

The Personal Turn: U.S. nonfiction, 1980-2022

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Abstract

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The Personal Turn: U.S. nonfiction, 1980-2022 analyzes the personal politics of U.S. nonfiction across the past forty years. Each of its chapters focuses on a key author or authors, a major nonfiction sub-genre, and a relevant critical discourse. These are: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's mid-career queer critical essays; Frank B. Wilderson III's memoir, *Afropessimism*, and the Black Studies manifestoes of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney; Claudia Rankine's lyric essay series; and *The Best American Essay* anthology series. At the heart of the project is a nuanced distinction between an entrepreneurial politics of personal writing, and what the thesis identifies as a set of more collectivist, solidaristic, intimate, and impersonal strategies that often conflict with and complicate the personal writing of the authors it takes as its focus. The thesis roots the distinction between these formal political strategies in a schism in 1980s feminisms: between 'personal' academic feminist epistemology, which often placed an assimilative stress on representation and relatability, and Black and women of color feminisms in the same period, in which—as in the work of writers such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa—autobiography frequently grounds a solidaristic politics of 'difference.' Reading with scholars of neoliberalism, the thesis considers the entrepreneurial politics of the 'personal turn,' contextualizing the turn in

relation to the conglomeration of publishing and the neoliberalization of higher education. In the archive of *The Best American Essays* series, the thesis finds an expression of this entrepreneurial politics of the personal, manifest in personal essaying. In the work of critics such as Sedgwick, Wilderson, Moten and Harney, and Rankine, meanwhile, the thesis finds more ambiguous and ambivalent representation of and relationship to the personal ‘I.’ The project shows that while the personal can never be excised from critique, the personal qualities of criticism—and the sub-genres critics choose to inhabit—shape the kinds of claims they can make. Ultimately, the thesis offers timely interventions in its four primary areas of scholarship, while giving the first sustained formal and historical account of the personal turn, a turn that is still pressingly underway.

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Epilogue

Luce Irigaray [...] noted that ‘collaboration’ was etymologically related to ‘labia’ and that women’s lips were ‘always touching each other in “collaboration.”’ What if I didn’t want to collaborate that way? What if I wanted to use logic, by myself, in an ‘objective’ way—without mothers or menstrual blood? — Elif Batuman, *Either/Or*

If our genres of the transformational event are the only media through which we think that other people will be interested in us, we construct our lives and our encounters with destructive disregard for the ordinary forms of care, inattention, passivity, and aggression that don’t organize the world at the heroic scale. — Lauren Berlant

Introduction: The personal turn and the politics of intimacy

What is the ‘personal turn’? The phrase has been used only sporadically in criticism and scholarship over the past forty years. Searching academic databases, there are few instances of the term being used to describe a paradigm shift in the form, content, or publication history of criticism or nonfiction. Instead, the contours of the turn appear through other concepts: scholarship on ‘confession,’ ‘testimony,’ ‘anecdotal theory,’ autotheory, and autofiction; *l’écriture féminine* and its offshoots; strands of feminist standpoint theory, affect theory, queer phenomenology, and the reclamation of ‘close reading’ in the 1990s and 2000s. The personal turn is closely bound to other turns, most notably the ‘reparative turn.’ It is seen in feminist responses to ‘masculine theory,’ and in Black and queer of color feminisms building on the liberatory forms of women of color feminists in the 1970s and ‘80s. I will discuss all of these component strands and histories in the turn towards the more personal practice of writing that has become slowly apparent, and in some places default, in U.S. criticism and nonfiction since the 1980s. But despite the paucity of the phrase in the literature, the ‘personal turn’ *was* being observed as a paradigm shift as it happened.

The concerns of the turn, as it was taking off, are summarized in a 1995 review in *Contemporary Literature* by Elizabeth Hirsh, titled ‘The Personal Turn: Of Senior Feminists, Silence, and the Pastness of the Present.’¹ Hirsh reviews three recent volumes: Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar’s *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*; Gayle Greene and Copellia Kahn’s *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism*; and Susan Rubin Suleiman’s *Risking*

¹ Elizabeth Hirsh, ‘Review: The Personal Turn: Of Senior Feminists, Silence, and the Pastness of the Present,’ *Contemporary Literature*, 36: 4 (1995), 708-717.

Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature.² ‘Collectively these volumes attest to the personal turn taken by literary criticism in recent years,’ Hirsh writes.

Whether the increasing freedom with which academic critics integrate autobiographical material into critical reflection—a development I summarize as “the personal turn” in criticism—represents a turn against “theory” or a particular evolution of theory; whether it serves to liberate minority voices within the academy or further privilege an elite; and whether it genuinely contests the prevailing ethic of academic discourse, with its posture of objectivity and preference for agonistic forms—all these are questions to which a reader of these essays will find no certain answers.³

As Hirsh makes clear, the personal turn may have been identifiable to observers in contemporary criticism, but its broader stakes were still obscure in the work that made up the turn itself. This, I want to suggest, is not just a feature of the turn being in its infancy, but a tendency of personal writing of the past forty years. While reflexivity about self, form, and the shape and purpose of theory are all central qualities of the personal turn, personal writing in many areas tends to root those reflections in individual experiences of attachment, rather than social, historical, or cultural context. Privileging personal experience and individual feeling as the primary liberatory epistemological ground of the new theory, the work of the ‘personal turn’ has often lost sight of its purposes, political effects, and the success of its apparent aims, as a result of its own intentional and stated focus on the self. The purpose and significance of the project at hand is grounded in this point. As I parse out the origins, key strands of thought, and effects and politics of the personal turn, I want to hold in mind a question that motivates my wider project: what is it about personal writing that can so readily impede, or simply delimit, the examination of the

² Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar, eds. *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Gayle Greene and Copellia Kahn, *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (London and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

³ Hirsh, 708.

personal's effects? Put bluntly: why is it that a turn in theory that is so rooted in self-reflection, and so defined by reflexivity, has been attended by the hesitation to reflect honestly on the politics of its own forms? What is it about the personal that allures, while repelling critique?

The personal turn: academic feminism and 'masculine critique,' 1980s-90s

The books that Hirsh reviews offer a useful starting point. The first volume listed in Hirsh's review is Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar's *The Intimate Critique*. As this introduction progresses, I'll argue for a distinction between 'the personal' and 'intimacy,' which I understand as an affect with distinct political valences, and produced through distinct formal devices, as compared with the personal academic feminisms of the 1980s and '90s. The editors of the 1993 collection do not share this distinction. Whereas I am going to use intimacy as a shorthand for a relational politics that entails and invites multiplicity, collectivity, and the recognition of difference, Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar assign a definite article to their project. *The Intimate Critique* is, the volume's title suggests, a coherent set of critical practices, with an identifiable set of aims. As Hirsh's review indicates, this is far from the case.

The collection, *The Intimate Critique*, was originally conceived as a panel for the 1988 Modern Language Association conference. At the time the conveners, now the editors of the collection, were organizing their project under the bracket of what they called 'interactive discourse.'⁴ When the panel was rejected by the MLA, they reconvened for the Midwest/MLA Conference under a more transparent title: 'Masculine and Feminine Modes

⁴ Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar, eds. *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, 1. All further references in the text.

of Literary Criticism.’ The title clarified the panelists’ purposes. As they write in the introduction to the volume, they, like many of their generation, had undertaken a graduate education based in the ‘methods of “objective criticism”’ (IC 1). Over time, however, they had come to see those methods, and the theory that they performed, as being ‘pseudo-objective, impersonal, and adversarial’ (IC 1). This pseudo-objectivity was the ‘predominant mode of formal academic discourse’ during the 1970s and ‘80s, they write: a practice marked by ‘formal distance and conventional hierarchies,’ with accentuated boundaries between author and audience, and between ‘the self of the author and the subject of the discourse’ (IC 2). The editors implicitly align the language of scholarship with that of the college essay, citing two scholars writing on college composition, who argue against the ‘scientific model’ of essay writing, and its ‘author evacuated prose’ (IC 2).

Against this ‘straitjacket,’ the editors of *The Intimate Critique* understand their practice as feminine insofar as it dissolves the same boundaries that ‘masculine’ critique sets up. This preoccupation with ‘boundaries’ and ‘lines’ is one that recurs across the writing of the personal turn. Whether in queer theory’s troubling of ‘straight’ lines of inquiry, or in autotheory’s interrogation of the boundaries between genres and disciplines, as personal critique tries to draw closer to authorial selves and to readers, it finds itself confronted with demarcations of various kinds. The editors of *The Intimate Critique* engage one immediate anxiety that attends the boundary between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’: gender essentialism. As though to indicate the varied epistemological backgrounds of the volume’s contributors, the editors outline their disciplinary backgrounds. They write, they say, as ‘feminists, composition theorists, poststructuralists, African-Americanists, reader-response critics,

and/or poet-critics' (*IC* 2). This gesture is intended to do something like the move that Hélène Cixous makes in her landmark essay, 'Reaching the Point of Wheat': 'every time [we] say 'masculine' or 'feminine,' or 'man' or 'woman' [...], please use as many quotation marks as you need to avoid taking these terms too literally.'⁵ The editors of *The Intimate Critique* quote this passage from Cixous, deploying her gentle and witty chastisement in order to ward off a critique that they nonetheless barely engage. The terms 'masculine' and 'feminine,' they repeat, are helpful labels in 'distinguishing the formality, linearity, and abstractions of conventional academic discourse from alternative models' (*IC* 2). They are 'not essentializing.' Rather, 'the writers in this volume assume the categories of gender, race, class, and ability are among the matrices that influence their reading, knowing and writing' (*IC* 10). These repudiating gestures out the way, the editors of *The Intimate Critique* point to the distinguishing qualities of 'feminine' practice. These include an interest in challenging the argumentative structure of critique; questioning the 'importance of the objective and impersonal' (*IC* 2); choosing not to aim toward a 'seamless, finished' product (*IC* 3); and making personal and often descriptive reference to the process of writing (*IC* 3). Instrumentalizing Cixous' wry tone, then, the editors overlook her sharper castigation. 'We must be very careful not to be too fascinated and deceived' by the words 'man' and 'woman,'⁶ she writes: a fascination that doggedly persists in *The Intimate Critique*.

The distinctions between 'feminine' and 'masculine' critique that the editors of *The Intimate Critique* offer in their introduction tell us little about the work itself. More insight

⁵ Hélène Cixous, 'Reaching a Point of Wheat, or a Portrait of the Artist as a Maturing Woman,' *New Literary History*, 19:1 (1987), 1-21 (p. 1).

⁶ Cixous (1987), 1.

into the actual form and politics of the work can be gleaned from the way that the editors depict the emotional qualities and interpersonal resonances of their project. They describe a ‘passionate correspondence’ among themselves, which ‘extended to a web of passionate correspondence with would-be contributors’ (*IC* 3). They talk about the ‘long personal letters’ sent by authors, ‘thanking us for creating space for [their] writing’ (*IC* 3). The project is not just personal in form but in stakes and motivation. ‘I’ve found myself progressively alienated from the lit criticism game,’ Gail Griffin writes, in one quoted letter to the editors. ‘I can never envisage a “venue” for criticism as I genuinely prefer to write it’ (*IC* 3). Brenda Daly observes that her own essay ‘not only avoids argumentation’ but ‘resists the possible loss of voice (my own)’ (*IC* 3). The editors foreground these feelings of displacement, alienation, and hunt for community experienced by women writers in the academy. ‘This anthology,’ they write, ‘provides just such a venue for writers whose essays refuse to separate impetus and content, their lives and their words’ (*IC* 3). It is this stress on personal, emotional fulfilment that drives the ‘intimate critique,’ and underpins its ‘feminine’ qualities.

Many of the tensions that attend the introduction of *The Intimate Critique* are indexed in the Fall 1987 issue of *New Literary History*, which published Cixous’ ‘Reaching the Point of Wheat.’ In that essay, Cixous compares Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to Clarice Lispector’s depictions of femininity, resolving in a discussion of the ‘point of wheat.’ The phrase is taken from Lispector’s *The Passion According to G.H.* It describes the point at which the subject becomes de-personalized: where ‘one grows and that is all, without even thanking God or Nature.’⁷ For Cixous, this is the moment that one

⁷ Cixous (1987), 20.

becomes a woman, which is to say, ‘pure Am.’ ‘Am a woman,’ she writes. Cixous’ stripping-out of the personal pronoun, in relation to Lispector’s impersonal prose, is a startling departure from the insistently personal inflection of the kind of U.S. academic feminism captured in *The Intimate Critique*. Her essay’s placement in the very topical issue of *New Literary History* illustrates an intense set of debates between impersonality and the personality of the ‘feminine’ in contemporary feminist scholarship. The editors of *The Intimate Critique* deploy Cixous as a citation, while departing from the spirit of her critique, suggesting where their volume comes down in those debates: far from the celebration of ‘pure Am.’

Alongside Cixous’ essay in the 1987 issue of *New Literary History* were, in fact, two essays central to *The Intimate Critique* and the discourse in which it intervened: Jane Tompkins’ now well-known ‘Me and My Shadow,’ and the essay to which Tompkins was responding, Ellen Messer-Davidow’s ‘The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticism.’⁸ The crux of the disagreement between Tompkins and Messer-Davidow, which distills some key elements of the debate around the role of the personal in U.S. feminist theorizing in the 1990s, revolves around the relationship of personal writing to feminist standpoint epistemology.

For Messer-Davidow, feminist scholarship is faced with a question: how to orient itself toward ‘the dominant male intellectual traditions’ and their epistemological underpinnings. ‘Are we to confront them or dismiss them, borrow from them or criticize them?’ she asks.⁹

⁸ Jane Tompkins, ‘Me and My Shadow,’ *New Literary History*, 19:1 (1987), 169-178; Ellen Messer-Davidow, ‘The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticism,’ *New Literary History*, 19:1 (1987), 65-103.

⁹ Messer-Davidow, 65.

There’s a lot to be said about the way that feminist standpoint epistemology theorists in this debate use the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘I.’ Messer-Davidow, for instance, both associates the first person plural with a coercive move by masculine critics, and wants to deploy it to ‘denote my affiliation with other feminists on the subjects treated in this essay.’ ‘Feminist readers’ might ‘join the we,’ she writes, while ‘non feminist readers

Her argument, across the arc of the paper, is that feminist critique necessarily entails a re-centering of the epistemological standpoint of the scholar. While ‘traditional literary scholars and critics’ seldom assume ‘the stance of radically detached objectivity’ taken in other disciplines, such as natural science, she argues, they nonetheless ‘fade from the domain of study, leaving their stances like plumes of smoke trailing behind them.’¹⁰ Feminist critics, by contrast, proceed from a place of ‘epistemic awareness.’¹¹ Messer-Davidow understands feminist criticism, then, to offer both a redress to the formal methods of ‘traditional literary criticism,’ and a positive articulation of what feminist critique entails. Feminist critics ‘stand forth in a domain of our making, revealing our perspectivity—and theirs,’ she writes. With its rootedness in epistemic awareness, feminist critique ‘prompts us to enter the domain of literary study and study ourselves.’¹² Ultimately, she concludes, the distinct operations of literary criticism and feminist criticism will cause the traditions to split. The feminist literary critic, she predicts, will ‘eventually have to make a choice.’ She will be ‘strung intolerably between fundamentally incompatible inquiries, a traditional one into literature and a feminist one into sex/gender ideas.’¹³ The choice rests on feminist inquiry’s dependence on an epistemology based in personal perspective.

Messer-Davidow’s argument for the value of perspectivism in feminist inquiry is made in scholarly terms. Tompkins’ departure is to insist that that argument must itself be made at the level of form. At the opening of her essay, ‘Me and My Shadow,’ Tompkins draws a distinction between two sides of herself: the critic, preoccupied with epistemological

may be jarred by it’ (n1, 96).

¹⁰ Messer Davidow, 88.

¹¹ Messer-Davidow, 89.

¹² Messer-Davidow, 89.

¹³ Messer-Davidow, 96.

definitions; and ‘a person who wants to write about her feelings.’¹⁴ While Tompkins takes issue with Messer-Davidow’s definition of epistemology, the key intervention of her essay is its personal and reflexive style. She argues that ‘Messer-Davidow’s essay participates [...] in the conventions of Western rationalism.’ Its language is ‘impersonal, technical,’ the vocabulary of ‘the epistemic ideology it seeks to dislocate.’¹⁵ Adherence to these ideological norms, at the level of form, upholds ‘a male standard of rationality that militates against women being recognized as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge.’ Whereas Messer-Davidow, in Tompkins’ argument, frames feminist critique as a liberation from the fetters of a subject-object epistemology, Tompkins feels it vital to preserve the formal continuity between herself and the literary-critical object. She concludes:

I can’t talk about epistemology. I can’t deal with the philosophical basis of feminist literary criticism. I can’t strap myself psychically into an apparatus that will produce the right gestures when I begin to move. I have to deal with the trashing of emotion, and with my anger against it. This one time I’ve taken off the straitjacket, and it feels so good.¹⁶

The debates about the epistemological stakes of 1980s and ‘90s feminist literary scholarship revolve, we see, around form. Whether criticism is able to hold space for manifold selves and experiences, and particularly women’s experiences, is a question that for leading voices in the debate—such as Tompkins—can only be discussed in work that can move free of the rigid ‘apparatus’ of scholarly writing. ‘Feminine’ form, and the perspectivism it is said to capture, constitutes the ‘personal’ quality of this period of the personal turn.

¹⁴ Tompkins (1987), 169.

