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in memoriam

Paola di Cori as a queer feminist intellectual and scholar

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Fig. 1 – Paola Di Cori

At the time of the CIRQUE conference in L'Aquila, Paola already suffered from mobility problems. She had accepted the invitation to submit a paper, but later called me to say that she didn't feel like traveling, really. Cancer was taking its toll, making her weaker. Repeated bouts of chemical treatments, too, and the exhausting experience of dealing with medical institutions and clinical protocols left her at times with little or no energy, despite her indomitable passion for life, intellectual work and networking.

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I understood. Then, she said to me, "Why don't you present my paper on my behalf?". I didn't expect this, but I knew it was a way for her to attend the conference, by passing through my voice. This is how her paper found its way to the conference: through a friend's voice, mine. On November 6th, 2017 Paola left us from her temporary bed in a Roman clinic. The last time I visited her was slightly unsettling: as the body was preparing itself to death, her mind was spiraling out into visions of new projects, one of which was her intention to revise the first draft of her paper on "Queer Narratives of Cancer". Still bigger projects involved her passionate interest to further develop a working group on the medical gaze, formed mainly by patients: the group had already met a few times and had started producing early sketches of reflections. Paola just would not give in to her illness. As soon as cancer had started to bite into her, she was ready to face the challenge and fight it with her own preferred weapons: intellectual curiosity, passionate indisciplinarity and political engagement. This is what she had taught me ever since we met, more than twenty years earlier, while she was lecturing at the University of Turin.

The way her body and her mind flew into wildly different directions, on that bed where she was confined in her final days, stirred in me conflicting feelings: in a way, I clearly anticipated her death, but had to suppress its impending presence in front of her bursts of apparent vitality. A vitality without purpose, it seemed to me. I felt a bit angry, even. Angry at my 'superior' knowledge, useless in itself. Angry at her childish ignorance of her own limits: in other words, angry at her blessing. Moreover, where would all that energy go once she had left us in this world? I felt I could never be equal to that unvoiced request: to carry that energy and conviction further, to keep on animating other people, even when the end is near, already upon us. I went home, back to Paola's paper to which I had lent my voice in L'Aquila. I recalled when she first told me about the topic she had chosen. I was half moved, half appalled. I could see she had decided to deal with cancer by displacing it through Eve K. Sedgwick's writing about her own cancer, added as a side note to his friend's battle with AIDS. I thought: how typical of Paola not to indulge in personal details, trying the utmost not to draw attention to herself! Thus, her cancer became relevant only as a pointer to a history of cancer, of breast cancer in particular, to a feminist history of the body. This way, her cancer ceased to be just her own. This way, it could be made good (I shudder at using this expression, but I still

dare say it), shareable in that it merged with a host of other cancers. However, this was no ordinary, shameful way of closeting one's illness into the secret of privacy; on the contrary, it was a way to turn one's own private illness into one that could speak, and be spoken of, as part of a collective discourse. Seen in this light, Eve's cancer could very well stand for her own cancer, too, if Paola so decided. So she decided.

A strategy of indirection. Your life and your words always go through the lives, and the words, of others. Sometimes you can choose which lives and which words will speak together with your own. To Paola, a child of 1968 as she would often describe herself, that collective voice had belonged to the project of feminism. She had devoted the best part of her life to the utopia of feminism. As a historian, though, she was always deeply conscious of the gaps, the discontinuities, the imperfect labor of memory, and the mishaps in the transmission from one generation to another. She believed that feminism could only survive if it got transformed anew by the younger generations. There was an irrepressible urge in Paola not only to fight against any authority principle, including that of established feminists, but also a burning desire to avoid placing 'women' in any given place, or identity. There was nothing which could prescribe in advance what women could be, would be or would do, or what they might do, or where they might go. This made her even more passionate about feminism. At least, this is what I understood of her allegiance to feminism: a passion about a subject that was in the making, coupled with an unwavering belief in anti-authoritarianism, with indisciplinarity and nomadism. Born in Argentina of a Jewish family, Paola lived most of her life in Italy, especially in Rome, but she preserved a transnational, even diasporic, perspective – rooted in her knowledge of Spanish, French and English – that often sat ill at ease within the Italian national context. As she points out in the short entry written for *Queer in Italia*: "I have to confess I have felt very isolated [in Italy], which is why I have spent long periods in the United States, England and paid short visits to Australia (between 1979 and 1990 I spent 5 years outside of Italy, a total of 10 in 30 years!)" (Di Cori 2011: 70). In the same text, she spoke of her frequent journeys to Argentina in the 1990's and her connections with the queer scene in Buenos Aires, in particular the trans activist group ALITT led by Lohana Berkins. Re-reading that text, I also find one of the rare instances of Paola's (sexual?) positioning, when she defines herself in passing as "an

