

Egg Theory's Early Style

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Abstract This essay contemplates an enduring form of reasoning it titles “egg theory”: the type of reasoning that trans people use, prior to transition, to prove transition’s impossibility or fruitlessness. It follows this reasoning in a critical and ironic framing in the work of the novelist and critic Sybil Lamb and then, in a less ironic mode, through some essays of Eve Sedgwick and, more broadly, the tranche of queer theory that her work continues to inspire. Egg theory’s hostility to the logic of transition inheres in queer theory’s own insistence on universality and virtuality as key aspects of queer politics. The essay concludes by considering, through Freud’s “Schreber Case” and Dalí’s “Metamorphosis of Narcissus,” alternatives to egg theory for approaching the condition of the egg before it hatches, the trans person before transition.

Keywords egg theory, Eve Sedgwick, Sybil Lamb

If every refusal is, finally, a loyalty to some other bond in the present or past, refusal is simultaneously preservation as well. The mask thus conceals the loss, but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment. The mask has a double function which is the double function of melancholy. The mask is taken on through the process of incorporation which is a way of inscribing and then wearing a melancholic identification in and on the body; in effect, it is the signification of the body in the mold of the Other who has been refused.

—Judith Butler, “Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Heterosexual Matrix”

What the neurotic shrinks back from is not castration, but from turning his castration into what the Other lacks. He shrinks back from turning his castration into something positive, namely, the guarantee of the function of the Other, this Other that steals away in the indeterminate echo of significations, this Other in which the subject no longer sees himself except as fate, but fate that has no end, fate that gets lost in the ocean of histories.

—Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book X*

never ever tr*nsition

One only becomes an egg in retrospect, when one has hatched, and the chick has emerged. So I remember being told, in the very early part of my transition, that I had been, until now, an egg, and—as powerfully rooted in a belief in latency as I found myself—I resented it deeply, this unlovely shadow of an unchosen object that, therefore, I had always (not yet) been. Thirty-four years of one’s life, one hopes, are more than mere latency—and less, too—and I recoiled from the notion that I was in a shell, “a shell of a man,” as the cliché goes. D. A. Miller begins his monograph *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (1992: 3) with a fantasy of having been close to the man himself: “Twenty years ago in Paris, long before I, how you say, *knew myself*, a fellow student told me he had seen Roland Barthes late one evening at the Saint Germain Drugstore.”¹ I never met Roland Barthes or Barbara Johnson, but, if I had, it would have been in boy drag. Was I, even then, tucked into a shell, insincere or stupid or both? *Mais non*, of course not. Still, to be called an egg is not to be insulted: by the time one is called one, it must be understood that one is *not* one, or not one any longer. An egg is displaced in time, “retconned” back into one’s own being; a protocol for a new, and newly incommensurable, sense-making procedure. Just because one cannot say “I am an egg,” then, without falling afoul of the liar’s paradox, does not mean that there aren’t eggs—any more than the same problematic proves that there are no liars. (Eggs are not liars, again by definition.) Just because one cannot point to a text as an egg text, therefore, does not mean that there are none as such. It simply means that “egg” is a heuristic that necessitates deployment of the judgment of the interpreter, that any such deployments reflect the observer’s judgment as much as they depict the egg.

But: eggs have theories. Chiefly, the egg’s theory is that they (he, she, ze, etc.) cannot transition. Not, generally, *must* not—though doubtless beneath the sacerdotal cassocks of a few “gender critical” ministers one can catch a glimpse of chalazae.² Egg theory is not generally ethical, but technical. One simply cannot. Which among us, given the chance, would not? But of course it is not so simple; indeed, the categories at issue are endlessly complicated, existing on different ontological orders (sex and gender, for example), and battened by chaotic forces so powerful and incoherent (desire, say, or sexuality, or “socialization”) that to attempt something like a sex change would not so much be malicious as it would be gauche.

The second step of egg theory is its abstraction, via a curious and ambivalent universalism, into a set of general observations about a system in which the desire is found aerosolized into a fine spray. Here is egg theory at its purest, a medium of thought form and desire, a desire with no object and with, perhaps, not even a subject to speak of; here, at last, is the compensatory

1 hallucination of a system of delight and foreclosure. We may have different names
2 for this system—we may call it “affect,” we may call it “queer,” we may call it
3 “aesthetic”; there are plenty of other names—all that is required is its ontology be
4 both virtual and plastic. And it must assure us that transition is both impossible
5 and inevitable, without exposing the dialectical negative of that contradictory
6 image to too much light.

7 The punk trans poet and novelist Sybil Lamb (n.d.) lays out the logic of egg
8 theory in a broken, split manifesto titled “You Best Never Ever Tr*nsition,
9 Tr*nny.” It begins:

11 DETRANSITION !!! if you are one of the 1:12000 people born with GID, if your
12 assigned gender is not your gendxer ID, if you are a fag who thinks dressing like a
13 woman will get you more boyfriends, then you are crazy. your head is all fucked up
14 and you are a social pariah. NEVER EVER TRANSITION. becoming a tr@nny
15 these days means comiting yourself to years of being a gender mutant on the
16 fringes of society. alientaion and discriination and violence are your only possible
17 rewards. best case scenario you can get a job in porn. she-male yum dot com pays
18 \$500 for a 2 hour photo shoot. all tr*nny get to do for the rest of their life is attend
19 support groups and write volues of tr@nny essays. do you really want to spend the
20 rest of your life as a trans intellectual ?? i mean sometimes i get invited to do a
21 workshop at a tr*nny conference but its been a while since that happened and
22 people know i talk alot of nasty hatefull dhit and swear too much. and i never got a
23 free train ticket or motel room outta doing a tr4nny conference.