¹⁵ Tompkins (1987), 170.

¹⁶ Tompkins (1987), 178.

An expanded version of Tompkins' essay is printed in *The Intimate Critique*.¹⁷ This version contains a new section, in which Tompkins takes up a series of books off the shelf in her office, comparing their style, with the initial goal of illustrating specific distinctions between 'masculine' norms and 'feminine' epistemological practices. Flipping open a series of classic works of theory, Tompkins wonders whether they will contain any kind of 'reference to the self, to the author's self, to ourselves, to how people feel, to how the author feels' (*IC* 33). The first example she gives is from Felix Guattari's *Molecular Revolution*.¹⁸ The language is 'incredibly alienating,' she says, with an 'incredibly distancing effect,' and 'totally abstract and impersonal' (*IC* 34)—her own language becoming conspicuously casual in response. Guattari may use the first-person singular, but he has 'no interest whatsoever in the personal, or in concrete situations as I understand them,' no interest in 'specific person[s],' no 'real noises, smells, aches and pains.' Harold Bloom, in *Poetry and Repression*, is similarly abstract, dense, impersonal, and distanced from both materiality and the place of the author.¹⁹ She is immediately frustrated Bloom's relationship to his critical object: his argument involving 'the asking and answering of questions about "a text"—a generalized, non particular object [...] and about an equally disembodied "psyche"' (*IC* 33). Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, meanwhile, she finds 'generalizing,' 'disappointingly magisterial,' and betraying a 'bland assumption of authority,' with Foucault 'march[ing] along giving orders, barking out commands' (*IC* 35).²⁰ The three texts index, for Tompkins, some key tendencies of

¹⁷ Tompkins, 'Me and My Shadow,' in *The Intimate Critique*, 23-40.

¹⁸ Felix Guattari, *Molecular Revolution: Psychiatry and Politics*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Penguin, 1984).

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revision from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

‘masculine’ theory: rhetorical density and abstraction, distance from the object, and authoritative universalization of an argument.

Among her readings of the formal qualities of these works, though, Tompkins slips in an observation that reveals the ultimate direction of her argument. Bloom’s *Poetry and Repression*, Tompkins reflects, takes as its focus a number of canonical texts that she summarizes as playing out ‘the drama of a self’ on ‘a cosmic stage.’ These texts ‘pall for me,’ she admits, ‘because it isn’t *my* drama’ (IC 34). This, it turns out, is the crux of Tompkins’ critique. At the root of her concern about the evacuated subject of ‘masculine’ theory is Tompkins’ desire to see herself reflected in the work. As the essay proceeds, it becomes clear that Tompkins isn’t so much arguing for a practice of criticism that recognizes the subject, but for a criticism that recognizes her specifically. She picks up a volume containing an essay by Jessica Benjamin on the politics of the erotic and briskly casts aside all of her formal points of objection toward the ‘masculine’ books she had just been critiquing.²¹ Benjamin, Tompkins writes, has ‘no personal reference’ and ‘deals, like Foucault, in generalities’ (IC 35). Nonetheless, Tompkins is ‘completely hooked.’ Why ‘don’t I bridle at [Benjamin’s] abstractions as I did when I was reading Guattari?’ She concludes that the essay is ‘already personal for me without being personalized,’ because it concerns ‘things that I’ve been thinking about for some time’ (IC 36).

What is personal is completely a function of what is perceived as personal. And what is perceived as personal by men, or rather, what is gripping, significant, “juicy,” is different from what is felt to be that way by women. For what we are talking about is what is important, answers one’s needs, strikes one as immediately *interesting*. For women, the personal is such a category. (IC 36)

²¹ Jessica Benjamin, ‘Master and Slave: The Fantasy of Erotic Domination,’ *The Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 280-89.

In this passage, Tompkins points to a tautology that sticks in 1990s feminist arguments that ‘feminine’ epistemology should have a distinctly personal form. Put simply: the tautology is that women find the personal interesting because the personal is what women find interesting. One question that Tompkins’ argument prompts is, of course: what woman? In a critique such as Tompkins’, offered only through the strict prism of the individual author’s taste and preference, ‘woman’ constitutes nothing more or less than the author herself. The crux of her argument is not that experimental forms of theory need to be represented in the academy, nor even that underrepresented forms of identity and experience provide valuable epistemologies for critique, but that theory should be representative of women’s, and particularly of her own, personal interest. Interest, here, describes both her attention to the critical object, and the benefit that the object offers to the feminist critic. What Tompkins considers ‘important’ is limited to what is described as personal, or personally relevant. There is no particular aesthetic quality to the personal—no clear sense of what makes personal writing formally ‘juicy’—but there is an insistence on women’s ‘need’ to perceive themselves in both criticism and art.

Women’s critical judgment is reduced to what editor Olivia Frey, in her essay in *The Intimate Critique*, describes as a difficulty distinguishing critical argumentation from personal experience. For Frey, like Tompkins, women’s apparent tendency to center personal experience is not only productive—forcing a less adversarial, less judgment-oriented paradigm in literary scholarship—but inevitable. Feminist epistemology, Frey argues, can advance an authority rooted in the correspondence of thought and embodied experience. But it also, and equally importantly, expresses the fact that it is ‘difficult for

some women to engage in intellectual debate.’²² Women’s critical authority, in this context, is predicated on resistance to habits of critical judgment. Instead of a lever by which to restructure the academy, Tompkins’ essay—like Frey’s—threatens to collapse women’s contribution to critique into simply narcissistic identification.

The ‘woman’ at the heart of Tompkins’ de-straitjacketed criticism inevitably prefers personal writing, and for Frey, cannot in fact write otherwise. Whether or not this was a choice, a political necessity, or somehow innate to femininity was a topic of much debate—that feminists *must* break from theory is the central point on which Tompkins and Messer-Davidow agree. For other contemporary feminist scholars, meanwhile, the personal turn in no way required that feminists distance themselves from theory. Nancy K. Miller writes, in her 1993 collection, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*, that ‘to want to produce and read another kind of writing [...] is not necessarily to turn one’s back on theory.’²³ Instead, the case for personal writing, for Miller, ‘entails the reclaiming of theory: turning theory back on itself.’²⁴ This is what Jane Gallop, in *Thinking Through the Body*, describes as the ‘passage between theory and life story,’ a passage paved by North American academic feminism, French poststructuralism, and psychoanalytic theory.²⁵ Similarly for Gayle Greene, in *Changing Subjects*, personal criticism is not a practice ‘pitted against theory and reinforcing the usual binarisms,’ but ‘may be imbricated in theory in a way which broadens the notion of theory.’²⁶ For Miller,

²² Olivia Frey, ‘Beyond Literary Darwinism: Women’s Voices and Critical Discourse,’ in *The Intimate Critique* (1993), 41-67 (p. 45).

²³ Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 5. Gallop develops this idea in her later work: *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); *The Deaths of the Author: Reading and Writing in Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁶ Greene, ‘Looking at History,’ in *Changing Subjects* (1993), 4-30 (p. 20).

the traversal of self and theory is in fact captured in the false binary that Tompkins sets up, between the critic and the ‘person who wants to talk about her feelings.’ It is precisely because that dualism is false that it is useful, for Miller, in interrogating the critical binaries that the dualism distils: of mind and body; rationality and emotion; feminine and masculine; theory and process. It’s the bluntness of the binarism that Miller finds so productive. This is clearly not Tompkins’ tack.

This is not to say that Miller eschewed personal writing, and comparing her personal essaying to Tompkins’ points to possibilities for engaging the distinction between a personal conception of feminist epistemology and the ‘masculine’ theoretical tradition. In a 1978 lecture, republished in her 1993 book, Miller maps the topography of her one-bedroom apartment. Her fascination with the intersection of domestic and intellectual spaces recalls the way that Tompkins roves around her study, lifting books off shelves, though Miller’s conclusion is very different. Miller describes how she has set up a divider of bookcases, separating her bed, phone, and television from her desk and reading chair. ‘I battle to establish a balance of power between the two major poles of my life: my bed and my desk,’ she writes. ‘I have a room of my own, then, but that room is inhabited by two wary antagonists.’²⁷ The antagonists are ‘vertical Professor Miller, who sits at her desk and writes “productively,”’ and ‘horizontal Nancy who watches television from her bed and mainlines into the telephone.’ Whereas for Tompkins, the horizontal Nancy might have to win out against Professor Miller, for Miller, the pair aren’t readily distinguishable. Her horizontal body intersects with the vertical of her theory.

Hirsh’s review, ‘The Personal Turn,’ clarifies some of the political-economic stakes of

²⁷ Miller, 33.

these debates in 1990s feminist literary criticism. Hirsh is enlightening not only because, as we've seen, the works she reviews are key pieces in the puzzle of the personal turn—but also because her vantage on the labor of academic criticism is distinct from many of its more high-profile personal practitioners. Her review situates the personal turn of 1990s U.S. feminist criticism in the intensifying ideological conditions of neoliberalism, though she does not use that term. Hirsh finds the clearest expression of her own position in an essay by Linda S. Kauffman, collected in *Changing Subjects*, which in writing 'against the grain of individualism [...] and personal testimony' marks a departure from much of the other work in the review. Kauffman argues that the personal turn is a symptom of a distinctly American obsession with 'sincerity and authenticity,' indicative of a politically exhausted culture.²⁸

Like Kauffman, Hirsh feels that the personal turn in U.S. critique vainly harks back to a myth of first-wave feminist purity, which obscures the elitist culture of the academy and the complicity in that culture of feminist scholars who insist on the value of the personal. Hirsh develops Kauffman's argument in a figure that she understands as the primary practitioner of personal critique in the 1980s and '90s: the 'Senior Feminist.' Capturing the intellectual, cultural, and economic conditions that have coalesced to allow for arguments such as Tompkins', the Senior Feminist is a 'paradoxical figure heretofore unknown in the annals of Academe.'²⁹ The product of important gains made by feminist scholars in the 1970s and '80s, the Senior Feminist is epitomized by scholars such as Tompkins, Miller, Madelon

²⁸ Linda Kauffman, 'The Long Goodbye: Against the Personal Testimony or, an Infant Grifter Grows Up,' in *Changing Subjects* (1993), 129-146 (p. 137).

The phrase 'the personal turn' interestingly comes up in sociological literature discussing trends in the corporate management. See e.g.: Fabien Trécourt and Scarlett Salman, 'Coaching is part of a "personal turn in capitalism,"' *Philonomist*. Web. <https://www.philonomist.com/en/interview/coaching-part-personal-turn-capitalism?check_logged_in=1> [Accessed 11 March 2024.]

²⁹ Hirsh, 710.

Sprengnether, and many others in the volumes, who now, Hirsh suggests with not a little bite, are posed with a ‘midlife crisis.’³⁰ With her newly acquired institutional power, the Senior Feminist is able to provisionally legitimate the personal turn. At the same time, the Senior Feminist’s institutional standing and anxiety over her complicity motivate a crisis for her criticism, which drives her argument that we need to reframe of the forms and purposes of scholarship.

Quietly attending all of the personal critique that we have mentioned so far is the question: who gets to write personal criticism in the academy? Hirsh, in her review, offers a resounding response. In the 1980s and ‘90s, it is senior, white, bourgeois feminists. As long as this is the case, for Hirsh—‘to the extent that self-dramatization remains the prerogative of celebrities and senior faculty’—personal criticism will remain structured by the politics outlined by Kauffman.³¹ Glancing back at Tompkins’ ‘Me and My Shadow,’ the question of academic celebrity gives crucial context to her argument. The value of personal critique, for Tompkins, is that it is far more interesting—‘juicy’—than masculine theory. If Tompkins is the central arbiter as to whether something is interesting, however—which in her scheme, is a question of whether it is relatable—then the interestingness of the personal is defined on the terms of academic celebrity. Tompkins herself recognizes this, in a way that also illustrates what Hirsh identifies as the Senior Feminists’ anxiety over her place in the academy. ‘I learned what epistemology I know from my husband,’ Tompkins writes. ‘What I am breaking away from is both my conformity to the conventions of a male professional practice and my intellectual dependence on my husband. How can I talk about

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hirsh, 712.

such things in public? How can I *not*.³² Like Hirsh and Kauffman, Miller has a moment of eyebrow-raising over Tompkins' fretfulness. 'No one would care if Jane Doe went to the bathroom: it matters that Jane Tompkins is a known critical quantity.' Some people, for instance, 'will know that she is married to Stanley Fish. And in that sense, the authority effect remains intact.'³³

What do we learn about personal criticism from these debates which take place between the late-1980s and mid-1990s in U.S. feminist literary criticism? First, that for Tompkins, as for the editors of *The Intimate Critique*, the figure of personhood expressed in personal criticism is defined not by the specificity of her epistemological stance, but by her similarity to feminist epistemology's established practitioners. Put differently: the personal is, in key areas of 1990s feminist discourse, aligned with a particular set of socio-cultural and economic traits and experiences. Secondly, that the personal—seen in conversations around epistemology, perspectivism, relatability, and 'feminine' and 'masculine' modes of expression—is one of the grounds on which the next generation of more precariously employed junior academics will have to build their feminism, under very different conditions from those of their senior colleagues. Tompkins writes:

I don't believe we can ever turn upon ourselves in the sense Ellen [Messer-Davidow] intends. You can't get behind the thing that casts the shadow. You cast the shadow. As soon as you turn, the shadow falls in another place. It is still your shadow. You have not gotten "behind" yourself. That is why self-consciousness is not the way to make ourselves better than we are.³⁴

Tompkins' shadow metaphor is intended to rebut Messer-Davidow's argument that the feminist literary critic might usefully examine how her standpoint inflects her theorizing.

³² Tompkins (1987), 176.

³³ Miller, n8; 27.

³⁴ Tompkins (1987), 174.

But the metaphor has another implication. With her metaphor of the feminist standpoint epistemologist, attempting in vain to contort herself to see her own shadow, Tompkins' naturalizes personal privilege into a universal rule. As we will see, Black and women of color feminists of the same period were eager to examine their shadows and one another's. These writers show that shadows are manipulated and manipulable; cast by the sun, but also on well-lit stages of our own devising.

The personal in black, queer, and women of color feminisms

The debates captured in a volume like *The Intimate Critique*, or the Fall 1987 issue of *New Literary History*, are part of a far broader set of contemporaneous discussions in feminist theory: in French psychoanalytic feminism (Cixous, Julia Kristeva, for instance); feminist sociology (Donna Haraway, Alison Jagger); decolonial feminisms (Gayatri Spivak, Angela Y. Davis, María Cristina Lugones); black feminist standpoint philosophy (Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks); experimental black feminisms (Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith); and queer and women of color feminisms (Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga). To understand what's meant by personal criticism, who can write it, and what ideas of personhood it might connote, we can now turn to these discourses, and their often markedly distinct understanding of the purposes of critique. As we've seen, the editors of a collection like *The Intimate Critique* root their project in the joy of building community with each other in personal letters, and in centering a personal attachment to the text. All too readily, though, that project can become subsumed into an argument for the value of identification, with the effect of crowding out difference and flattening material conditions. Compare Tompkins' argument, for instance, to Toni Cade Bambara's foreword to the landmark 1981 first

edition of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.

Now that we've begun to break the silence and begun to break through the diabolically erected barriers and can hear each other and see each other, we can sit down with trust and break bread together. Rise up and break our chains as well. [...] There is more than a hint in these pages that too many of us still equate tone with substance, a hot eye with clear vision, and congratulate ourselves for our political maturity. For of course, [...] it takes more than the self-disclosure and the bold glimpse of each others' life documents to make the grand resolve to fearlessly work toward potent meshings. [...] *This Bridge* can get us there. Can coax us into the habit of listening to each other and learning each other's ways of seeing and being.³⁵

From the outset, Bambara's foreword grounds *This Bridge* in a project of intersectionality, and she stresses the importance of difference.³⁶ She urges even the authors collected in the volume not to rest easily on the comforts of 'self-disclosure' or even the 'bold glimpse of each others' life documents.' It takes more than divulgence, she counsels, to instigate 'the grand resolve' toward forging a community, with all its 'potent meshings.' She presents that resolve not as a one-off act of empathic relation, but an ongoing political 'habit' of centering others' ways of 'seeing and being.' This movement is two-way: at the same time as sitting down to break bread, the community rises up to 'break our chains.' The stakes of personal writing for Bambara lie in its capacity to build and foster intersectional political communities driven by knowledge of each other's needs and, through community, to initiate political action. Reminding us of the focus on labor in these texts, Bambara calls this 'the work: To make revolution irresistible.'³⁷

As Bambara's foreword indicates, personal writing as it appeared in 1980s and '90s Black, queer, and women of color feminisms was often less preoccupied with grappling

³⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, 'Foreword to the First Edition, 1981,' *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 4th ed. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015 [1981]), xxix-xxxii (xxix-xxxi).

³⁶ The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in: 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1:8 (1989), 139-167.

³⁷ Bambara, xxxi.

with what Hirsh describes as the ‘midlife crisis’ of the Senior Feminist. Instead, works such as *This Bridge*, *Home Girls*, and *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave*, illustrate the centrality of personal writing to the revolutionary ambitions of Black feminist and queer of color scholarship.³⁸ Many of the texts included in these volumes showed how autobiographical and anecdotal gestures might articulate and elicit solidarity amongst a diverse community of writers, organizers, and thinkers, all with distinct material, social, and cultural needs. The first edition of *This Bridge* was released by Persephone Press, under the editorship of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, before joining with Kitchen Table, the renowned Black feminist press born out of conversations between Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, and the members of the Combahee River Collective.³⁹ As the collective’s statement articulates, these thinkers and activists believed that a Black feminist politics must be founded in ‘the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.’⁴⁰ From its inception, *This Bridge* drew on intersectional feminist praxis, with participants, editors and publishers involved in groups such as the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), and with roots in Black radical, decolonial, and Marxist traditions. The conception of community expressed in a collection such as *This Bridge* was founded in the negotiation of difference—even as misogynist and racist reactions to, for instance, Black women’s

³⁸ Barbara Smith, ed. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, 40th Anniversary Edition (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023 [1983]); Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2015 [1982]).

³⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, ‘Letters: Help *This Bridge* Called My Back,’ *Feminist Connection* (November 1983), 23. *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*. Web. <link-gale-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/apps/doc/CVLDRM208121983/AHSI?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=96fba30d.> [Accessed 11 March 2024].

⁴⁰ The Combahee River Collective, ‘The Combahee River Collective Statement,’ in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, 307-318 (p. 307).

writing and activism also necessitated the protection of dedicated sisterhood spaces, made up entirely of women with closer intersections of oppression.⁴¹

Contemporary reviewers of *This Bridge* foregrounded liberatory praxis, even when they were discussing the collections' personal significance to them, and the qualities of its authors' autobiographical reflections. Juana Maria Paz, reviewing the collection in *Motherroot Journal* in 1981, offered a rhetorical turn on the question of collectivist praxis in her opening paragraph. 'I cannot honestly say this book changed my life. I changed my own life several years ago with the help of a tribe of womyn warriors.'⁴² In her disavowal, she aligns *This Bridge* with the work of the tribe, rather than the text alone. Even while ostensibly dismissing the political force of the collection, she gives an impression of its place in both a vibrant intellectual and political discourse and in intimate communities of women of color. Similarly, Catherine Devine, in a jubilant essay in *Hagborn* (1981), weaves the book's solidaristic discussion of class together with her personal thrill in the work. She entreats the reader to feel similarly. 'Already this book is changing my life [...] You *must* read it. This book is about you,' she writes.⁴³ Rather than her interpellation pinioning 'you' in, for example, a womanhood that corresponds with her own, her address acts as a recognition of mutual otherness. She continues:

The wimmin of this book talk about class - how their educational advantages distance them from their poor, disenfranchised communities. [...] However, generalizations about race and class can obscure more complex realities. The writers

⁴¹ Courtney Thorsson, *The Sisterhood: How a Network of Black Women Writers Changed American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023). See e.g. 43-73.

⁴² Juana Maria Paz, 'This Bridge Called My Back,' *Motherroot Journal*, 3:4 (Winter 1981), 6. *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*. Web. <link-gale-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/apps/doc/BXWMKI600382712/AHSI?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=ca4badb4>. [Accessed 11 March 2024].

⁴³ Catherine Devine, 'In Review: *This Bridge Called My Back*,' *Hagborn*, 2:2 (1981), 7-15 (p. 7). *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*. <<https://link-gale-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/apps/doc/RYUINW703083267/AHSI?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=2b4077cc>>. [Accessed 11 March 2024].

of this book are concerned that identifying as “Third World” creates silences among themselves about differing experiences. So they talk specifically about race, class, and culture because of “each woman’s desire to have all her sisters of color actively identified.” Audre Lorde states, “Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.” [...] These wimmin talk about everything!⁴⁴

Quoting from Lorde’s ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,’ reprinted in *This Bridge*, Devine illustrates that the ‘power’ of the ‘personal’ is grounded in ‘difference,’ with autobiographical writing eliciting ‘raw and powerful connection.’

Devine’s exclamation—‘these wimmin talk about everything!’—expresses not just the collection’s openness, but also the range and spread of its subject matter, whether in the diversity of working conditions or embodied experiences of racialization and gendering.

Devine’s unattributed quote—‘each woman’s desire to have all her sisters of color actively identified’—is from Moraga’s introduction to the fourth section. This is the section of *This Bridge* titled ‘Between the Lines: On Culture, Class, and Homophobia.’ Moraga foregrounds the fissures between women of color. ‘There are serious differences between us which could collapse our dreams, rather than fuse alliances,’ she writes.⁴⁵ But ‘here we begin to fill the spaces of silence between us,’ between ‘these seemingly irreconcilable lines.’ Her insistence is not that the community of *This Bridge* collapse epistemological differences, but that they express them, articulating ‘the class lines, the politically correct lines, the daily lines we run down to each other to keep difference and desire at a distance.’⁴⁶ Urging that the community reduce the ‘distance’ between themselves and their differences, Moraga offers a figure of closeness that is based in appreciation of the space

⁴⁴ Devine, 7-15.

⁴⁵ Moraga, ‘Between the Lines: On Culture, Class, and Homophobia,’ in *This Bridge: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 101-103 (p. 101).

⁴⁶ Moraga, 102-103.

between people's distinct epistemological positions.

A collection like *The Intimate Critique* is in closer conversation with the work of contemporary Black feminist standpoint theorists than with the Marxist feminisms of a press such as Kitchen Table. But whereas a critic such as Tompkins bases her understanding of the personal in some degree of sameness, contemporary standpoint theory was invested in relative epistemological difference, as Moraga and Bambara celebrate in *This Bridge*. *This Bridge's* conception of difference was deeply conversant with contemporary standpoint theory. Particularly, writers such as Bambara, Moraga, and Anzaldúa shared with Black feminist standpoint sociologists their abiding arguments against assimilation as a response to difference. In this, we begin to see some of the key distinctions between the collapsed identifications of the personal, and the pluralistic closeness of a political intimacy.

While writing in a rhetorical mode markedly more academic than the artistic engagements of *This Bridge*, formal experimentation was nonetheless central to 1980s Black feminist standpoint theory. Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, grounded her now-canonical 1986 essay, 'Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,' in a call to sociologists to place 'greater trust in the creative potential of their own personal and cultural biographies.'⁴⁷ Elaborating her central concept of the 'outsider within,' a status held by Black women in situations that range from their role as domestic laborers in white households to contemporary academic spaces, Collins argued that sociological discourse would powerfully benefit from the insights of Black

⁴⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,' in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Harding (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 103-126 (p. 103).

feminist thought. ‘As outsiders within,’ she writes, ‘Black feminist scholars may be one of many distinct groups of marginal intellectuals whose standpoints promise to enrich’ and ‘reveal aspects of reality’ obscured to more ‘orthodox’ scholarship.⁴⁸

For Collins, Black feminist experience was inextricable from creativity: expressing both the wealth of non-normativized insights offered by the experience of being the ‘outsider within,’ and the experimental form of those insights. Citing Alfred McClung Lee, she notes that sociological literature has long been interested in the ‘most stimulating, albeit often [...] painful’ experience of marginality.⁴⁹ For many ‘Afro-American female intellectuals,’ Collins writes, “‘marginality’ has been [that] excitement to creativity.’⁵⁰ She illustrates how this creativity operates across varied contexts, genres, and vantages; both a topic of Black feminist inquiry and a quality of Black feminist writings. Contemporary Black feminist scholarship, she writes, has taken a powerful interest in ‘the role of creative expression in shaping and sustaining women’s self-definitions and self-valuations.’ She describes this as a ‘an important element of Black women’s culture.’⁵¹ Citing Alice Walker’s 1974 essay, ‘In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,’ and Willie Mae Ford Smith’s 1984 documentary, ‘Say Amen Somebody,’ Collins points out what she sees as ‘the necessity of Black women’s creativity, even in very limited spheres, in resisting objectification and asserting Black women’s subjectivity as fully human beings.’⁵²

bell hooks’ 1984 work, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, is for Collins an important and illustrative example of the ‘outsider within’ in Black feminist thought, and

⁴⁸ Collins, 104.

⁴⁹ Alfred McClung Lee, *Toward Humanist Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973). Quoted Collins, 104.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Collins, 113.

⁵² Ibid.

encapsulates ‘creative expression.’ Collins quotes from the preface to the first edition of the book. That passage has since become a touchstone of Black feminist standpoint theory.

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. For black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the rail-road tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. [...] Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. [...] We had always to return to the margin [...]. Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside and in from the inside out [...]. We understood both.⁵³

hooks opens her work on the concept of marginality in Black feminist theory with an autobiographical anecdote. That anecdote, however, is couched in the language of the collective. She refers to ‘we’ and ‘our’: ‘living as we did’; ‘our marginality.’ Despite the specificity of her experience growing up in a small Kentucky town, her language gathers ‘black Americans’ into a living body within the whole but outside the ‘main body.’ While appearing to universalize her experience of otherness, the key organizing quality of the ‘black Americans’ collected in her ‘we’ is that they have an ‘oppositional world view.’ Not that she depicted Black Americans as a monolith. With a ‘mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors,’ hooks sees the marginalized as being ‘sustained’ in ‘our struggle to transcend poverty and despair,’ strengthened in ‘our sense of self and our solidarity.’⁵⁴ At the heart of hooks’ conception of solidarity is the pluralism of what she calls the ‘whole’: the social body made up of the center and the margin. ‘[F]eminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences,’ she writes.⁵⁵ The autobiographical anecdote, in other words, grounds for hooks an argument as to the political and critical importance of ‘a variety of human experiences,’ her own

⁵³ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 4th ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2015 [1984]), xvii. Quoted Collins, 104 (Collins quotes from the first edition).

⁵⁴ hooks, xviii.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

experience turned toward a vision of multiplicity. As Audre Lorde puts this thought, in a memorable figure in her 1982 essay, 'Learning from the '60s': 'Unity does not mean unanimity—Black people are not some standardly digestible quantity. In order to work together we do not have to become a mix of indistinguishable particles resembling a vat of homogenized chocolate milk.'⁵⁶

Reading with Collins, we see how the figure of the 'outsider' proceeds from an epistemological theory that is markedly distinct from, for instance, Tompkins' argument in 'Me and My Shadow.' Tompkins argues that 'what is important' is what 'strikes one as immediately interesting,' and that 'for women, the personal is such a category' (*IC* 36). Meanwhile 'what is personal is completely a function of what is perceived as personal.' For Collins and hooks, and in a different context, for Bambara and Moraga, what is important and interesting is the diversity of human experience, rather than the personal as such. The stress on labor and working conditions in Black feminist and queer of color theory in the 1980s and early '90s clarifies this point. Where for Tompkins, what is important and interesting might lie in her personal investment in and struggle against her husband's relative academic celebrity, for Collins and hooks, their focus is necessarily trained on the diversity of experience among marginalized academic workers. As hooks' 1984 book illustrates, this focus on the margin is not to the exclusion of the center: she writes that 'at its most visionary,' a solidaristic feminist theory will 'unify rather than polarize,' and 'emerge from individuals who have knowledge of both margin and center.' Nonetheless, the quality of 'the personal,' in Black feminist and queer of color theory of this period, is found in marginalized writers' 'creative' expressions of a wide range of experiences. That

⁵⁶ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007 [1984]), 136. All further references in the text.

breadth is central to the real ‘importance’ and ‘interest’ of the personal. The personal serves in the production of what Bambara calls the ‘work’: a solidaristic and radical critique, inseparable from praxis.

Lorde’s writings of the 1980s are foundational to Black feminist theorizing of the ‘outsider,’ the role of creative expression in solidaristic organizing, and the distinctions between intersectional and white academic feminisms. In her essay, ‘Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,’ Lorde observed:

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equal. [...] Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences. (SO 115)

Lorde suggests that racial capitalism ‘program[s]’ economic subjects to assimilate difference. In her prescient analysis, the way that we treat difference runs along lines that we might now recognize as neoliberal ideological imperatives toward self-management, self-preservation, and personal efficiency. As David Harvey wrote, neoliberalism is driven by an ideological impulse to ‘bring all human action into the domain of the market.’⁵⁷ Lorde is attentive to the psychological conditions of neoliberalism. She, like Bambara and Moraga, argues that ‘recognition’ is key to resisting the assimilative drive of capital. She suggests that if difference is not readily assimilable, we ignore it; if it might benefit our social, cultural, and economic standing, we copy it; if it threatens the established order and

⁵⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3. My thinking on the relationship between Lorde, neoliberal ideological imperatives, and U.S. imperialism, is strongly informed by Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: U.S. Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2021).

our place in society, we subordinate it. Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, the same year that Lorde delivered the essay at a colloquium at Amherst College. Anticipating the intense individualism of the coming economic and ideological order, Lorde urges solidarity based in the appreciation of difference.⁵⁸ Difference emerges as the basis of a solidaristic politics of class consciousness.

At the heart of the recognition of difference, for Lorde, is an understanding of the value of diverse perspectives within a discourse and a discipline. In a gesture that might remind us of the framework of *The Intimate Critique*, Lorde notes that ‘white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone’ (SO 117). Women of color, she writes, are then rendered ‘other,’ an ‘outsider whose experience and tradition is too “alien” to comprehend’ (SO 117). Lorde suggests that difference underpins ethical relation. White academic feminists fail to value Black women’s work ‘because of their reluctance to see Black women *as women and different* from themselves’ (SO 118, emphasis added). Form, particularly experimental and personal expression, is a preoccupation for Lorde, as she meditates on how to address this gap of comprehension. She urges that we ‘develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives’ (SO 115-116). Her phrasing indicates that creative political and social changes requires creative tools, used to map social and cultural difference.⁵⁹ Just as Collins notes that the ‘outsider within’ status of Black women has historically, through painful experience, produced ‘creative’ responses, Lorde illustrates

⁵⁸ On Lorde’s politics of difference as a ‘set of egalitarian political tactics,’ see: Jack Turner, ‘Audre Lorde’s Politics of Difference,’ in *African American Political Thought*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 563-592.

⁵⁹ See also: Lorde and Marian Kraft, ‘The Creative Use of Difference,’ in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 146-153.

that an anti-assimilationist, liberatory feminism relies on the creative production of those historically pushed to the margins. For Lorde, this is not just a pragmatic political issue, but a literary-critical one. She observes that ‘to examine Black women’s literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities—as individuals, as women, as humans’ (SO 118). In other words: white feminists’ dehumanization of Black women constitutes not only an unjust politics, but an ineffective practice of literary criticism.

In her 1982 work, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde explores the politics of difference in the weft of her own autobiography. She famously described the work as ‘biomythography,’ writing that it is an ‘attempt to create a piece of art, not merely a retelling of things that happened to me and to other women with whom I shared close ties. [...] I’ve found no other word to really coin what I was trying to do.’⁶⁰ The mythographic quality of the work, in her description, is bound to its depiction of intimacy between women. Lorde’s syntax places her retelling of ‘things that happened’ to other women on par with her telling of her own experiences. A diversity of experience and a complex web of relationships appears to be a foundational quality of the genre. Heather Russell notes that ‘biomythography’ provides ‘always a polysemous cast to the “historicity” of events being represented,’⁶¹ a multiplicity that operates in its cast of characters, each with their own personal histories and mythos, in concert with its interweaving of mythology and history. Reflecting her argument in ‘Age, Race, Class, and Sex,’ for the value of dwelling on difference, Lorde’s portrayal of her relationships frets at the epistemological fissures

⁶⁰ Lorde and Karla Jay, ‘Speaking the Unspeakable: Poet Audre Lorde,’ in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, 109-114 (p. 110).

⁶¹ Heather Russell, *Legba’s Crossing: Narratology in the African Atlantic* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 60.

between margin and center, rather than collapsing them into bland assimilation.

These fissures are powerfully portrayed in Lorde's depiction of her relationship with Muriel, a white woman with whom she lived in New York in the 1970s. From their first meeting, she recalls, Muriel 'made me feel that she was understanding whatever I was saying,' as well as, 'given the massive weight of my inarticulate pain, a great deal of all that I could not yet put into words.'⁶² Despite the force of what Lorde perceives as Muriel's understanding, there quickly develops an inequality in their intimacy. Lorde begins to feel that Muriel is 'more and more like a vulnerable piece of myself' (Z 190). Whereas Lorde acknowledges her own vulnerability to racism, homophobia, and misogyny, she longs to protect Muriel in a way that isn't available to her. 'I could take care of Muriel. I could make the world work for her, if not for myself' (Z 190). Lorde's ability to make the world 'work' for Muriel, if not for herself, is based in their distinct experiences of racialization. The fissure between their understanding of their place in society deepens, as it becomes clear that Muriel doesn't distinguish between prejudice on the grounds of race and on the grounds of sexuality. Comparing her relationship with Muriel to her relationship with a Black female friend, Felicia, Lorde writes:

The fact of our Blackness was an issue that Felicia and I talked about only between ourselves. Even Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. "We're all n—s," she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would always be false. [...] Over time I came to realize that it colored our perceptions and made a difference in the ways I saw pieces of the worlds we shared, and I was going to have to deal with that difference outside of our relationship. This was the first separation, the piece outside love. (Z 203-204)⁶³

⁶² Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1982), 186. All further references in the text.

⁶³ Throughout my thesis, I have chosen to blank out the n-word when it is used in textual quotations, regardless of context.