aging hetero-queer feminist (Di Cori 2011: 74).

In a way, Paola had always assumed that gender and queer studies (and activism) were contiguous, part of the same wider field of alliances. She clearly recognized that queer theory was one of the outgrowths of Anglo-American feminism, itself developed as part of an intense transatlantic conversation that had merged 'French theory', post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and so on. She was nomadic, I believe, less because of her own transnational connections than because in her eyes feminism itself had grown out of national contexts while far exceeding those boundaries. Therefore, while deeply sensitive to the contingent limits (and situated opportunities) of 'place', Paola never thought of it as inherently bounded: more as a porous and workable social terrain. This belief would lead her to investigate the work of Michel de Certeau (with her only book project nearly completed at the time of her death). Speaking of herself, however, she repeatedly identified as one "out of place", who also actively contributed to her own out-of-placeness wherever she was: in the university, even in feminist circles, especially in Italy. Maybe, it was for this reason that the term 'queer' fit her so well, or at least I thought so, even though she used it so sparingly in her writings. To feel placed and yet deny the integrity of that place, to work at odds with one's own place, yet with people who belong to you, in that they move about and share your 'place'. This was the restless nature of Paola's inherent nomadism, less marketable than others, for sure, but deeply insisted upon, doggedly even. She interpreted such a (dis)location as queer, the common place attracting those subjectivities that make a place different to itself, turning themselves as both displaced *and* displacing agents.

In the late 1980s, Paola helped introduce gender studies in an Italian context that was highly resistant to it: she translated Joan Scott's influential essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" and started heralding a renewal of feminist thought in Italy, entertaining a constant dialogue with what was happening elsewhere, especially in Anglophone feminism: from the post-colonial debates to the "sex wars", and finally the "queer moment". When we first met in the mid-Nineties, she was deeply into Foucault and introduced me to a queer reading of his work. She was the right sort of feminist that could empower my queer thinking. Indeed, she was such an avid reader that throughout her life she would always be quick in recommending something to read that would help my thinking,

rather than just her own. Yet, nothing would be spared by her critical sharpness, not even the most interesting new approaches from the Anglophone world. Even when championing gender studies, for instance, she would invariably start from carefully teasing out their historical, cultural and political implications, pointing out the erratic path of translating terms from one context to another (cf. her essay in *Generi di traverso*, Di Cori 2000). She was always wary of embracing the newest ideas coming from abroad, not because of any conservatism, but because of her overarching interest in transmission and translation: what to do with those ideas in this context, for whom and with whom? It seemed that for Paola feminist utopia had to be tempered by political wisdom, a sense of pragmatism that was all the more necessary because of the fragility of any non-, or anti-institutional movement. Nothing else would secure the preservation of such heritage but the careful working out of ways to pass it on. Most of her feminist cultural politics dealt with issues of memory, affect and memory making (therefore, with teaching and pedagogy, too).

