

Rebekah Sheldon
Queer Universal

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1.

Recent feminist and queer theorizations have turned emphatically away from the ambitions of late twentieth-century universalism in favor of particular forms of life. Lightning, atoms, jellyfish, and fetuses teem from the pages of prominent journals, as do HeLa cells, extinct aourouchs, wooly coral reefs, sacred pipestone, indigenous cosmologies, toxic dumps, and transgender frogs.¹ This patchwork of objects and life-forms has much to say about the ineradicable openness of the world, its disregard for niceties of category and scale. Think, for example, of the many and varied effects of plastic. From problems of sexual differentiation feared for BPA-exposed children to the marine life slowly starving from the microplastic remains of tampon applicators they have mistakenly consumed, plastics make palpable the interchanges between gender, sexuality, and ecology. In a similar fashion, HeLa cells underscore the inextricability of biomedical mattering from racial pseudoscience, a formation Harriet Washington calls “medical apartheid.”² Humbled before the animations of objects, contemporary queer and feminist theorists are content to let them speak – at least mostly – for themselves.

This reticence also takes the form of the imperative. We are enjoined to resist the temptation to add things up. In their introduction to *GLQ*'s “Queer Inhumanisms” issue, Dana Luciano and Mel Chen argue that “particular situations” cannot be summarized in total or “proclaimed from above” without undue violence to the specificity of each life world.³ In like manner, Karen Barad, whose work on the philosophical implications of quantum physics raises thorny questions about the universal and the particular, explains that the queer critters that march through her writings are not there to “make trans or queer into universal features” but instead “to make plain the undoing of universality, the importance of the radical specificity of materiality as iterative materialization.”⁴ A physicist herself, Barad's most striking formulations describe the basic units of reality. Yet rather than setting out the laws of physics, Barad labors to reveal the fundamental contingency of all things, even the most apparently immutable. In these feminist and queer returns to the natural and the ontological – territories once considered coextensive with racist and misogynist essentialisms – it is the material world itself (and not discourse, language, history, or culture) that is radically open to revolutionary change, if not its very wellspring. It is for this reason that J. Jack Halberstam finds that attending to individuals in their precarious specificities

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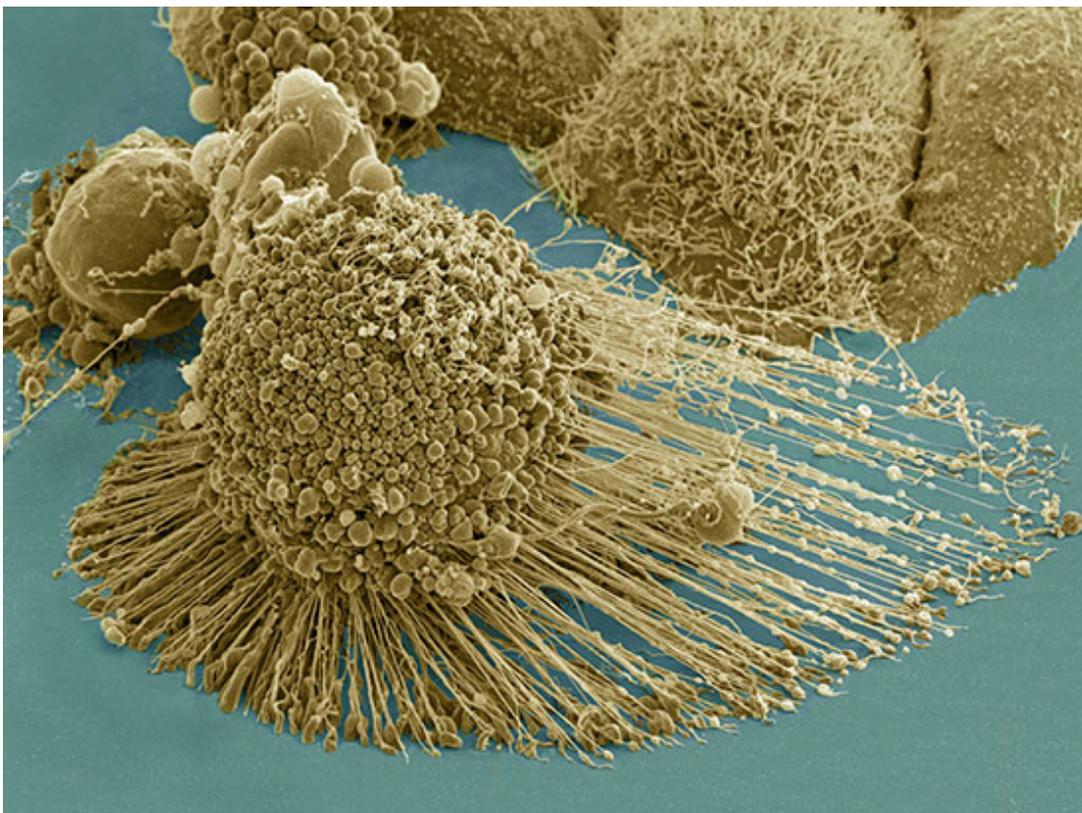
“allows us to find our way through the thick material of the universal to the queer theoretical spaces of possibility.”⁵

