LaTrobe University

Frankie Hanman Siegersma

A great, upwelling flux of mutability: Failure and error in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's A Dialogue on Love

Abstract
How might we think of the creative potential of error when we bear witness to ourselves? Could we think of stumbling as mistakenly finding our space of possibility? How might we suggest a praxis of error and failure as messy, sexy, cognitively powerful energy? This paper takes up A Dialogue on Love *(2000) by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a hybrid nonfiction account of a therapeutic relationship, to examine relationality and care in the making of poetic errors to encourage us toward new trajectories. I work with Anne Carson's suggestion that error in poetry is generative (2000), use Jack Halberstam's possibilities of queer failure (2011) and integrate Audre Lorde's reflections on her experience with breast cancer in* The Cancer Journals *(1980). Sara Ahmed's theorisation of the feminist killjoy (2017) provides an opportunity for thinking through mistakenness and error as pressing for social change and questioning of power structures. With the assistance of these texts, I lean into the generative qualities of* A Dialogue on Love*, centring Sedgwick's playfulness, attention to pleasure and love as she bears witness to herself in language.*
Keywords: creative writing, queer, poetry, hybrid, American, bodies

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: Messy and sexy

> *What it's feeling like to me isn't death, but a great, upwelling flux of mutability*
> *as if, falling in,*
> *you'd emerge young – old – dead – a*
> *different person –*
> (Sedgwick 2000: 136)

How might we think of the creative potential of error when we bear witness to ourselves? Could we think of stumbling as mistakenly finding our space of possibility? How might we suggest a praxis of error and failure as messy, sexy, cognitively powerful energy?

In her autobiographical poetic memoir, *A Dialogue on Love* (2000), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks on the difficulty of writing a book from notes and fragments of

sessions with Shannon, her male therapist, after being diagnosed with depression after treatment for breast cancer. Will this writing project be 'a failure? A mess? A bliss?' (194). Through analysis of form and content, I read *A Dialogue on Love* as a messy, sexy example of a failed cancer memoir, providing poetic potentials of defamiliarisation and undoing via error-making. Using Judith Butler to examine the shakiness of the speaking 'I' in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), Anne Carson's suggestion of the importance of error in poetry (2000), Jack Halberstam's notion of queer failure (2011) and Audre Lorde's reflections of her own experience with breast cancer in *The Cancer Journals* (1980), I lean into the generative qualities of these texts in allowing us to think about *A Dialogue on Love* as a playful, attentive space of bearing witness to oneself.

A mix of haiku, dialogue, therapist's notes and journal entries, *A Dialogue on Love* fails as the perfect cancer memoir; Sedgwick is not a 'good' sick person. Michael Moon suggests that her work holds 'abundant generative potential' in the 'relation of [poetic] form and its effects to illness and pain' (Moon 2010: 211). This affinity of form and content – how Sedgwick chooses to write her body into the text – is present in the rhythm, differing fonts, prose and poetry of *A Dialogue on Love*. A commitment to the hybridity and self-revelation of a sick woman seeking counsel and relationality could be messy for some. In its very doing, its very content: failure can be bliss or mess.

I read *A Dialogue on Love* as a series of *rather-not-said* 'queer errors'. Sedgwick's therapy notes, poetic fragments, diary entries and dialogue might be seen as humiliating, embarrassing, *mistakes all over the page*. (Get them out!) We might read through the lens of error, embarrassment and failure to propose a generative praxis of unbecoming and undoing. As Joseph Litvak writes in a personal communication to Eve Sedgwick, quoted in in her essay 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading':

> It seems to me that the importance of "mistakes" in queer reading and writing … has a lot to do with loosening the traumatic, inevitable-seeming connection between mistakes and humiliation... [A] lot of queer energy [goes into] practices aimed at taking the terror out of error, at making the making of mistakes sexy, creative, even cognitively powerful. Doesn't reading queer mean learning, among other things, that mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises? (Litvak qtd in Sedgwick 1997: 147)

I take up Litvak's proposition that mistakes can be good, that they can be sexy surprises opening up *queer ways* of relating and articulating. By following the queer energy that takes the terror out of error, I suggest *A Dialogue on Love* is a frisky example of the ability of failure to make us unfamiliar, ultimately providing us with alternative ways of witnessing the wobbly 'I'.

'In almost every face I can find the curve of a tenderness' (Sedgwick 2000: 217)

In *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde says, 'I want to illuminate the implications of breast cancer for me, and the threats to self-revelation that are so quickly aligned against any woman who seeks to explore those questions, those answers' (Lorde 1980: 41). Lorde demands more than the 'good cancer patient' story; she's requesting a complex sick black lesbian female subjectivity. In the words of

Halberstam, she is one of those 'negative thinkers' 'who do[es] not believe that getting cancer has made them [a] better person' (Halberstam 2011: 4); in fact, positivism is not a primary concern for Lorde, instead there's a stake in highlighting the failure of those reductive narratives. What is at stake is also a threat to self-revelation; that is, if Lorde explored how breast cancer had impacted her (and her writing voice), she would be reaching a 'base register'. As if concerns of the body are of a lower order, and thus move one further away from theoretical or philosophical conceptions of the self. This very Western, Cartesian, capitalistic split of a mind separate from the body is felt most by those whose bodies are highly politicised. I believe Sedgwick, like Lorde, seeks to illuminate these implications of *living in a sick body* while also playing with and unpacking why the body – and its excesses – are used against women who turn toward their flesh.