When I proposed to publish Paola's paper in the first issue of *Whatever*, I was acutely aware of the ethical implications of such a transmission. I had only a draft with me, though fairly structured and with a handful of bibliographical notes and references. I knew that this writing, like the paper in its oral delivery before it, would have to go through my hands once again. She had trusted me enough to present it through my voice the first time. Would she trust me again, though no longer living, to take it into my hands and prepare it for its next stage? On her deathbed, she had anticipated working on it, which made it harder for me to take over. On my last visit to the clinic, I did not have the courage to ask her permission to publish the paper as a draft, because by asking such a question I would have doubted her own faith in recovery. So here I am, this time without permission, once again taking her words and shifting them ever so slightly. I have corrected a few mistakes, added missing information, struck out a few repetitions, changed place to a couple of paragraphs, amended some English. I have taken liberties with an unfinished text, while imagining to negotiate with Paola some small strategies to produce a second (no less unfinished) version, one which inevitably carries not just her voice, but mine too. I don't know, really, if this is ok. I have been thinking of Paola, of her cancer muted (transmuted, rather) behind Eve's cancer, itself only a small part of an essay that foregrounds Michael Lynch's white glasses

and his AIDS-worn body. In Sedgwick's essay, his friend is temporarily recovering, while she has discovered in the meantime that she is sick with cancer. Paola's (provisional, unfinished) reading of "White Glasses" starts with a breast (Eve's, her own, all women's, both sick and healthy, raped and assertive), then lingers rather longer on Eve's Bardo, the transitional state between life and death. Indeed, through a certain shift in the use of her critical sources, "Queer Narratives of Cancer" toys with cultural history but increasingly turns into a meditation on Sedgwick's movement towards death, on her transitional state of being. Thus, she ends up performing her own belated obituary of Eve, while experiencing a bodily connection that bridges the temporal gap between the two queer feminist scholars. A cancerous, affective proximity amplified by the gaps opening between reading and writing, between a draft version and a published one.

Was she in some sort of Bardo (between herself and Eve, trans-identifying with her, like Eve did with her friend Michael?) when she wrote this paper? In Paola's text. "White Glasses" is often referred to as a paper, rather than an essay, even though the version she read could not be the paper delivered at the MLA conference, but the version finally published, first by Duke UP, then by Routledge. I am noticing only now that I have normalized the oscillation, so as to make it consistent with the 'historical truth' of "White Glasses" being accessible only as an essay in *Tendencies*, as opposed to its previous state of conference paper being read. By interfering with this oscillation, by interpreting it as a 'mistake', I am interrupting the shifting suspension between paper and essay, orality and writing: did Paola wish to *hear* "White Glasses" from Eve's voice, rather than *read* it from the book? What is remarkable is that the 'mistake' in Paola's draft paper is also one of temporality, as though Paola was haunted by Eve's paper, i.e., by its previous, contingent performance at the MLA conference. This queer moment, overlapping with the doubleness of cancer in both writers, helps Eve's published essay revert impossibly to its oral form. In Paola's paper and thanks to her slippage, Eve's "White Glasses" is at the same time the paper and the essay by the same name, asynchronously. (Paola's collected volume of essays bears the title *Asincronie del femminismo*, "feminist asynchronies"). My normalizing move, on the other hand, performs a different queer temporality. By removing the traces of incompletion, error and uncertainty, I am attempting the impossible: to turn her *paper*, fractured by Paola's death, into an *essay*, something that it will never become, lingering

forever in its own Bardo. In doing so, I inscribe my own affect, pushing this paper towards a foreclosed future, in the same way that Paola was overhearing the audible traces of Eve's paper coming from its past.

In doing so, I realize I have also inscribed my own obituary of Paola, by using her own (indirect) obituary of Eve. Passing on life, across the (friendly) abyss of death.

Selected bibliography

Paola Di Cori's output is dispersed in a large number of essays, short pieces, review articles, both in print and online. Below are just the volumes that she edited, or, more frequently, co-edited. A small number of essays were also published, or translated, into English and Spanish.

