



CHAPTER 3

Object-Love in the Later Writings of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

In her primer on living with advanced breast cancer, literary critic and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick tells a perplexing joke that she has brooded over increasingly as she gets deeper into her own cancer experience. Someone asks a farmer about his pig's wooden leg. The farmer goes into a long story with many examples of how the pig saved his son's life, his daughter's and her boyfriend's, and his own with progressively extraordinary feats of ingenuity that far exceed anything a pig would be capable of. But despite reciting the details of the pig's heroism, the farmer never explains why it has a wooden leg. Finally, the inquiring man beseeches the farmer to speak more directly, and the farmer says he thinks it should be obvious: You don't eat a pig like that all at once.¹ This odd tale can be seen as an analogy for living with cancer as a process of attrition in which corporeal wholeness is gradually eroded.

The allegory of the pig whose life and bodily integrity are subject to both danger and conservation encapsulates the major themes of this chapter. It supplies an open-ended instruction on survival, it ruminates upon death through gallows humor, it involves prosthetic part-objects, it grimly delights in the disassembling of the body into fragments, and unexpectedly



it has to do with love. Who loves whom and how that love is shown is put into question.

Sedgwick was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1991. She lived with cancer for eighteen years before succumbing to it in 2009. As in the case of Audre Lorde, her cancer supplied the occasion to reflect upon what is entailed in continued survival in the face of loss. Sedgwick's later writing mediates her relation to loss and mortality, and demonstrates how she learns to come to terms with enduring an illness without cure. In addressing her attitudes toward "living on" as a slow process of dying, she formulates a pedagogy of love in such writings as her contributions to *MAMM*, a magazine for "women, cancer, and community," and *A Dialogue on Love*, a memoir of her therapy. These two bodies of writing deal explicitly with illness and are arguably the least studied of her oeuvre—at least this is the case for the *MAMM* articles.² Sedgwick's "cancer journalism" and *Dialogue* represent a public discourse on love, which is intended to be used as "good pedagogy" to counteract the "bad pedagogy" of received knowledges from which threatened groups (queer, disabled, racially othered, poor, diversely shaped, to name a few) do not profit.³ In her later writings, Sedgwick learns how to grasp what sustains her by paradoxically letting go. One can view this as letting go of a desire for wholeness by embracing her own dissolution. By disseminating pieces of herself in her published works Sedgwick strives to serve as an instrument for good pedagogy. Detaching herself from the need to be the sole author of her experience, she mobilizes the destruction of cancer and its treatment into a process of collective reparative work—with her therapist and with her readers. These reparative labors are acts of impersonal and anonymous love. Through a generalized care for the world, Sedgwick learns to care for herself as an object of love.

A Public Discourse of Love

MAMM was conceived by Sean Strub, founder of *POZ*, a publication targeted to an HIV-positive or AIDS demographic. The first consumer magazine geared to people affected by breast and gynecologic cancers hit newsstands in October 1997 and was discontinued in 2009. Survival was an issue for *MAMM* since its inception. Initially its subtitle was "Courage, Respect and Survival" before it was changed to "Women, Cancer and Community." Cynthia Ryan titles her ethnographic study of editorial practices at *MAMM* "Struggling to Survive," foregrounding the rhetoric of survival that perennially attends cancer discourse and placing it within the financial constraints of a periodical that seeks to uphold high standards of medical

