

Periperformativity: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Queer Step Ahead

Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003. ISBN 0-8223-3015-6. 196 pp.

Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity offers a collection of essays that reflect literary critic, queer theorist and activist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's research interests in the last decade. Despite the richness, suggestiveness and complexity of Kosofsky Sedgwick's argumentations and writing style, her lines of thought may still be relatively clear to the informed reader. The first three chapters explore issues of performativity and the affects and their implications for literary analysis. Taking into consideration these investigations, Chapter 4 engages in a more general discussion on the current state of theory. Finally, a concern with pedagogical issues provides an original coda in the last chapter on Buddhism.

Kosofsky Sedgwick continues to explore performativity in a project that she started in her most well-known book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991). In that work, she showed her fascination with gender and sexuality as performance, shared by other pioneer queer theorists since the 1980s. In this sense, the introduction to *Touching Feeling* provides useful hints for the current state of affairs in the study of performance and performativity in literary and critical theory. Kosofsky Sedgwick traces two distinct trends that followed J. L. Austin's works: one that is more formalist and linguistic, exemplified by the works of John Searle and Émile Benveniste; and the one from which her own work develops, Derridean deconstruction and Judith Butler's queer formulations.

In critical theory, the "performative" is studied in two ways, either by focusing on the dramatic and the non-verbal—theater criticism,—or by emphasizing the non-referential, and the verbal—speech act theory and deconstruction (7). Providing her interest in dismantling dualistic thought, Kosofsky Sedgwick is mainly interested in the ways these two critical discourses converge. However, J.L. Austin is still the point of departure. She prefers to call "explicit performatives" those speech acts that Austin defined in the 1950s as "performatives," for example, the formulaic "I do"

that executes the institution of marriage. Even though she acknowledges the centrality of the explicit performative, what is important for Kosofsky Sedgwyck is everything that lies in their vicinity – what she defines as “periperformative utterances.” They are characterized by their allusion to a central performative utterance, sometimes describing or even negating that explicit performative:

Periperformative utterances aren't just about performative utterances in a referential sense: they cluster around them, they are near them or next to them or crowding against them; they are in the neighborhood of the performative. Like the neighborhoods in real estate ads, periperformative neighborhoods have prestigious centers (the explicit performative utterance) but not very fixed circumferences; yet the prestige [that she later explains as rhetorical force] of the center extend unevenly, even unpredictably through the rest of the neighborhood. (68)

To offer an example, Kosofsky Sedgwyck explores “the topic of marriage itself as theater” in well-known nineteenth century novels, trying to include both the verbal and the non-verbal in her analysis. She claims that in Victorian fiction, the “sexual plot climaxes” do not take place “in the moment of adultery, but in the moment when the proscenium arch of the marriage is, however excruciatingly, displaced” (73). It is in the vicinities of the performative utterance and act of marriage where the literary critic may find the subtle and often contradictory consequences of its centrality, its rhetorical force, and even its subversive potential.

Furthermore, she emphasizes the spatial quality of the periperformative. Spatiality enables the periperformative to be “the mode in which people may invoke illocutionary acts in the explicit context of other illocutionary acts” (79). This is exemplified in her comprehensive analysis of the convergence of the topic of British marriage and U.S. slavery in Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Sons* (1848). In the novel, different allusions to the institution of marriage as slave market, especially in the case of Edith Dombey, Mr. Dombey's second wife, connect with Charles Dickens's actual interest in American slavery as noted in his travel book *American Notes* (1842). This fact launches Kosofsky Sedgwyck's exploration of periperformative gestures that reveal Dickens's understanding of both

acts: getting married, and becoming a slave, emphasizing what Michel Foucault called “the over-all ‘discursive fact’” in the context of his analysis of sexuality (Cit. in 91).

