



Amherst

“Sabrina Doesn’t Live Here Any More”

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

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Sabrina is the main object of this solemn undergraduate occasion in the early 1900s.

“Sabrina doesn’t live here anymore”

By Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick
Associate Professor of English

I WANTED to start by saying a little about the story of the first woman at Amherst. When she arrived here in 1857, she was different from the other students. Not only was she female, but she weighed 350 pounds, she was bronze in color, and she had no clothes. An historian of Sabrina writes:

For a while she occupied a place of honor upon a terrace between old North College and the Octagon. She remained here for several years and enjoyed comparative peace and quiet. The first prank which was played upon her occurred a few years later when a youth arrayed the goddess in divers garments stolen from a nearby girls’ school. Needless to say, the student was dealt with by the faculty and to this day, Sabrina’s fair cheek bears remembrance of the student’s ill-timed vengeance. From this time on, Sabrina was the butt of the undergraduate body. She was whitewashed, indecorously decorated, and often anticipated her future career by frequent changes of color. Many were the humiliations Sabrina suffered at the hands of various blades. After a while the faculty, having become vitally wary of

This is the text of a talk, subtitled “Gender Pride and Gender Prejudice at Amherst College,” which Professor Sedgwick delivered in the Converse Assembly Room last November as part of a “Forum on Diversity” sponsored by the college’s Orientation Committee.

the students’ rude treatment of the gift to the college of such a distinguished man — the governor who had donated her — decided to put an end to the affair. Then too, her appearance was becoming increasingly unattractive. Accordingly, the college janitor was given the task of removing and doing away with the statue. [You probably know the end of the story from Oedipus.] This faithful servant of the college could not withstand the mute appeal of the goddess for mercy, and accordingly hid her away from the prying eyes of the students in his barn, where she remained hidden for two years as the tradition of the hidden goddess took root.

The history of abuses to Sabrina has been told in many articles. What I’d like you to imagine is Sabrina’s point of view on what was happening to her during these years. What I think she mostly felt was confused. To begin with: she is told that she’s a goddess, but she is compulsively degraded, humiliated, and treated like property. People pretend to feel awe for her, but they treat her as the most familiar of familiar objects. She is told that she is especially sanctified and spiritual, but she is totally identified with her body — both because it is a nude body and because it is a female body. She can’t move, but other people’s actions toward her are attributed to things that she mysteriously “does.” In one newspaper article, for instance: “Sabrina eventually lures some susceptible Amherst student to slice her off at the base and stick her in a truck” (italics ES). Another confusing thing: Sabrina doesn’t know her real name. She’s

never sure if she is Sabrina or The Sabrina. Are there other Sabrinas? Is Sabrina a proper noun or a common noun? Is Sabrina a proper lady or a common property? Is Sabrina a goddess or a whore?

Then again, Sabrina is supposed to be important and powerful, but she is a completely passive object of violence and mutilation. Any time anybody is angry at anybody, they take it out on Sabrina. And I go back to that sentence from the historian, “Needless to say the student [who committed an indignity to Sabrina in the first place] was dealt with by the faculty and to this day *Sabrina’s* fair cheek bears the mark of the student’s ill-timed vengeance” (italics ES). Faculty angry at student, student angry at faculty, student takes it out on *Sabrina*, which has been the problem in the first place. Plus, Sabrina keeps getting thrown down wells, buried in chicken guano, having her arms and her toes carelessly amputated — and everybody is giving her a hard time because she doesn’t have a sense of humor! It’s confusing.

How do I know that Sabrina is confused? I asked Sabrina. I asked her if she wasn’t angry at the treatment that she had received. And you know what she said? She said, “I’m not angry, I’m just *confused*.” But her teeth were clenched so tightly together that it was difficult to hear her.

Why wasn’t Sabrina angry? When men get angry, they beat up on Sabrina. Sabrina’s immobilized; she can’t beat

You're still young, in a society where men's status and entitlement increase with age and women's status and entitlement decrease with age.

up on anybody. If she got angry she couldn't take it out on anyone else, so she'd fall to pieces. She said, "I'd fall to pieces. *They wouldn't take me seriously anymore.*" As a final word from Sabrina, I asked her if she had any advice for undergraduate women. She said, "Don't let anyone put you up on a pedestal."