Though Muriel and Lorde ostensibly share worlds, Lorde is deeply aware that the wider world might be made to ‘work’ for Muriel in a way that it won’t for a Black lesbian. Put in hooks’ terms, the way that they each inhabit the ‘whole’ is different: Muriel’s place in the margins is entirely distinct from Lorde’s. The result, as Lorde dramatizes it here, is a different lens on society—‘it colored our perceptions,’ Lorde writes—a poetic framing of Collins’ standpoint epistemology. Muriel’s upsetting collapse of their embodied experiences indicates the vast gap between their positionalities. In referring to ‘all’ gay women as ‘n——s,’ Muriel illustrates the racism of lesbian communities, founded in what Lorde describes as a ‘tool of social control,’ governing women’s relationship to difference under racial capitalism. ‘Women have been encouraged to recognize only one area of human difference as legitimate, those differences which exist between women and men’ (SO 122). Invoking again the idea of the lens, or the process of ‘perception,’ she writes in ‘The Uses of Anger’ of how ‘oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity’ (SO 132). She notes that this is a particular feature of white feminism: ‘No woman is responsible for altering the psyche of her oppressor, even when that psyche is embodied in another woman’ (SO 133). With Muriel unable and unwilling to bridge the gap of understanding—an unwillingness predicated on Muriel’s sense of her own oppression as a gay woman—Lorde is forced to ‘deal with that difference outside of our relationship.’ The result is not solidaristic love across difference, but mutual banishment: ‘the piece outside love.’

Crucially, for Lorde, as for the creators of *This Bridge*, the critical and political significance of the concept of the ‘outsider’ rests in its ability to articulate the relationship between difference and praxis. Reflecting on the gap between herself and Muriel, Lorde

writes: ‘Somehow, I knew that difference would be a weapon in my arsenal when the “time” came’ (Z 204-205). Although the exact conditions of ‘the time’ are left vague, the phrase ominously anticipates the difference between Lorde and Muriel’s experiences of oppression. Whereas Lorde believes she can protect Muriel from homophobia and misogyny, Lorde knows that ‘the “time” would certainly come in one way or another,’ and implicitly because of Muriel’s inability to understand and bridge their difference, ‘I would have to protect myself alone’ (Z 205).

Lorde’s figure of ‘the time’ speaks to what Habiba Ibrahim has identified as the ‘racialization of age,’ and the resultant non-normative temporalities of Black girlhood and womanhood.⁶⁴ Ibrahim draws on Michele Wallace’s opening essay in the 1982 collection, *All the Women are White, All the Men are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave*, in which Wallace recalls playing with her sister at turning silk scarves into straight hair. In the ‘game of being feminine,’ Ibrahim notes, in which ‘being feminine meant being white,’ Black girls learn to ‘critique the temporal horizon toward which they move.’⁶⁵ ‘What constitutes a normative timeline of maturation for Black girls when all the women “are white”?’ she asks, adding that if Black bodies are ‘unknowable under the schema of a two-gender system,’⁶⁶ then ‘Black bodies have been unknowable through the schema of linear, normative life stages.’⁶⁷ In Lorde’s sense of the ‘time’ that ‘would certainly come,’ we see the temporal horizon towards which she is writing as being markedly distinct from Muriel’s. We are made to feel the urgency of the personal. If Black women operate in a

⁶⁴ Habiba Ibrahim, *Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 36.

⁶⁵ Ibrahim, 34.

⁶⁶ Ibrahim quoting from Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State Press, 2013), 8.

⁶⁷ Ibrahim, 37.

distinctly racialized and gendered temporality to white womanhood, Muriel's failure to comprehend difference is both symptom and cause of those differing timelines. Operating against the temporality of white womanhood, Lorde's biomythography engages a plurality of relations and voices to strike out against the racist assimilative drive illustrated in Muriel's 'We're all n—s,' insisting urgently and personally on what she calls a 'unity [that] does not mean unanimity' (SO 136).

For the generation of Black feminist and queer of color scholars and activists who proceeded from Lorde, Moraga, Anzaldúa, Bambara, Davis, Crenshaw, and the groundbreaking intersectional thinkers of the '80s, the figure of the 'outsider within' had to develop a new set of teeth in the face of the AIDS crisis. As Cathy J. Cohen outlined in her now-canonical 1997 essay, marginality might be better articulated through the figures of 'punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens' than through what some scholars have since described as the 'homonormativity' of some gay and lesbian communities.⁶⁸ Cohen argued that the AIDS crisis privileged a single lens of oppression over an intersectional framework. This single lens framework was, in her analysis, the result of strategies that drew on the civil rights movements of the 1960s, 'where assimilation into, and replication of, dominant institutions are the goals.'⁶⁹ Against the 'assimilationist tendencies of AIDS activism,' she argued for a queer politics of 'sustained and multisited resistance to systems,' manifest in a 'destabilization of collective identity' and a willingness to 'confront normalizing power by

⁶⁸ Cathy J. Cohen, 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?' in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, eds. Donald E. Hall, Annamarie Jagose, Andrea Bebell, and Susan Potter (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 74-95. The phrase 'homonormativity' is generally acknowledged to have been made popular by Lisa Duggan, in her book, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003). She writes of a 'new homonormativity that does not challenge heterosexist institutions and values, but rather upholds, sustains, and seeks inclusion within them,' 50.

⁶⁹ Cohen, 75.

emphasizing and exaggerating [one's] own anti-normative characteristics and non-stable behavior.'⁷⁰ Rather than focusing on integration into dominant institutions, she urged a politics in which 'one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades.'⁷¹ Black and women of color feminisms were the intellectual ground on which Cohen's queer critique was built.

One of Cohen's key arguments, in 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,' is that there might be far more shared ground for liberatory organizing between a gay woman and 'a culturally deficient, materially bankrupt, state dependent, *heterosexual*, woman of color,' than a Black gay woman and a white gay woman. We see this powerfully in Lorde's relationship with Muriel, of course, and in the stress on labor issues in the writing of Black and queer of color second-wave feminists. As queer theory emerged as a discipline in the early 1990s, the Black feminist figure of difference—and its articulation at the level of form—became central to the burgeoning fields of scholarship and activism. As Cohen illustrates, the question for intersectional queer thinkers was 'how to build a politics organized not merely by reductive categories of straight and queer.' Autobiography, personal gestures, depictions of intimacy and closeness, and experimentation with shifting and fugitive vernaculars, were important areas in which Black feminist and queer of color thinkers resisted the assimilationist tendencies of queer theory, as the discipline was gaining ground in both the academy and in activist spaces.

E. Patrick Johnson's figure of 'quare' is indicative of this intimate formal resistance to homonormative modes of expression. Though published in 2001, the essay looks back on Johnson's childhood and on the intersectional thinkers of the 1980s and '90s to outline the

⁷⁰ Cohen, 76.

⁷¹ Cohen, 75.

role of the ‘outsider within’ queer theory and the queer activism of the period. Johnson notes a ‘general suspicion’ of the term ‘queer’ among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgender people of color, in which ‘queer’ often ‘displaces and rarely addresses’ the concerns of communities with a set of experiences that intersect sexuality.⁷² As Johnson puts it, ‘there is some “race” trouble with queer theory.’⁷³ Recalling the urgent insistence on intersectional and class conscious praxis in the black, queer, and women of color feminisms of the 1980s, Johnson offers ‘quare’ theory as a redress to ‘queer’ theory. His intervention draws on the poststructuralist and deconstructionist bent of the emergent discipline, as he insists on the ‘conjoining of academic praxis with political praxis,’ in line with a recognition that if queer theory’s project is to ‘dismantle all notions of identity and agency,’ then that must operate ‘on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or anyplace where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed.’⁷⁴

Importantly, ‘quare’ is a term drawn from autobiography. Johnson recalls how his grandmother, in her ‘thick, Black, southern dialect,’ would pronounce, ‘That sho’ll is a ‘quare’ child.’⁷⁵ This ‘quare’ denotes someone ‘odd, irregular,’ or ‘off-kilter,’ but also a state of symbolic excess. *Quare* for Johnson, then, ‘might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience.’⁷⁶ *Quare* reasserts what is lacking, for Johnson, in the dominant and more conventional use of the term ‘queer,’ and ‘particularly in its most recent theoretical reappropriating in the academy.’⁷⁷ With his grandmother’s voice resounding

⁷² E. Patrick Johnson, ““Quare” Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother,” in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, 96-118 (p. 129).

⁷³ Johnson, 129.

⁷⁴ Johnson, 128-129.

⁷⁵ Johnson, 126.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

through Johnson's argument, he finds an intersectional and praxis-driven queer scholarship in an intimacy that runs actively counter to the reduction of autobiographical experience to identification or assimilation. Autobiography is used to express an intimate political relation among diverse spheres of experience, and to insist on the continuation of that diversity in a deconstructionist scholarship. If a scholar such as Tompkins offers a vision of the personal structured by a mirrored self, then Johnson illustrates how intimacy can only be relational, and therefore based on the recognition of difference.

Closeness: New Criticism to surface reading

In this chapter, I've begun to elaborate a distinction between solidaristic intimacy—negotiated across planes of difference—and a self-directed idea of 'the personal.' As I've argued, Black feminists such as Lorde, along with women of color theorists such as Moraga, have articulated visions of solidaristic "intimacy" across difference, sharply challenging the self-assimilative politics of the "personal" that we find, for instance, in *The Intimate Critique*. But what characterizes this distinction at the level of form? One major figure is *closeness*. Closeness speaks to the kinds of proximity that can be forged across economic, social, and cultural experiences; closeness to the text, as a way of relating to self or other; and closeness in the sense of fidelity to the specificity of experience. Closeness also, of course, invokes a weave of debates at the heart of 20th century literary scholarship. It's to these debates that I now want to turn.

'Close reading' has been widely understood to proceed from New Criticism, before being reconceived during the method wars and the backlash against New Criticism. More recently, the literary academy has seen a reclamation of closeness by affect theorists and

queer theorists, with key concepts including Eve Sedgwick's 'reparative reading,' Michael Warner's 'uncritical reading,' and Heather Love's 'close but not deep' reading.⁷⁸ Other responses to the 'venerable ideal of textual closeness'⁷⁹ include D. A. Miller's 'too-close reading,' Franco Moretti's 'distant reading,' Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best's 'surface reading,' Timothy Bewes' 'reading with the grain,' and the discourse of 'postcritique.'⁸⁰ Highlighting some important moments in 20th and 21st century critical genealogies of closeness, I want to hold in mind some guiding questions: what techniques elicit a sense of closeness? What are the emotional and political dimensions of the spatial metaphor of closeness? When we feel close to a personal text, are we empathizing with an other, seeing ourselves reflected, or something else? Is closeness a feeling for the reader, a relational network of political affects, or a practice of reading and interpretation? Is closeness defined by its subjectiveness, as Tompkins suggests, or is it identifiable as a set of generic devices or critical practices? Crucially, for my purposes: what is closeness's relationship to textual intimacy, as opposed to a more self-directed notion of 'personal' writing?

Close reading has been widely understood as the chief inheritance of New Criticism in the U.S. academy. Garrick Davis, in the introduction to his anthology of New Criticism's key texts, attributes New Criticism with being 'responsible for the introduction of close

⁷⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You,' in *Novel Gazing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-37; Michael Warner, 'Uncritical Reading,' in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York and Abingdon, Routledge: 2004), 13-38; Heather Love, 'Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,' *New Literary History*, 41:2 (2010), 371-391.

⁷⁹ Tristram Wolff, 'That's Close Enough: The Unfinished History of Emotivism in Close Reading,' *PMLA*, 134.1 (2019), 51-65 (p. 52).

⁸⁰ D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013); Sharon Best and Stephen Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' *Representations*, 108:1 (2009), 1-21; Timothy Bewes, 'Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism,' *Differences*, 21:3 (2010), 1-33. E.g. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, eds. *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

reading,’ and describes the influence of the ‘academic movement’ as being ‘immense’ and ‘vital to this day.’⁸¹ Cecily Devereux, in a chapter in which she assesses the ways that close reading has transformed since the early-20th century, nonetheless describes it as New Criticism’s ‘primary gesture and most significant legacy.’⁸² Again and again, the scholarship on close reading comes up against an enduring question. What is it? And, by extension, how and why do we teach it?⁸³ Despite the long legacy of close reading in the 20th century, its roots in New Criticism remain sparse. ‘Close’ practices of reading are often traced from the London and Cambridge New Critics of the 1920s, before traveling to the American New Critics and the Kenyon School in the 1950s,⁸⁴ with key early texts including T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Perfect Critic’ (1920), I.A. Richards’ *Practical Criticism* (1929), John Crowe Ransom’s ‘Criticism, Inc.’ (1938), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* (1938), Wimsatt and Beardsley’s ‘The Affective Fallacy’ (1949) and ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ (1946), and later essays by Brooks, including ‘My Credo’ (1951). Moretti calls this an ‘extremely small canon,’ a problem intensified, as John Guillory has pointed out, by the fact that the phrase ‘close reading’ is hardly ever mentioned in the central texts of New Criticism.⁸⁵

The ensuing history of close reading only intensifies that question: what is it? With the

⁸¹ Garrick Davis, *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), xxviii.

⁸² Cecily Devereux, “‘A Kind of Dual Attentiveness’”: Close Reading after the New Criticism,’ in *Rereading the New Criticism*, eds. Miranda B. Hickman and John D. McIntyre (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 218-230 (p. 219).

⁸³ For recent work on this topic, see e.g. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021); Jonathan Kramnick, *Criticism and Truth: On Method in Literary Studies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

⁸⁴ Critics who trace ‘close reading’ along these lines include: Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Anniversary Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 37-46; Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (1987), 162-179.

⁸⁵ Moretti, 48; John Guillory, ‘On Close Reading,’ Lecture, Brown University (16 November 2023).

turn towards poststructuralism and deconstruction in the 1960s-'80s, New Criticism fell out of favor, but practices of close attention to the text continued to be central to the U.S. literary academy. Devereux notes that the poststructuralists may have seen New Criticism as being opposed to 'the kind of situated reading that characterizes theorized analysis,' but practices of close reading, in various forms, persevered.⁸⁶ Jane Gallop observes that much of the literary academy operating 'under the name of deconstruction' was in fact practicing 'a form of close reading of literary texts not [...] so radically different from New Criticism.'⁸⁷ Paul de Man, famously, has made this point in noting that deconstructionist reading practices rehearsed many of the close reading techniques that Reuben Brower had taught in the 1950s, at Amherst and then Harvard.⁸⁸ As the method wars gave way, in the 1990s and 2000s, to the affective turn and queer theory, new assessments of close reading were offered by critics such as Gallop, Gayatri Spivak, and Andrew DuBois.⁸⁹ As various ideas of close reading came in and out of fashion, then, the genealogy of close textual attention became a tangled skein, reaching only messily back to the New Critics. Angus Connell Brown puts it starkly: 'the trouble with close reading is that we don't know anything about it.'⁹⁰

So what was 'close reading' for the New Critics: political-critical method, pedagogical

⁸⁶ Devereux, 219.

⁸⁷ Gallop, 'The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,' *Profession* (2007), 181-186 (p. 182).

⁸⁸ Paul de Man, 'The Return to Philology,' *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1986), 21-26. Virginia Jackson attributes Reuben Brower with having coined the phrase 'close reading,' in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 99. On the origins of the phrase 'close reading,' see: Angus Connell Brown, 'Between Lines: Close Reading, Quotation, and Critical Style from Practical Criticism to Queer Theory,' DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014), 52-53.

⁸⁹ Andrew DuBois, 'Close Reading: An Introduction,' in *Close Reading: The Reader*, eds. Frank Lentricchia and DuBois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1-40; Gayatri Spivak, 'Close Reading,' *PMLA*, 121:5 (2006), 1608-1617.

⁹⁰ Connell Brown, 14.

technique, or some kind of affective relationship to textual form? The answer, as we'll see across this section, is that close reading tends to invoke these qualities unevenly across its many manifestations. The significance of its variety, for this project, is that without a thorough understanding of the dynamics of closeness, it's hard to sufficiently analyze the politics of the personal turn and intimacy in the later 20th century. Put differently: as the personal turn manifests across a series of critical traditions and nonfiction discourses, is it any wonder that it goes under-developed in scholarship, while closeness and its forms are so diffuse?

I.A. Richards' *Practical Criticism*, which instituted a version of close reading at the core of the Cambridge University tripos, announces itself as being before anything else a textbook on 'technique.'⁹¹ The term is used 38 times in the introduction, in which Richards lays out his intentions for the work, describing for instance his intention to elaborate a 'new technique in discussion' of literature, a revision and improvement of 'our present technique for investigating opinions' which 'must be admitted [...] to be woefully inadequate.'⁹² The inadequacy of literary interpretation, at the time of Richards' writing, lay for him in its tendency toward unreflective and—more importantly—unsubstantiated judgment. 'When views that seem to conflict with our own prepossessions are set before us, the impulse to refute, to combat, or to reconstruct them, rather than to investigate them, is all but overwhelming,' he writes. The history of criticism, as such, is a 'history of dogmatism and argumentation rather than a history of research.'⁹³ In this context, the closeness of practical

⁹¹ The importance of 'close reading' being a technique, rather than a political or ideological method, is the topic of John Guillory's current project. Guillory, 'On Close Reading,' Brown University (16 November 2023).

⁹² I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1952), 28.

⁹³ Richards, 8.

criticism lies in the critics' meticulous, investigative attention to the text. Richards urges the critic toward 'the very closest and most sensitive of reading,' and counsels the importance of becoming a 'close reader.'⁹⁴ Crucial to the operation of closeness, here, is the critics' capacity to partially suspend the self in order to prioritize the words on the page.

