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**Gen/Ten:
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* at 30**

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opens the preface to the 1992 edition of *Between Men* by wondering "if it's obvious, reading *Between Men* now, what reckless pleasure went into its writing." I wish she were here today to hear us reckon the many pleasures that have come out of reading and rereading this book over the past thirty years.

I still remember my first time. It was 1987, I had graduated from college the year before, and a friend I admired as an expert in all things lesbian handed me her copy. "You have to read this, Sharon," she said, a bit ominously. She had bought the book in hardcover! I was living in a group house and my own tiny room was the only space where I could get any quiet, so I read *Between Men* in bed, trying to keep the dust jacket pristine while having my mind reorganized.

I went to college between 1982 and 1986 and came to *Between Men* steeped in the unlikely brew of psychoanalytic thought and separatist radical feminism that Sedgwick invokes when, towards the end of the book's first chapter, she calls out "Lacan, Chodorow and Dinnerstein, Rubin, Irigaray, and others" (27). Separatist and psychoanalytic feminists both took the differences between men and women, masculine and feminine, as categorical and foundational. Debates there were aplenty, but they mostly concerned whether sex and gender were essential or constructed, worth keeping or in urgent need of eradication. Marxist feminism and writing by women of color sometimes complicated this picture by showing how class and race divided and differentiated women, but in four years of college I was assigned almost no reading that didn't take heterosexuality to be

more or less universal. Sometimes lesbians got a week or two on women's studies syllabi, but before Foucault's *History of Sexuality* became required reading, gay men only got a hostile footnote in Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

So for me, in 1987, a book entitled *Between Men* that also called itself feminist seemed like a category error. At the time, it really did seem persuasive that all men were united in oppressing all women. Indeed, *Between Men* is often misapprehended, at least in my experience teaching it, as making exactly the kind of structuralist argument it sought to complicate. Some think the book presents the male homosocial traffic in women is a cover story for repressed homoeroticism. Others see it as arguing that male homosociality always enables straight men to oppress women and gay men. But *Between Men* is not the kind of book that makes the same argument about gender and sexuality in each chapter, and it is definitely not about how all men really want to fuck each other. It's about how men fuck each other over, in historically variable ways, using age, class, race, homophobia, knowledge, pathos, wit, and women. Yes, Sedgwick repeatedly shows how men oppress women, but each chapter also shows how men's bonds with *other men* involve "mastery and subordination" (66); each chapter analyzes how men seek to dominate, manipulate, and control one another (see e.g. 196) -- with women often becoming collateral damage.

Rereading *Between Men* for this conference, thirty years after it was first published, the book's arguments about sexuality and gender also struck me as arguments about thinking itself, and in particular, as arguments about generalizations, schemas, and paradigms. Famously, the book argues that good arguments about sexuality defy summary. Each chapter presents a *distinctive* way of organizing power relations between men, because, as Sedgwick says early on, "what, historically, it means for something to be

'sexual'" is always changing and "depend[s] on and affect[s] historical power relationships" (2) that are not themselves overtly defined as sexual. She restates this point when she reminds us that "men's genital activity with men" has varied in "its frequency, its exclusivity, its class associations, its relation to the dominant culture, its ethical status, the degree to which it is seen as defining nongenital aspects of the lives of those who practice, it, and perhaps most radically, its association with femininity or masculinity in societies where gender is a profound determinant of power" (26).

Throughout, Sedgwick expresses leering about generalizations, and in particular, about the stasis they impose. Where the dictionary opposes the general to the particular, *Between Men* more often contrasts the general to the variable. But spatial imagery also abounds for alternatives to the "oppressive" alignments of "activist grand theory" (vii): loose and crossed ends (viii), displacements, discontinuities (8), and fractures (10), the oppositional (6), the subtle and discriminate (10). Not surprisingly, Sedgwick, already a queer theorist, wanted to replace the straight with the bent, to discover "hidden obliquities" instead of "hidden symmetries" (22; see also 6, 10). Less intuitively, perhaps, one might say that the book pursues the hetero- rather than the homo-, differences rather than similitudes. Thus, although her argument depends on equating love and hate by subsuming both within the notion of "desire," differentiation is the book's keynote far more than homology, and even the equation of love and hate serves an argument about power *differences* between men.