If failure to comply with a status quo provides potential, it is also isolating. *Feeling too much* about your body, emotions and experiences is chiefly the result of racialised patriarchy enforcing a devaluation of such affects. In her journals about cancer treatment, Audre Lorde voices the nature of this isolation: 'Off and on I kept thinking. I have cancer. I'm a black lesbian feminist poet, how am I going to do this now? Where are the models for what I'm supposed to be in this situation?' (1980: 49). Further, she admits, 'I feel always tender in the wrong places' (45). Lorde asks for narratives by and for black lesbian poets about sickness and illness, while she makes herself in language. She draws attention to internalised modes of harm which tell her that her soft places are wrong. By illuminating these implications, she urges the reader-subject to insist on more stories and bodies that look like hers, to make a community based on this tenderness. She touches soft spots, together we rub lotion on them.

In *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde centres the many textures of pain after her mastectomy. When reading this acute detail, I feel the edge of language twisting and shifting in her attempt to represent the pain she experiences, the increasing agony in her chest wall:

> My breast which was no longer there would hurt as if it were being squeezed in a vice. That was perhaps the worst pain of all, because it would come with a full complement that I was to be forever reminded of my loss by suffering in a part of me which was no longer there. (1980: 37-38)

Lorde articulates the 'felt-characteristics' (Scarry 1985: 12) of pain for a body part that is no longer attached. Lorde turns towards her breast, no longer there, conjuring an image of a vice clamping down on her chest wall, causing 'the worst pain of all': both a physical and metaphorical loss. Because pain 'has no referential content' (Scarry 1985: 5) – that is, it exists on the plane of somatics, inside the boundary of our bodies – Lorde uses objectification (the image of a vice) to gesture towards her terrain of pain: physical, emotional, psychological. We get closer to Lorde's pain through our own image of how a vice functions, even though a vice is not what has removed her breast. Writing on *The Cancer Journals*, Sarah Ahmed says, 'We can feel an absence; we can sense what is missing' (Ahmed 2017: 184). Lorde presses down on the edges of language to describe her experience of loss, showing how the medical-industrial complex responds to her changed body.When she goes to the doctor's office the nurse comments, 'You're not wearing a prosthesis', to which Lorde replies, 'It really doesn't feel right'. The nurse says her choice is 'bad morale for the office' (1980: 60). Ahmed notes that 'not to wear a prosthesis is not to cover over an absence', it

is to bring out the messy, leaky truth of Lorde's body (2017: 184). Her body, changed by cancer and the mastectomy, is 'a reminder of illness and fragility that is unwanted' (184). Lorde is her own kind of killjoy by not wearing the prosthesis, 'the one who gets in the way of the happiness of others by the way she appears' (184). Ahmed says we learn that 'bodies need to get in the way to open up a world to others', therefore we insist on more bodies that look like Lorde's (184). Through the linguistic texture and images of Lorde's pain and breast tissue removal, she opens up and makes space for self-definition for other Black lesbian poets.

Born into a Jewish-American family in 1950, Sedgwick embodies a different subjectivity to Audre Lorde. *A Dialogue on Love* explores what Moon calls the 'crisis of self-intimacy', tracking the 'routes of relation between her post-cancer-diagnosis depression and her earlier struggles with sometimes powerful depressive tendencies' (2010: 211). In a session with Shannon, Sedgwick says, 'I've never known what I was supposed to ask of my pain' (2000: 194). This inquiry into the meaning of pain is posed as much for Shannon as it is for the reader-subject, as we ponder what our responsibilities are when we push up against Sedgwick's pain body. How do we hold another's pain? Not to rid them of it – as that impulse can never be actualised – but to witness another in their experience, so pain does not become isolation?

Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985) provides us with a contextualisation of our own pain and that of others. 'Whatever pain achieves,' Scarry says, 'it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language' (1985: 4). Although there are finite limits to both Lorde and Sedgwick's ability to *share* pain – no one, however much they wanted to, could share those sensations – they use language to create different representations of pain. For example, Sedgwick enquires what her pain might teach her, and Lorde investigates the lack of representation of black lesbians with breast cancer in her community, in her world. Both authors work with their pain to express the effect it has on their writing, line and poetry. Through Lorde and Sedgwick's explorations of pain, they urge us toward our encounters with another's bodily sensations in language. As Scarry says, pain is resistant to language, due to its quality as an 'interior state' of the body, felt first as sensation, then translated through the representation of words (1985: 5). Sedgwick's expression of pain, then, functions as a kind of translation of pain through a secondary medium: linguistics.

When Eve 'reveals' moments of medicalised trauma/experiences of the treatment for cancer, there are effects. Her emotional vulnerability is unapologetic: she is not sheepish to 'show' herself. How is her body affected by the trauma of cancer? The details of her treatment leak and spill as she waits seated for an airplane to refuel.