Kosofsky Sedgwyck’s expansion of speech act theory is complemented by another line of investigation that recovers relatively unknown psychologist Sylvan Tomkins’s work on affect. To put it simply, affects differ from drives for their non-instrumentality, for being “autotelic.” Tomkins’s statement, “any affect may have any ‘object,’” becomes the motto for Kosofsky Sedgwyck (19). The productive quality of affects makes them relatively unconstrained, and thus provides a “structural potential” that the drive system lacks. She follows Tomkins in arguing for the importance of affects as main motivators of human behavior. This fact also leads to the consideration of sexuality as the “most affectlike” of the drives (18). In this sense, the study of affects allows for the exploration of fluid sexualities, emphasizing multiplicity and productivity (100-1).

Among the basic affects defined by Tomkins, Kosofsky Sedgwyck focuses on the study of shame, an affect that is innately activated by “the incomplete reduction of interest or joy” (97). The study of shame offers “a script for interpreting other people’s behavior toward oneself” (62). In this vein, Kosofsky Sedgwyck approaches Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel* in two ways: in relation to his own shame after his unsuccessful experiences as a playwright; and in connection with his past selves, particularly with his former self as a child. Kosofsky Sedgwyck’s study of the “inner child” in Henry James’s works, as well as her reading of Sogyal Rinpoche’s bestseller *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* in the last chapter of the book (157), are certainly among the most illuminating and useful for the literary critic. For her, the metaphor of the “inner child” is interesting insofar “that [it] presents one’s relation to one’s own past as a relationship, intersubjective as it is intergenerational” (40). This connects with her concern with the image of “the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (yet?) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification,” which becomes for her “a kind of *genius loci* for queer reading.”¹

For Kosofsky Sedgwyck, the study of the periperformative and the affect of shame are useful not only for literary and cultural analysis in general, but also to explore (queer) identity politics (62). However, she is

preoccupied with making it clear that there is nothing inherently subversive in studying periperformative utterances (90). In this sense, her reflections on the current state of affairs in what we call “theory” clarify her concerns. After the triumph of the “hermeneutics of suspicion”—in Paul Ricoeur’s words,—she defined theory as paranoia, or “systematic persecutory delusion” (125). Among its features, which she extensively analyzes in Chapter 4, an antiessentialist positionality stands out as a premise for any critical undertaking, what she calls the “paranoid imperative” (126). Why is “respectable,” “serious,” or “strong” theory equaled to antiessentialism? Does antiessentialism always lead to subversive critical interventions? On the one hand, Kosofsky Sedgwyck offers a critique to a whole line of critical thought coming from poststructuralist and mostly deconstructive theorizations, when she ponders:

[...] it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds. (126)

On the other, she is also targeting both her own and other queer theorists’ fascination with the performativity of gender and sex, by rejecting paranoid critical thinking as “a privilege *object* of antihomophobic theory,” an idea that has been prevalent in the development of queer theory since the mid 1980s (126. Emphasis in the original).

In conclusion, Kosofsky Sedgwyck offers her particular views on “what is left of theory?,” a question of primary concern in current academic debates.² More particularly, she partakes in queer theorists’ efforts to look for alternative, non-dominant systems of thought that may be adequate to the study of sexualities in terms of production. She revisits debates that have been central in feminist and queer studies—essentialism vs. social constructivism. And finally, she gives hints at issues that cultural and queer theorists are now starting to consider, such as the question of whether visibility is enough for effective political representation (140).³ In this context, her insights on the visibility of violence are worth reproducing here:

In the United States and internationally, while there is plenty of violence that require exposure there is also, and, increasingly, an ethos where forms of violence that are hypervisible from the start may be offered as an exemplary spectacle rather than remain to be unveiled as a scandalous secret. (140)

The reflection shows another important aspect of Kosofsky Sedgwyck's literary analyses and constant search for alternative new modes of critical thought: how her studies remain closely tied to the personal and the historical, a commitment that have always made her works distinct and distinguished.

Ricardo Vivancos Pérez
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Notes

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwyck, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You," *Novel Gazing. Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwyck (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 2.
2. Two books that show this interest and that can be consulted for further inquiry are the collection *What's Left of Theory?: New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas (New York : Routledge, 2000); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003).
3. For a different analysis of the questions of visibility and representation in current queer theory, see Anamarie Jagose, *Inconsequence. Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002).