We are, in other words, in the midst of a new queer particularism. While universalizing theories engender powerful explanatory structures, queer particularism is less committed to knowing things than it is to feeling them.⁶ Under the sign of epistemology, humanists and social scientists have staked their claims for political efficacy on the ground of vigorous, truthful, and well-formed descriptions of urgent social problems, with the tacit assumption that such descriptions will engender changed attitudes and actions. Queer particularism takes root in the several schools that have arisen to challenge this assumption, most notably affect theory, new materialism, and speculative realism. These schools seek to evade the closed circle of knower and known and to allow for the agency of other-than-human forces. Together, these fields have begun to put pressure on *how* knowledge leads to social change. They point to the powerful persuasive effects of aesthetics and style, of sensory intuition, bodily habit, collective entrainment, and other modes of noncognition as well as the force exerted by nonhuman agents of various kinds, from the built

environment to the unintentional distribution of psychopharmaceuticals in the waterways.

Or, as Barad asks, “What could be more queer than an atom?”⁷ This queer particularism is new, then, insofar as it locates queerness outside of both desire and epistemology. In this sense, it repeats with a difference the terms of the binary opposition upon which queer theory first found its method and its motive. For, in many ways, it was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s decision to situate the particularity of gay and lesbian experience within the matrix of heterosexual definition that founded the contemporary practice of queer theory as universalist. Rather than arguing for inclusion or touting a uniquely queer aesthetics, Sedgwick’s monumental and field-defining *Epistemology of the Closet* (published in 1990) argues for the structuring co-constitution of hetero- and homosexual definition. Her question is not how best to support and advocate for queer communities and persons, but why such support is necessary to begin with. She asks what forces drive the explosiveness of homophobic violence just as we might summarize Judith Butler’s contemporaneous *Gender Trouble* as asking what fuels misogyny. What Sedgwick finds requires leaving aside particularist (or what she calls

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The above is an electron micrograph scan of an apoptotic HeLa cell. These controversial cells, widely used in laboratory, descend from Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman who was the unwitting donor of cells from her cancerous tumor. Photo: Zeiss Merlin HR-SEM, wikimedia commons

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In this detail of *Crochet Coral Reef* the technique of "hyperbolic crochet" discovered in 1997 by Cornell University mathematician Dr. Daina Taimina becomes a taxonomy of reef-life forms in the ongoing art project by Christine Wertheim and Margaret Wertheim. *Crochet Coral Reef* "fuses art, science, mathematics, handicraft, and community practice." Photo: Steve Jurvetson.

“minoritizing”) identity formations to recognize the mutually constitutive double bind of homo/heterosexual definition, its structuring paranoia, and its many costly disavowals. It is this sense that she gives to the universalizing view, which sees sexuality as “an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities.”⁸ Sexual definition precedes the sense and meaning of particular forms of sexual subjectivity and sexed materiality. What matters is the terrain of sexual subjectification from which both hetero- and homosexualities derive their meanings and worldly dispositions.