> Anti-icing fluid ... suddenly running pink down the window
> beside me looking like Pepto-Bismol, but it comes on my sight
> like a horror: what I am seeing, I think, is (something I hadn't
> thought of from that day to this) the bloody discharge from tubes
> in the week or so after the surgery. (Sedgwick 2000: 88)

The trauma of those signs, *pink fluid* running down the side of the airplane, reminds her of hearing a woman weeping on the airplane, triggering feelings of abandonment, 'that outrage' and 'crazy regression, an infantile compulsion' (associated with childhood neediness, fear and uncontrollable grief). This is helpful, as it provides 'an alternative to looking forward with dread' at the possibility/inevitability of her own death (89). They could be read as errors, these

interjections of emotion, these feelings of *it just gets too much*. The pink fluid running through Sedgwick's prose opens up space around sickness and desire, flowing associatively from bloody discharge to anti-icing fluid while waiting for the ice to melt on the side of the airplane. This space is left for our own pink fluids and bloody discharge, urging the reader to notice psychological linkages between desire, pain and meaning-making. Sedgwick encourages us to move closer to trauma and its associations, to appreciate its tacit, visceral qualities: to notice our own tenderness in areas we deem to be messy and unruly.

Sara Ahmed's work on becoming a leaky tap as a feminist killjoy is helpful in contextualising Sedgwick's leakage. Feminist killjoys, Ahmed says, 'tend to spill all over the place': they are a 'leaky container' (2017: 248). As Sedgwick deals with this messy and excessive space of sickness, she shows how containment is not only unhelpful, but impossible. The anti-icing fluid blurs and melts like Pepto-Bismol through language. The pink, leaking fluid connects her bigger-bodied, sick experiences: spilling out in language. Although Sedgwick's spillages of cancer treatment and depression are filled with articulations of pain, she plays with the subject-reader's interpretation of the sick body. She discusses the 'triggering event' of her depression as being the diagnosis of breast cancer. That she 'kind of did beautifully with it', '[bouncing] back from the mastectomy', saved by the fact that her being sick 'wasn't all about dread' (2000: 4). Sedgwick's reflections of doing beautifully with cancer insert subjective pleasure into what might typically be depicted as narratives of pain, loss and torment. Is this a new place in language we find ourselves in? Finding the beautiful in a life-threatening illness?

The content of this desire gives us confessions, pain, sadness, proclamations, blushes and mistakes. One moment of blush is when Eve decides to show a photo of her adolescent self to Shannon, prompting a conversation about the 'pink room of childhood masturbation', a place of safety and security for Eve (Sedgwick 2000: 81). She was 'someone who, given the opportunity, would spend hours and hours a day' in her bedroom masturbating (45). Shannon reads this as neglect from her parents; Eve, however, expresses self-pleasuring as life-giving, one of the only reasons she was able to stay in one piece. What he might see as a mistake of her parents, makes up:

> the aura of this
>
> fantasy world. Warm. Golden.
>
> Intoxicating (Sedgwick 2000: 45)

I suggest Sedgwick's treatment of masturbatory desire offers us a frank and legitimising form of autoeroticism, 'a freeing experience' that 'the self shares with itself' (Wales Freedman 2014: 10). A young girl has a room of her own within which to pleasure herself. And that is a world. Exploring child-memories of pleasure and warmth allow Eve a connection, and legitimacy, to bringing pleasure into her life while managing the pain of cancer, the heaviness of depression. Access to pleasure is a form of meaning-making, where the female subject makes space for her intoxicating joy, taking the time in fantasy. Audre Lorde explores the concept of this meaning-making through her incredible essay on the erotic as power. Lorde says, 'the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing', therefore it is not only about the erotic as sexual, but instead the 'power' and 'honour' that comes with 'satisfaction' (Lorde 1989: 88). Eve asserts the power of the erotic which enables

a sense of safety. Lorde says that within the erotic, 'we touch our most profoundly creative source' (91), and Eve does this by bringing her body into language.

Any threat of a male psychologist gaze, who perhaps holds sex-negative or body-shaming assumptions about girls and women is offset by Sedgwick's power. Rather than Shannon's value judgement of neglect, Sedgwick highlights the ability of self-narrative to powerfully communicate experiences of sexuality, creativity. We look into Eve's hours upon hours of self-exploration, communicated as safety and security, opening up alternative ways of holding the reader-subject's fantasy and self-pleasure.

The expanse of sexual possibility is made possible in *A Dialogue on Love* by exploring the messy, mistaken steps of an account for the sick, queer, female body. This productive potential of self-narrative has creative and cognitive power. Interested in taking the *terror out of error*,I suggest Eve Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love* embraces the shaky, undone and unbecoming 'I'in her exploration of a therapeutic relationship with a psychologist after cancer treatment. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Jack Halberstam puts forth a 'grammar of possibility' as 'a desire to live life otherwise' in the face of queer failure (2011: 2). He speculates that:

> under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. (2)

But what possibilities does Halberstam think failure can produce? Perhaps it could 'allow us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour', and 'preserve some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood'? (3). Perhaps it could also provide a push back to the 'positive thinking' of respectability, to the capitalistic idea of success so tied to heteronormative, racialised reproduction in a nuclear family unit. There are alternative possibilities for those 'grouchy, irritable whiners' who do not accept norms and behaviours, who complain, who keep pointing out toxic colonial, sexist, racist structures of capitalism and labour (3). For those feminist killjoys, in the words of Sara Ahmed, these failures to abide by corrosive supremacist power structures are a sort of stumbling.Put another way, by complaining and *pointing out* errors of a slick system:

> I stumble; maybe by stumbling I found you, maybe by stumbling I stumbled on happiness, a hap-full happiness; a happiness that is as fragile as the bodies we love and cherish. (2017: 266)

I point out here, as Ahmed does, that happiness stems from the Middle English word *hap*,meaning chance (265). What does it mean to come upon another killjoy in your stumblings? If stumbling brings us close to those we love and cherish, hence those who we make community with, does that change the way we might think about making mistakes? That they bring us close to love? Love in the sense of being validated, seen, reflected. Failing to cohere to a power structure might offer more surprising ways of being in the world, Halberstam says (2011), but this praxis is also fragile, says Ahmed (2017), it can in fact put our lives in danger.