Richards' *Practical Criticism* proposes the 'closeness' of close reading as both political-critical method, and as a technique to be taught. John Crowe Ransom's essay, 'Criticism, Inc.' (1938) clarifies the institutional and pedagogical significance of close reading. Sometimes cited as New Criticism's 'founding statement,'⁹⁵ Ransom makes clear that a primary feature of close reading is that it makes the case for the value of literary studies. Against what he understands to be the overrepresentation of historical scholarship in literary academia, Ransom argues that 'the students of the future must be permitted to study literature, and not merely about literature.'⁹⁶ He contrasts what he calls 'close criticism' with the work of 'the philosopher.' The latter, he argues, is too 'apt to see a lot of wood and no trees, for his theory is very general and his acquaintance with the particular works of art is not persistent and intimate, especially his acquaintance with their technical effects.'⁹⁷ Close criticism is here, as in Richards' *Practical Criticism*, a practice of persistent attention to the work of art, and particularly to the way that its specific, technical devices produce literary effects. The technical quality is key. Ransom writes that literary criticism must 'become more scientific, or precise and systematic,' a process that can only happen in the academy and driven by 'the collective and sustained effort of learned

⁹⁴ Richards, 238, 114.

⁹⁵ Wolff, 55.

⁹⁶ John Crowe Ransom, 'Criticism, Inc.' in *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, 49-60 (p. 51).

⁹⁷ Ransom, 50.

persons.⁹⁸ He identifies the literature professor as the chief practitioner and apostle of close criticism. The ‘whole enterprise,’ he writes, ‘might be seriously taken in hand by professionals,’ hence ‘Criticism, Inc.’⁹⁹ The literature department is the locus of a kind of sustained production, of which close reading is central: an office dedicated to the product of literary attention, manifest in well-trained undergraduates.

Richards and Ransom point us to some of the political-critical, institutional, and pedagogical valences of early 20th century theories of close reading. Cleanth Brooks helps to clarify the role of affective relation. In ‘The Formalist Critics’ (1951), Brooks describes his program for literary criticism in these terms: ‘literary criticism is a description and an evaluation of its object’; ‘in a successful work, form and content cannot be separated’; and ‘the general and the universal are not seized upon by abstraction, but got at through the concrete and the particular.’¹⁰⁰ Brooks then addresses a key critique, soon encountered by the New Critics, as they laid out various visions of ‘close reading.’

[T]o make the poem or the novel the central concern of criticism has appeared to mean cutting it loose from its author, from his life as a man, with his own particular hopes, fears, interests, conflicts, etc. A criticism so limited may seem bloodless and hollow. [...] [T]o emphasize the work seems to involve severing it from those who actually read it, and this severance may seem drastic and therefore disastrous. After all, literature is written to be read.¹⁰¹

Brooks states these concerns, he writes, ‘as sharply as [he] can’ precisely because he is sympathetic with them. He puts visceral stress on the ‘severing’ of the text from the subject, depicting its corpse as ‘bloodless and hollow.’ He acknowledges that the text can never be entirely separated from the author, critic, or reader of criticism, given that ‘man’s

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Cleanth Brooks, ‘The Formalist Critics,’ in *Praising It New: The Best of the New Criticism*, 84-91 (pp. 84-85).

¹⁰¹ Brooks, 85.

experience is indeed a seamless garment, no part of which can be separated from the rest.’ Nonetheless, he argues, devising a program for criticism involves ‘drawing distinctions,’ rather than retreating into ‘this fact of inseparability.’¹⁰² The proficient close reader must not confuse ‘an account of the work’ with a speculative inquiry into biography and psychology.¹⁰³

The author and critic emerge from this scene as depersonalized ideals. The ‘relevant part of the author’s intention is what he got actually into his work.’¹⁰⁴ The reader, meanwhile, must be framed as ‘an ideal reader,’ as a bid to arrive at the truest reading of the work. In other words, the ‘particular hopes, fears, interests, conflicts’ of the various subjects involved in analyzing a text are, for Brooks as for the New Critics, necessarily subjugated to the demonstrable techniques and devices of the text. Wimsatt and Beardsley expand this point in ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ and ‘The Affective Fallacy,’ in which, respectively, they argue that the autonomous work of art must stand apart from history and biography, and critical judgment must operate distinct from any imagined effects that the work might have on a reader.¹⁰⁵ The closeness of New Critical close reading is not the closeness of ‘particular’ persons and the ‘seamless garment’ of their experience with their writing or criticism, but the closeness of analytical, professional, or, to return to Ransom’s words, ‘scientific’ attention to the art object.

It is the question of the depersonalized ideal, with its universalist underpinnings, that makes New Criticism’s conception of close reading distasteful to the literary academy

¹⁰² Brooks, 86.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Brooks, 87.

¹⁰⁵ Wimsatt and Beardsley, ‘The Affective Fallacy,’ in *Praising It New*, 92-101; ‘The Intentional Fallacy,’ in *Praising It New*, 102-116.

following the poststructuralist and deconstructionist turns. Close reading had persisted as a pedagogical norm in the U.S. literary academy throughout the method wars, even as it was continually decried. Jonathan Culler, for instance, argued in 1981 that ‘whatever critical affiliations we may proclaim, we are all New Critics, in that it requires a strenuous effort to escape [...] the requirement of ‘close reading.’”¹⁰⁶ Peter J. Rabinowitz, similarly, observed that when he set out to write a paper ‘against close reading,’ a colleague remarked that ‘of course it must be ironic.’¹⁰⁷ The apparent ongoing and foundational role of close reading in the academy seemed a necessary partner to repeated claims of its death, and its seemingly continual resurrection as an object of analysis. In the 2007 paper in which she argued, with De Man, that close reading had persisted in the academy through the theory wars, Gallop nonetheless also called for the reinstitution of ‘close reading’ practices in the face of an increasingly historicist academy, following the turn to New Historicism in the 1980s. Continually killing the ‘imposing and repressive father-figure’¹⁰⁸ of New Criticism, the late-20th century literary academy kept close reading very much alive.

The guise under which close reading remained central to the US literary classroom in the 1990s was, as Devereux and Gallop point out, accordant with the new centrality of the historical subject in criticism. ‘Under pressure from what were often represented as “special interest groups,””¹⁰⁹ close reading was forced to move—or be conceived to have moved—beyond ‘timeless universals’ and toward a ‘course correction,’¹¹⁰ in the form of historicism and informed by ideology critique. The blend that Gallop called for illuminated an ongoing

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 3.

¹⁰⁷ Peter J. Rabinowitz, ‘Against Close Reading,’ in *Pedagogy is Politics*, ed. Maria-Regina Kecht (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press), 230-243.

¹⁰⁸ Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), xiii.

¹⁰⁹ Devereux, 220.

¹¹⁰ Gallop, ‘The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,’ 185.

habit of close reading: a flexible and continually updated idea of attention to the text, deployed in each new critical era to suit or revise the critical goals of the day. At the same time, close reading techniques could temper the faults of whatever current scholarly trend. Historicism, Gallop wrote, had been ‘persuasively linked to sexism, racism, and elitism’; hence the need for a historicist-influenced close reading technique, one that had learned from and yet departed the lessons of recent critical history. By the end of the 20th century, the depersonalized ideal of the New Critics had receded into the background, replaced by a new stress on the reader’s experience, standpoint, structural and political constitution—deploying differently, but in the same term, the idea of ‘close reading.’

A major departure and revision of close reading in the U.S. literary academy came in the form of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s 1997 queer critical essay: ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You.’¹¹¹ As we’ve seen, in the course of the method wars closeness became a matter of situating the historical subject in relation to the ‘technical effects’ and devices of the text: returning the text to history, and the subject to the specificity of their historical conditions. For Sedgwick, however, the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ had far from done its job. In the essay that birthed the reparative turn, Sedgwick argued that a theory based in suspicion had turned out to be far more concerned with a frantic and paranoid habit of exposure, than what she now termed ‘repair’: an attention to ‘the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the

¹¹¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You,’ in *Novel Gazing*; ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,’ in *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-152.

seeker, knower, and teller.’¹¹²

Close reading has had many lives as it wends through the emergence and institutionalization of queer theory, discourses of repair, and the affective turn. While Sedgwick’s figures of repair and paranoia, elaborated in ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,’ have initiated an entire disciplinary strand, the concept of ‘reparative reading’ has a life well beyond the essay. (To take some very crude figures: Google Scholar lists Sedgwick’s original essay as cited around 2000 times, compared with around 85,300 occurrences of the phrase ‘reparative reading,’ in journals devoted to everything from the medical humanities to criminology.)¹¹³ Sedgwick’s argument for repair acts like a hinge in the history of the personal turn. In turning the literary academy’s attention to our relation to the personal entailments of the work, she laid out what would become the dominant understanding of closeness, still in effect today: one grounded in an attention that honors the ‘local, contingent relations’ between knowledge, and the ‘seeker, knower, and teller.’ In other words, Sedgwick proposed a manifesto for close reading based in the closeness between the object of knowledge, and us: you, and I, and we. The constitution of these categories—personal and collective—has been at the heart of debates about interpretation and method since, in a U.S. literary academy still widely shaped by the turns to affect and repair.

The turn to repair was closely bound to the ‘affective turn,’ of which Sedgwick’s own work on Silvan Tomkins was a major instigating feature.¹¹⁴ More broadly, the affective turn was driven by such diverse scholarship as Brian Massumi’s readings from Spinoza,

¹¹² Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 124.

¹¹³ As of 16 April 2024.

¹¹⁴ Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, eds. Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

Deleuze, and Guattari, Sara Ahmed's queer and feminist phenomenology, Lauren Berlant's analysis of affective publics, Judith Butler's theorizations of sense in subject formation, and reassessments of psychoanalytic theory by scholars like Ruth Leys.¹¹⁵ Exploring the composition of the social, and its relationship to the affective and affected subject, the turn brought new formulations of closeness into focus in the literary academy, as well as in sociology, women's and gender studies, cultural studies, and critical theory. By 2010, the affective turn had become sufficiently pronounced to prompt the publication of Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg's *The Affect Theory Reader*, which aimed to 'capture without closing off' an 'undulating, albeit never-to-be-cohesive field of inquiry in the midst of its coming-to-bloom.'¹¹⁶ It privileged ideas of 'forces,' 'encounters,' 'in-betweenness,' 'capacity,' intensities,' 'attunings,' and the 'passages' of affects between materialities. These were the kinds of concepts of relation that would inflect literary theoretical figures of closeness and the personal in the ensuing years. Affective theorization of relation became a component of the personal turn as it developed in the academy—not only in the focus of its thought, but in its stylistic habits.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus' now canonical 2009 essay, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' attends to both the emergent language of 'attunings' that accompanied the affective turn, and to the fraught 'we' of contemporary criticism, to which Sedgwick calls

¹¹⁵ E.g. Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of American Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2000).

¹¹⁶ Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell, 'A Shimmer of Inventories,' in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, ed. Seigworth and Pedwell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 1-59 (p. 2).

attention in her urge to repair. Their essay is another salutary moment: one in which the tension between ideology critique, and the lasting centrality of the critical subject, becomes clarified in yet another conception of closeness. At the opening of their essay, they observe that the ‘we’ writing in their special issue of *Representations*, which the essay introduces, are of a generation that cut their teeth in deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion.¹¹⁷ These were scholars who ‘received doctoral degrees in either English or comparative literature’ around or after 1983.¹¹⁸ Typically, with their intellectual background, such academics understand reading to mean interpretation: ‘assigning a meaning to a text or set of texts,’ and more specifically, to interpret by seeking meanings that were presumed to be ‘hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter.’ The special issue in which Best and Marcus were writing was designed in response to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Frederic Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, the book that popularized ‘symptomatic reading.’ But they also diagnose the academy as being pervaded by a belief in the value of uncovering—originating, they suggest, in the 19th century, in Marx’s interest in ideology and the commodity, and Freud’s in the unconscious and dreams.¹¹⁹ The schools of interpretation that built on these critical genealogies—Freudian psychoanalytic reading, and Marxist literary scholarship—had, in Best and Marcus’ outline, come by the 1990s to suppose a kind of closeness that Sedgwick was taking issue with in her critique of paranoia: a closeness that underscored arguments for the continued value of the professionalized literature department, in which the literary scholar had specialized training that allowed

¹¹⁷ Best and Marcus, 2.

¹¹⁸ Best and Marcus, 1.

¹¹⁹ Best and Marcus, 4.

them to undertake excavation, to interpret their results, and to teach the process of uncovering in turn.

The goal of Best and Marcus' essay is, like Sedgwick, to inquire whether a closeness that gets under the skin of the textual object has either the political impact, or even pedagogical value, that might have until recently been presumed. In 2009, they argue, the politics of the object of knowledge might seem to lie terribly close to the surface. '[We] have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were immediately circulated on the internet,' they write. They propose, instead, a kind of reading that abandons the search for 'hidden meanings and lost histories,' in favor of 'bearing witness to the given.'¹²⁰ Ultimately, they ask 'what it might mean to *stay close* to our objects of study, without citing as our reason [...] a belief that those objects encapsulate freedom.'¹²¹ While the 'divine aspirations' of revolutionary critics, epitomized by Jameson, are one of those strands of critique against which Best and Marcus propose 'surface reading,' another is the 'identity politics' of feminism, queer studies, critical race studies, and those freedom-oriented projects that imbed authority 'in particular subject positions.'¹²² Put more starkly: the goal of 'surface reading' is to act as a redress to both the ideology critique that informed the turn to repair and against which Sedgwick was writing; and also a redress to the centrality of a (heterogeneous and complicating) subject, that remained key to the reparative and affective turns. As they admit, their model of closeness 'recalls the aims of New Criticism': their intervention another unsettling of the shifting ground of closeness and the personal.

¹²⁰ Best and Marcus, 17-18.

¹²¹ Best and Marcus, 15. Italics added.

¹²² Best and Marcus, 16.

Intimacy and the personal

In the previous section, I outlined some key moments in 20th and 21st century literary studies that illustrate the contradictory, overlapping, and often capacious ideas of ‘closeness’ that have attached to discourses around close reading. In this section, I return to the question of the personal and its distinctions from intimacy. We’ve established the complexity of close reading. We have a sense of the necessity of a rigorous political understanding of intimacy and the personal, to clear a path in the thickets of these two concepts. The stakes, as I’ve suggested at the top of this introduction, are real. A central claim of my project is that the personal turn in U.S. critique has been under-theorized, insufficiently delineated, and often assumed to carry liberatory ambitions and effects. Noting how discrepant ideas of closeness have been across recent critical history, we begin to have a sense of how easy it would be for personal critique and practices of intimacy to become similarly tangled: whether understood as techniques of reading, modes of relating, affective nexuses, pedagogical methods, arguments for the value of the humanities, or visions of the liberatory possibilities of critique.

In what follows, I suggest that we can distinguish the personal from intimacy in each of these senses, even as—in my project as a whole—I suggest that it is the vibrant interrelation of intimate and personal devices, and various political ambitions and critical histories, that make the operations of intimacy and personal writing so compelling both for authors, and as an object of critique here. We can begin by looking back to the opening of this chapter, and my reading of 1980s and ‘90s feminisms, in which I drew a distinction between a self-directed and self-sustaining idea of relatability with the text, and the

celebration and pursuance of difference with a view to praxis. These strands persist into the 2000s: now building on the twists and turns of ideology critique, early affect theory and queer theory—and in the burgeoning marketing category of autotheory.

As numerous recent studies have pointed out, the generic category of ‘autotheory’ describes a practice of feminist writing and activism that has long roots in various global literary traditions, but that only became widely identified and marketed using that term in the 2000s and 2010s. ‘Autotheory’ emerged into the popular consciousness as a generic category in the wake of Maggie Nelson’s 2015 book, *The Argonauts*, when Nelson and her many critics and reviewers began using the term, drawing on Paul B. Preciado’s use in *Testo Yonqui* (Testo Junkie, 2008/2013).¹²³ Before that point, diverse schools of thought had drawn the autobiographical self into relation with what might broadly have been called ‘theory.’ Robyn Wiegman, for instance, suggests that something like autotheory might be glimpsed in 18th century confessional life writing, used to present and synthesize critical argument.¹²⁴ Linda Anderson traces a practice of autobiographical theorizing back to Augustine’s *Confessions*.¹²⁵ Lauren Fournier notes that ‘since the beginning of the feminist movement as understood in the West, feminist philosophers have worked from an autotheoretical place.’¹²⁶ She points to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Sojourner Truth’s *Ain’t I A Woman?* (1851) and Shulamith Firestone’s *A Dialectic of Sex* (1970); the topic of theoretical reflection in each being ‘catalyzed by their

¹²³ See e.g. Micah McCrary’s interview with Maggie Nelson: ‘Riding the Blinds,’ *Los Angeles Review of Books* (26 April 2015). This point is also made by: Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2022), 7; Alex Brostoff, ‘An Autotheory of Intertextual Kinship: Ambivalent Bodies in the Work of Maggie Nelson and Paul B. Preciado,’ *Synthesis*, 14 (2021), 91-115 (pp. 91-92).

¹²⁴ Robyn Wiegman, ‘Introduction: Autotheory Theory,’ *The Arizona Quarterly*, 76:1 (2020), 1-14 (p. 2).

¹²⁵ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2011), 17-56.

¹²⁶ Fournier, 8-9.

lived experience as women in patriarchal and colonial societies.’¹²⁷ For Fournier, as for Anna Ioanes, however, the generic category of autotheory has distinct origins in 1960s Western feminisms, coming into fruition in the context of women’s liberation movements.¹²⁸ We have seen how the politics of locating oneself in the theoretical text have been central to academic feminisms, psychoanalytic French feminisms, and Black and queer feminisms throughout the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s.