25 It hits like a blizzard. Lamb's irony is of that relentless, manic kind that cannot
26 finally be forced to line up on one side or the other of its apparent meaning: it is
27 both a bitter pastiche of egg ideology and its no less bitter reinstantiation. It begins
28 with scarcity: only “1:12000” are “born with GID,” and access to transition
29 depends on, even in the virtual domain of desire, a kind of mathematical
30 accreditation—unless I can say with confidence that I am one of this number
31 (and who could), then I count myself out. The irony begins to separate into yolk
32 and albumen in the following sentences, however, with the alienation of the
33 “tr*nny” being, also, a ticket to a more romantic being, “fucked up” and “a gender
34 mutant.” A little more sexy. Yet the irony does not settle into mere parallelism.
35 Rather, a second pairing takes precedence over “pariah”/“mutant,” which opposes
36 the two jobs that a “tr*nny” is qualified to discharge: porn (“best case scenario”) and
37 being a “trans intellectual,” which pays less well and seems, perhaps, to
38 require one to moderate one's language. Another specifically trans dyke dimen-
39 sion of this reasoning, another clue that this is egg theory, cast back in time from a
40 hatched present, rather than simply propaganda: under the conditions of patri-
archy, to be a woman is to desire not to be, so the transsexual desire oscillates

1 around a gravitational center that can never be inhabited until the abolition of
2 patriarchy in general.

3 Lamb (n.d.) continues:

4
5 BROTHERS AND SISTERS ! TR*NSEXUALITY IS FUCKING HORRIBLE ! never
6 ever transition. I mean first off do you really identify as the other gender ?? do you
7 even act more like or kinna physically resemble the other gender ?? such qualifi-
8 cations are highly subjective and arbitrary. If your a tr*nny or junior tr*nny cadet
9 then you should know by now that gender, at least in the modern western
10 understanding is actually about 8 factors including a lot of socialization and other
11 peoples perceptions. Once again we are living in the eye of the hurricane of the
12 20th century western world. Now is a great time to be a dyke or fag. Or if your not
13 that way you can be a Nelly boy or a Rosy the Riveter tough lady. Or if you really
14 want to, what with all the punks and weirdos around there's people with face
15 tattoos and 20 rings in their face working at the coffee shop. So it shouldn't be to
16 big a deal for you to cut your tits off or get some installed or whatever. Similar like
17 sexuality is biological and its near impossible to sufficiently brainwash someone
18 out of being a queer. And penguins and dogs are queer so that's cool. Butch
19 women and nelly boys is also just part of how society is way over genderpated and
20 needs to stop telling kids which toys are appropriate. So to be perfectly clear and
21 make complete sense : gays and lessies and bull daggers and swishy fops: all natural
22 normal members of society. Tr*nsexuality is some kind of government plot to sell
23 penises and 'ginas !!!
24

25 Switching into another register, the egg speaks to us as a pedant (“actually about 8
26 factors”), even a mansplainer (“highly subjective and arbitrary”)—that is, as a
27 kind of professorial authority. An authority that positions trans people against
28 other queers—“all natural normal members of society”—whose thriving
29 depends on the exclusion of the “tr*nny,” a figure scapegoated for the fact that
30 “society is way over genderpated” and somehow responsible for the gendering of
31 toys. The sheer incommensurability of the various registers deployed against the
32 would-be transitioner, whose character Lamb revises through turns (romantic
33 outsider, cheap fuck, tiresome intellectual, inattentive student) must culminate in
34 a conspiratorial unity—and so it does, with the “government plot” that alone can
35 explain the phenomenon of transsexual desire. Egg theory contends with a dis-
36 tinctive kind of paranoia, not without its love for the “gender mutant,” but which
37 must contend at some point with the friction between the life of the “tr*nny” and
38 that of the queer others whose transness has been sublimated into a more
39 nuanced, sophisticated orientation toward gender. Like Leslie Feinberg, whose
40 *Stone Butch Blues* Lamb (n.d.) positions as a futurological egg theory, the post-
detransition text that completes the cycle of foreclosure: “Or remember Les, the

1 stone butch blues guy ?? He's my fucking hero cuz stone butch was all about how
2 freaking scary and upsetting tr*nnsexual life is and after forcing himself through
3 20 years of loneliness and workplace discrimination he called bullshit and ripped
4 his beard out with tweezers and proclaimed him self *neither yet both*." The
5 reduction of the text to a violently detransitioned body: pushing back in Leslie
6 Feinberg.