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Queer narratives of cancer: Eve K. Sedgwick's "White Glasses"

Paola Di Cori

(Buenos Aires 1946 – Roma 2017)

Abstract: Through a reading of "White Glasses", an essay included in Eve K. Sedgwick's *Tendencies*, this paper invites a double perspective: on the one hand, a comparative approach to feminist narratives of cancer (from Audre Lorde to Gayatri Spivak reading and translating Mahasweta Devi); on the other, a reflection on Sedgwick's contribution to queer thinking on temporality. It is also an attempt to broaden our own perception of Eve K. Sedgwick by turning to her later interest in Buddhism and textile art. Thus, the focus on "White Glasses" shifts between the temporal scale of Sedgwick's lifetime and the wider cultural history of feminist body politics in the 1980's and early '90s. This is the decade when feminism increasingly became queered, a shift that is followed here through the lens of AIDS, illness and bodily transformation – a nexus powerfully interrogated, and embodied, by Eve K. Sedgwick.

Keywords: cancer; breast turn; E. K. Sedgwick; feminism; queer temporality.

As it has happened to other heroines of 'queerland', Eve K. Sedgwick has been read and interpreted as though she were several different personalities in one, each heading in different directions. She was a brilliant literary critic, a specialist in late 19thC American, British and French literature, and a sophisticated interpreter of Henry James in particular. Moreover, she has been unanimously considered the founder and one of the leading characters of queer theoretical thinking, one of the initiators of the affective turn in the humanities. Together with Susan Sontag and Audre Lorde, Sedgwick has also been among the earliest feminist intellectuals to write about her personal experience of breast cancer, the pioneer of an original genre of autobiography combining poems, personal memories, her shrinks' notes, and much more.

The paper "White Glasses" was delivered in 1991 at an MLA conference as a homage to her friend and writer Michael Lynch, who was dying of AIDS. Soon after she began writing the paper, Sedgwick was diagnosed a breast cancer. A famous sentence from this text has often been quoted: «Shit, now I guess I really must be a woman». Indeed, Sedgwick's diagnosis

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opened up for her a totally unexpected scenario: before knowing she was ill, Sedgwick's identification with her friend had been based on sharing a gay identity; after the cancer news arrived, her identification changed because of the life-threatening disease. Illness became for Sedgwick what falls "across the ontological crack between the living and the dead" (Sedgwick 1994: 252). Her female body and her political and sexual labels as feminist and gay no longer defined her identity: now her breast cancer did. Previously, Sedgwick had identified herself as a gay man married with a heterosexual man; she came to be associated with the term "queer" only after 1992, when the word began to spread outside gay and feminist circles.

"White Glasses" is included among the essays of *Tendencies* and provides a highly provocative analysis of the permanent instability of gender, age, race, sexuality when facing a mortal illness; it also gives an insightful account of the affective dimensions of people living with cancer. As usually, Sedgwick manages to ceaselessly question boundaries across disciplines and accepted identity classifications. Her paper lingers in a kind of hybrid space: a personal confession, a public homage to a colleague and friend, a way of taking position on issues of general interest from a theoretical and political point of view.

"White Glasses" is not an ordinary essay. It does not have any of the features of the papers that are generally written, delivered and listened to in conferences and seminars. First of all, it is written in the first person, which is unusual in academic contexts. The use of first personal pronouns characteristically began to be adopted in the 1970s, as one of the many effects of the increasing insistence by feminist, gay and lesbian, black and anti-racist activists on the equation: the personal is political. In fact, Sedgwick's essay has several focuses and it is not always clear which is paramount. On the one hand, Sedgwick is paying a special tribute to her friend Michael Lynch who was dying of AIDS, and offering a kind of obituary *avant la mort*. Moreover, Sedgwick had recently been diagnosed of breast cancer herself, so the essay is also a public personal confession about her own illness. Last but not least, the essay has also the theoretical ambition to reflect on the changes to sexual identity as a result of the illness being diagnosed: her breast has now become central in her life; cancer and mastectomy are key to an understanding of what female identity is about. As Sedgwick writes in "Queer and Now", the 1991 essay included in the same collection *Tendencies*:

> It's probably not surprising that gender is so strongly, so multiply valenced in the experience of breast cancer today. Received wisdom has it that being a breast cancer patient, even while it is supposed to pose unique challenges to one's sense of "femininity," nonetheless plunges one into an experience of almost archetypal Femaleness (Sedgwick 1994: 12).