The capacious politics and forms of ‘autotheory’ mean that it does not map neatly onto either ‘personal’ writing or ‘intimacy.’ Rather, the term indicates, like ‘close reading,’ how ways of reading, generic strategies, and formal devices might tap into the self-directed politics of the personal turn, and moments later into a more solidaristic, collectivist, and relational politics. The recent flurry of scholarship on autotheory finds both of these strands realized powerfully in autotheoretical work and understands both strands to be at times definitive of the autotheoretical genre. Questions of narcissism, for instance, have been a recurrent theme in scholarship on autobiography, life writing, confession, and autobiographical theorizing.¹²⁹ On the other hand, Stacey Young (1997), in a very early use of the term, deploys ‘autotheory’ to describe queer of color feminist anthologies published in the early 1980s, in a sense that accords closely with my theorization of intimacy here.¹³⁰ Kyle C. Frisina, similarly, has argued that Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* is autotheoretical in the same degree to which its ethical politics are based in a commitment to

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Anna Ioanes, ‘What the Afterlife of SCUM Can Teach Us about Autotheory,’ *American Literature*, 94:4 (2022), 677–703.

¹²⁹ See e.g.: Nicole Trigg, ‘Notes on Autotheory, Art Writing, and The Encounter with Carla Lonzi,’ *ASAP/Journal*, 6:3 (2021), 534–537.

¹³⁰ Stacey Young, *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). See e.g.: 61–98.

the intersubjective and interpersonal.¹³¹ Each of these lines of thought indicate a feature of the personal turn: work that readily combines an appeal to identificatory relation, reliant on the lure of sovereign individualism, with intimate solidarity expressed through textual manifestations of difference.

Even as both personal attachment and solidaristic intimacy might co-exist in any given autotheoretical text, the circumstances of autotheory's rise are historically particular. For many intersectional Black feminist and queer of color writers in the 1970s and '80s, autobiographical gestures, anecdotal asides, and creative depictions of lived experience were intended to forge bonds across areas of classed, raced, and gendered struggle. Thorsson, for instance, points to the difficult circumstances in which 'The Sisterhood,' a contingent of Black women writers, was formed; their bonds necessarily strong in the face of a hostile literary and culture industry. We've seen, meanwhile, how a collection such as *This Bridge* undertook a year-by-year battle to keep their solidaristic project funded and in print, despite their popularity among key reading publics.¹³² Other examples of Black feminist autobiographical writing, such as Assata Shakur's *Assata*, engaged even more directly with the constant threat of government surveillance, police violence, and neoliberal imperialist policy that attended the writing of Black female life.

Today, autotheoretical and personal critique, as least in the space of literary publishing, can't be said to be so readily sidelined—by which we might learn not only something of a change in the identity and politics of its practitioners, but also its value to the market and the academy. Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* has earned her a MacArthur Fellowship, and

¹³¹ Kyle C. Frisina, 'From Performativity to Performance: Claudia Rankine's Citizen and Autotheory,' *The Arizona Quarterly*, 76:1 (2020), 141-166.

¹³² See above: footnote 33.

a great many commendations, including a National Book Critics Circle Award. Nelson, and a number of other autofiction writers, have won vaunted roles in humanities departments at leading U.S. universities. In the U.K., Nelson, alongside writers such as Rankine, is published by Penguin, a publisher that has devoted significant budget to contemporary works of autotheory. Meanwhile in the academy, personal criticism has become a mainstay of institutions such as Duke University Press, which alongside its *Writing Matters!* series, has published experimental and often semi-autobiographical criticism by affect theorists and queer theorists such as Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, and Kathleen Stewart.¹³³ This is to say nothing of a developing norm in literary studies monographs, in which a personal note situating the argument in relation to the autobiographical experience and identity of the author appears not just a concerted methodological move, but increasingly standard.

This context—in which autotheory has become (comparative to the autobiographical writings of 1980s Black Marxist feminists) aligned with a white, wealthy, sometimes tenured, and academic-rather-than-activist body of writers—is one that I want to actively hold in mind as we approach the personal turn. We can trace the trend back to Hirsh’s critique of Senior Feminists. Yet whereas Hirsh identified her senior colleagues as turning to personal writing with a mix of anxiety about their privilege in the academy, and reliance on that privilege for the deviation into the personal, it’s clear that it is not only highly privileged academics and critics who are turning to more autobiographical forms. We might assume, given the landscape, that autotheory, and personal practices of criticism, are being democratized: more widely accepted and embraced in traditional scholarship, as in the

¹³³ Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart, *The Hundreds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Berlant and Leo Bersani, *Sex, or The Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). In *Writing Matters!* see e.g. Monica Huerta, *Magical Habits* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

public literary marketplace. While that may be true, it's not the full picture. This is why it's important to distinguish the politics of a self-directed and self-sustaining, individualized and authority-building personal writing, from a practice intent on solidarity and difference. Ultimately, the distinction may boil down to this: what are the stakes of this writing? What is it trying to achieve, in its greatest risks? Whose interests are being furthered, in its autobiographical and confessional moves? Do its risks rely on affordances already plentifully given to the writer, or does it find avenues of solidarity, in the face of precarious circumstances?

Compare the privileged politics of what I am calling personal writing, to contemporary theorizations of intimacy. In 2001, Berlant edited a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled simply, 'Intimacy.' From the present vantage, we can see that it heralded a shift in affective and queer theorizing. In the 2023 *Affect Theory Reader 2*, Seigworth and Pedwell identify this as a shift in affect theory toward 'disquiet, tension, ambiguity, obstinacy, [...] cruel-
esque optimism, and sometimes unmitigated pessimism.'¹³⁴ Featuring now-famous work including Laura Kipnis' 'Adultery,' Berlant and Warner's 'Sex in Public,' and an excerpt from Sedgwick's *A Dialogue on Love*, the issue captures the complexity of debates on intimacy and personal closeness in the critical landscape of the period.¹³⁵ Intimacy, it turned out, was less a question of life-giving and sustaining relation to the object of knowledge, than a fraught and perhaps inevitably disappointed expectation of a collective good life. Berlant, introducing the special issue, put it this way:

"I didn't think it would turn out this way" is the secret epitaph of intimacy. [...] [Intimacy] involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is

¹³⁴ Seigworth and Pedwell, 3.

¹³⁵ Laura Kipnis, 'Adultery,' in *Intimacy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9-47; Berlant and Warner, 'Sex in Public,' 311-330; Sedgwick, 'A Dialogue on Love,' 331-351.

set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love. Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. People consent to trust their desire for “a life” to institutions of intimacy; and it is hoped that the relations formed within those frames will turn out beautifully, last over the long duration, perhaps across generations.¹³⁶

The conclusion of Berlant’s paragraph makes clear how limited the possible outcomes are, when our desire for ‘a life’ is entrusted to institutions of intimacy. Numerous strains of Marxism, feminism, social reproduction theory, and now queer theory had exposed the false promise in the couple form and the family. Berlant similarly touts traditional, private zones of familiarity and comfort, only to illustrate their anxious imbrication in institutions, and underpinning it all, our deep and cruel optimism for durational love and its wished-for emancipations.

For Berlant, the insufficiency of contemporary models of closeness is apparent in the uneasy collectives we put together to cope with life in the 21st century. Berlant points to ‘proliferating forms of therapeutic publicity,’ including twelve-step groups, talk shows, and various genres of ‘witnessing.’¹³⁷ In part, Berlant implies, we put together these groups to deal with the double-punch by which we are taught, on the one hand, that ‘having a life’ equates to ‘having an intimate life’; while also being taught that intimate life is only valuable if it is entirely fulfilling, durational, and emancipatory. As Berlant suggests, this leads to a valorization of intimacy, as well as a turning away from more uncertain and precarious modes of collectivity. Intimate lives ‘personalize the effects of the public sphere and reproduce a fantasy that private life is the real in contrast to collective life: the surreal, the elsewhere, the fallen, the irrelevant.’¹³⁸ Intimacy emerges from this scene as a failed

¹³⁶ Berlant, ‘Intimacy: A Special Issue,’ 1-8 (p. 1).

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Berlant, 2.

ideal of privacy, to the loss of the disruptive intimacy of public relation across various and contingent collectives.

In the ensuing decades, and in the path marked out by the ‘Intimacy’ issue of *Critical Inquiry*, theorization of intimacy became increasingly ambivalent about its politics, and the institutions and infrastructures through which it operates. In the process, theorization of intimacy grew increasingly close to the celebration of contingent and precarious *difference* between economic and political actors—closer to Black feminisms of the late-20th century—than the privileged personal affiliations of, for instance, *The Intimate Critique*. Kadji Amin, Ara Wilson, Karen Tongson, Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani, Nayan Shah, and Elizabeth Povinelli, for instance, have all developed the critique of neoliberal ideological conditions, U.S. imperialist policy, and racial capitalism, that animated Berlant’s writing about intimacy in the 2000s.¹³⁹ Tongson, in *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*, points to an illustratively ambivalent technology of contemporary isolation and intimacy: the car. Tongson turns over the then-established liberal association of queer sociality with dense habitation, creative industries, adult-oriented nightlife, and urban economies of spatial ‘rehabilitation.’ Instead, she points to the ‘remote intimacy’ that

¹³⁹ Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Ara Wilson, *The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Global City* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 2004); Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Adam Phillips and Leo Bersani, *Intimacies* (Chicago, IL and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

A rich strand of the queer scholarship on intimacy takes up ideas of kinship, though I don’t have space to treat the topic in any depth here. Teagan Bradway, for instance, has written extensively on the subject: ‘Graphic Attachment: Relational Formalism and Queer Dependency,’ *ASAP Journal* (March 27 2023); ‘Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form,’ *PMLA*, 136:5 (2021), 711-727. See also: Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman, ‘Introduction: Kincoherence/Kin-aesthetics/Kinematics,’ in *Queer Kinship: Race, Sex, Belonging, Form*, eds. Bradway and Freeman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

persists in cities like Los Angeles, among racialized and marginalized communities who exist apart from or only uneasily amongst the gentrifying hubs of liberal queerdom. She writes:

Reading space vis-a-vis queer studies now requires shifting our spatial fantasies about sexuality from one kind of street life to another: to the compensatory forms of motion and contact in spaces seemingly [...] bereft of the urban luxury known as “walking culture.” Driving in your car through lonely stretches or Southern California or elsewhere. [...] Rollin’ deep with your homies, sisters or bros, real or conjured, desperately seeking excitement elsewhere, somewhere, but realizing that it might just be all about the ride, the inevitably aimless transport of accidental reverie—and all about who you’re riding with.¹⁴⁰

In Tongson’s vision of riding through lonely stretches of Southern California highway, intimacy exists in temporary togetherness, movement, precarious and shifting clusters of bodies. The closeness she describes is one of ‘aimless’ attention, or ‘accidental reverie,’ and those caught in the intimacy might be ‘real or conjured,’ ‘sisters or bros,’ their identities unfixed in much the same way as the space and purpose that temporarily unites them. If, as Berlant suggests, there is cruel optimism in our bid to ‘trust [our] desire for “a life” to institutions of intimacy,’ and that we hope in vain that ‘the relations formed within those frames will turn out beautifully, last over the long duration,’ for Tongson, the most thrilling and queer forms of intimacy are found in the recognition that neoliberal affective and ideological environments will not support the kind of flourishing that we might start to believe we are promised. Rather than striving for fully-realized alternatives to an unfulfilling reality, Tongson attends to ‘compensatory forms of motion and contact.’ Compensation implies a serious acknowledgement of an oppressive, structural and affective reality—palpably figured in the lonely and destructive container of the car—but also the possibility of finding everyday, temporary pockets of relief and resistance.

¹⁴⁰ Tongson, 213.

Drawing a line from *This Bridge*, to Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and through to Berlant, Tongson, and many queer and queer of color theorists today, I find a tradition of intimacy that drives my own project. Where Tongson celebrates ‘reverie’ and ‘aimless attention,’ however, the work that forms my focus is committed to working rigorously at how to best express the tension between the dual imperatives of personality, and collectivity, solidarity, and sociality. In the four chapters that follow, I expand on the politics of key moments in the personal turn since 1980. These moments map to four critical traditions and five genres. My first chapter examines the legacy and effects of Eve Sedgwick’s ‘I,’ to consider how her critical essays of the 1980s and ‘90s walk a tightrope between the vastly pleasurable and virtuosic personal performative, and the liberatory work of queer collectivity. I then turn to Afro-pessimism, illustrating how Frank B. Wilderson III’s memoir leans into the limitations of the personal ‘I,’ in its expression of the doomed ‘unnarrativizability’ of Blackness. By contrast, I argue, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s depersonalized manifesto, *The Undercommons*, opts for that genre as an expression of their belief in the possibility of Black sociality. Their manifesto is an ‘appositional’ response to the way that Black subjectivity has been historically positioned by violence. My third chapter takes up Claudia Rankine’s *American* series, to show how Rankine’s poetics of ambiguity insist on continual and competing planes of meaning, blossoming out of moments of misunderstanding and racialized interpellation. Finally, the fourth chapter traces the history of the personal essay form in the archive of *The Best American Essays* anthology series from 1986 to 2022—a run that maps closely onto my periodization of the personal turn.

My readings of each of these authors and archives draw out vibrant issues in the personal turn. I show how the forms of intimacy that I am associating with Black and

woman of color feminisms in the 1970s and '80s have been adapted and rewritten in the context of, for instance: the rationalization and professionalization of the U.S. academy; the deepening neoliberal ideological imperatives that inform autotheory, essaying, and criticism; the changing demands of a 21st century political landscape; and the conglomeration of publishing. Through my readings of these authors and texts, I demonstrate how a personal idiom can function as a limit that critics work against or seek to innovate beyond. The personal is an ineluctable condition of all critical writing, and each period and culture's manifestations of the personal has distinct characteristics. In the period that I'm focusing on—the past four decades in the U.S.—the personal is a means for writers to think against and alongside Black studies scholarship, various emergent feminisms, and overbearing historical structures of subjectification. Much work that I read here thinks closely with the concept of 'fugitivity.' Akwugo Emejulu describes 'fugitive intimacy' as founded in strategies of living under and against the illimitable spaces of power, driven by 'our collective responsibility to build community as a space of possibility' and attempting to find—however temporarily—relief from 'models of hyper-individualism' that have dominated public life under Western racial capitalism.¹⁴¹ None of these texts pretend to abnegate the subject. But they often yearn, successfully or otherwise, for collective closeness; a closeness that is necessarily precarious, forged in resistance to the sucking lure of individualized personalism. We could call this intimacy, or fugitivity, or something like impersonality. This is the vibrant partner to the personal that I want to draw out of the personal turn: the bid to write and imagine a 'kind of provisional "we" at difference with itself from the inside out.'¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Akwugo Emejulu, *Fugitive Intimacy* (London: Silver Press, 2022), 91.

¹⁴² Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York: New York

University Press, 2018), xi.

‘And some people hate that’: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s virtuosic ‘I’

In looking at the personal in critical writing, there are few richer—and for that reason, more obvious—places to start than the first-person singular of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.¹⁴³ Sedgwick’s ‘I,’ in fact, is marked by both its virtuosity and obviousness. Her groundbreaking criticism in the late-1980s and 1990s, which shaped the burgeoning field of gay and lesbian studies and then queer theory, is driven by an ‘insistent perspectivism,’ and an ‘I’ that she describes as a ‘heuristic,’ faux-modestly and characteristically adding: ‘possibly a powerful one.’¹⁴⁴ By the 2000s, that self-declaredly ‘virtuosic’ first-person—which bridged ‘the specificities of her identity’¹⁴⁵ and the arc of her heterogeneous inquiry—had become well enough established to take on life as the free-floating adjective, ‘Sedgwickian.’¹⁴⁶ Today, Sedgwick’s ‘I’ is associated with the turn to repair, or more broadly the era of postcritique in the Western literary academy. But what are the contours of her engagements with personal critique? How does her ‘I,’ its emergence, changes, and enduring significance, shape the objects and forms of queer criticism today?

The force of Sedgwick’s ‘I’ is directly related to its non-fixity. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick sees her own ‘oblique relation to declared identity’ (*EC* xviii) as supporting the work’s interrogation of ‘relations of double and conflicted definition’ (*EC* 13). In *Tendencies* (1993), her first-person singular bolsters an inquiry into ‘passionate queer things that happen across the lines that divide genders, discourses, and “perversions”’

¹⁴³ I use the hyphenated ‘first-person,’ though Sedgwick in *Tendencies* uses ‘first person.’

¹⁴⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Preface to the 2008 Edition,’ *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, [1990] 2008), xv; Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), xiv. All further references in the text.

¹⁴⁵ Ramzi Fawaz, ‘An Open Mesh of Possibilities: The Necessity of Eve Sedgwick in Dark Times,’ in *Reading Sedgwick* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 1-28 (p. 11).

¹⁴⁶ Lauren Berlant, referring to ‘Sedgwickian relationality’: Berlant and Lee Edelman, ‘What Survives,’ in *Reading Sedgwick*, 37-62 (p. 47).

(*T* xiii). She insisted that her capacious inquiry into ‘passionate queer things’ was also a ‘passionate project of community.’¹⁴⁷ Queer theory’s growing significance in U.S. literary academia, and in university humanities departments, had been forged in the heat of the AIDS crisis, and the palpable urgency of contemporary queer activism. In this context, Sedgwick also saw her ‘I’ as being in direct conversation with a queer collective: a ‘we’ that she gathers into critical community with her. Yet the ‘we’ is bound together by Sedgwick’s own ‘cathecting’ critical vision: ‘Me, plus anybody else,’ as she would later write.¹⁴⁸ In other words, Sedgwick’s extraordinary project of queer plurality and heterogeneity was often rooted in her tenacious, individualized first-person singular: the highly identifiable, particular, and autobiographical ‘I’ of the ambitious and brilliant young critic.