In a sentence that follows the introduction's tour de force reading of the "whole lot of 'mean'-ing going on" in Catherine Mackinnon (7), and its reading of race, gender, and sexuality in *Gone with the Wind*, Sedgwick sums up what she is striving for:

Before we can fully achieve and use our intuitive grasp of the leverage that sexual relations seem to offer on the relations of oppression, we need more -- more different, more complicated, more diachronically apt, more off-centered-- more daring and prehensile applications of our present understanding of what it may mean for one thing to signify another (11).

As so often in Sedgwick's writing, one slightly unusual word, "prehensile," jolts its neighbors into sentience. "Prehensile," usually applied to claws, feet, and tails that can seize, grab, and hold, literalizes the dead metaphor of "grasp" and makes good on the physicality of "leverage." But the sentence's very success at encouraging us to feel our way to a new way of thinking also creates some confusion. The accumulation of more and more "mores" squares with "leverage" -- the more we amass, the more force we can exert. But "More off-centered" and "more daring" are harder to reconcile with "more prehensile." The three phrases *can* work together, if we think of a monkey using its prehensile tail to swing from tree to tree. But the idea that overflowing complexity will give us a tighter hold on understanding is also counterintuitive. It's easier to imagine more and more slipping away from us, like the volatile, mercurial quicksilver to which Sedgwick often likens sexuality (73). The proliferation signaled by the repetition of more - - "more different, more complicated, more diachronically apt, more off-centered" would seem to loosen our grasp, not secure it. "Prehensile" seems to throw the sentence off-kilter in exactly the ways that Sedgwick wants to tilt thought off-center.

How can we get a keen hold on variety and variation? What happens to structures if we let them wobble? These are the thoughts about thinking that I now see woven into every page of *Between Men*.

As I reread the book with these questions in mind, I kept seeing the syllables gen- and ten-. Sometimes they show up together, as when Sedgwick lists some "tentative generalizations offered" by her reading of Shakespeare's sonnets (47) or clarifies her

"generalizations" about male sexuality in *Our Mutual Friend* (172) as "tentative."¹

Variations on "gen" appear throughout the book: general, generalize, genealogical, generator, generosity, genetic, genre, generic, gender, genital, genuinely, genius, gentleman, gentry, genocidal, degenerate. "Ten-" is almost as popular, as in tendentious, tendency, intensity, extent, distended, tenderness, tenancy, tentative, tentacle, and even Tennyson.

"Gen" words refer to classes or kinds of things that have attributes in common, and almost all of them come from genus, Latin for birth, stock, race, kind. The Aryan root, which gave us the word "kin," means to beget, to produce, to be born. "Ten" words, by contrast, come from three different roots: tenere, to hold, as in tenacity; tendere, to stretch or move towards, as in extend; and tentare / temptare, to try, as in tentative or tentacle.

Between Men avoids the "tendentious," deliberately overstretched generalizations that Sedgwick associates with ideology (see 141), but almost every chapter offers some fairly bold and schematic "tentative generalizations." Literary critics, with our love of detail, ambiguity, and qualification, will find it easy to understand why Sedgwick wants to keep generalizations tentative. Because generalizations by definition apply to all, or nearly all, and are unlimited in application, they obscure variation and shut down actual and potential alternatives, thereby misrepresenting the crosscurrents and temporal flux of history.

Yet *Between Men* is unwilling to let go of generalizations and paradigms, despite their flaws. Over and over the book offers taxonomies, schemas, graphs, and

¹ "Gen-" and "ten-" even pop up together in a quote from *Edwin Drood*: "his nephew gently and assiduously tends him" (191).

generalizations alongside the asymmetries, obliquities, and historical variations that fracture them. At one point Sedgwick defines meaning as "intensively structured, highly contingent and variable, and often cryptic"(48). Notably, this phrase does not oppose "intensively structured" and "highly contingent"; it apposes them. Similarly, the erotic triangle intensively structures gender and sexuality and recurs in each chapter, but its very persistence allows Sedgwick to demonstrate its variability, since the triangle outlines "a different group of preoccupations" (181) each time it reappears.