In addition to Ahmed's notion of stumbling, we could consider Halberstam's suggestion for feminism, where 'gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals' (2). This of course is not without its dangers, as we know all too well there are punishments for those who do not abide by the Western colonial gender binary (2011: 4). In other words, if there are

reliefs, there is also infuriation. Shannon, Eve's therapist, recalls her describing 'a sense of spoilage/wastage/ruin physically and gender-wise' in one of their later sessions. She 'refuse[s] or fail[s] gender categories' and is spoiled 'in terms of not being intelligibly masculine or feminine enough' (Sedgwick 2000: 193). Why does Sedgwick feel she wrongly inhabits her body? This displacement is a moment of exasperation: *being* spoilt like a soft, bruised piece of fruit or the green-mouldy skin of an old custard pudding. She doesn't have a 'slender, discrete body' and there is no 'self-contained' aspect of her before 'the turmoil of becoming gendered comes down' (193). *Being a waste. Full of ruin.* A kind of impossibility and leakage outside of what is valuable.

How can I exist when I am seen as ruin? Sedgwick asks. This failure is grounded in the body, it's about having a 'wrong temperature' and 'never moving easily' (193), the 'rage and damage around fat issues' being a lived experience, how the bigger-bodied subject is always-already viewed 'as a totalizing matter' of 'ruin, 'sick or offensive' (85). She remarks on the pernicious gaze that polices and names the fat body as spoilt, remembering a poem her mother recites: 'Oh fat white woman whom nobody loves, why do you walk through the fields in gloves...?' (193). In the poem titled 'To a Lady Seen from the Train' by Frances Darwin Cornford (1996), we begin with the speaker's gaze from a train window, fixed on a woman in the fields who the speaker presumes (or is projecting?) nobody cares for, who wears gloves for no reason. On remembering the sensation of 'the poem [being] pointed at her', Eve cries, wondering whether 'she would be like this, unloved as she matured into a woman' (Sedgwick 2000: 193). Fatness is associated with lovelessness is associated with meaninglessness – the fat body becomes a kind of scenic error, an error passing by Cornford's window. And if the content of *A Dialogue on Love*, namely that of the sick, queer, bigger-bodied woman, is to be lensed through the language of error, what forms of *undoing* might be enabled here?

'like a big / allegory about love' (Sedgwick 2000: 155)

In thinking of *A Dialogue on Love*'s sexy, messy content, I speak of Cornford's *error-woman*, how the recitation of 'To a Lady Seen from the Train' by Sedgwick's mother comes to rest inside Eve's body, comes to *shape* her understanding of its flesh. What if, like many other examples of toxic, corrosive language used against bodies-deemed-as-other, we were to look at the potentials of that mistake? For example, let us think about failure as error, let us follow that mistake. Anne Carson's 'Essay on What I Think About Most' includes the following lines:

> what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,
>
> the willful creation of error,
>
> the deliberate break and complication of mistakes
>
> out of which may arise
>
> unexpectedness (Carson 2000: 35)

Anne Carson suggests something 'change[s] in the quotient of our expectations' when mistakes are made in poetry (36). We stumble into an undoing and

unmaking, as seen in *A Dialogue on Love*. Sedgwick's bigger-bodied, queer-oriented, sick subjectivity changes our expectations of what that body is supposed to do, how its desires take shape, what it is allowed to think. She deliberately breaks those expectations we have of bodies like hers. 'Error. And its emotions', says Carson (30), brings Sedgwick's body into view and the making of that body in language. Sedgwick's work is concerned with the potential of stumbling through, constituted in the multitudes of error-making. I suggest the meaning of error and failure to be constituted by that which is not meant to be there, or that which one is not supposed to be seen to be doing, a kind of mess, excess or misstep.

Stepping away from Carson and Sedgwick, I want to think about a song released in August 2018 by British musician Devonté Hynes, otherwise known as Blood Orange, from his album *Negro Swan* (Blood Orange 2018). The track is 'Jewelry', and it begins with a spoken word fragment from the producer, writer and American activist Janet Mock. Hynes and Mock are discussing what comes to mind when she thinks about black joy, and she responds that her:

> [F]avourite images are the ones where someone who isn't supposed to be there ... in a space where we were not ever welcomed in, where we were not invited, yet we walk in, and we show all the way up. (Torres 2018)

This event where someone who is not invited, comes into the room and brings energy, power and momentum is articulated in *Negro Swan*,which articulates experiences of transnational depression and anxiety for trans and gender non-conforming communities of colour (Torres 2018). The specificity of this kind of 'showing up', repeatedly precarious, ruptures a space rendered inaccessible due to racism, transphobia and other violence(s). Bodies that historically are not supposed to be there. Bodies that in their very physicality, movement and gesture, represent a kind of *difficulty*,a nuisance, *mistake* or undoing. What I am trying to do is suggest a necessitation between error, failure, stumbling and *walking in uninvited*.