On the other hand, the paper is also a call concerning AIDS and activism in order to exert pressure for new drugs and better information.

As a result of all the many directions it is heading to, the essay has a sort of fluctuating movement. It begins with a healthy friend wishing to pay homage to a sick friend who is dying; yet, after a few pages the scene changes abruptly and turns upside down. The healthy friend Sedgwick has received a cancer diagnosis and is now sick, while the dying Lynch has regained some health and seems full of energy. The whole text swings back and forth, going through a constant oscillation between health and illness, physical decay and strength, life and death. To Sedgwick the inspiration to describe the intermediate state between life and death came from Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (1992). In this text, the concept of Bardo – indicating an intermediate state between life and death – is central.

To all this, I would like to add another crucial aspect: the focus on female breast. It is interesting to note the different role female breast played in theoretical debates on gender and sexual identities in the 1980s and 1990s. A few years before the publication of "White Glasses", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had been debating the literary work of Mahaswetha Devi, the great Indian writer, in particular Devi's *Breast Stories* (Devi 1997). In the 1970s and '80s, Devi wrote three short tales, subsequently translated into English by Spivak. Two of them are discussed at length in the well-known collection of essays published by Spivak in 1987, *In Other Worlds* (Spivak 1987). I will briefly refer to them as a sort of earlier echo, an anticipated response, to Sedgwick's paper from another geographical area.

If we take a look at the theoretical debates on sexual identities in those years, it is easy to realize that they were characterized by a kind of 'breast turn'. Very abstract debates on gender identity went hand in hand with important contributions advanced by empirical research in the social sciences, by body art and bodily performances.[1] Most importantly, this took

[1] The second half of the 1980s and early 1990's was a very rich period of theoretical contribu-

place at a crucial moment in the history of gay and lesbian communities. When "White Glasses" was presented as a paper, the fear of AIDS pandemic was at its peak; this was particularly true for gay and lesbian groups in cities like New York or San Francisco. The late 1980s and early 1990s can be seen as a very dramatic period in the history of these communities in the Anglophone world: AIDS panic was spreading. In the year 1987, AIDS killed almost 60,000 people worldwide and more than 40,000 were found HIV-positive in the United States alone. "ACT UP" – the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power – was founded in 1987 at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Manhattan, New York, with the goal to provide support and information about the disease. The premiere of the well-known play by Tony Kushner *Angels in America* – a story about New York's gay community life in the 1980s – took place in New York in 1991.[2]

As Lisa Diedrich has shown (Diedrich 2006), Sontag's insistence on metaphors and ideas about cancer was in contrast with Sedgwick's focus on affect and affective strategies to deal with illness in general, in particular with AIDS and cancer. An important conference at Stony Brook in 2002 and the book that grew out of it – *The Voice of Breast Cancer in Medicine and Bioethics* (Rawlinson-Lundeen 2006) – have shown that self-reflection and humanist critique were not isolated efforts in their interest in breast cancer. At the time, there existed a great variety of

tions on sexual identities: Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" was first published in 1984; Leo Bersani's *The Freudian Body* in 1986, the same year as Joan Scott's essay, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis"; *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler came out in 1990. The first important monograph signed by Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men. English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, was published in 1980. The same period was also marked by an interest in breast cancer, as evidenced by Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* (Lorde 1980) and by the first edition of *Dr.Susan Love's Breast Book* (1991) – the book that *The New York Times* described as "the bible of women with breast cancer" and one of the books that Sedgwick had open on her desk together with books by J. L. Austin, Henry James, and Mme de Sévigné (Sedgwick 1994: 9). Jo Spence's highly provocative photographs taken after her breast cancer diagnosis were exhibited in 1982 (*Cancer Shock*) and 1982-86 (*The Picture of Health?).* Mona Hatoum's exhibition *Corps Étranger* at the Centre Pompidou came in 1994. In 1997, Marilyn Yalom published *A History of the Breast* – a thorough survey of the cultural history of the female breast across the centuries (Yalom 1998).