I think in a lot of ways, women students today are grandchildren of this first alumna. Not that we're very close with granny, but every couple of years, the guys truss her up and dangle her from a helicopter and fly her across a field just so that we can get a sense of where we're coming from. Women students today have some of the same problems that Sabrina has and some different ones. But that basic structure of conflicting expectations — of a double bind — I think remains very much the same.

To start with, I think women students at a place like Amherst — recently coeducated, where you have only recently been admitted to the rights and privileges of access to a dominant culture — on the one hand feel eager to fit in, grateful to be here, wanting to buy in as much as possible. At the same time, there are other forces that pull us into a position of adopting an oppositional stance toward that culture. On the other hand, the tug toward adopting an oppositional stand isn't all that immediate yet.

To begin with, as undergraduate women, you're not experiencing many of the very important forms of gender oppression yet. The college environment really is more egalitarian than a

lot of environments. And it's *especially* more egalitarian toward students than it is toward staff and faculty. Part of the reason that you as students are less discriminated against than women faculty and staff is that you are economically the equal of men students — you're paying the same tuition dollar that men students are. When you get to the workplace, and your economic value doesn't come from how much you're paying but from how much you're paid, you'll find that your economic value, compared with that of men, plummets. Again, most of you women haven't faced an unwanted pregnancy. Most of you haven't had a child, either wanted or unwanted. Most of you haven't faced the difficulty of childrearing in a society that devalues childrearing. You haven't had much time to test out your hopes about romance and about work, so it's still easy to imagine that finding the "right" mate, finding the "right" job, adopting the "right" attitude will let you avoid pitfalls that you see or hear about other women falling into.

Another important point is that you're still young, in a society where men's status and entitlement increase with age and women's status and entitlement decrease with age. When you go to the gynecologist and he calls you by your first name, you're used to it: everybody calls you by your first name because you're young. You haven't yet had the experience of having a gynecologist who's *younger* than you are call you by your first name. It will come. Generally speaking, your relative inexperience with discrimination probably makes it harder for you to imagine what it will be like, and a little harder to recognize it when you do come across it.

Then again, a lot of people, even people older than you are (although relatively fewer women and relatively

fewer people of color) still believe that there is such a thing as reverse discrimination going on. They still believe that it's going to be easier for you and not harder for you to get that well-paying, visible, prestigious job because you're a woman. Part of the reason this happens is that women are so rare in prestigious jobs that we're very visible, so every time a woman gets a job, every time a person of color gets a job, "that person got that job *because* she was a woman, he was black, she was Hispanic" etc., whereas all the many times that a white man gets a job, nobody even notices that another white man has gotten a job. In study after study, this reverse discrimination that's such a large part of America's sense of what happens on the job market can't be found; it *isn't there*. The same *old* discriminations are going on and on.

ALL THIS puts you in a tricky position if you're an undergraduate woman. On the one hand, if you're trusting and interested in buying into this culture, you know at some level that you're making yourself vulnerable to some serious betrayals and disappointments. On the other hand, if you don't want that to happen and you're wary and trying to protect yourself intellectually and emotionally for coming across some heavy weather, a lot of these discriminations haven't arrived yet in your lives, and so you feel paranoid. You aren't quite sure what you're being so wary about, and other people look at you and say, "Why so mistrustful?" And again, if you're a woman and you're a feminist, or becoming a feminist, there's always that sword hanging over your head of being called a lesbian. But a lot of the most concrete discriminations aren't raining down on you yet.

At the same time, Elizabeth Tidball (George Washington University) did a study a few years ago that showed that by external measurements, like *Who's Who* or graduate degrees or professional degrees, the life achievements of women from quite mediocre women's colleges were higher than the life achievements of women from even *very* good coeducational colleges. (Continued on page 15)

(Sabrina, from page 14)

Something's already going wrong for women at places like Amherst. Tidball thinks that maybe, if she did the study again, some of these numbers would be getting closer, but she's not so sure. But it's not very easy to figure out what's going wrong.