We might return to Anne Carson's emotions of error. Emotions of 'shame and remorse' (2000: 53), associated with an act, a mistake (you would rather not have committed). Do you have shame about walking into the room you were not invited into? Error has effects; belonging to the reader of error or the maker of error. What is that value exactly? What is its generosity in offering? Shall we witness the error? Making errors together. I would like to argue in the value of possibility, which is to say a kind of space-making. If we would like to think about error, we might also think about failure. Jennifer Thorp argues that Carson's work is always tracking 'failure and [obsessive doubt]' which can be used as a 'means of negotiating the limits of form and the inherent fallibility of language' (Thorp 2014: 4). Kate Middleton suggests Carson is interested in 'how we access our knowing in both rational and emotional forms' and 'proposes mistakenness as one possible method of accessing new instances of knowing' (Middleton 2009: 9). This un/knowing in terms of Eve's understanding of herself and the forming relationship with Shannon, creates spaces of tone, dialogue and verse that stream into excess, error and failure, turning from 'straight autobiography [in]to queer memoir' (Wales Freedman 2014: 13).

EM Nolan connects Anne Carson and Judith Butler, claiming they both think failure and error is inevitable in writing the 'I': 'Failure is for Butler what error is for Carson: unavoidable' (Nolan 2015: 23). Nolan states that, in her poetry, Carson

'is more comfortable not knowing' (2015: 24). The failure of a stable 'I' is extrapolated by Judith Butler:

> The "I" cannot tell the story of its own emergence, and the conditions of its own possibility, without in some sense bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, prior to one's own becoming, and so narrating that which one cannot know. (Butler 2005: 26)

This not knowing allows all kinds of creative potentials and moments of other ways of seeing. If failure is unavoidable, might we embrace its *silly* and generative opportunities, to call on Jack Halberstam? When I say 'I', I say it while being always-already connected to others. When I say 'I', I am in reference to an in endless regression that is becoming: that is coming into view while vanishing. There are 'several possible versions of the origin', where 'I can try to give narrative form to certain conditions of my emergence' (Butler 2005: 26), but perhaps this is always a failure unto itself. We fail at a complete beginning (our stories are not individual). Vicki Kirby reiterates this failure of Saussure's attempt at beginning at a cohesive point when speaking of the sign and the signifier:

> For the question of how to secure a beginning, an origin or entity that will guarantee the proper point of departure for interpretation, is the essential problematic [Saussure] enact[s] ... any beginning must always be provisional because we are already underway, caught in the vertigo of an infinite regress of other beginnings that both motivate and limit the focus. (Kirby 1997: 8)

If we fail at beginning, and we fail at a complete and whole 'I', and we fail in our gender, we fail at the sick body, we fail in our queerness, as turning up and walking in as a kind of error; what can we attempt to say at all? In *A Dialogue on Love*, Eve cannot give a complete and whole version of *her 'I'*, for already the process of writing and narrativism is one of selection, omission, inclusion. And if she were to embrace these very problematics? Perhaps we could draw similar lines with what Simon Reader says about the pedagogical potentials for this kind of relationality to error:

> In most cases we would think of error as something to be avoided, at the most an event to be tolerated for teaching us what not to do. In terms of aesthetics, however, it may assume a different kind of value. (Reader 2008: 2)

And what is this different kind of value? It could be one of using the error to your advantage, leveraging the slip in speech, the 'incorrectly' spelt word. The value of error can be productive, in that it generates and produces a new set of principles that allow us to lean into different subjectivities, urging us to recognise the spectrum of possibilities that come with self-narration. These new, error-ridden principles might press against previous rules located within language which often times seek to maintain a capitalistic, racist, sexist order of things. An error-ridden value might apply pressure to both the writing and reading 'I', opening up spaces of surprise. Error makes us unsure what will happen next. It draws us into rooms that are not our own. Errors encourage us into rooms within ourselves where we have not yet ventured. Reader continues:

> Error and poetry … both share a structure of defamiliarisation. Errors are *committed*, we *do* them, just as we do poetry, and both

> jolt us away from the ordinary surface of life into fresh trajectories previously unthought. (2008: 3)

If error and poetry both encourage us toward alternative directions, are we encouraged to suspend momentarily, even briefly, preconceived notions regarding the structure, linearity, togetherness of the self? Our ordinary surface might begin to flake off. Come apart. The 'press' may give way to another room.

In *Bluets* (2009), Maggie Nelson describes the nature of pain, witnessing pain in another person. Nelson cares for her friend who is made quadriparalytic after a serious accident, experiencing 'diffuse nerve pain along the surface of her skin which no doctor understands'. In relation to the proximity to her friend's pain, Nelson remarks, 'to be close to her pain has always felt like a privilege to me, even though pain could be defined as that which we typically aim to avoid' (Nelson 2009: 38-39).

There are many ways that white supremacist capitalism has made us avoid caring for each other. What would it look like to prioritise and centre community methods of care: both witnessing and holding the pain of others? Not to take away pain or rescue, not to save. Instead to approach the acknowledgement of another's pain as a privilege to be close to. Are we afraid of what we might witness within ourselves when we witness others? Error and poetry present us with possibilities of how we might hold this defamiliarisation, where systems within the self will necessarily fray at the edges: unpredictable, strange and unknown to us. Could receiving poetry, hence reading error, provide an example of how we can respond to the pain of another, to work with care?