7 As Lamb's reference to Feinberg implies, queer theory is, in certain of its
8 guises, indistinguishable from egg theory—not because the two habits of thought
9 are the same but because egg theory is drawn to queer theory's engagement with
10 a sexuality athwart identity, an account of sexuality that derives from something
11 more, less, or other than identity. And perhaps one can say something more
12 direct, even, than that. Among the blueprints of queer theory—the foremothers—
13 one finds some egg theory: several figures within queer theory either wrote, at the
14 time, about a transsexual desire that they kept at arm's length (most famously Eve
15 Kosofsky Sedgwick), or made late-career pitches to trans identity claims. Since
16 describing the latter would entail dreaming a dream as dreamy as Miller's reverie
17 of the Saint Germain Drugstore (though major queer theorists are interviewed
18 enough that it isn't hard to google what I'm gossiping about), I will restrict myself
19 to the case just mentioned, with the proviso that I am not attempting to do justice
20 to Sedgwick's complex and nuanced account of queerness or sexuality, and simply
21 to ask a question about the egg-theoretical style as it is explored in a body of work
22 whose importance to anti-essentialist practices of queer criticism can be followed
23 quite easily.

24 Egg theory gets in at the root; it seems always to be felt as the historical-
25 dialectical antecedent of any position. It can be grown, for example, in this kind of
26 soil, from *Epistemology of the Closet*: "Axiom 1: People are different from each
27 other" (Sedgwick 1990: 22). This is a statement that has been formulated not to
28 provoke an argument or to clarify a difference, but to accomplish two quite
29 contrary rhetorical goals. On the one hand, the statement seeks to ground and to
30 found a discipline in difference, and therefore to establish incommensurability,
31 division, discrimination, and distinction as its characterizing techniques. On the
32 other hand, Sedgwick boils down this new discipline, which we have come to call
33 "queer theory," into an unobjectionable, even quite staggeringly bland, position.
34 By virtue of being unexceptionable, the position is thereby also universalist: the
35 axiom, if it is true at all—and how, of course, could it not be—it follows that it
36 must be true for every "each other" that one could conceptualize. People may be
37 different from each other, but everyone is differenced in the same way. In the
38 sentence that follows, "it is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we
39 have for dealing with this self-evident fact" (22), Sedgwick seems to evoke the first
40 axiomatic of the United States Declaration of Independence, if not in a citational
form then at least in a tonal shift into mock epic—as well as, in this case, a politics

1 of the “respectable.” (Respectable according to whom?) The rhetorical bind is
 2 similar too: we may hold these truths to be self-evident, but to the degree that we
 3 are required to hold them, they are not self-evident but require evidencing and
 4 instantiation. Likewise, though perhaps it is a “self-evident fact” that “people are
 5 different from each other,” that fact nonetheless requires the ancillary labor of
 6 “dealing with.” Yet why anything so grandiose as “conceptual tools” are necessi-
 7 tated by a statement as bland as “people are different from each other” remains, at
 8 the very least, an open question.
 9

10 **queer oviparity**

11 Perhaps an answer is supplied in “White Glasses,” a short paper of Sedgwick’s
 12 delivered at the City University of New York (CUNY) Center for Lesbian and Gay
 13 Studies in 1991, the year after the publication of *Epistemology of the Closet*, and
 14 collected in *Tendencies* (1993). It comprises a lyrical reflection on Sedgwick’s
 15 friendship with the queer poet and intellectual Michael Lynch. It is a text whose
 16 egg theory seems designed to provoke trans readers to bifurcated rage and
 17 sympathy, much like Lamb’s. “One of the first things I felt when I was facing the
 18 diagnosis of breast cancer was, ‘Shit, now I guess I must really be a woman’” (262),
 19 Sedgwick writes, marking a shift into cancer memoir with one of the genre’s
 20 characteristic discursive modes—gallows humor. The gallows humor in ques-
 21 tion, moreover, is one that conditions the speaker not merely to mourn the
 22 fantasy of bodily integrity that cancer threatens—in fact, it is explicitly not bodily
 23 totality that is under siege, since Sedgwick explicitly rebuts the notion that breast
 24 cancer could be “the secret whose sharing defines women as such” (262). Rather,
 25 the joke is that cancer has forced Sedgwick into a position where she has to reject
 26 a political alignment (that of “women as such”) that has, within her community,
 27 attempted to force a competition for resources between research on breast cancer
 28 and research on AIDS. “As though AIDS were *not* a disease of women, of lesbi-
 29 ans!” (262) as Sedgwick exclaims. That disgraceful attempt to draw a line between
 30 two different kinds of disease determines, for Sedgwick, a difference not between
 31 men and women but between queer men and “that-thing-that-is-not-man, that is
 32 not the male labeled queer, that thing not vulnerable through poverty or racism,
 33 through injection, through an insertive or hot and rubbed-raw sexuality to the
 34 bad luck of viral transition” (262–63).