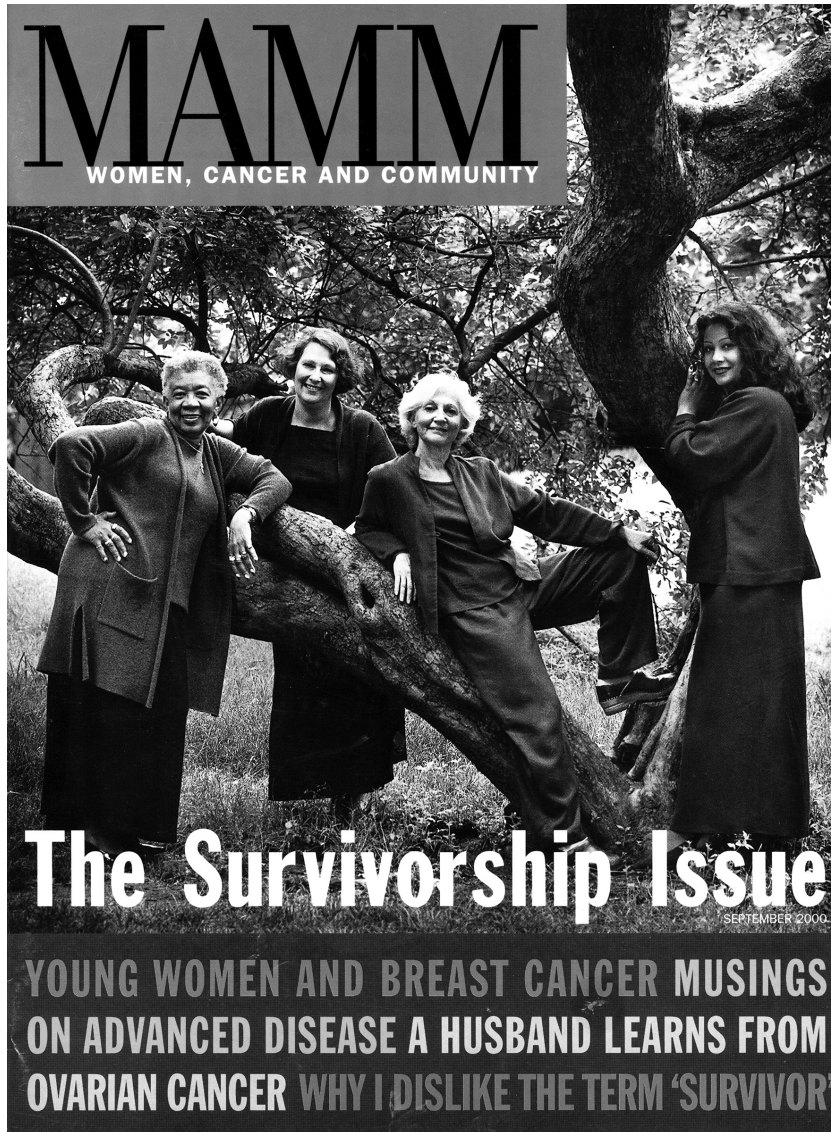


Figure 5. *MAMM*, September 2000. Courtesy of Hal Sedgwick.

journalism, while retaining advertising loyalty. *MAMM*'s predicted viability was initially favorable, given the one in eight women in this country to which it would presumably appeal, but its advertising base quickly and steadily declined soon after its initial publication.⁴ Despite the fact that both magazines jointly won the *Village Voice* best health/lifestyle award in 2002,

POZ, initiated four years earlier than *MAMM*, has outlived its sister publication and continues to this day.⁵

In its June/July 1998 issue, *MAMM* published Sandy Fernandez's history of the pink ribbon that has now become synonymous with breast cancer culture.⁶ Fernandez traces the pink ribbon initially to the yellow ribbons that signaled hope for the safe return of Iranian hostages, then to the iconic red AIDS ribbons, and last to a confluence of Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation's distribution of pink ribbons at its 1991 New York City Race for the Cure and a collaboration between *Self* magazine and Estée Lauder that resulted in 1.5 million pink ribbons being distributed at cosmetic counters across the country. This was the beginning of a mass mediatization of breast cancer culture in North America where malls and websites flood potential consumers with sneakers (Lace Up for the Cure), food processors (Cook for the Cure), and even toilet paper graced with pink ribbons to benefit the irreproachable cause of "breast cancer awareness." As Gayle Sulik succinctly puts it in *Pink Ribbon Blues*, "breast cancer is an illness that now functions as a concept brand."⁷ In an influential 2001 *Harpers* article, Barbara Ehrenreich lambasts what she calls the "cult of pink kitsch." She underscores the infantilization of women who are offered pink teddy bears upon diagnosis with her often quoted, pithy retort: "Certainly men diagnosed with prostate cancer do not receive gifts of Matchbox cars."⁸ In league with Ehrenreich, Marita Sturken identifies the teddy bear as the poster child of "comfort culture."⁹ Situated at the intersection of trauma and consumerism, the teddy bear has a depoliticizing function meant to reinforce the idea that hardships need only be endured—rather than actively interrogated as an impetus for change—with the help of a product that will make them "bearable."