We know how embedded power is in language, we know how power is made in language. Therefore, we must have a multitude of small and important adjustments, reorientations to urge us toward fresh trajectories. For example, in *A Dialogue on Love*,Sedgwick describes the approaches of her maternal grandmother and mother to sickness and pain as 'trenchant' and 'impatient', and that there was a general 'don't ask, don't tell' approach among the Kosofsky family (2000: 150). Sedgwick remembers her Nanny's 'heroic, near-psychotic, exasperating denials: of ever feeling any illness, weakness, or fatigue. Even weather. Given her own way, she'd wear shorts all winter' (150).

Nanny's internalised ableism paired with stubbornness has created an environment where sickness is a form of weakness. She feels an intense anxiety to avoid being witnessed in pain. Dominant society favours able bodies. This has both highly noticeable and more subliminal effects on the way we view our own sickness and disabilities. Social linkage of sickness and weakness comes to live inside the room of Nanny's body and psyche. Eve's family history plays a big role in dictating 'knee-jerk' responses she has to breast cancer and the resources to move with it. Eve recalls her mother's words retelling Nanny's response to illness in the family. 'There's no money for doctors, so *you feel fine*' (original italics, 150), even though the 1919 influenza took most of her family. This embodiment of shame and denial has a flow-on effect where pain and illness made Eve, an 'odd child' whose maternal figures would be 'rigid' 'with something like fright' or else just leave the room when 'confronted with' pain or illness (151).

An antidote for being left alone in the room is *perhaps A Dialogue* writing relationally in the sticky, dream-poetic score of therapist-client bond. Through Sedgwick's being witnessed by Shannon, she creates a kind of holding relation that throws into question these familial and societal views about bodies

experiencing pain and illness. In particular it creates a tenderness toward being seen, validated and complicated in pain, to be able to ask and decide what kind of help, attention and assistance you receive.

A Dialogue on Love, like the cumulation of societal and familial rules around pain and illness, is 'haltingly assembled' (Sedgwick 2000: 164). We witness the slow unfurling of Eve's subjectivity seen through the eyes of Shannon, gradually becoming more complex, more full, playful, surprising. There is a multilayering of reflections and musings, revolving around the 'sheer pleasure' Sedgwick gets from this relationship (164). This halting assemblage is reflected in the splicing of Shannon's reflections in full capitalisation, with Eve's words in quotation marks. Shannon and Eve's dynamic curiosity oozes slowly from each conversation – it emerges in moments as caring, maternal, paternal and at times sexual and romantic – as they mirror and challenge each other. In the below section, I have marked who is speaking in each instance for the sake of clarity and to show the nature of this haltingly assembled dialogue on love.

Eve:

> I'm tickled that he'd taken the thought of me along with him – and of course, anything he tells me does me interest. In my mind it's connected with his mentioning, before he left town, "I'm glad they'll be painting my office while I'm gone, but I'm going to miss that stain over the couch. It gives me something to stare at when patients are talking – and I like thinking that it's shaped like the *Starship Enterprise*,"
>
> which had surprised me
>
> into this fond, sensuous,
>
> big snot, like "Oh *you* – !"
>
> "Of course it does! Of course it just does!"

———

Shannon (to himself):

> I ASK HER ABOUT MY TELLING HER ABOUT THE BRIDGE [he shared that he thought of Eve when he was crossing a bridge in New Orleans]. THIS SEEMS TO HAVE IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES FROM THE INTERACTIONS WITH HER FATHER, PARTICULARLY IN HIS ABILITY TO TAKE OVER A TOPIC AND DEADEN IT FOR HER. WE TALK AROUND THIS FOR A WHILE. I MENTION THAT I THINK IT MARKED A CHANGE IN HOW I FEEL ABOUT HER.

Shannon (to Eve):

> I was looking forward to making it so you *would* be interested in the bridge. Thinking about it later, I saw that all this signified some real shift in my relationship to you. I'm feeling something I rarely do about patients: that being really seen by you is

> something that matters to me. Not that I just get narcissistically recirculated back to myself through your eyes, which happens all the time – but that I'm changed to myself in some way as I see that you see me. (Sedgwick 2000: 162-163)

In the above section, the separateness of Shannon and Eve's perspectives seeps and blurs: what is it that shows them apart? What is it that keeps them contained to their own fleshy bodies? The ending of one of Shannon's sentence may drip and leak into Eve's next thought. Sedgwick invites the reader into collected moments of relation between Shannon and herself, staging an unsure encounter: a fraying, breathing, proximity in which error and entanglement are a necessity of relation to illness, to other humans, to love. We go forth into this assemblage, unsure of the outcome, and end up in the creative potential of slow release, where there is always a 'fresh supply of narrative coming [our] way to brood over' (164). The reader collaborates and bears witness to the deeply holding relation between Eve and Shannon – and between text and ourselves.

When Eve and Shannon are first beginning their therapeutic relationship, Eve goes through a series of conditions on which she will engage with him. Those conditions include feeling 'very fine and at home about [queerness, the discussion of AIDS]', being a feminist, being older than she is and making sure that 'real change' is only possible through a pleasure (8). Much of this 'just-plain-sweetness' is to do with the 'circuit of reciprocity' between them, where Eve says (or thinks) to Shannon 'the part of you that's in me will be able to nourish the part of me that's in you [Shannon]' (164-165). Eve also relates this nourishing reciprocity when speaking about being an 'essential, central member of a queer family' (155). The energy within this context is one where she can:

> [R]ecognise others and be recognised in many aspects that don't, this time around, seem to denigrate one another: as loving *and* bright, as included and constitutive. (154, italics in original)

The relationality explored in the above quote aligns with a sense of community and belonging which Eve found lacking in the Kosofsky family. This alternative, chosen family constellation allows Eve a role; she is essential and central. How does Sedgwick explore this loving and bright relationality through the form of *A Dialogue on Love*?Is the form of *A Dialogue on Love* representative of the queer family context she describes, where each aspect of a person's life is constitutive of the whole?