35 (Do you know, when I started taking synthetic progesterone in the sum-
 36 mer of 2018, my expectation is that it would do precisely nothing for me? Trans
 37 people I knew—the cultists!—had insisted that the “titty skittles” would make
 38 my breasts grow. But my prescribing doctor could not confirm that with me. The
 39 only clue was that I had to sign a form indemnifying the clinic in the case that I
 40 developed breast cancer. But why would I be at increased risk of breast cancer?
 Only because the progesterone would make my breasts grow: the doctor couldn’t

1 confirm it, but the actuarial staff said differently. My tits *have* grown, for whatever
2 that's worth. Not enough.)

3 In the paragraph of most direct interest to the trans reading of Sedgwick,
4 we acquire a discipline of identity:

5
6 Now, I know I don't "look much like" Michael Lynch, even in my white glasses.
7 Nobody knows more fully, more fatalistically than a fat woman how unbridgeable
8 the gap is between the self we see and the self as whom we are seen; no one,
9 perhaps, has more practice at straining and straining to span the binocular view
10 between; and no-one can appreciate more fervently the act of magical faith by
11 which it may be possible, at last, to assert and believe, against every social possi-
12 bility, that the self we see can be made visible as if through our own eyes to the
13 people who see us. The stubborn magical defiance I have learned (I *sometimes* feel I
14 have succeeded in learning) in forging a habitable identity as a fat woman is also
15 what has enabled the series of uncanny effects around these white glasses; uncanny
16 effects that have been so formative of my—shall I call it my identification? Dare I,
17 after this half-decade, call it with a fat *woman's* defiance, my identity?—as a gay
18 man? (256)

19
20 Like Lamb's, Sedgwick's disclosure here comes from a setting-into-the-past of an
21 identity that can be claimed, overtly, because it has been earned over time—"after
22 this half-decade." Yet if there is irony in the remainder of "White Glasses," there is
23 here a rather different affect, and one that—unlike irony—can name itself safely:
24 "stubborn magical defiance." Though the sentence in which something is defied
25 without being named is complex for more reasons than that, and for reasons more
26 submerged than the characteristic rhetorical pyrotechnics (em dashes) with
27 which Sedgwick interrupts the articulation of an identity claim. Where, after all,
28 does the sudden surge of defensiveness come from? Has someone been telling
29 Sedgwick that she shouldn't identify as a gay man? If so—and here is where the
30 ironic bifurcation of interest in "White Glasses" reveals itself as egg theory—then
31 the dominating voice against whom Sedgwick articulates her defiance is not the
32 voice of (let us risk being embarrassed and call it) the patriarchy; rather, the voice
33 that must be forced back is the voice of the tr*nny herself, for whom only an elect
34 cadre can be allowed to make such identifications. Sedgwick's rage is not directed
35 at anyone who might, indeed, impede the expression of gay male identity, but at
36 those who are perceived as already having made the crossing.

37 If we contrast, for example, these reflections on identifying as a gay man
38 with AIDS and those of Lou Sullivan, Sedgwick's contemporary and a gay trans
39 man who had died of AIDS two months and seven days before Sedgwick delivered
40 "White Glasses" at CUNY (Sullivan passed on March 2, 1991), we can notice some

1 similarities and some differences. Consider this letter from Sullivan to Judy Van
2 Maasdam, of the Gender Dysphoria Program in Palo Alto, dated May 21, 1987.

3
4
5 Dear Judy,

6
7 I'm writing to let you know what's happening with me:

8 Have finally completed my genitoplasty via Michael Brownstein. It was a
9 long haul, as I had trouble keeping the left testicular implant, and it had to be
10 reinserted two additional times before it "took." But I'm all there now.

11 Don't know if you've heard it from Paul Walker, but this past New Year's
12 Eve I was diagnosed with pneumocystis pneumonia AIDS. Brownstein was good
13 enough to finish my surgery despite the risk.

14 So, Judy, even though your Program did not believe I could live as a gay
15 man, it looks like I'm going to die like one.

16
17 Yours in liberation,
18 Louis G. Sullivan

19
20
21 By this point, the egg has fully hatched—hatched athwart the grave. The enor-
22 mous moral seriousness of the letter does not deter Sullivan, any more than it
23 deters Sedgwick, from deploying a little genre craft: in this case, a sharp escalation
24 in seriousness from the difficult but still broadly comical tale of repeated ball
25 insertion into a disclosure of AIDS status that can be asserted, explicitly, with
26 pride, a pride that overwhelms the vacillation of egg futurity ("I could [not] live as
27 a gay man") with the finitude of trans certainty ("I'm going to die like one").

28 Do Sedgwick and Sullivan have anything to say to each other? Perhaps the
29 question is rather, what is the futurity of egg theory? How do we understand the
30 choices that transsexual orientation (a word I am using here distinct from, but not
31 in contradiction to, *identity*, from Sedgwick, or *desire*—a term I have used
32 elsewhere) can enable or tolerate? I will say, for my part, that an identification that
33 remains psychic or notional, as Sedgwick's does, is not merely the theory of an egg
34 voice that prevented me from seeking transsexual health care for a couple of
35 decades, and still admonishes me for having done so; it is also, and more con-
36 sequentially, the voice that harasses trans people for the force of our identifica-
37 tions in the name and voice of queer theory. For example, Christopher Reed
38 constructed his 2018 antitrans manifesto out of axioms, "a format that pays
39 homage to Eve Sedgwick," and explicitly of the post-1980s moment, which he
40 associates with a kind of anti-"essentialist" queer liquidity, a pleasing slipperiness