I think, though, we can point to some of the double binds that you're already running into, and I hope you'll recognize some of these. One of them is a double bind that all women share of whatever age. It's easiest to describe this one by going to another experiment. The experimenter sends out three sets of questionnaires to three different sets of psychotherapists. The first questionnaire says, "Give me a list of adjectives that describe a healthy adult person." Second set: "Give me a list of adjectives for a healthy adult man." Third set: "Give me a list of adjectives for a healthy adult woman." The healthy adult person and healthy adult man turn out to be very similar. For the healthy adult woman, though, there emerges a completely different set of adjectives! That means as long as you're acting like a woman you're not acting like a person, as long as you're acting like a person you're not acting like a woman. You're always going to be doing something wrong.

This experiment may be hard to believe, but I ran across something that made it easier for me to believe: a description of a test of psychological femininity that was administered in the '50s. According to this test, the things that would show you to be psychologically feminine were the following: "1. acceptance of traditional roles and hobbies and acceptance of clean white-collar work [and of course that association of clean white collars with women is very suggestive — no ring around the collar for these white-collar workers], 2. social sensitivity, 3. timidity in both social and physical situations, 4. compassion and sympathy, 5. lack of interest in the abstract, political, and social world, 6. lack of braggadocio and hyperbole, 7. pettiness and irritability, 8. niceness and acquiescence." If you want to be that, you can be that, but it obviously means that you aren't a person. If you want to be a person, you

can be a person, but it obviously means you aren't being that woman.

Those of you who are women students are probably running into this already in a conflict between being "tough-minded" in that Amherst combative, abrasive, really-on-top-of-



Frank Ward

Sedgwick: Conflicting expectations conflicting with conflicting expectations

things style, as you expect yourself to be, your professors expect you to be, your friends expect you to be, and being nurturing, as you expect yourself to be, your boyfriends, your girlfriends expect you to be. It's hard to fit these two together. Some people can do it, but it takes a particular kind of balancing act, and it's not one that should be demanded of everybody.

This is something that gets highlighted in the recent ad hoc committee's report on the conditions of women faculty at Amherst; it's something women faculty feel too. To quote a couple of paragraphs from the report:

"A senior female faculty member commented, 'There is a sense here at Amherst that bright people are abrasive and less bright people are nice.' " Recognize that? "Another woman felt that intellectual toughness was often assumed to be inextricably linked to personal toughness. Yet a female assistant professor noted that women are not simply expected to assimilate stereotypical male behavior." Here comes that double bind again. For "There are two conflicting demands on women — to be silent and decorous and to perform." Then in another part of the report on a discussion of advising: "Some women faculty report that if and when they try to resist student pressure to play a maternal supportive role, they encounter deep resentment and harsh criticism from the students. At the same time students sometimes equate supportiveness with a lack of intellectual rigor." So that there's a demand for that supportiveness and at the same time a contempt for the people who provide it, as if "They're just doing my emotional housekeeping for me."

There are more double binds students can run into. Be sexual, don't be sexual. Be sexual — dress up; look as if you're on the sexual market or else you're a man hater, you're being unpleasant, you're not making yourself agreeable. On the other hand, don't be *too* sexual because then you're asking for it, you're not intellectually serious. And of course these two categories have always overlapped. You're always wrong, one way or the other.

Again, for students who come from cultural backgrounds that aren't the exact WASP background that we find here, there's going to be a whole other layer of double binds. If you're coming from another culture of one sort or another, that culture in itself is going to have its own demands, often conflicting demands, on you as a gendered person. So if you're still figuring out what it means to be a Jewish woman (and I speak from my own experience with this), and what the demands on a Jewish woman are for being, say, nurturant, warm, *but not possessive*, then to have to take up that position in relation to a WASP culture that has a whole different set of conflicting ex-

pectations of you as a Jewish woman means that you're facing conflicting expectations conflicting with conflicting expectations. It's going to be tough, because every issue of ethnic identity, racial identity, cultural identity, also gets played out as an issue of gender identity. I don't come here just as a Jew, I come here as a Jewish woman.