So when Luciana and Chen warn against pronouncements from above, it is with skepticism about the most high (the general, the abstract) but also the most low (the subtending, structuring, pre-individual matrix from which specific forms surface as symptoms), just as Barad takes the most fundamental (the atom) and finds in it the principle of radical contingency. Finally, the labor to reveal the source of homophobic or misogynistic violence becomes in queer particularism a desire to seek out joyful community and experiences of surprise, beauty, and care. For Halberstam, for example, exploring particular things recalls the “dream of ecstatic contact that we continue to seek out in life, in love, in dreams, and in material objects.”⁹ Punning on the role of feeling in affect theory as well as the felt wool used in constructing one of her essay’s particular objects, the *Crochet Coral Reef*, trans studies theorist Jeanne Vaccaro calls for a “felt method.” The *Crochet Coral Reef* employs as well as exemplifies this method. A collective experiment in critical handmaking, the *Crochet Coral Reef* is a form of affective practice that subsists in the concrete space of shared work where “bodies lean, eyes dart, and hands touch to repair stitches, learn and exchange technique, and create and share a feeling of community.”¹⁰ In it Vaccaro finds what Luciana and Chen call “corporeal communing.”¹¹ In contradistinction to the universal-epistemological demand for change against obdurate social institutions, projects like the *Crochet Coral Reef* work toward stabilizing communities, engendering new norms, and building a sense of collective responsibility for a rapidly changing ecosphere. In this context, the old project of queer culture-building expands to include all of the many thousands of cultures that go into multispecies thriving.

Vaccaro’s example teaches us how much of the persuasive power of this method rests on exemplification. For Eileen Joy, it is from these suggestive glimmers of other lifeworlds that we might “invent improbable murmurs of being, new

modes and styles of living, polymorphous affective intensities, and new relational virtualities and friendships.”¹² But something unexpected has happened here. For as emphatic and explicit as these authors have been about refusing the impulse to abstract general principles or subtending structures from particular lives and objects, looking at particular queer critters nonetheless has enabled surprisingly robust claims about what theory can do. Indeed, the cogency of these perspectives – their shared desire for what Jayna Browne names “life on other terms”¹³ – suggest a underlying conviction about forms of causation whose thrust is, yes, universal even if it explicitly orients to the particular.

2.

In “Eve’s Triangles, or Queer Theory Beside Itself,” Robyn Wiegman looks back to *Epistemology of the Closet* to disinter what she sees as an overlooked discomfort with the universal fueling Sedgwick’s analysis.¹⁴ As Wiegman reminds us, the presumptive opposition between universalizing and minoritizing views is one of the many binaries that Sedgwick works to deconstruct. Sedgwick, she recalls, vigorously maintains that “no standpoint of thought [exists] from which the rival claims of minoritizing and universalizing understandings of sexual definition could be decisively arbitrated as to their ‘truth.’”¹⁵ The universal/particular bind was never about choosing sides but instead about the impossibility of selecting a side at all without inadvertently activating the logic of the other. This would seem to imply that the anti-universalist position isn’t available in the straightforward way that so many particularisms imagine it to be. Yet Wiegman’s essay goes on to make a ferocious case for choosing the affective over the epistemological, citing Sedgwick’s own ferocity in her late work against the paranoia of the universalizing, epistemological drive and its fatal thinness. Indeed, Wiegman’s rallying cry – which we might condense as “touch feeling, don’t know it” – is as good a summary of Sedgwick’s later work as it is of the new queer particularism I have been describing.

It is in her 2002 book *Touching Feeling* that Sedgwick dramatically turns away from the universalist stance that had animated her earlier work, thus setting a course for subsequent queer theorists. This turn is especially clear in three essays in *Touching Feeling*: “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,” “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” and the “Introduction,” which together represent a trenchant intercession into the scenography of criticism and an effort to

recall the pleasures of reading in directions other than from above. “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold,” for example, asks the reader to consider the “beside.” “As any child knows who’s shared a bed with siblings,” Sedgwick writes, “*beside* comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations.”¹⁶

In giving flesh to the idea it advocates, this list calls out in this reader a painfully rich cascade of memories and associations whose lateral spread threatens to overwhelm the vertical thrust of argumentation. These variegated and modular relations come from the constraints of the bed, the temporal plenitude of siblinghood, and the basic assumption of companionate sharing. Planar, horizontal, I want to say rolling, this world isn’t even in the same galaxy as what Sedgwick calls the “tracing and exposure” methods of universalizing, epistemological, antinormative criticism, or “what theory knows today”¹⁷ in which theory is