1 that allows one to aestheticize and thus incorporate difference without it
2 departing from the ambit of “play.”³

3 Others—Aren Aizura (2018), Blu Buchanan (2018), and Ellen Samuels
4 (2018) especially—have assessed the irony of a text that speaks for “English
5 professors” in laying down the law of queerness for the youngsters, while
6 declaring, with a rather irradiated sense of irony, that while “the feeling of
7 asserting authority can be very seductive,” nonetheless “that doesn’t make it right”
8 (Reed 2018: sec. 7) My point here, in this assessment of queer trans-antagonism, is
9 merely that Reed’s reading of Sedgwick in “Axiomatic” is, basically, right; or at
10 least, it is in the same spirit as Sedgwick’s reading of Sedgwick in “White Glasses.”
11 Egg theory suffuses the entire disciplinary scene that Reed has convened. Like
12 Lamb’s egg, Reed blames trans people for the authoritarian patrolling of
13 gender—for Lamb, in the canny reference to “toys”; for Reed, in the fourth
14 axiom: “People feel real pain because of artificial social expectations. One
15 response is to help people meet those expectations. Another is to dismantle the
16 expectations.” The first of these, Reed apparently thinks, is the accommodationist
17 trans position; the latter position is that of queer theory, which is revolutionary.
18 Yet the affect that Sedgwick has committed to, and I suppose in the end it’s not so
19 different to Reed’s own, is that of the “stubborn magical defiance,” an asymptotic
20 and repetitive performance of foreclosed femininity, the femininity of the difficult
21 woman, that can always be relied on to supply a compensatory pleasure to the
22 subject that fails to transform itself into the object of its own desire.

23 Which is, how you say, *fine*. The force worth resisting is not outright
24 hostility to transition among queer scholars, which, after all, trans people have no
25 chance of defeating on any existing institutional grounds, but the holding of trans
26 thought to the implicit standards of egg theory. Sedgwick’s thought, of course, is
27 multivalent and supple, juicy if one likes juicy, and really good at rubbing on
28 various surfaces and exposing various textures. Nonetheless the continued appeal
29 of Sedgwickian paradigms of criticism seems, to this former egg at least, strangely
30 looped into the temporal rhythms of egg theory. I was reading a supposedly trans-
31 friendly review of Andrea Lawlor’s book *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl* the
32 other day, which ends with the following:

33
34 Despite the fact that the question of bodily or sensate commensurability is staged
35 across the putative chasm of what we call “sexual difference,” however, Lawlor
36 refuses to let bodily sex provide or remain any sort of stable explanatory frame for
37 experience, precisely because of Paul’s ability to change his body. Indeed, while
38 Sedgwick’s “people are different from each other” does point to the endless col-
39 lection of differences, both large and small, that gather under the auspices of most
40 identity descriptors (but especially gender and sexuality), her deceptively simple

1 little maxim also quietly suggests that, from the start, people are simultaneously
2 always different from themselves.

3 In this sense, Lawlor's novel is both about trans experience and a vision of
4 trans experience that is not yet, but could be, and nowhere is this more clear than
5 in our encounter with Paul. His body's special capacity for change physically stages
6 the limitless potential for a self not curbed by the stabilizing energies of
7 identity—a potential that exists on psychic, social, physical, and cultural levels for
8 all of us. (LaFleur 2019)

9
10 What is this citation of Sedgwick doing? Clearly articulating a universalism of
11 some kind, in line with the “violent universal bang” that Lawlor's titular character
12 experiences in her first lesbian orgasm. But of what kind? A universalism predi-
13 cated on the infinite divisibility of self into ever more complex and contradictory
14 fragments, an “endless collection of differences.” This is not, obviously, an
15 attempt to police the bodies of trans people—although it is, perhaps, a refusal to
16 assess the grounds on which trans people's experience is already constituted by a
17 policed body. By failing to register that the condition of the body as a “stable
18 explanatory frame” is precisely the fact on which dysphoria depends, the reviewer
19 generates an account of embodiment that entirely elides even the possibility of
20 transition, let alone the lived reality of trans people. This “vision of trans expe-
21 rience that is not yet, but could be” is a vision of “trans experience” as micro-
22 dosing, as commodified, low-risk, performance enhancement. It is a diet of purest
23 egg. To put that another way: since what is being salvaged from Sedgwick, by
24 Lawlor's reviewer as well as by Reed, is an idea of conspicuous, bland superfluity,
25 one is prevented from disagreeing. Yes, people are different from each other. This
26 reviewer did not, of course, go so far as to agree with Reed (2018) that “a stable
27 gender identity may be like an iPhone X: a lot of people tell you need one—but
28 maybe you don't,” but the argument is substantially the same, and formally very
29 similar. To define trans as “a self not curbed by the stabilizing energies of iden-
30 tity”—I suspect the difference between that position and Reed's is reducible to a
31 difference of tone. But the tone entails a complex little twist: by reducing the
32 difference between “trans” and “queer” to nothing, and tucking the former term
33 neatly into the latter, this writer is able to diffuse the tension between the two
34 constituencies by entirely eradicating the distinctiveness of one of them. A dif-
35 ference that, under the sign of egg theory, can only be felt as anxiety.