[2] Well-known films about cancer, AIDS, and the communities of friends and family support were released in those years: John Erman's *An Early Frost* (1985), *Les nuits fauves* by Cyril Collard (1992), Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993), *Jeffrey* by Christopher Ashley (1995), Jerry Zach's *Marvin's Room* (1996), adapted from the play by Scott McPherson (who died in 1992). The debate on queer theory and queer identities was just at its beginning. A special issue of the journal *differences* – now considered as a sort of inaugural manifesto – entitled "Queer Theory: Gay and Lesbian Sexualities" and edited by Teresa de Lauretis, was published in 1991.

interpretations, reactions and responses as a result of the rise of cancer figures in the United States, and of huge changes in health policies and medical treatments of the illness.What seems to me worthy of attention is that Sontag, Lorde and Sedgwick – in different ways and each with different purposes in mind – succeeded in merging intimate anxieties, clinical results, health policies, and political strategies, and transferring them into the public arena. The last two decades of the twentieth century showed an increasing 'coming out of the closet' of topics concerning sexual habits, unmentionable diseases, and the strategies of pharmaceutical industries. Highly provocative books such as Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, Sedgwick's *Between Men* and *Epistemology of the Closet*, disclosed entire new worlds of thinking and looking at issues concerning life and death, personal identities, health and illness. Feminist and queer experiences of first-person narratives were key in showing the importance of the construction of public, legitimated voices on these matters. This is why Sedgwick commented on the changed meaning in the use of "I", both in the first pages of *Tendencies* and in her remarkable psychoanalytic/autobiographical diary *A Dialogue on Love* (1999).

It is interesting to emphasize the different focus on breast and cancer in Spivak and Sedgwick: whereas Spivak focuses on breast and its putrefaction by cancer, Sedgwick focuses on cancer and the breast's disappearance. To Sedgwick, breast is crucial to female identity: it becomes particularly so when it disappears as a result of mastectomy. Devi and Spivak both agree that breast is the essence of femininity and rots away because of patriarchal and capitalist violence. Cancer has different functions in Sedgwick's "White Glasses" and Devi's "The Breast-Giver". In Sedgwick's paper, cancer diagnosis has also, as it were, a liberating function, as it reveals an identity that had remained enigmatic until that moment; in Devi and Spivak cancer is the inevitable consequence of male violence, turning into a monument decrying the postcolonial and patriarchal strategies against the women of the Third World.

In the Western world, female naked breasts have been for centuries symbols of motherhood, religious devotion, eroticism. Since the 1960s and '70s breasts have undergone a big transformation: they have ceased to be imprisoned by bras and corsets. Women living in the Western world have started to exhibit their naked breasts on the beach, under T-shirts, and in the streets during political demonstrations. Breasts are located at the

center of the body, in the chest – the place of the heart, as they say. However, in the decades since the 1960s they have been represented not only as beautiful, rounded and fleshy parts of young bodies – as in the tradition of the Christian iconography of the Virgin –, they have also been shown as diseased body-parts, mutilated and injured.

An important shift occurred in the use of bodily parts as a political symbol: the displacement from vulva to breast. In the early 1970s the focus was predominantly on the vagina – as was shown by the monumental artistic installation *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago.[3] During the 1960s and '70s the most famous feminist gesture was the sign for the vagina, the triangle with the thumbs held upwards and the index fingers of both hands about to touch or pressed against each other. In the late 1970s through the '80s, this hand gesture was increasingly replaced by breast display. This way, the breast has undergone a profound transformation and become a complex bodily component: from being the center of religious devotion, erotic desire and artistic creativity, it has turned into a site of violence, the locus of mortal diseases, a disposable and replaceable part of the female body. Most importantly, it has become a political and theoretical weapon, an instrument capable of exerting criticism. Feminist demonstrations in recent years have shown women exhibiting their naked breasts as weapons, such as the Ukrainian group Femen. This trend can be found all over the world: on 7th February 2017 Argentinian women marched with their bare breasts in a demonstration ("Tetas Libres") campaigning for topless sunbathing in Buenos Aires.