“diagrammatically sharp” (“Introduction,” 18)
“vigilant” (“Paranoid,” 130)
“hypervigilant” (“Shame,” 17)
“cruel and contemptuous” (“Paranoid,” 144)
“ascetic” (“Paranoid,” 132)
“hygienic” (“Shame,” 17)
“evacuative” (“Shame,” 15)
“exposing” (“Paranoid,” 139)
“totalizing” (“Paranoid,” 130)
“reifying” (“Introduction,” 13)
“detoxifying” (“Shame,” 20)
“stringent” (“Shame,” 17)
“bossy” (“Introduction,” 8)
“coercive” (“Paranoid,” 146)
“grim” (“Paranoid,” 144)
“defensive” (“Paranoid,” 147)
“monopolistic” (“Paranoid,” 145)
“tautological” (“Paranoid,” 144)
and again and again “moralistic.”

Despite the emphasis on “knowing” in the phrase “what theory knows,” these terms seem to me nonsensical when taken as if they were only about the “heuristic habits and positing procedures of theory today.”¹⁸ Instead, they form a clear picture of a reader in pain. Particularly in “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading,” that pain forms the evidence for a diagnosis. Personified and diagnosed, theory appears here as a paranoiac driven by disgust to expose and hold up for disapprobation its denigrated object. The central word around which all the others seem to radiate, even more than “moral,” is “hygiene.” If moralism divides the world into

binary categories, hygiene represents the extirpation of the invading other within. In repudiating it, however, Sedgwick uses the enormous force of her writing to transmit her pain to the reader. If “even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact,” as she writes of the phrase “touchy-feely,” then these essays remind us that not all skin-to-skin contact feels good.¹⁹ They may be palliative, they may be searching for nourishment – and they certainly seem to have nourished – but they also cut.

Sedgwick uses another bed metaphor to convey the problem with what she calls the “binarized, highly moralistic allegories of the subversive versus the hegemonic, resistance versus power.”²⁰ She writes:

It’s as if A and B are in bed together under a dual control electric blanket, but with the controls accidentally reversed: if A gets cold and turns up the temperature, B’s side of the bed will get warmer, whereupon B will turn down the temperature, making A’s side even colder, so A turns up the temperature further – on B’s side, and so on ad infinitum.²¹

It is easy to imagine an overheated, hypochondriacal “theory” forced to share a bed with its other and convinced, both rightly and wrongly, that it at least is actively working to make the bed more livable. Stuck inside this autocatalyzing feedback loop, the heat keeps rising. “Stultifying” and “impoverishing”²² are two of the words she uses to characterize the effect of this loop as it elevates one condition, feeling, or explanation to the status of universal, as Sedgwick argues by way of a joke:

A disturbingly large amount of theory seems explicitly to undertake the proliferation of only one affect ... It’s like the old joke: “Comes the revolution, Comrade, everyone gets to eat roast beef every day.” “But Comrade, I don’t like roast beef.” “Comes the revolution, Comrade, you’ll like roast beef.”²³

The joke’s humor arises from Comrade B’s dogged refusal to renounce his gastronomical preference in answer to what is clearly supposed to be a persuasive speech, as if, in the prior example, bedmate B were sullenly to insist that he is hot despite A’s quite accurate depiction of the bed as cold. Resituated into the critical scene and yoked to the prior analogy, the joke suggests that critical exposure does a bad job of attending to political realities but a very good job of making the reader want to like what the

speaker likes. Because roast beef functions as a symbol, to not like roast beef is to abjure revolution; but in this reversible metonymic chain, the promise of a better life symbolized by roast beef loses its connection to the myriad, specifiable ways that life might be bettered and becomes instead the idea of the betterment. Excitement is not only contagious, it also has little interest in its own diminishment.