36 scrambled

37
38 Anxiety is nonadaptive, as everyone learns; the anticipation of suffering does not
39 produce the prophylactic effect that we pin our hopes on. What Sigmund Freud
40 ([1926] 1958: 53) calls “the affect of anxiety” he enmeshes within the complex of
feelings, fears, and desires around castration—and therefore around transsexual

1 ideation—an association that, from “Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety”
 2 ([1926] 1958) onward he treats as an affect that precedes and catalyzes repression.
 3 Which is to say that anxiety is structural and reproduces itself irrespective of
 4 conditions. For those whose bodies are subject to repressive biopolicing, not
 5 merely anxiety but that-which-anxiety-anticipates is reinstated as bodily
 6 threat; the regime of biopolitics thus becomes, for racial capitalism, a regime of
 7 terror. What Freud means by “castration” is somewhat different from what trans
 8 people signal with the term *transition*, at least insofar as Freud’s conception
 9 produces recoil (“anxiety”) in the (male) subject who experiences it, and trans
 10 women only produce recoil in those around us. Nonetheless, the problematic of
 11 castration anxiety depends on the anticipated loss of an ego ideal, and therefore it
 12 looks different once one has relinquished the ego ideal. To use the term *transition*
 13 in this context indicates an accession to Freud’s reality principle—the surrender
 14 of a fantasy of phallic wholeness that enforced the paranoid-schizoid reproduc-
 15 tion of the policed presentation of self.

16 Freud, ultimate egg theorist, was positioned on the precipice of a castration
 17 he couldn’t even immanentize as theory, and never as practice without delegating
 18 the body to the authority responsible for taxonomizing and containing those
 19 marshaled under the diagnosis of schizophrenia. Nowhere is this problematic
 20 clearer than in the case of Schreber, who “believed that he had a mission to redeem
 21 the world and to restore it to its lost state of bliss, [which] he could only bring about
 22 if he were first transformed from a man into a woman” (Freud 1958: 16). Freud, as is
 23 well known, attributed the desire to become a woman to “the appearance in
 24 [Schreber] of a feminine (that is, a passive homosexual) wishful phantasy, which
 25 took as its object the figure of his doctor” (47). Critiques of that position ground
 26 the metapsychological accounts of castration of both Giles Deleuze and Félix
 27 Guattari, and Jacques Lacan, yet in both cases what is found most troubling in
 28 Freud’s text is his reduction of Schreber’s cosmologically scaled ambition to the
 29 scale of the Oedipal family. Neither objects that to attribute transsexual desire to
 30 thwarted homosexuality abolishes the former while ontologizing the latter. Freud’s
 31 commentary on Schreber’s *Memoirs*, as it goes, does leave some room for a
 32 transsexual ontology, although it is sequestered within an ambiguous modal verb:
 33

34 The most essential part of [Schreber’s] mission is that it must be preceded by his
 35 *transformation into a woman*. It is not to be supposed that he *wishes* to be trans-
 36 formed into a woman; it is rather a question of a “must” based upon the Order of
 37 Things, which there is no possibility of his evading, much as he would personally
 38 prefer to remain in his own honorable and masculine station in life. But neither he
 39 nor the rest of mankind can regain the life beyond except by his being transformed
 40 into a woman (a process which may occupy many years or even decades) by means
 of divine miracles.

1 One can sense, from the tenor of Freud's observation, that he would rather take
 2 transsexual desire off the diagnostic table because mere desire—manifest
 3 content—would fail to account for the principle of libidinal necessity that
 4 Schreber has articulated. Transsexual desire, then, is in fact non-desire; the
 5 delusional fantasy derives from the occlusion of homosexual desire. (Freud will
 6 not, therefore, line up on these grounds with those who reduce trans orientation
 7 to the workings of desire, because “desire” is an epiphenomenal condition:
 8 explication depends, in “The Schreber Case,” on a firm grappling with the
 9 structures that preexist and govern desire.)

10 What one cannot fail to sense, however, is the looming identification that
 11 Freud feels with Schreber, which makes itself known in a modular syntax that
 12 places Freud before, after, inside, and athwart Schreber. A list of the modal verbs
 13 in this short section of prose: (1) “it *must* be preceded,” a free indirect formulation
 14 that suspends the subject/object relation the sentence had initially erected (Freud
 15 does not say “he wanted/needed it to be preceded”); (2) “it *is not* to be supposed,”
 16 presumably by a third party, the reader/supposer, whose scene of supposing is
 17 detached from, and incompatible with, the scene in which Schreber's mission
 18 *must* be preceded; (3) “a ‘must’ based upon the Order of Things,” in which Freud
 19 pulls the necessity initially attributed to Schreber, back within the scene of his
 20 own text, in the form of a citation that one cannot confidently ascribe either to
 21 Freud or to Schreber; (4) “a process which may occupy many years,” a framing
 22 which, given the difficulty governing the citational position of *must*, we are
 23 variously prohibited from confidently assigning either to Freud or Schreber. Let
 24 us underline this more fully: after introducing Schreber through a conspicuous
 25 attempt to take his megalomania seriously, or at least to appear serious and
 26 sympathetic while taking Schreber's megalomania, Freud now introduces in
 27 parentheses a claim that, perhaps, could be taken to indicate that Schreber's
 28 delusion was not that he could be transformed into a woman, but that he could be
 29 so transformed quickly. Does Freud really believe that, given enough time,
 30 Schreber could have achieved his singular goal of transforming himself into a
 31 woman? I don't think the prose will allow us to rule it out.