Rather than renounce generalizations altogether, Sedgwick imagines making them stretchier, more capacious, although she also wants to avoid manipulating schemas to the point where they become rigid and tendentious. One might say that Sedgwick imagines a "gen-" inhabited by "ten": if we could be less certain about what is and is not kin, what does and does not belong in the same category, we would be able, as Sedgwick puts it, to "add texture and specificity" to our generalizations (172) -- to tenderize them. Consider this sentence: "To generalize, it was the peculiar genius of Tennyson to light on the tired, moderate, unconscious ideologies of his time and class, and by the force of his investment in them, and his gorgeous lyric gift, to make them sound frothing-at-the-mouth mad" (119). Here, the quirkiness of peculiar genius coincides with a generalization about it, and the peculiar genius under discussion is itself a talent for making general normalcy sound bizarrely idiosyncratic.

Between Men ends up making a case for tenaciously pursuing structural claims -- if one can figure out how to reconcile structure with play. Sedgwick writes that she would like to treat the schema of the triangle not as a "transhistorical graphic absolute" (159) but "as a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification" (27). The ability to

graph -- to diagram, delineate, outline, generalize -- does not inevitably lead to transhistorical absolutes.² Indeed, without delineation it would be impossible to take note of play. Significantly, Sedgwick writes that the tremulously "sensitive register" whose needle picks up on the smallest variations makes play "*graphically* intelligible." Not only does the graphic stay in the picture; the graphic is what allows us to have a picture at all.

Between Men reaches for generalizations as flexible as a prehensile tail whose ability to curl and uncurl enables it to tighten its grasp. My time is running out, and I'm not going to reach for a grand conclusion; I have tried here to register how my most recent reading *Between Men* got me thinking about what the book tells us about thinking in general, and about thinking *as* general. But I will close by pondering how *Between Men's* tentative generalizations about generalization itself might help us think about gender today. Gender and genre are two of the book's other big gen- words. Both exemplify tentative generalization in that each simultaneously marks sameness and difference. Works of the same genre have in common their difference from other works; women as a gender share their supposed difference from men.³

Rereading *Between Men*, I noticed how much less femininity varies from one chapter to another than does the relationship between male homosociality and male homosexuality. In each chapter, female characters end up annulled or "diminished" (178), albeit in different ways and by different means.⁴

² Much more could be said about the word graphic, whose common meanings include pertaining to writing; rendered in vivid detail; and pertaining to the use of diagrams and graphs.

³ Another word that appears often in the book's final chapters, "gentleman," similarly differentiates one set of men from another but also designates a class; see 172, 173.

⁴ For example, Sedgwick refers to "how unrelentingly Lizzie is diminished by her increasingly distinct gender assignment" from strong woman worker to wife (178). The reference here to "gender assignment" and the book's references to male feminization (e.g

I don't think this is a failure of sensitive registration on Eve Sedgwick's part. I wonder if it registers a difference between gender and sexuality. *Between Men* was incredibly prescient and radical in conceiving of sexuality as not only lacking any essence but also as having no existence as anything other than the variable historical forces that at any given moment shape how we live the generalities of gender. Observing the persistence, thirty years later, of many of the gender asymmetries that shaped women's lives when Sedgwick wrote in 1985 and that she traced across three centuries of English literature, I feel a stirring of my radical feminist roots. I wonder if we have been so justifiably concerned that our paradigms might not be sensitive enough to variation or might be too specific to be portable that gender studies today might be suffering from something of a paradigm deficiency. To fully realize the uncannily precocious wisdom of *Between Men* will always mean heeding its call to register volatility and variation -- but we should also remember its tenacious grip on the tentative generalization.

51, 208) offer interesting elements for a trans reading of *Between Men*. Such a reading might also attend to the prevalence of the word "transaction" (51, 64), which sometimes means men exchanging women and sometimes means men embodying themselves in or as women (64).