When theory takes itself as “a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication,” it is more likely the triumph than the advance that operates.²⁴ In other words, theory is deeply committed to the persuasive power of its style despite its “practice of disavowing its affective motive and force and masquerading as the very stuff of truth.”²⁵ The lesson queer particularism takes from this critique results in its modesty of tone, its tendency to linger on the surface, and its preferences for the flat ontologies that allow it to get into bed with its objects. Yet the essays I have been citing from *Touching Feeling* offer no especially strong reasons to consider some affective registers as intrinsically mendacious and other as palliative. What concerns Sedgwick about the use of theory as a hygienic procedure is the way it rigidifies the difference between self and other and so makes it more difficult to fit the

other into the partial, multiple, contradictory worlds we inhabit and therefore “to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower or teller.”²⁶

The same, I say, is true for the divisions between the paranoid and the reparative, the universalist and the particularist, the epistemological and the affective, the righteous and the joyful. What theory knows today is not terribly different in form and mode than it was for Sedgwick. It is just such a hygienic procedure. And if it is strange to find Sedgwick using the very strategies she lampoons, it is quite a bit stranger still to find them repeated in Wiegman – and indeed across the queer particularisms – over a decade later.²⁷ For the purpose of Sedgwick’s double binds in *Epistemology of the Closet* was to assert the absence of grounding sufficient to either adjudicate or frankly to recognize the difference between the two sides of any closely entwined binary. So why parse out the epistemological from the affective? After all, to the extent that the power of the affective comes from its potential to renew critical perspective and to engender a new stance toward the subject of our writing, it carries the

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Rembrandt van Rijn, *Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther*, 1660. Oil on canvas. Credit: Pushkin Museum

implied but still crucially operative promise of causal effect. It is not a feeling or a way of knowing, but a method for generating effects. We may not all like roast beef, but that hardly means that we are not committed to persuasion, however it may be theorized and to whatever end it is pursued. The real question then, it seems to me, is how to understand the content of that promise; how, that is, to embrace a queer universal method.

Perhaps it is simply that the capacity of these oppositions to produce each other is built into the foundation pits of any transformative criticism that understands itself as having political affects without specifying the nature of the effects. Rather than try again to make sense of the real differences between the universal and the particular, the epistemological and the affective, I'd like to ask what it might mean to come to different terms with the universal, or better, to come to terms with a different universal, one that openly courts the potential embarrassment of seeking to specify the universal immanent to transformative scholarship in toto. That is to say, to risk the embarrassment of asking *how scholarship produces effects* at all. For we might draw a different lesson from Sedgwick's work with the affective and say that it is the routinization of affects and the undertheorization of their rhetorical purpose that deadens and stultifies and therefore that we should cultivate a rigorous, supple, and nuanced approach to affective causation. In this way, it is the particular details of local relations that determine the choice of tone, mode, mood, or stance. Such a contention, however, requires and is premised upon a universalist account of the persuasive power of critical affects.

3.

Perhaps most surprising of all, the problem of critical causation animates an assertion made at the very beginning of the queer theoretical enterprise, in the very first passage of *Epistemology of the Closet*. Of the many sumptuously layered and incisively rendered paragraphs that make up the queer theory canon, this is surely one of the most captivating:

Epistemology of the Closet proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured – indeed, fractured – by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century. The book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be,

not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; and it will assume that the appropriate place for that critical analysis to begin is from the relatively decentered perspective of modern gay and antihomophobic theory.²⁸

Here is a universal! But this is not the same universalization we have already seen. In fact it contains two different kinds of universalizing claims. The first claim (that “many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured – indeed, fractured – by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century”) is her universalizing account of the contouring effect of sexuality on modern Western knowledge-production writ large. The second claim (that “an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition”) is no restatement of the first, but a dramatic upping of the theoretical wattage of her argument, moving as it does from saying something about her *subject* to saying something about her *writing and its methods and its effects*. Put together, these two universals add up to a stunning methodological claim. The first relies for its sense on the idea that knowledge is world-making; the second claims that a particular kind of knowledge is damaged. To produce damaged knowledge is to *do* damage far beyond the reach of the individual knower. And the redemptive force of the corrective is likewise amplified.

Sedgwick never stops thinking about this question. She takes it up again in *Touching Feeling* in the form of her sustained inquiry into the performative and the periperformative – categories derived from linguist J. L. Austin that seek to elucidate the conditions by which speech acts make things happen in the world. Or as she puts the question: “What does knowledge *do*? The pursuit of it, the having and exposing of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows? *How*, in short, is knowledge performative and how best does one move among its causes and its effects?”²⁹

This autonomy and agency of knowledge in this formulation – the perambulations of writing away from the scene of reading relations – is markedly uncomfortable for Sedgwick, calling as it does for a universal but still highly specified account of critical causation and raising the specter that such an invention might work. Her