32 Sedgwick's (1991) essay “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay” performs a
 33 related sleight-of-hand around the figures of effeminate boy and the gay man. The
 34 affective and political climate Sedgwick names is “a culture's desire that gay people
 35 *not be*” (26), and the problem she names is the emerging gay-affirming psy-
 36 chotherapies of the late 1980s that separated gender expression from sexual
 37 identity. This separation, Sedgwick argues, “is how it happens that the *depatho-*
 38 *logization* of an atypical sexual object-choice can be yoked to the *new* patholo-
 39 *gization* of an atypical gender identification” (21). This “pathologization” is, of
 40 course, the basis of a diagnosis of what we now call gender dysphoria that, while
 roundly criticized by trans activists calling for demedicalization, provides the

1 basis for self-determination for trans people. Sedgwick, quite clearly, understands
2 the medicalized subject of such a pathologization as a “proto-gay” child (22), and
3 the child’s medicalization within what we might as well call the apparatus of trans
4 health care is problematic not, in the end, because it requires the recitation of a
5 medical script as a condition of transition (as Dean Spade [2006] shows), but
6 because the mechanism removes embryonic gay men from the pipeline into gay
7 adulthood, and that homosexuality, in the process of its depathologization, has
8 thus been heterosexualized. The unspoken premise, then, is that any and all
9 effeminate boys will grow up to be gay men unless they are medically directed to
10 become trans women with male object-choices. The argument then sets up, with a
11 strategy that one could only call paranoid, an apparent conflict of interests
12 between gay and trans people that evaporates the moment one observes that not
13 all effeminate boys grow up to be gay men, nor do all masculine girls grow up to
14 become lesbians.

15 I suppose some remark on “cancel culture” is necessary, since us vicious
16 trans bitches are so frequently convicted of having performed in that
17 grotesquerie—often, rather strangely, by those who in other diners order most
18 enthusiastically from the critique-only menu. As though criticism were the same
19 as censorship. But to say something reductive: I am not trying to cancel Sedgwick.
20 I would look—anyone would look—utterly ridiculous if they attempted to do
21 such a thing to a critic of such profound and continentally broad sophistication.
22 My arguments here have been (1) that the construction of queer universalism in a
23 certain thread of queer theory has been predicated on the impossibilization of
24 transition, which I have called “egg theory”; (2) that egg theory has been explicitly
25 deployed in trans-antagonistic contexts; and (3) that it has also begun to shape
26 certain elements of trans discourse itself, as though we were rushing to prove the
27 impossibility of our own existence. That Sedgwick’s case for foundationalist
28 gayness incorporates both the arguments and the premises avowed by Stock and
29 the other gender criticals would likely unnerve everyone except for Reed. But the
30 point can hardly be made urgently enough, in a context in which the same
31 genocidal animus Sedgwick correctly attributed to 1980s America is now being
32 directed against trans people—by a political and cultural establishment that
33 threatens, routinely, to prevent us from accessing medicine, restrooms, rape crisis
34 centers, and so forth—that the practical manifestation of egg theory would be the
35 removal of health-care provision for trans children. Not, as Jules Gill-Peterson
36 (2018) has argued, that “protect trans kids” is an altogether adequate method for
37 historicizing desires trans people feel in the present, or a sophisticated enough
38 ethic by which to assess the applicability of a rubric for creating and sustaining life
39 for trans people, across ages and generations. As Gill-Peterson suggests, the drive
40 to protect may also be a drive to “propertize,” and the very idea of the egg, as I
began by saying, seems to imply a claim to know others better than they know

1 themselves—a claim that, however functionally indispensable to queer and trans
 2 relations, can hardly be generalized or scaled. As she puts it, “Trans-affirmative
 3 voices struggle to find a way to protect trans children that does not imagine them
 4 as deserving of protection because they are, finally the *property* of adults, not
 5 people with the right to gender self-determination” (ii). The same is surely true of
 6 pretransition adults. Eggs become chicks, chicks become hens, hens lay on top of
 7 eggs. The whole question of how to bring your kids up trans, of how to bring
 8 yourself up trans, instantiates the problematic of oviparous reproduction, which
 9 is to say the temporal formulation of dialectics as such: “Which came first, the
 10 chicken or the egg?” Is the ruse of trans latency one in which the past reveals itself
 11 as latent content only in light of the symbolic images that it appears to have
 12 hatched? The grievance incurred by such a trauma (that of hatching) would then
 13 entail the loss of a being that could never have been, that never was, much like the
 14 temporal doubling that occurs when the cognitive subject occasioned reignites
 15 herself and experiences, long after the first, a second puberty. Given which, it is
 16 not surprising that transition rarely works perfectly; the more remarkable fact is
 17 that it works at all. That we do, indeed, submit our bodies to programs of radical
 18 transcription, such that what is remodeled is not merely the ornamental or plastic
 19 accidents of the enfleshed soul but its definitive essence.