In Spivak's and Devi's writings we read about a deeply material breast: it is the post-colonial breast of the subaltern Asian woman, naked, raped, wounded, bleeding, torn apart. In the last pages of Devi's "The Breast-Giver", we read:

> The sores on her breast gaped more and more and the breast now looks like an

3 Produced between 1974 and 1979, first exhibited in 1979, the installation table is now on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum, New York. It consists of 39 place settings arranged along a triangular table that measures 48 feet (14,63 m) on each of the three sides and prepared for three groups of historically famous women, each of them consisting of 13 historical characters – from Theodora of Byzantium to Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe. Each plate depicts a colored vulva with the woman's name and bears images related to her accomplishments. The installation has provoked innumerable controversies and critical responses by feminists and non-feminists, art critics and visitors (Jones 1996).

> open wound. It is covered by a piece of thin gauze soaked in antiseptic lotion, but the sharp smell of putrefying flesh is circulating silently in the room's air like incense-smoke" (Devi 1997: 65).

When we read Sedgwick, however, we never look at the real breast, since it has disappeared after the mastectomy. Yet, we think intensely about this disappearance and the abstract substitution that has taken its place. Although an imaginary healthy breast and/or a sick breast are implicitly referred to, we never see either of them: there is no description of the sick breast, for instance, except for a few medical details of some oncological treatment. On the other hand, it is precisely because it is invisible that we can speculate about sexual identity.

Jane Gallop has recently written an important essay on the two books published by Sedgwick in 1992, *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Tendencies* (Gallop 2011). Gallop deals with some important issues raised by Sedgwick's "White Glasses", in particular one that is crucial for AIDS literature and cancer narratives, as well as being a favourite topic of Sedgwick: time and temporality. Indeed, everyday temporality is here essential. This is one of the many differences between Spivak's and Sedgwick's perspectives. While Spivak measures time in terms of centuries of colonialism and subaltern postcolonial agency, always looking at everyday life in terms of the inheritance of colonialism, Sedgwick focuses on the day-by-day progress of the illness in herself and among her friends. She accurately draws a kind of timeline in her essay: from a pre-obituary celebration of her friend Michael, to her cancer diagnosis; from working, living and sleeping with Michael, to the temporal span of illness. This oscillation allows her to construct a new dimension, a 'queer temporality'.

Sedgwick is interested in writing about this special way of experiencing time: "the temporality of the queer moment", as Barber and Clark have put it in the introduction to their book on Sedgwick (Barber, Clark 2002). They are referring to a poem written by Sedgwick in 1994, in which she mentions "the rack of temporalities". The poem is about AIDS: here temporality displays a tormented pace, a distorted twist due to the disease. Sedgwick will return to this queer moment in her writings on Proust. Beside her homage to Michael Lynch in "White Glasses", there is another brief obituary and homage in the book *Tendencies*, one dedicated to Craig Owens, who had died of AIDS in 1990. As Gallop comments, what is so interesting

in the time-twist that is typical of Sedgwick's queer moment is not just a reference to death, but also to reading and writing.

As a matter of fact, "White Glasses" is shot through and intersected by comments on temporal contradictions while writing her paper. They are related to health and disease, life and death:

> When I decided to write "White Glasses" four months ago, I thought my friend Michael Lynch was dying and I thought I was healthy. Unreflecting, I formed my identity as the prospective writer of this piece around the obituary presumption that my own frame for speaking, the margin of my survival and exemption, was the clearest thing in the world. In fact it was totally opaque: Michael didn't die; I wasn't healthy [...]. So I got everything wrong (Sedgwick 1994: 250).