Not long after Ehrenreich's critique of what she would later label the ideology of positive thinking, Breast Cancer Action (BCA), an activist organization based in San Francisco, launched its "Think Before You Pink" campaign. BCA coined the term "pinkwashing" to refer to the hypocrisy of corporations that prey upon consumer's charitable feelings to market products whose manufacture either cause cancer or are linked to the disease.¹⁰ Pink buckets of Kentucky Fried Chicken and Estée Lauder's pink ribbon cosmetics are two of the worst culprits. Sulik woefully summarizes the depleted discourse that circulates in contemporary breast cancer culture: "Courage. Strength. Goodness. Hope. Fight. Survive. Win. . . . The war on breast cancer when united with pink femininity leaves few other words from which to choose, and we speak with the words we have."¹¹

Although Ehrenreich cites *MAMM* as complicit in the compulsory optimism of breast cancer culture, Ryan argues that *MAMM*'s staff explicitly

attempts to counter the “traditional restitution narrative.”¹² Instead, their mission is one that Sedgwick would share as a contributing editor, to produce a manual for surviving with cancer, one that does not portray the cancer “survivor” as necessarily restored to an ideal of wholeness but as struggling with the disruptions of living with a chronic disease. The original editor, Regan Solmo, announced in its first issue that *MAMM* was a “guide to life. For anyone living with or affected by cancer.”¹³ This is an apt description of Sedgwick’s goals in “Off My Chest,” which performs love as a public discourse within a scene of identification and instruction.

In a review for the *Lesbian and Gay Studies Newsletter*, Sedgwick recounts how the medical editor of a local daily newspaper in Durham County, North Carolina, phoned her because he wanted a human angle on his piece and had heard that she was public about her diagnosis. Her conversation with the reporter suggests some of her motivations for undertaking her own cancer journalism. They spar for a bit:

REPORTER: So tell me, I know it isn’t lucky to have cancer, but do you feel you’re lucky that your cancer was detected early?

EKS: It wasn’t detected early. And even “early” isn’t early. According to current understandings of breast cancer, by the time it’s detectable on a mammogram or by touch, it’s already systemic.

REPORTER: But they got it all?

EKS: What part of the word “systemic” don’t you understand?

The reporter then asks if Sedgwick has any advice for other women.¹⁴ Sedgwick replies that she has lots of advice for women diagnosed with cancer. But the reporter corrects her, saying he was looking for advice for the “average woman.” Sedgwick responds that she hasn’t any except to avoid growing up five blocks from a major toxic incinerator.

Though this journalist did not seek her advice, Sedgwick was eager to offer it to the people whom she thought she could help, those who suffered from cancer. Her advice column, “Off My Chest,” appeared in *MAMM* from February 1998 until January 2003. The recurrent illustration that accompanied her column was the image of a telephone, as if Sedgwick were waiting for a call from someone unlike the aforementioned journalist for whom she could be of use. Much like the psychoanalyst whom Freud compared to a telephone receiver, positioned to hear the patient’s messages, Sedgwick might have symbolically embodied the telephone.¹⁵ On the other hand, she may very well have used the column as a forum in which to work through her own confusions and fears regarding her cancer which had metastasized by the time she began contributing to the magazine. In an interview that took place in January 2000, she confessed to making up all the letters because, much as she wished for correspondents, no one wrote in for advice.¹⁶ Composed in a populist, highly accessible and humorous style that skillfully reproduces the advice column genre, “Off My Chest” lands somewhere between talking to herself and talking to another. It has its ambiguity of voices in common with *Dialogue*, which I will elaborate upon later in this chapter. In her *MAMM* articles, Sedgwick gets to play both roles at once, the distraught, complaining, or bewildered questioner and the more settled, stable, sage advisor. Interestingly this multiplicity of selves materializes in her advice column moniker, *eves@mamm.com*, which reads as many Eves inviting you to “get it off your chest.”