This chapter takes three parts. The first delves into the performative dynamics of Sedgwick’s first-person singular in her mid-career writings. I contextualize her ‘I’ in relation to the queer theoretical project as it was evolving in the 1980s and ‘90s. Her critical star was rapidly rising in these years, as queer theory became established as a field in the U.S. academy. To draw out the dynamics of her ‘I,’ I focus on her most personal collection, *Tendencies*, and particularly her essay ‘A Poem is Being Written.’ In these years, as we’ll see, the virtuosity of Sedgwick’s critical ‘I’ was charged: central to her budding body of critique; proof, nonetheless, of her turn away from her ‘first love,’ poetry (*DL* 65). The second part of this chapter turns to later in Sedgwick’s career, briefly rehearsing her argument for reparative reading, before exploring the textual politics of repair and its figurations of ‘the personal’ and intimacy as these concepts appear in her 2003 work, *A*

¹⁴⁷ Nancy K. Miller, ‘All About Eve,’ *The Women’s Review of Books*, 17:2 (1999), 21-22 (p. 22).

¹⁴⁸ Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999), 106. All further references in the text.

Dialogue on Love. Finally, I turn to Sedgwick's reception in queer writing today. In Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, we find evidence of the long tail of Sedgwick's 'I' in 21st century autotheory, and of the significance that Sedgwick's personal writing has had in the spread of marketable autotheory.

At various stages of her career, Sedgwick insisted that her critical project was both dependent on the first-person singular as a performative rhetorical strategy and defined by collectivity. David Kurnick has recently noted the bleed between charismatic 'celebrity' theorists and a parodic characterology of theory itself, which does disservice both to critical inquiry and to the reality of academic labor in the neoliberalized humanities faculty.¹⁴⁹ I want to hold this context in mind as we look at Sedgwick's queer project in the '80s and '90s. To what degree does her tenured professorship complicate the relationship between her performative 'I,' and the pluralistic, heterogeneous drive of her theorizing? To what extent is her project grounded in a projected charismatic authority, and bolstered by a surrounding queer 'we'? What is the constitution of that 'we'? And how do her ideas of collectivity speak to the conditions under which we theorize today?

The little, stubborn current: *Tendencies* (1993)

After the release of her monograph, *Between Men*, in 1985, Sedgwick won tenure and began to write the books that would confirm her status as a major figure in the emergent field of queer theory. *Epistemology of the Closet* was released in 1990, and three years later, accompanied by *Tendencies*, her book of queer critical essays. While the latter was far more personal in style than the former, the two were, as she wrote at the time, in

¹⁴⁹ David Kurnick, 'A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas,' *ELH*, 87:2 (2020), 349-374.

‘intimate adhesion’ (T xiv). The focus of the former, she wrote, was her hypothesis that the modern homo/heterosexual definition had become so entrenched because of an ‘enduring incoherence’ as to whether it was an issue primarily for gays and lesbians, or an issue that ‘cuts across every locus of agency and subjectivity in the culture’ (T xii). In *Tendencies*, her focus was tightly related but distinct: that modern sexual identities are structured by a ‘double-binding but *immensely productive* incoherence about gender’ (T xii).

It was the stress on the immense productivity of gender’s incoherences that prompted, for Sedgwick, the work’s ‘experimental ambition[s]’ (T xiii). While both books feature the ‘ready use of the first person’ (E xv), *Tendencies* became home to some of Sedgwick’s most personal critique. The close first-person of *Tendencies* allowed Sedgwick, as she later wrote, to unfold her fascination with the productive incoherences of gender through the grounding of the ‘I’: a space in which ‘the impoverished abstractions that claim to define sexuality can be treated as not authoritative’ (E xvi). The first-person, she wrote, would allow her to get into question of ‘Who’s speaking, to whom? Who wants to know, and what for? What do these answer *do?*’ (E xv). I want to pick up some important implications of these questions. Namely: how does Sedgwick’s ‘I’ relate? What are its performative effects? And while the ‘I’ may remove authority claims from the realm of abstraction, can we really say that Sedgwick’s ‘I’ doesn’t reach toward the ‘authoritative’?

The foreword to *Tendencies* includes not only one of Sedgwick’s most noted, but also one of her most direct discussions of the first-person singular in her criticism. Given its significance, it’s worth recalling here at relative length.

There’s a lot of first person singular in this book (and some people hate that), and it’s there for different reasons in different essays; to begin with, though, I’d find it mutilating and disingenuous to disallow a grammatical form that marks the site of such dense, accessible effects of knowledge, history, revulsion, authority, and

pleasure. Perhaps it would be useful to say that the first person throughout represents neither the sense of a simple, settled congratulatory “I,” on the one hand, nor on the other, a fragmented postmodernist postindividual—never mind an unreliable narrator. No, “I” is a heuristic; maybe a powerful one. (*T* xiv)

Sedgwick’s assertion of the heuristic power of the ‘I’ lays the groundwork for the essay collection that it precedes. From the off, Sedgwick locates the heuristic power of the first person in its complex epistemological texture: its resources of ‘knowledge, history, revulsion, authority, and pleasure.’ It does not, she insists, represent any kind of ‘simple, settled congratulatory’ selfhood; nor does it splinter uselessly into a ‘fragmented postmodernist postindividual.’ In her argument for the heuristic force of the ‘I,’ the postmodern suspicion of the first person appears shallow, unproductive. In her dismissal of congratulatory self-representation, meanwhile, she distances her project from what she had recently described as the ‘anti-intellectual’ tendencies of ‘personal criticism.’¹⁵⁰ She associated personal criticism with limitation: it ‘presumes that there’s one story to tell and that it’s the autobiographical story,’ severing autobiography from theory. In conjuring and then waving away these readings, Sedgwick indicates that she intends her first-person to have a critical function distinct from two strong strands of contemporary literary academia. Essentially, she wants us to know, she takes the first-person seriously: a historically rooted site of knowledge; a way into the textual object, and consequently a source of real critical power.

For both Jonathan Goldberg and Jason Edwards, much of the texture of Sedgwick’s first-person singular lies in the way that it invites not just attachment but an awareness of heterogeneity. As Goldberg writes, her ‘I’ inscribes ‘a position any of us can variously

¹⁵⁰ Sarah Chinn, Mario DiGangi, and Patrick Horrigan, ‘A Talk With Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,’ *Pre/Text*, 3:4 (1992), 79-95 (83-4).

inhabit.’¹⁵¹ He finds that her mutability allows her to live on differently in each of those who loved her and her work. Edwards, similarly, suggests that Sedgwick’s first-person performs her belief that ‘people are different from one another.’¹⁵² This, he says, is an idea ‘at the heart of Sedgwick’s oeuvre,’ insisting on ‘the irreducible particularity and potential pedagogical value’¹⁵³ in every reader, drawn out in their capacity to learn and reflect on themselves and their responses as a source of those ‘dense, accessible effects of knowledge, history, revulsion, authority, and pleasure.’

But even as Sedgwick’s first-person seems to treat the reader as their own unique site of epistemological wealth, she frames her argument for the ‘I’ with the creation of an us-and-them. The passage above opens with the unapologetic assertion that ‘there’s a lot of first person singular in this book.’ She then underlines that gesture with her rebuttal of a group of imagined detractors. These are imprisoned together in parentheses: ‘(and some people hate that).’ In bracketing off the ‘some people [who] hate’ the first-person singular in criticism, Sedgwick not only sets up her queer theoretical project in distinction to (at least) two strands of contemporary literary discourse—postmodernism, and ‘personal criticism’—but also to a more general outside, opposed to the queer project that centers her ‘I.’ The group of detractors holds a near central position in the longer paragraph. They act like a hinge, so that despite the vague determiner—‘some’—Sedgwick’s rejection of the detractors as a faceless mass takes primary position in establishing her ‘I.’ The ‘I,’ as a result, is posed in its alignment with a queer theoretical collective, and in its opposition to whatever is outside that collective. The vagueness of ‘some people’ sharply clarifies the ‘I,’

¹⁵¹ Jonathan Goldberg, *Come As You Are* (Punctum Books, 2021), 22.

¹⁵² Jason Edwards, *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 4.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

making it joyously specific. In rendering the ‘some people’ who ‘hate’ the first-person singular in criticism so vaguely, Sedgwick is able implicitly to ascribe greater malice to them. Rather than attacking a specific group, she gestures to those who would take issue with the first-person, in their ‘mutilating and disingenuous’ disallowing of knowledge and pleasure. More specifically: to take issue with the first-person is to move against Sedgwick’s own ‘I,’ in turn equated with the groundbreaking contemporary queer project, which finds such wealth of ‘knowledge, history, revulsion, authority, and pleasure’ in Sedgwick’s performative pronoun.

Turning to the beginning of *Tendencies* foreword, we get further context on the group politics of Sedgwick’s first-person singular. She opens on the 1992 Pride parade in New York City, which is turned into a poststructuralist *mise-en-scene*. Sedgwick’s eye tracks the loud T-shirts of the crowd: ‘KEEP YOUR LAWS OFF MY UTERUS,’ reads a top worn by a ‘muscular man in full leather regalia’ (T xi). ‘FAGGOT’ and ‘BIG FAG’ are the ‘legends self-applied by many, many women.’ ‘DYKE’ and ‘LICK BUSH’ worn by ‘many, many men.’ Everywhere, ‘on women and on men,’ are T-shirts that read simply, ‘QUEER’ (T xi). The gathered bodies with their brightly declared cross-identifications indicate, for Sedgwick, that the era in which she’s writing is one defined by the fluid and relational politics of queerness. ‘I suppose this must be called the moment of Queer’ (T xii), she writes.

Even as Sedgwick considers the mutable identities of the crowd, she’s prompted to reflect on ‘queer’s capacities to renegotiate the bounds of the self. The effect is multiple: to gesture to the expansive polis of queer politics; and to root this essay collection on ‘queer’ in the cathecting vision of a stubborn ‘I.’

It feels queer, and good—I'm sure I wasn't the only one at the march to have this sensation—when the wave of a broadly based public movement somehow overtakes and seems to amplify (amplifies by drowning it out?) the little, stubborn current of an individual narrative or obsession, an individual wellspring of narrow, desiring cathexis and cognition. (*T xi*)

If 'queer' is a feeling, it is here collective, individual, or something else? Who is 'the individual' in this scene, and what are they desiring? Who constitutes the queerness of the collective? With how much skepticism should we take Sedgwick's suggestion that her individual wellspring of cognition gets so easily overtaken and drowned out?

I can see three key and relevant readings of this passage. First, the 'queer' feeling in which the 'individual' is participating seems to rebound among the crowd until, made collective, it 'overtakes' her little narrative. In this reading, Sedgwick is 'the individual'—has good, queer feeling—but submits her narrative to the crowd. In the process, she loses the specificity of her 'I' to the abstraction of 'the individual.' In a slightly variant reading, we see 'queer' as not negating the 'I' but amplifying her narrative alongside 'many, many' others, until all those desiring first-persons singular together become a queer 'wave,' a crashing whole. Here, the individual isn't 'overtake[n]' by the wave, but becomes a constitutive part of it: less drowned in the collective than a 'stubborn current,' the waters of her 'wellspring' retaining their integrity while also flowing into that greater mass. Finally, we are offered the possibility that Sedgwick alone is having or comprising the 'queer' sensation of the crowd. 'I'm sure I wasn't the only one [...] to have this sensation,' she writes, introducing the hypothetical that, in fact, she is. Appending half-ironic diminutives to terms like 'individual' and 'narrative'—'little,' 'narrow'—Sedgwick gently inflates the individual. And after all, the structure of the passage puts weight on its second half: the wave of queer collectivity washing toward the twice-invoked 'individual,' with her

stubborn little narrative interpretation.

Sedgwick keeps all of these readings open. Key to this is her parenthetical, mid-sentence question: '(amplifies by drowning out?)' In interrupting her flow of thoughts, Sedgwick's aside reminds us that the queer feeling on display is made from her flow. The possibility of multiple interpretations is managed by her understanding of the scene. We are returned to a specific critical gaze that is organizing the bountiful significance of the crowd into a trend in contemporary literary academia. The abstraction of 'the individual' acts similarly. The individual doesn't replace the 'I,' but underlines the fact that Sedgwick's first-person singular constitutes individuality in this scene; not a stand-in for everyone's—'anybody else's—but, in reality, the one that performatively realizes 'QUEER' feeling, queer meaning.

The result is a critical 'I' that allows for plurality of interpretation, and in doing so controls with masterful anticipation a given set of readings; an 'I' that finds its authority not in spite of but through reflection on a great sea of cross-identifications. In this set up, we get a glimpse of another presence, an outside or other to the wave of 'QUEER.' The outside doesn't map simply onto a homophobic majority culture, though that seems to be present. It also implies a point of difference closer to home: a tendency that Sedgwick would later describe as a 're-naturalizing of identity categories' in gay and lesbian studies.¹⁵⁴

Sedgwick's stubborn little narrative defines and thereby is defined by the queer collective and the heterogeneous intermingling of the queer 'wave.' Her 'I,' though, is what distinguishes that intermingling from the rigid identitarianism that she associates with gay and lesbian studies. Far from Sedgwick's individual, desiring cathexis being somehow

¹⁵⁴ Mark Kerr and Kristin O'Rourke, 'Sedgwick Sense and Sensibility: An Interview with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,' *Thresholds: Viewing Culture*, 9 (University of California Santa Barbara, 1995).

‘drown[ed] out,’ we are made to feel the significance of her critical capacity in defining the moment: this ‘QUEER time’ (T xi).

The stakes of the ‘QUEER time’ are made clear in the first full essay in *Tendencies*, ‘Queer and Now.’ The essay opens with Sedgwick’s now well-known observation, indicating the political, critical, and pedagogical significance of the moment: ‘I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents’ (T 1). Tying together homophobic state and federal policy with the systematic suppression of academic research, Sedgwick indicates that the problem unites political activism and the academy. She lists a spate of recent polities, designed to persecute queer youth: San Francisco’s recent denial of condoms to young people, which caused a swell in HIV transmission among under-twenty-fives; the decision in 1991, under pressure from congress, to defund all research into adolescent sexuality.

Reflecting on this context, Sedgwick deploys an interesting tension between first-persons singular and plural. ‘This history makes its mark on what, *individually, we are and do,*’ she writes (italics added). The construction interpolates Sedgwick’s ‘I’ into multiple collectives. These include: a general citizenry of political actors; a more specific public of queer and particularly AIDS activists; a body of general academic readers, implicitly addressed by the essay; and a budding collective of queer theorists and researchers, presumably keyed to the ongoing crisis of queer youth. Like the polysemous scene of the 1992 Pride march—part stubborn individual current, part crashing wave—the construction appears to both lessen the political significance of the ‘I,’ and at the same time to place stress on it. From this scene of overlapping and competing significances, Sedgwick emerges as the organizing, guiding, and personal intelligence. One thing that ‘queer’ can

refer to is ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning,’ she writes, ‘when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality, aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’ (*T* 8). From this vibrant meshing, Sedgwick’s personal performative pronoun emerges as a guide. If queerness expresses the fact that gender and sexuality can’t be rigidified into monolithic signification, then one effect of the scene of polysemy is to articulate the specific and personal critical attentions and capacities of Sedgwick, the critic and teacher.

For instance: Sedgwick’s depiction of the political and academic collectives implicated in the crisis of queer adolescence leads her to a meditation on the ‘irreducible multilayeredness and multiphasedness of what queer survival means’ (*T* 3). In turn, this multiplicity leads to Sedgwick’s own personal identifications and strategies for survival. She identifies as queer the tendency of children to ‘attach intently’ to ‘a few cultural objects’ whose meaning seemed ‘mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us.’

We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love. [...] [I]t’s almost hard for me to imagine another way of coming to care enough about literature to give a lifetime to it. [...]. For me, a kind of formalism, visceral near-identification with the writing I cared for, at the level of sentence structure, metrical pattern, rhyme, was one way of trying to appropriate what seemed the numinous and resistant power of the chosen objects. (*T* 3)

What is the function of formalism here? Why are we given the impression that literary academia is not only driven by scholars’ formal attachments, but that those attachments are, at root, queer? In depicting the literary academy as motivated by scholars’ individual desiring cathexis, Sedgwick also traces that cathexis back to the survival tactics of queer youth. ‘We needed for there to be sites’ of queer polysemy, she suggests, tying her

theorization of ‘queer’ to the close reading operations of the literature department; in fact, it’s hard to ‘imagine another way of coming to care enough about literature to give a lifetime to it.’ In this elision, we get the sense that the entire literary academy is founded in individual practices of queer survival. More specifically: we get the sense that the entire literary academy operates along Sedgwick’s personal lines of queer survival, which is to say, formalist attachments. Close reading evolves from a set of disciplinary methods to a Sedgwickian childhood practice. As Sedgwick moves from ‘we’ to ‘me,’ across the course of the paragraph, we get the quiet sense that her childhood love of meter and rhyme underpin the literature department, which is in turn, queer to the precise degree that Sedgwick’s own reading practices constitute a queer political method.