20 (I write now as a hen, which is to say as a person who not only assumes the
 21 right to read and interpret egg theory but, more pressingly, as someone to whom
 22 self-avowed eggs—closeted trans women—have shared stories, fears, desires.
 23 There are many ways to prep an egg. One of the strangest of all is that of the
 24 masculine-presenting people who, on learning that I was not always a woman but
 25 have chosen to be one, respond wistfully, “oh, I have always wanted to do that,” as
 26 though I were talking about taking a trip to Iceland or beginning a comprehensive
 27 physical detox. I do not always believe that they are telling me the truth. There are
 28 others, many others, perhaps some in every room of people I have ever addressed,
 29 whose relation to egg theory is one of absolute, disassociated foreclosure: who
 30 cannot transition, and can only barely stop the drive to do so from pulling their
 31 ribs out of their flesh.)

32 Salvador Dalí’s *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, painted in 1937, presents a set
 33 of strange and incompatible mirrorings. On the left, Narcissus, with a walnut for a
 34 head, leans heavily down onto his own knee; his obscured gaze, we assume, is
 35 planted like his shin and wrist in the pool, love and shame interbled. His torso is a
 36 yellowed marble, and though we see his “reflection” as less a reflection and more
 37 an extension of his body, we do see imprinted next to him in the lake the virtual
 38 replication of the cave behind him: as Dalí writes, “With the loss of his divinity the
 39 whole high plateau pours itself out” (quoted in Etherington-Smith 1993: 222)
 40 Narcissus is not doubled in the virtual space of the lake, but in the virtual space of
 the painting, nudged into the right-hand side of the visual field. What is the

1 difference between the two like figures? Dalí wrote a poem to accompany the
 2 painting, which distinguishes these two figures from the “heterosexual group” in
 3 the background between them, but he does not name them. We cannot tell if these
 4 two figures, who share a geometric form, also share consciousness, or some other
 5 kind of nonspatial continuity, but we can tell that there is a formal congruity, and
 6 that while the left pulls energy downward toward the lake, plunging languorously,
 7 the right is almost a plinth, gripping or balancing an egg, out of which grows a
 8 flower. Dalí's image reminds us that the metamorphosis of Narcissus is not
 9 merely a mutation of plastic matter but a transition, in the full sense, from one
 10 form of object into another. Here, indeed, there are two such mediations: the
 11 nudge, whose spatialization endows the composition with its unusual geometrical
 12 arrangement, and then, as though recapitulating that theme through a miniature
 13 thematic fragment, the emergence from the egg of, not a chicken but—a flower.
 14 Unlike Freud's Schreber, Narcissus transforms out of a surplus of desire, rather
 15 than its obliteration. For this reason, and others, it is surely a transsexual Narcissus,
 16 and not a homosexual one, that Dalí has in mind as the other of the “heterosexual
 17 group,” when he ends his poem with the egg: “When that head slits when that head
 18 splits when that head bursts, it will be the flower, / the new narcissus.”

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 22 author of *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Literature and the Idea of Japan* (2019). Her essays have
 23 appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, *ELH*, *Novel*, *Modernism/Modernity*, and *differences*.

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 28 on these thoughts as they emerged.

30 Notes

- 31 1. The pleated temporality of this line is the centerpiece of Barbara Johnson's (2002) essay
 32 “Bringing Out D. A. Miller,” an important appraisal, in the aftermath of the first wave of
 33 queer theory, of the queerness evinced by and through Miller's signature mode of critical
 34 analysis.
- 35 2. I deploy the absurd term *gender critical* here to refer to that group of antitrans activists,
 36 academics, and journalists, including Kathleen Stock, Germaine Greer, Sophie Allen,
 37 Jane Clare Jones, Holly Lawford Smith, Mary Long, Rebecca Reilly-Cooper, and Graham
 38 Linehan. By using this term, I am avoiding the more value-neutral *TERF*, an acronym for
 39 “trans-exclusionary radical feminist,” partly on the grounds that *exclusion* is not the best
 40 word for the hostile actions of members of this group—the forced inclusion of trans men
 within the category “adult human female,” for example, is as objectionable as the
 repeated physical molestation and relentless vilification of trans women. But I also partly
 do so because the term *gender critical*, which on its own distinguishes Stock et al. from

precisely nobody, is conspicuously stupid enough that I think it is worth letting the group defend. For a concise digest of the position of the group, see Stock et al. 2019.

3. Reed's "Axiomatic" has, fortunately, been removed from the Penn State University English Department website that was hosting it, and it is difficult to find. I have a private copy in my own personal archive, and I'm sure one can find it by searching Reddit—I'm not going to, though.

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