Another problem is tokenism. There's a whole group of double binds around tokenism. You're going to run into this much more when you graduate, because every woman and person of color here is among other things being educated to be a terrific token. You're going to be in demand to be the only person of your kind on that board of directors. Demands are going to be made of you that will essentially ask you to deny who you are. And it takes a lot of maturity to deal with that — a lot more maturity than anybody could expect you to have at this point. You'll feel this even at the undergraduate level. For instance, you may be a woman who hangs out with guys, and guys say to you things like "I like you because when I'm with you I don't feel like you're a woman." That means that either you can have the friends you have or you can be a woman, but you're always doing it one way *or* the other. Be a woman, but be our kind of woman. But being our kind of woman means *not* being "like" a woman.

There are other speculations on why coed schools tend sometimes to suppress women's development. There is a reluctance by women, relatively speaking, to speak in mixed groups. There's pressure on women to underachieve: that famous fear of success that Martina Horner writes about. At the same time, there's fear of failure. And when you get a fear of success it can be in the riptide of the fear of failure. There are some very debilitating possibilities. Say you're one of the five women in that particular major or one of the three women in that math class: there's pressure on you to represent your gender. And it's a very frightening thing to fail at something. It's not just you failing, but women failing.

Also there's a tendency for women to underestimate not only their own potential but their own achievements.

Studies show that when a woman and a man get the same SAT scores in math, in the medium range, the man will say, "Great, I can be a math major," and the woman will say, "Gee, I really don't think this is good enough. You really have to be awfully good to be a math major." That same B- means different things to men and women.

There's another interesting hypothesis that I don't think has been tested out. I heard Elizabeth Tidball speaking about this, and it was just starting to get researched. It was about the effects of long-term heterosexual relationships on men and women undergraduates. What she said she was starting to find was that when men were involved as undergraduates in long-term sexual relationships their self-image and self-esteem went way up. They felt great about themselves, their engagement with the community increased, their performance in their classes got better; they were right on top of things. When women got involved in the same relationships, just the opposite thing happened. Their self-esteem tended to go down, they withdrew from the college community, from engagement with classes; their grades went down. Something serious and detrimental to women is happening within some of those bonds.

One role model isn't enough. One in each department isn't enough. You need a whole smorgasbord.

The lack of female role models for women at a coed college also is a problem. It doesn't mean just one role model, it means having five role models or fifty. None of you women are going to be me when you grow up. You're not going to be Rose Olver, Andrea Rushing, Rosalina de la Carrera. You're going to be somewhere in

among us. One model isn't enough. One model in each department isn't enough. You need a whole smorgasbord.

There's the additional problem of the absence of women and gender perspective from the curriculum: this will surprise those of you who are freshmen and taking "Race and Sex" and English 11. There are 500 courses in the Amherst catalog; ten of them have to do with women or gender, 490 of them do not. You're going to be running into the other 490 very soon.

ONE THING that women students have in common with Sabrina is her fear of anger, her fear of her own fury. I think this is related to a fear in women, a fear of starting to recognize the things that are going to be coming down on us: you know once you start to see those things you're going to get angry. But what you think is going to happen to you when you get angry is just what Sabrina thinks is going to happen to her. You're going to go to pieces. You feel immobilized, disempowered, as though when you get angry it's not going to do the same thing for you that happens when your professor gets angry and he slams the table and looks mightier and more in control than ever. Quite the opposite. You're going to burst into tears. You're not going to be able to talk anymore. You won't even be able to finish the sentence. Who would want to get angry? And worst of all, you're going to be shown to be a woman because after all it's women who lose control. It's women who burst into tears. You'll really just blow it.