'What am I doing? Messing with "stuff"' (Sedgwick 2000: 199)

Eden Wales Freedman suggests *A Dialogue on Love*'sform, font, narrative and genre is constantly shifting (2014: 18). This movement opens space between modes of self-address, conversations between Shannon and Eve and reflections on the psychotherapeutic work they are doing together, allowing each thread to slowly emerge, cumulating to the thick, rich conversation of the text. The motion connecting each thread uses a shifting lyric 'I', applying pressure on the authors ability to translate her experience in language. From which point of view does her voice come into cadence? We hear her voice's timbre from many different perspectives, and Sedgwick plays with this instability.

> Think how inefficient it is, this way of keeping one's own self consolidated and comforted. (...) I expect its wastefulness has a lot to do with how floppy, productive, representational … that 'self' turns out to be. It has
>
> A big, loose footprint
>
> Like a messy hurricane
>
> It churns up the space (2000: 140)

Perhaps this never-being-still in form allows Sedgwick to be in deep speculation about the stability of her 'I', using indented paragraphs to carefully pace how we encounter the self. It is only ever a big loose footprint, living in representation without any kind of consolidation. We are encouraged inside Sedgwick's playful relation to language, which performs this surprising, floppy, moving poetic 'I'. Through her invitation, we carry the text along, churning up space like a big, loose footprint, urged toward the thought that perhaps we too, are less consolidated as readers than we would like to believe.

Although Sedgwick's text has a quality of movement and change, we are held securely in the personalisation of direct address, in exposing disclosures about pleasure, the body and language. For example, when Eve describes how masturbating and writing makes her 'feel held', she uses indented lines to create a halting rhythm, bringing our attention to the content of this conversation.

> Eve:
>
> 'It's awfully striking how much the thread of a self, for me, seems to have been tied up with all of this masturbating.'
>
> 'Striking to me, too,' Shannon says. 'It seems to have been what made you feel safe – almost what made you feel held.'
>
> 'You mean that'd odd, because I'm alone then?' Shannon nods. 'But it's true being alone does exactly that for me.
>
> A summer morning,
>
> waking up in my own good
>
> time, with *my cool skin,*
>
> a writing project waiting when I get around to it: for me, these are the real elements of heldness on a day-to-day basis. More than even being held by another person.' (Sedgwick 2000: 76)

Sedgwick expresses how the self is held in these incredibly tender, private, internal moments of masturbation and writing, both a form of pleasure through the body.

Audre Lorde's power of the erotic is useful here, as we circle around Sedgwick's pleasurable energy that defines the thread of self in safety, in heldness. The erotic, Lorde says, is a measure 'between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings'. The erotic is a resource inside ourselves, a sense of 'satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire'.

Lorde recognises the power of the erotic which is not purely sexual, instead a deep satisfaction rooted in 'the deepest knowledge' and 'self-respect' (1989: 88). Sedgwick expresses the resource of the erotic through writing, explicitly linked to her body – on a summer morning, in her own good time, with her cool skin – illustrating that pleasure comes through these practices which involve her relationship to gestures and actions that bring a strong sense of self. Sarah Ahmed, writing on Lorde's use of the erotic, says that a feminist killjoy 'in being charged up is warmed up; she is an erotic figure' (2017: 248). Sedgwick expresses 'desire for more to life, more desire; a desire for more' (Sedgwick qtd in Ahmed 2017: 248).

Sedgwick's erotic power as it relates to writing and pleasure unfurls in the white space on the page. As Wales Freedman says, 'white space also opens' (2014: 16). Changing formatting, varieties in typesetting and indentation to gesture a breaking off into poetic reflection plays with traditional modes of address. *A Dialogue on Love* takes up many tones, mixing Shannon's voice with Eve's, poetry with prose, witness with witnessed, creative with critical. Within 'deliberate error', Sedgwick enables access to the sibylline recesses of her mind, performing the messy hurricane of language. These recesses might articulate what Hélène Cixous meant when she said, 'I could burst – burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames' (Cixous 1976: 876). The forms are the ones of the queer female body, the errors and excess of the sick, bigger-bodied flesh. Sedgwick's desire to *carry* over her body into form (and make the form hybrid, many, *queer*), echoes Cixous' suggestion, 'Write yourself. Your body must be heard' (1976: 880). Hearing the body means showing it in form, as Wales Freedman asserts Sedgwick has difficulty 'containing herself in text' (2014: 4).

