
Provisional Recovery: A Cool and Deliberate Sort of Madness

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Abstract

Drawing on works by feminist and archival studies scholars like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Ann Stoler, and Carla Kaplan, this paper explores a new approach to reading multiple recovered narratives by and about women. I examine the unsettled prehistory of Rose Pastor Stokes' 1916 "problem play" *The Woman Who Wouldn't*. I read this play historically in order to theorize the complicated ethical negotiations implicit to the textualization of immigrant women's struggles in the early twentieth century United States. To do this I propose a "provisional" reading practice that gathers together two critical impulses, deferral (Sedgwick) and process (Stoler). This method aims to redirect critical attention toward the particular challenges of reading recovered texts relationally. My provisional approach to Stokes' play highlights the work's indebtedness to an earlier murder trial narrative. In November 1908 the nurse and Russian Jewish immigrant Sara Koten was tried for murdering Dr. Martin Auspitz. Newspapers reported that Koten had requested the doctor's presence at the home of a pretended patient where, on his arrival, she shot him through the heart. While counsel entered a plea of insanity, Koten proved less compromising, explaining that Auspitz had chloroformed and raped her while she was working for him. She determined to kill him on discovering that she was pregnant. While the courts evidently accepted the plea of insanity, Koten's own rendering of events is visible due to a newspaper retelling from later that year, which transcribes into English a prison conversation held in Yiddish by social worker, leftist political activist, and writer Rose Pastor Stokes, herself Jewish and an immigrant. Stokes claimed that her identity as a woman and a Jewish immigrant enabled her to register the nature of Koten's troubles. Stokes' literary productions, as I will show, complicate this straightforward vision of solidarity between two immigrant women. Analyzing Stokes' work alongside early twentieth century print production surrounding the Koten incident, I show how a provisional reading practice can be deployed to recover the complexities of relationships between communities of immigrant women.

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