Found at the end of *Tendencies*, "the unsettling temporality of 'White Glasses' is in a way the temporality of the entire volume" (Gallop 2011: 70). Again, the dedication of the book – "in memory of Michael Lynch" – plays with someone who was at the time of writing still alive. Therefore, the book itself is located in a sort of uncanny time: this is precisely the "continuing moment", "the moment of queer to be sure, and of gay men dying of AIDS" (Gallop 2011: 70). Therefore, the "continuing moment" of queer temporality is, as it were, a sort of oxymoron, an anachronistic element within general temporality. Moreover, as Sedgwick said in an interview in 2000, we have to add the urgency that is typical of a mortal disease. Such an urgency had been anticipated by the first essay of *Tendencies*, "Queer and Now", whose very title indicates an insistence on time, the felt need to do things very quickly. Yet, what is central here is also an aspect belonging to Oriental culture, which I have mentioned earlier on: the concept of Bardo from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It refers to an intermediate, transitional state, an in-between state referring to the existence between one's own past and future lives on earth. Metaphorically, it describes the moment when our way of life becomes 'suspended', as in periods of illness, or in states of intense meditation.

In the last part of her life, Sedgwick traveled to Asia and immersed herself in Buddhism, attracted by its ever-shifting relationality and metamorphosis. As a consequence, she began to abandon writing in favor of textile work. Her exhibition *In the Bardo* was presented at the CUNY Graduate Center in 2000. As Maggie Nelson – Sedgwick's doctoral

student who reviewed the exhibition – put it: it is an installation of fiber art, "in the form of a dozen or so stuffed figures hanging from the ceiling, clothed in different kinds of cloth, paper, felt, in varying shades of indigo blue" (Nelson 2000). Sedgwick's hanging figures represent aspects of her experience in the Bardo: "the disorienting and radically denuding bodily sense generated by medical imaging processes and illness itself", on the one hand, and "the material urges to dress, to ornament, to mend, to re-cover, and heal" on the other.

From "White Glasses" onwards, that is, from the public announcement of her cancer diagnosis, Sedgwick began to reflect increasingly on time and temporality. Moreover, she radically changed her main intellectual references, too. Jason Edwards's excellent book on Sedgwick takes the reader through the various new aspects of her life and thought: the changes brought about by her illness, mastectomy, lymph and spine cancer, her travels to Asia, her depression and psychoanalytical experience, her textile art and Buddhist interests, her poetry (Edwards 2009). Last but not least, as Edwards writes, it is important to emphasize the changes undergone by Eve's use of the personal pronoun 'I' throughout all these years, from her AIDS militancy to the cancer diagnosis, throughout the different stages of the disease, to her new interests in Buddhism, Melanie Klein and affect theories.[4]

Sedgwick's writings of the 1990s open up new ways to understand subjectivity and identity. "White Glasses" (indeed, the book *Tendencies* as a whole), the autobiographical account *A Dialogue on Love* (1999) and *The Weather in Proust* (the posthumous book edited by Jonathan Goldberg in 2011) are all key stages in the attempt by this extraordinary woman and scholar to confront theoretical and political conflicts, and deal with personal and intimate emergencies at the same time. Recently, Robyn Wiegman has captured this predictive and prefigurative element in Sedgwick's thinking through writing, and suggested an eighth axiom to the seven field-defining axioms that open *Epistemology of the Closet*: "it is impossible to know in advance how anyone will need to travel the distance

4 "Living at the threshold of an ever more extinguished identity, Sedgwick is no longer seeking to grasp at the first persona as though it were a specimen to be immobilized rather than a vagrant place-holder. She has also become increasingly unconcerned with things that isolate or immobilize potential selves and now embraces a profound consciousness of impermanence." (Edwards 2009: 134-35).

between her desire and the world in which those desires must (try to) live" (Wiegman 2012: 159).

As Judith Butler has summed up in her own essay on Sedgwick: "she is profoundly conceptual, although the concepts are very often staged in a certain relation to one another that produces dissonance and insight. They are also, almost always, inextricable from figures, from tone, from a form of political lyricism" (Butler 2002: 109).

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Fig. 2 – Eve K. Sedgwick in the 1980s

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