Advice is by definition proffered at the onset of a problem. Sedgwick-as-Eve positions herself (or the team of Eves position themselves) as problem solver(s). The problem is how to survive a grave illness. Cynthia Franklin argues that *Dialogue* “extends to readers a form of impersonal intimacy, one that allows for forms of identification that make useful the narcissistic impulse of the therapy and one that provides provocative crossings between the private and the public, the personal and the political, the intimate and the public.”¹⁷

Sedgwick’s contributions to *MAMM* function similarly, albeit through a distinctly different style and format. By virtue of the shared narcissistic injury of cancer diagnosis she prompts identifications that move across the private and public, the personal and the political, stimulating their

interpenetrations. When she first publicly disclosed her diagnosis, she maintained that her purpose was to be available for identification. “It’s as though there were transformative political work to be done just by being available to be identified with in the very grain of one’s illness.”¹⁸ Additionally, Sedgwick regarded it her task to make people smarter, as she describes it in *Dialogue*.¹⁹

These two persistent goals—identification and instruction—are entwined and come under the rubric of “love.” Identification, a necessary step toward the capacity for object-love, is a mode of learning. Freud connects love as identification to education, which helps us to both differentiate ourselves from and bind ourselves to sociality. He makes this connection through the figure of the poet, a figure to which Sedgwick had a life-long devotion. The poet, for Freud, submits himself as the first ego ideal, much like Sedgwick aspired to in setting herself up as a model for identification.²⁰ Through his invention of heroic myth, the poet hands out imaginative advice on the nature of living and loving. Through her invention of “Eves,” an alter ego ideal who alternately takes the position of heroic leader and supplicant, Sedgwick doles out instructions on how to care for ourselves by identifying with her, which is to say, by loving her.

To understand identification as a form of love, it is useful to examine how Freud came to view identification as foundational to the formation of the ego. In his most extensive rumination on identification, which tellingly appears in his commentary on group psychology, Freud states more than once that identification is “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person,” or “the original form of emotional tie with an object.”²¹ Referring to his thesis that in cases of melancholia the attachment to a lost loved object takes an inward turn toward the self and is replaced by an identification, he asserts: “To the ego . . . living means the same as being loved.”²² By this account, life consists of the love of others who have been taken into the self. And this does not only apply to those suffering melancholia. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud realizes that replacing a lost object with an identification is, in fact, typical, and furthermore, that it may be the very means by which the ego is built, providing, as Deborah Britzman says, the “raw material for character.”²³ The process by which a love object that is lost or abandoned becomes a part of the ego resembles something of a love story itself. As Freud narrates it, “When the ego assumes the features of the object [that is, when it undergoes a process of identification] it is forcing itself . . . upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id’s loss by saying: ‘Look, you can love me too—I am so like the object.’”²⁴ Not only is this a transcript of love, but it is also one of repara-

114. Lorde, *The Black Unicorn*, 108.
115. Ibid.
116. Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 105.
117. Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*, 12–13.
118. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.
119. Ibid., 147.
120. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena.”
121. At least two community organizations in New York take Lorde’s name, Callen-Lorde Community Health Center and the Audre Lorde Project, which advocates for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans and Gender Non Conforming People of Color.
122. Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson, *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (Third World Newsreel, 1995).
123. William Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985): 11.
124. Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *SE*, 17:217–256, at 245.
125. Audre Lorde, *Our Dead Behind Us: Poems* (New York: Norton, 1986), 59.
126. Klein, “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States,” 130.
127. Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950–2001* (New York: Norton, 2002), 159.

