shame that circulates around them—of the resembling and imitations and identity games that were so much a part of my experience as a graduate student at Duke, and the education in which was one of Eve’s great gifts to me.

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NOTES

1. This text is a revision and expansion of the talk that I presented at “Honoring Eve: A Symposium Celebrating the Work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,” Boston University, 31 October 2009.


3. Ibid., 8.

4. The phrase is from Djuna Barnes’s Nightwood (New York: New Directions, 1946). Early in the novel, Barnes is describing the character Felix’s attraction to the pageantry of the circus and to circus performers. These performers, Barnes writes, “took titles merely to dazzle boys about town, to make their public life (and it was all they had) mysterious and perplexing, knowing well that skill is never so amazing as when it seems inappropriate. Felix clung to his title to dazzle his own estrangement. It brought them together” (11).


8. On paranoia’s contagiousness and its construction of symmetrical epistemologies, see ibid., 126–27.
9. Ibid., 134.
12. Ibid., 134.
14. I refer to Eve Sedgwick, the author, as “Sedgwick” and to the person who was my teacher as “Eve.”
15. Here I am referencing the following passage from Eve Sedgwick, A Dialogue on Love (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999):

   Last week Mary described me to myself as “scattering sequins over us all”—all the people I love. She’s right, she and they do seem so glamorous and numinous to me. I always see the light shaking out of their wings. It does shock me when anyone views them in an ordinary light—or worse when they see each other that way. (108)

16. Warhol recounts the story in Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, POPism, 247–48. Warhol quotes about this event in the following text are from these pages.
17. I discuss this story in the context of a longer argument about the relationship between liking and likeness in Warhol’s work in “Like: Collecting and Collectivity,” October 132, no. 2 (2010): 114–34. Some of the discussion of Warhol over the next couple of paragraphs is borrowed from this essay.
19. Personal communication, cited by Sedgwick, ibid., 147.
21. Ibid., 83.
23. Warhol, Philosophy, 93.
24. Ibid., 115.