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discomfort is clear in the long digression through the story of Esther in *Epistemology of the Closet's* first chapter. Esther is the Old Testament queen whose act of self-disclosure saves her people from genocide. When her gentile husband is advised to purge the country of Jews, Esther's desperation to save them forces her to admit what she has long withheld, that she is a Jew – a speech act whose effect is not to make her unlovable (as one might worry) but instead to prevent the massacre, as she had hoped. Much later in the book, Sedgwick makes a confession of her own about the scene of confession she relates. The section on Esther, she writes, reveals “all too visibly” her own “salvational fantasies.”³⁰ By refusing the relations these coordinates could confirm – Esther as mirror for her own authorial intent – Sedgwick augurs the violence with which she will later turn away from the universal and the epistemological both. In doing so, however, she lets go as well of the book's second claim to universality – a claim about what knowledge does and could do – that is neither vanquished by that violence nor ceases to haunt the scene of the affective and ontological.

It is the repetition of Esther's triumph – as if that speech act and only that one contained revolutionary force – that Sedgwick came to find so distressing in the theoretical enterprise of her day. In its desire to let the object speak for itself, however, queer particularism merely shifts the locus of the Esther-function from the critic to her objects; it continues to presume the causal efficacy of the speech acts whose universalizing implications it also and at the same moment disavows. The question that results from Sedgwick's second universal – which we might condense here as the hopelessly naive and embarrassingly grandiose “how does criticism effect change?” – puts us back in Esther's role and brings with it the danger of presuming too imperial, indeed too universal, a point of view. A queer universalism, however, would begin from the recognition that epistemology is affective (and affect epistemological), that particular objects and lifeworlds evoke speculations about their enabling conditions, that if essence is contingent then contingency is a form of essentialism, and that the most modest of critical claims opens onto breathtakingly vast ontological vistas.

x

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See for example *GLQ* 21, no. 2–3, “Queer Inhumanism,” eds. Dana Luciana and Mel Chen (2015); *WSQ* 40, no. 1–2, “Viral,” eds. Patricia Clough and Jasbir Puar (Spring–Summer 2012); *differences* 26, no. 1, “Queer Theory Without Antinormativity,” eds. Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A Wilson (May 2015); *philoSOPHIA* 5, no. 2, “Anthropocene Feminisms,” eds. Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein (2016); and *Feminist Theory* 12, no. 2, “Nonhuman Feminisms,” eds. Myra Hird and Celia Roberts (2011).

2
Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experiments on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

3
Mel Chen and Dana Luciana, “Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?” *GLQ* 21, no. 2–3: 189.

4
Karen Barad, “TransMaterialities: Trans/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings,” *ibid.*: 413.

5
J. Jack Halberstam, “In Human – Out Human,” *ibid.*: 241.

6
The term “universal” is sometimes set in opposition to identitarian categories. This is the sense in which Madhavi Menon uses it, for example, in her recently released *In Difference to Difference: On Queer Universalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). For my purposes, the universal is a matter of scope and scale regardless of the analytic object or point of view.

7
Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* NR 1–2 (2012): 39.

8
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.

9
Halberstam, “In Human – Out Human,” 242.

10
Jeanne Vaccaro, “Feelings and Fractals: Woolly Ecologies of Transgender Matter,” *GLQ* 21, no. 2–3: 280.

11
Chen and Luciana, “Introduction,” 185.

12
Eileen Joy, “Improbable Manners of Being,” *GLQ* 21, no. 2–3: 222.

13
Jayna Brown, “Being Cellular:

Race, the Inhuman, and the Plasticity of Life,” *ibid.*: 325.

14
Robyn Wiegman, “Eve’s Triangles, or Queer Studies Beside Itself,” *differences* 26, no. 1: 48–73.

15
Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 9.

16
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.

17
Sedgwick, “Introduction,” *ibid.*, 1.

18
Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 1.

19
Sedgwick, “Shame,” 17.

20
Ibid., 16.

21
Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 12.

22
Sedgwick, “Paranoid,” 124; Sedgwick, “Introduction,” 18.

23
Sedgwick, “Paranoid,” 146.

24
Ibid., 135.

25
Ibid., 138.

26
Ibid., 124.

27
On the other hand, Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) is notable for the way it attends to particular objects in order to elaborate a critical methodology and a metaphysics.

28
Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 1.

29
Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.

30
Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 154.

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