I think the proportion of women who have thought, "I really can't go in and talk to that professor because I'm about to burst into tears" is probably equal to the proportion of women faculty who have thought "I really can't go meet that class today because I'm sure I'll burst into tears." I sense a discrediting

power of tears that is very very strong. Men talk a lot about how men aren't allowed to cry, and it's true men aren't allowed to cry. Women *do* cry, but it's always seen as a terrible liability. We've solved this problem of anger that we aren't allowed to feel by self-accusation, by turning anger against ourselves, by making up some other story about why our fists are clenched. "I'm not angry, just confused." "I'm cold." We've solved this problem of anger by turning against ourselves with self-destructive behavior of all the kinds that are increasing among young women — smoking, alcohol abuse, anorexia, oblivious sexuality, and by having self-destructive feelings of worthlessness and depression.

Don't men have conflicting demands too? Of course. The majority of men who aren't WASP men have that whole set of conflicting sets of conflicting demands that we discussed in the case of women. And then there's a whole litany of other conflicting demands that I'm sure you men know better than I do. Be sensitive, but be macho. Be feminists. You can't be a feminist, you're a man. Be well groomed and well behaved, but don't be effeminate. Bond closely with other men. But don't bond *too* closely with other men. Or if you do bond very closely with other men, find some female figure to route it through, like the Sabrina. The greatest sentence in that one article about Sabrina is something like, "Sabrina served as an instrument for class bonding." And you have to understand "class" in the broadest possible sense!

It's tough for men; it's tough structurally in a lot of the same ways that it's tough for women. Double binds are similar in shape. On the other hand, for men, the pathway from Amherst College to positions of real power in the world is relatively clear and unobstructed. If you don't ask too many questions and if you manage to get out of here with exactly the right mixture of self-knowledge and self-ignorance, the rewards for filing straight through this defile of double binds are power, love, money.

Even good, nice, loving, sympathetic men who are supportive to women benefit from the oppression of women.

The proportion of women who think, "I can't go in and talk to that professor because I'm about to burst into tears," is probably equal to the proportion of women faculty who have thought, "I can't meet class today because I'll burst into tears."

They benefit from violent, threatening, and misogynist men, in the same way that men who aren't physically threatening benefit from rapists. What you probably *feel* most strongly, if you're one of these supportive men, is the loss that you suffer because other men are violent against women. You feel that women don't trust you as you wish they would, and as you feel you deserve to be trusted. You feel a loss in the possibilities of intimacy that you think you deserve. Those are real damages. But what you aren't feeling is how high your market level rises as a nonviolent, supportive, and sympathetic man: how much in demand you are, how rare you are, and how valued you are for these traits that really ought to be able to be taken for granted from *all* men.

Men do face these double binds, and all men lose something in navigating through them. Some men lose a very great deal. But the general entitlement of men at the cost of women is so pervasive and so hard to pin down that men need to look seriously to see where and how they're moving ahead on the basis of the oppression of women. They can't do this just by introspection. If you just look inside yourself and say, "Am I sexist?", you're not going to see the structural things in the society that let you profit from the oppression of women. Just the way if, as an Amherst College student, you simply look inside of yourself and say "Am I a

racist?", you're not going to realize how, for instance, a lot of the money that's supporting your education comes from investments in a racist society. You have to look analytically around you.

I've had a lot of people say to me, "When I look at a woman I don't see a woman. I see a person. How could I be a sexist?" But to say that is already denying and devaluing and making invisible the experience of that woman *as a woman*, which is a large part of her experience: her oppression as a woman, her acculturation as a woman, her resourcefulness in surviving as a woman, and her making of a female self for herself. And to blind yourself to that, in the name of gender-blindness, fairness, not being a sexist, is the wrong tack to take, I think.

SO, WHAT CAN students do? Women, feel anger. Think about what to do with the anger. If you know it's anger, then you're in control. If you feel that anger and it's a moment in which you just can't afford to blow up, as long as you know it's anger, you can say to yourself, "All right, this is anger. I'm not going to blow up. I'll do it later." It's if you don't know it's anger that you're out of control. Think about things you can do with anger. Think about people you can share it with who will validate it, and let you make something interesting out of it. *Write it.* Also, women, learn how to weep without stopping talking. Just let the water come out of your eyes and keep talking. You know: you're a woman, you cry sometimes. It doesn't mean that you can't finish the sentence. A lot of times, (Continued on page 21)

(Sabrina, from page 17)

women burst into tears because of that sense of strangled powerlessness, and they always try to make themselves stop crying because the anger is so upsetting. You can cry and talk at the same time. And once you aren't busy trying to make yourself stop crying, then your voice will be able to come out. You can finish the sentence. You can finish the class whether you're a student in the class or a teacher in front of the class. It'll get said. The women around you and the men around you will learn to listen to somebody talking who's crying at the same time.