Much like exploring and explaining her desire through masturbating, those 'mistakes' or decisions of inclusion *open up*. The 'solid, dumb ordinariness' of confessions and details from one's life: 'Of course it's embarrassing!' (Sedgwick 2000: 141). She gives precedents to the messiness of the body, even boring, embarrassing parts. Sedgwick indulges in the 'dirt' of details, specks of error, 'not because it's exceptional but because it's ordinary' (2000: 116). She negotiates ways of formatting and layout that allow prose and poetry to be unfamiliar to her. While speaking of James Merrill's death, Sedgwick is 'haunted' by an essay he wrote about a trip to Japan, where he used an 'unfamiliar form: prose interspersed with haiku', which allowed a sense of 'his very sentences fraying' (2000: 194). Where sentences fray and poetry enters, line breaks encourage breath, create gaps. This multiplicity of Sedgwick – darting, sweeping – the seeping of voices, perspectives, confessions, they must be acted out and smudged onto the paper. Again, Wales Freedman says:

> [T]he subject of Sedgwick's sentence is [denoting] a self so hybrid that it cannot be contained in a singular "I" or plural "we" but transcends localised identity altogether, denoting Eve as "it", both determined and indeterminate, like queerness itself. (2014: 6)

Sedgwick's fraying notebook style allows us to move athletically between modes of address, opening up various realities of how self-narration might take place, through relation with others, through the reflection of memories, and what the author chooses to include or exclude. This indeterminacy is fluid in its identity, providing possibilities of strangeness in familiarity.

'"You're not telling me to just make the pain go away, are you?" he mildly notes. "And I don't think you're telling me a story about cancer and the trauma of mortality, either.

He's heard that correctly; I'm smiling when I shake my head.' (Sedgwick 2000: 7)

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls *A Dialogue on Love* her 'texture book', filled with weaving, resounding blushes of her queer errors (2000: 207). From notes taken by Shannon in one of their later sessions, Eve 'talks about her current drive to document herself and others as having some relationship to an awareness of death, that she wants to leave a sense of her relationality' (2000: 198). This (perhaps anxious) need *to be used for years after one's death*, in the words of Eileen Myles (2015: 110), belongs to a process of formation for the pained, ill, queer body, how 'after the chemo was over, when [her] hair was growing back', Eve didn't want the 'pieces of [herself]' to come 'back together' 'in the same dazed and laborious place' (2000: 7). She is interested in 'how to live in relation to an incurable [illness]' (216), how to 'handle every rough or silky twist of its pass'; a gentle attention and curiosity coming close to 'enjoining care' (213).

Eve articulates relationality with Shannon as 'your ability to hold me inside you, and mine to hold you inside me', a kind of 'circuit of reciprocity' (165). The enjoining care in relationality, of the reader-subject's connection to *A Dialogue on Love* and our witnessing of Shannon and Eve's bond, reminds us of our ability to be undone and in error, while remaining warm and in pleasure. It is within the pink room of joyful exchange, this error-making surprise, that we end, hybrid – sexy – messy.

Works cited

Ahmed, S 2017 *Living a Feminist Life*,Duke University Press, Durham NC return to text

Blood Orange 2018, 'Jewelry', *Negro Swan*, Domino Recording Company, [CD] return to text

Butler, J 2005 *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, New York return to text

Carson, A 2000 *Men in the Off Hours*,Vintage Books, New York return to text

Cixous, H 1976 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in K Cohen and P Cohen (trans), *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, 4: 875-893 return to text

Darwin Cornford, F 1996 *Poems*, Enitharmon Press, London return to text

Halberstam, J 2011 *The Queer Art of Failure*, Duke University Press, Durham NC return to text

Kirby, V 1997 *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, Routledge, New York return to text

Lorde, A 1980 *The Cancer Journals*,Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco return to text

Lorde, A 1989 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', *The Whole Earth Review* 63: 87-91 return to text

Middleton, K 2009 '"An Interesting and Valuable Mental Event": Anne Carson's Error Poetics', Master of Arts in English thesis, Georgetown University, Washington DC return to text

Moon, M 2010 'Psychosomatic? Mental and Physical Pain in Eve Sedgwick's Writing', *Criticism* 52, 2: 209-213 return to text

Myles, E 2015 *I Must Be Living Twice*,Harper Collins, New York return to text

Nelson, M 2009 *Bluets*, Wave Books, New York return to text

Nolan, EM 2015 'What to Do with All This Imperfection?', *The Word Hoard* 1, 4: 21-27 return to text

Reader, S 2008 'In the Wrong: Bad poems and Errant Teaching in Anne Carson's *Men in the Off Hours*', Master of Arts in English thesis, Concordia University, Montreal return to text

Scarry, E 1985 *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, New York return to text

Sedgwick, EK 2000 *A Dialogue on Love*,Beacon Press, Boston return to text

Sedgwick, EK 2003 *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham NC

Thorp, Jennifer R 2014 '*Prowling The Meanings: Anne Carson's Doubtful Forms and The Traitor's Symphony*', Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of Manchester return to text

Torres, E 2018 'Blood Orange's Dev Hynes Breaks Down Every Song on His New Album, *Negro Swan*', *Pitchfork:* pitchfork.com/features/song-by-song/blood-oranges-dev-hynes-breaks-down-every-song-on-his-new-album-negro-swan/ (accessed 15 October 2018) return to text

Wales Freedman, EE 2014 'The Queer Faces of Eve: Witnessing Theories in Sedgwick's *A Dialogue On Love*', *Writing From Below* 2, 1: 1-25 return to text

Frankie Hanman Siegersma is a writer working in non-fiction and poetry living in Melbourne. Their work has been published in Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry *(Hunter),* Rabbit Poetry*,*Cordite Poetry Review*,* The Suburban Review *and* Scum Mag.

TEXT
Vol 23 No 2 October 2019
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Julienne van Loon & Ross Watkins
text@textjournal.com.au