3. OBJECT-LOVE IN THE LATER WRITINGS OF EVE KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Living with Advanced Cancer: The ABCs,” *MAMM*, May 2001, 30.
2. Sedgwick wrote poetry throughout her life, some of which deals with her cancer. To my mind, however, she did not embark on poetry as a specific response to illness in the manner in which she undertook the record of her therapy and her “cancer journalism.” Her passion for arts and crafts, which coincided with her illness, is treated, for example, in Katy Hawkins, “Woven Spaces: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Dialogue on Love,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 16, no. 2 (July 2006): 251–267, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).
3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 3.
4. Cynthia Ryan, “Struggling to Survive: A Study of Editorial Decision-Making Strategies at MAMM Magazine,” *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 19, no. 3 (July 2005): 357.
5. Although I would not want to read into this too heavily, the fate of the two publications concisely illustrates the economic power of a predomi-

namely gay male population in comparison to a community focused on women as well as the effectiveness of AIDS research in relation to cancer research.

6. Sandy M. Fernandez, "Pretty in Pink," *MAMM Magazine* (1998), <http://thinkbeforeyoupink.org>.
7. Gayle A. Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues: How Breast Cancer Culture Undermines Women's Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22.
8. Barbara Ehrenreich, "Welcome to Cancerland," *Harper's Magazine* (November 1, 2001), 46–47.
9. Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007).
10. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 4; Breast Cancer Action, "Think Before You Buy Pink," accessed October 7, 2014, <http://thinkbeforeyoupink.org>.
11. Gayle A. Sulik, *Pink Ribbon Blues: How Breast Cancer Culture Undermines Women's Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 318.
12. Ehrenreich, "Welcome to Cancerland," 48; Ryan, "Struggling to Survive," 366.
13. Ryan, "Struggling to Survive," 354.
14. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Breast Cancer: Issues and Resources," *Lesbian and Gay Studies Newsletter*, Fall 1995, 15.
15. Sigmund Freud, "Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, ed. James Strachey, 12:115.
16. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark, eds., *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 255.
17. Cynthia G. Franklin, *Academic Lives: Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the University Today* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 260.
18. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 261.
19. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *A Dialogue On Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 165.
20. Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," 136.
21. *Ibid.*, 105, 107.
22. Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id," in *SE*, 19:58.
23. *Ibid.*, 28–29; Deborah Britzman, *Freud and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 111.
24. Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 30.
25. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Off My Chest. A Scar Is Just A Scar: Approaching That First Postmastectomy Tryst," *MAMM*, 1998, 27.

26. Here and elsewhere I use the gender neutral pronouns “they” and “their” when gender is indeterminable.
27. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Off My Chest. World of Confusion: What Should We Make of the Mammography Controversy?” *MAMM*, February 2003, 20.
28. Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 256.
29. Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,” in *SE*, 8:1–247.
30. Sigmund Freud, “Humour,” in *SE*, 21:159–166.
31. S. Lochlann Jain, *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 9.
32. Sedgwick, “Living with Advanced Cancer,” 30–31.
33. Jasbir K. Puar, “Prognosis Time: Towards a Geopolitics of Affect, Debility and Capacity,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19, no. 2 (July 2009): 161–172.
34. Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 759.
35. *Ibid.*, 758.
36. *Ibid.*, 760.
37. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Off My Chest. Fat or Thin? Can’t Win: What to Do and How to Do It,” *MAMM*, Summer 2002, 11.
38. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 16.
39. *Ibid.*, 23.
40. *Ibid.*, 24.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
43. Sedgwick, “Living with Advanced Cancer,” 28.
44. *Ibid.*, 27.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Off My Chest. The Guy Factor in BC Support Groups,” *MAMM*, 2000.
47. *Ibid.*, 21.
48. Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 67–68.
49. Sigmund Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams,” in *SE*, 4:149.
50. *Ibid.*, 150.
51. Sedgwick, *A Dialogue On Love*, 168.
52. Cynthia G. Franklin, *Academic Lives: Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the University Today* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 250.