The next thing that students can do is to work actively — and get faculty working actively, and get administration working actively — to create a non-homophobic community on campus. You probably noticed when I was going through that list of double binds that some of them for women, and a very high proportion of them for men, were structured in the first place by the threat of homosexual labeling. If that threat stops being a threat, some of those double binds disappear, and so do some of the ugly self-ignorances that are enforced by those double binds. This isn't just an issue of making things nice for gay students, though it is very important to make a campus livable for gay students. It's very important also for heterosexual students or for students who are probably heterosexual that the campus be livable for gay students. Otherwise, there's that whole potential for blackmailing yourself or for other people blackmailing you about your sympathy for women, your love for women, whatever, whether you're a man or a woman. That threat simply disappears if you're in an environment that's not homophobic. There's a wave of homophobia obviously sweeping the country, sweeping prestigious campuses in the Northeast now, which is very, very dangerous. I've been told that a few years ago there were thirty to forty gay

and lesbian students out on this campus, and this year there are fewer than half a dozen out. The proportion of gay and lesbian students who are out on this campus is a very good indicator of the level of general trust on campus. And if that trust isn't there, women and men can't go about leading their affective and political lives safely, heterosexual or gay women and men. It's got to be a priority.

Next, all students need to be aware — or at least need to have opportunities

Don't go to men faculty for brain stuff and women faculty for heart stuff. The women faculty have brains, and a lot of the men faculty have hearts.

to become aware — of gender structures in their lives, whether as oppressors or as oppressed — or, as in most of our cases, as both — just as all of us need to become aware or have opportunities to become aware of class and economic and racial and technological structures that are shaping our lives. What you as students can do is make this faculty aware of your felt curricular needs in all your courses, even the ones where they seem least likely to be met. Keep asking the questions that you are learning to ask in those freshmen courses on gender. In your upperclass courses, those questions are going to be fresh and important and break open new territory in the coverage of the courses.

Again, though, don't recycle your double binds on the faculty. Don't demand emotional nurturance from women faculty, and then devalue them for giving it to you. Value the emotional nurturance you get from all of your professors highly, and value it *as part of their intellectual worth, not as*

opposed to their intellectual worth. When you are dealing with men faculty, don't either devalue the nurturance you get from them or deprive them of the opportunity to give you nurturance. Don't go to men faculty for brain stuff and women faculty for heart stuff. The women faculty have brains, and a lot of the men faculty have hearts.

Don't let your interest in ending gender oppression stop at the metaphorical gates of the college. If you want to have choices in the family structures that you form, if you want to have a choice of a nuclear family or extended family or a couple of one sort or another, you should be interested in the wholesale regulation of families under systems like apartheid. If you want reproductive freedom, you should be speaking out for all women — whether it's for their access to safe, legal abortion, or for their freedom from sterilization abuse. If you want to have choices about child-rearing and day care, you'd better be working for economic and cultural recognition for child-care workers. If you want to be free from the terrorism of rape, you need to oppose *all* of the political and terroristic uses of rape: for instance, its use as torture in authoritarian societies. And in general if you want other people to reflect on how their entitlement can be a tacit part of your oppression, you need to be ready to do the same thing.

The final thing you can do is to value your own community. If you're a woman, one of the things that means is the community of women around you, and if you're a man, one of the things it means is the community of like-minded men around you. One way to start that is through a process of consciousness-raising groups.

I'm going to conclude in the most obvious way, by asking you the three questions that Rabbi Hillel would ask you now if *he* were standing up here:

If you are not for yourself, who will be for you?

If you are only for yourself, what are you?

And if not now, when? □