The performative force of Sedgwick’s first-person singular is clarified in another of *Tendencies*’ most famous passages. Reiterating a message of the foreword, Sedgwick reminds us of the degree to which the first person is performatively bound to the contemporary queer project. A part of the experimental force of the term ‘queer’ as a speech act is ‘the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself.’ Comparing the term ‘queer’ to ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian,’ she writes:

Anyone’s use of ‘queer’ about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else. [...] “Queer” seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person’s undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation. A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which “queer” can signify only *when attached to the first person*. One possible corollary: that what it takes—all it takes—to make the description “queer” a true one is the impulsion *to* use it in the first person. (*T* 9, italics in original)

This passage, small and complex in *Tendencies*, gives way to deeper and clearer depths when read in conjunction with Sedgwick’s contemporary writing on performativity. In her 1993 essay, ‘Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,’ Sedgwick outlines

what she describes as the ‘weird centrality of the marriage example’ in the philosophical discourse on performativity.¹⁵⁵ Writing on J. L. Austin’s almost compulsive return to marriage in his 1955 Harvard lectures,¹⁵⁶ Sedgwick observes that the centrality of ‘I do’ has a three-way effect in Austin’s text: to install monogamous heterosexual dyadic church- and state-sanctioned marriage ‘at the definitional center of an entire philosophical edifice’; to construct that philosophy around ‘*the class of things [...] that can preclude or vitiate marriage,*’¹⁵⁷ most notably ‘personal characteristics or object choices’; and finally, and consequently, to construct the philosopher as a man ‘whose relation to the marriage vow will be one of compulsive, apparently apotropaic repetition and yet of ultimate exemption’ (*QP* 3).

Sedgwick’s response to Austin’s ‘weird’ fixation on marriage, in both ‘Queer Performativity’ and ‘Queer and Now,’ is to explore what she finds to be the powerful possibilities of the second feature that she outlines above: the interruptive or ‘deformative’ potential of personal choices and attachments, which she sees Austin as embedding in his continued return to the marriage example (*QP* 3). Taking up that example, Sedgwick notes all the points at which the discursive scene of marriage might be disrupted, and thereby alter the discursive constitution of the ‘I.’ These include the ‘witnesses,’ who ‘recognize’ the marriage; the state, who confers legal authority on it; and the ‘logic of the (heterosexual) supplement whereby individual subjective agency is guaranteed by the welding into a cross-gender dyad’ (*QP* 3-4). This is a key point at which Judith Butler’s

¹⁵⁵ Sedgwick, ‘Queer Performativity: Henry James’ *The Art of the Novel*,’ *GLQ*, 1 (1993), 1-16. All further references in the text.

¹⁵⁶ J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

¹⁵⁷ Italics in original.

contemporary theorization of queer performativity corresponds with Sedgwick's. As Butler put it, in their response in the same edition of *GLQ*: 'the discursive condition of social recognition precedes and conditions the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject.'¹⁵⁸ For Sedgwick, this series of social recognitions that enable the performative force of the 'I' are continually liable to perversion. The queer subject might refuse or deflect heterosexual supplement, might hold a 'far less simple association' to state authority, and might be in 'far less complacent relation' to their being 'witnessed' (*QP* 4). The emergence of the first-person, of singularity, of the present tense, and of the grammar of active and indicative, are all rendered 'questions, rather than presumptions, for queer performativity' (*QP* 4).

Returning to the passage above, from 'Queer and Now,' we see how Sedgwick wants to attach to the first-person that disruptive and perverting discursive power. 'Anyone's use of "queer" about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else,' she writes, implying an activity to queer self-definition that directly interferes with the subject's formation through social and state interpellation. Butler, in implicit criticism of Sedgwick, reminds their reader that 'there is no "I" who stands *behind* discourse': the 'I' only comes into being in the act of being called, a discursive constitution that takes place prior to the 'I.'¹⁵⁹ For Sedgwick, though, the 'I' has capacity for 'particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation' (*T* 9). As we've begun to see, the particular significance of the first-person's perverting performative qualities lies not just in the 'I' in general, but in Sedgwick's specific 'I.' Sedgwick frequently uses the first-person plural ('we') in close conjunction with her arguments for the value of the first-

¹⁵⁸ Judith Butler, 'Critically Queer,' *GLQ*, 1 (1993), 17-32 (p. 18).

¹⁵⁹ Butler, 18. Italics in original.

person singular ('I'). In this, we see a sort of inverse of what she calls the 'shame on you' effect.

When Sedgwick stakes an argument for the queer performativity of the first-person, she often does so through a skilled interweaving of what she, in her critique of Austin, calls the 'pronoun matrix' (*QP* 4). Her primary example of this matrix is the chiasmatic declaration, 'Shame on you!' The phrase lacks an active subject and verb, thereby effacing the speaker, and by extension, effacing their shame at the same moment that they project it onto the second person. This is a quintessentially queer performative, for Sedgwick: implying 'a first person whose singular/plural status, whose past/present/future status, and indeed whose agency/passivity can only be questioned rather than presumed' (*QP* 4). Keying into the psychoanalytic constitution of shame, in which shame becomes present for the infant in the moment at which they are deprived of affirmatory feedback from the parent, Sedgwick suggests that shame describes a disruption in the 'circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication' (*QP* 4). Shame disrupts identity, because it instigates a moment in which child goes unrecognized, un-interpellated. Where there is shame, then, Sedgwick argues, there is also the possibility for identifying, and performing, otherwise.

Sedgwick's own engagement with shame, however, rarely adheres to the depopulated scene that she outlines in the phrase, 'shame on you.' Instead, Sedgwick consistently rallies around her an approving queer 'we.' This is her inversion of the depopulated pronoun matrix. Casting her gaze across the 'wave of a broadly based public movement,' Sedgwick's 'little, stubborn current of an individual narrative' isn't effaced but made more pronounced in its relation to the collective. A more grammatically pertinent

example is found in ‘Queer and Now’: ‘This history makes its mark on what, individually, we are and do,’ she writes: ‘We needed there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other.’ The ‘we’ gives way to ‘me, [...] the writing that I cared for.’ Rather than effacing the first-person singular, the movement of Sedgwick’s essays is continually toward her personal grammatical subject. Rather than replay the scene of the infant, shocked by the parent’s turning away, Sedgwick constructs collectives that act as queer witnesses, recognizing and bolstering the ultimate significance of her first-person. In the question of ‘what [...] we are and do,’ in her criticism of this period, it is her first-person that ‘does.’ As we will see in the next section, Sedgwick does this quite literally in one of the key essays of *Tendencies*: her return to a scene of her infant shame, in ‘A Poem is Being Written.’

‘A Poem is Being Written’

Sedgwick’s writings on performativity in the early-1990s put shame on the map. ‘Queer Performativity’ proved, as David Halperin and Valerie Traub note, to be ‘widely influential as well as highly controversial.’¹⁶⁰ It became central to queer theory for the rest of the ‘90s, in part because shame was rich material for debate—Sedgwick’s essay having failed to secure ‘for that notion any generally acknowledged solidity, clarity or coherence.’¹⁶¹ This was not altogether accidental. She concludes her essay with a dismissal of those critics who would search, in the burgeoning discourse of performativity, for a way to bracket performative acts as ‘good’ and ‘bad’: ‘straining eyes to ascertain whether particular performances [...] are really *parodic and subversive* [...] or just *uphold the status quo*’ (*QP*

¹⁶⁰ David Halperin and Valerie Traub, eds., *Gay Shame* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

15, italics in original). The bottom line, she writes, is always dull: ‘kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic,’ the activity of sorting a ‘sadly premature domestication’ of the ‘conceptual tool’ of performativity. She associates the first-person pronoun with the possibilities that still lie in the conceptual tool of performativity. As Ramzi Fawaz has put it, Sedgwick was a ‘theorist of multiplicity,’ and she felt that her practice of ‘ground[ing] us repeatedly in the specificities of her identity and her historical moment’ was a way of performing ‘her adherence to the *value* of multiplicity.’¹⁶²

At the same time, Sedgwick turned to Henry James and the reclamation of shame at an interesting moment in her life and career. Allen Durgin has put his finger on this, noting that ‘Queer Performativity’ homes in on two periods of ‘scouring depression’ (*QP* 6) for James, which bookended a ‘relatively blissful period of literary production’ (*QP* 8) during which time he wrote new prefaces to the New York Edition.¹⁶³ In the early-1990s, Sedgwick was similarly sandwiched between ‘blockage’ and productivity. She wrote *Between Men, Epistemology of the Closet*, and some of the essays of *Tendencies* in her own period of blissful creation, with stark depressions either side. Motivating these depressions, or at least corresponding with them, was the thwarting of what she considered her ‘first love [...] and first self’: her poetic muse (*DL* 65). If failing her doctoral orals in the 1970s felt like a ‘violent hemorrhage’ (*DL* 64)¹⁶⁴ to Sedgwick, at least during graduate school she had retained her ability to write poetry. By the 1990s, though, that capacity had vanished, replaced with what she seemed to feel to be the relatively lesser magic of criticism.

In *A Dialogue on Love*, Sedgwick explained that poetry had always been attended

¹⁶² Fawaz, 10-11.

¹⁶³ Allen Durgin, ‘Baby with the Bathwater: The Queer Performativity of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick,’ *GLQ*, 25:1 (2019), 11-15.

¹⁶⁴ See Durgin, 12.

by ‘the most excruciating blockages,’ and had been ‘gone now for years’ (*DL* 65). Its disappearance had corresponded with her breast cancer diagnosis—accompanied by chemotherapy and the loss of her hair—as well as several close friends having been diagnosed with AIDS, including Michael Lynch and Gary Fisher. Much of this context is addressed directly in the essay ‘Queer and Now,’ with Sedgwick noting that her intellectual attachments in the early-1990s were driven by a ‘viscerally intense, highly speculative (not to say inventive) cross-identification with gay men’ (*T* 14). The ‘overdetermined’ nature of this attachment she ascribes to being a ‘forty year old facing a protracted, life-threatening illness’ in 1991: ‘it wouldn’t take much for such a woman’ to realize that ‘the people with whom she had perhaps most in common’ (*T* 14) were people living with and in relation to AIDS, to say nothing of the disruptions that being bald, as a result of chemotherapy, occasioned in Sedgwick’s experience of gender. As Durgin puts it, then, when we read Sedgwick’s essays on queer performativity and shame in this period, we are reading texts that are in their ‘most active imaginable relation to shame.’¹⁶⁵ I’d add: possibly at a most intense and anxious level of investment in the political and critical significance of the autobiographical ‘I.’

Nowhere are the inter-perversions of performativity, shame, and the ‘I’ more apparent than in the most personal and confessional essay of *Tendencies*, ‘A Poem is Being Written.’ The essay opens with a highly Sedgwickian gambit. ‘This essay represents a claim for respectful attention to the intellectual and artistic life of a nine-year-old child, Eve Kosofsky,’ Sedgwick writes. It seems that we’re being asked to relate and attend to the autobiographical figure of a child; one who writes poetry. At the same time, as we’ll

¹⁶⁵ Durgin, 14.

discover, we're being asked for a rather knottier kind of witnessing. The 'Poem' of the title is Sedgwick's 'sulky problem child' (T 178), her long narrative poem, *The Warm Decembers*. She saw it as a 'current work' through the decade leading up to 1984, at which point she became unable to write it. The problem child at the heart of the problem poem is its heroine, Beatrix, who was left in suspension, caught in the final lines that Sedgwick had got down before her muse abandoned her. The loss of Beatrix, the poem, and the self that it represented was extraordinarily painful for Sedgwick. 'It took me three or four more years of a punishing incredulity to understand that this poem was not being written. In fact it was nine years [...] before I seemed to be able to write poetry of any kind.'¹⁶⁶

It is into this void that Sedgwick writes 'A Poem.' Conceived for a 1985 'Poetics of Anger' conference at Columbia University, before being published in *Representations* in 1987 and then collected in *Tendencies*, 'A Poem' was written in the first stages of Sedgwick's losing her muse. Sedgwick had published poetry previously and written copiously. Another of her long, narrative poems, 'Trace at 46,'¹⁶⁷ had been published in *Diacritics* in 1980, and she had sent out manuscripts of her first book of poems, *Traceable, Salient, Thirsty*, in 1977, while so far failing to find a publisher.¹⁶⁸ Now, as her critical star was vigorously rising, the 'first self' of her poetry was having to be replaced by the 'I' of *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Tendencies*. 'A Poem' plays out the tension between the 'powerful' first person singular of her mid-career critique, and her numerous poetic identifications. Through the essay's central 'misrecognition,' in which a child being

¹⁶⁶ Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 153. All further references in the text.

¹⁶⁷ Sedgwick, 'Trace at 46,' *Diacritics*, 10.1 (March 1980), 3-20.

¹⁶⁸ Jason Edwards, 'Bathroom Songs?' in *Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet* (Punctum Books, 2017), 17-76 (p. 18).

punished by ‘spanking’ becomes the rhythmic, controlled, and eroticized slap of poetry, Sedgwick elaborates a related discourse of ‘female anal eroticism’ (*T* 178). One effect is that in calling attention to her ‘difficult child,’ Sedgwick roots the political urgency of queer theory in not just the adult’s critical first-person, but in her fraught relation to her own poetry. In doing so, she forges the ‘absent’ (*T* 178) discourse of female anality that she identifies. She also urges us—or ‘you,’ as she will come to intimately address the reader by the essay’s end—to recognize and witness her creation, proving out the power of the newly emotionally-weighted critical performative.

At the same time, Sedgwick engages a complex mesh of shame and attachment, which underpins her treatment of the first-person in ‘A Poem.’ Calling our attention to the claim of her problem child, Sedgwick insists on the activation of our critical *interest*. Interest has a significant place in the scene of shame for Sedgwick. In the introduction to their edited collection of the writings of Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters*, she and Adam Frank write that Tomkins places shame ‘at one end of the affect polarity shame-interest.’¹⁶⁹ The pulsations of cathexis around shame, they suggest, ‘are what either enable or disable so basic a function as the ability to be interested in the world.’ They present this as being as much a theoretical question as a question of the disciplinary significance of theory. Tomkins is, they write, a redress to ‘the prevailing moralism of current theoretical writing,’ which attaches to shame ‘the prohibited or disapproved’: a symptom of a wider tendency that they see in theory, in its treatment of critical objects.¹⁷⁰

In part, Tomkins is useful in rebutting the moralism of theory because for

¹⁶⁹ Sedgwick and Adam Frank, ‘Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins,’ in *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, eds. Sedgwick and Frank (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 1-28 (p. 5).

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Sedgwick and Frank, he's simply deeply strange. Strangeness is a quality that Tomkins associates closely with shame. Because of its unfamiliar qualities, his work forces a different kind of attention—an interest—in the willing reader, which pries open the operations by which shame attempts to evacuate the subject (as in the performative, 'shame on you'). 'You don't have to be long out of theory kindergarten to make mincemeat' of much of Tomkins' writing, Sedgwick and Frank note, and he has the ability, for that reason, to productively 'terrify' the critic.¹⁷¹ Noting a passage in which Tomkins holds a cat, Bambi, until its fear resides, they strike a parallel with his writing. 'A potentially terrifying and terrified idea or image is taken up and held for as many paragraphs as are necessary to "burn out the fear response" [...]. Bambi isn't the only terrified wild thing in this picture.'¹⁷²

Like Henry James, Tomkins experienced major intellectual and creative blockages: seven years of a 'severe reading block' during his postdoctoral years at Harvard. The work is 'not least affective for the traces it bears of an intensively problematized verbal process,' Tomkins' block seemingly producing 'astonishingly heterogenous writing' that 'often embraces multiple overlapping voices to attenuate terror.'¹⁷³ Sedgwick, in 'A Poem Is Being Written,' does something similar. She seems to draw on Tomkins' example as she works to 'burn out the fear response' in her reader, in form that seems both a response to her own intensely problematized writing at the time, and a bid for the 'astonishingly heterogeneous' theorizing that was her hallmark in the period. The essay encourages us to find pleasure in an autobiographical criticism that takes not just female anality as a space of

¹⁷¹ Sedgwick and Frank, 2.

¹⁷² Sedgwick and Frank, 3.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

interest, but the critic's own poetry. It insists that we depart not only from the shame that might attach to anality in criticism, but from the shame of the autobiographical, and more specifically, the shame that Sedgwick worries might all too readily attach to her lost poetic identity. Sedgwick not only calls us to attend to these things—the polar opposite of shame, for Tomkins—but eventually to realize a 'like' criticism, positioning her experimental practice as originary.

Throughout, the authority we fall back on is that of the remarkable young critic, which should point us to the fact that Sedgwick feels something like shame in writing of her poetic identifications and ambitions. The authority of Sedgwick's critical 'I' allows her to ask that such shame is turned to both readerly attention and to the ultimate attention: the continuation of the discourse that she is here inducting. Just as Sedgwick and Frank see in Tomkins' strangeness the ability to point to the shamed and shaming dynamics of contemporary theory, we see Sedgwick pointing to the prominent aspect that her autobiographical first-person singular takes in the burgeoning field of queer critique: to burn out what she anticipates as her reader's fearful impulse toward moralism.

The essay opens, then, with Sedgwick calling attention to a child. She begins to turn over the child's 'claim.' It would be fairer, she reflects, to say that 'her claim to attention' isn't in the past but has 'persisted through every day of these twenty-seven years.'

What comes late, here, is then not her claim itself, which both deserves and was denied respect because of its very commonplaceness, but the rhetorical ground on which alone it can be made audible, which is unfortunately and misleadingly the ground of exception. She is allowed to speak, or I to speak of her, only here in the space of professional success and of hyperconscious virtuosity, conscious not least of the unusually narrow stylistic demands that hedge about any language that treats one's own past. [...] [O]nly an elegantly ostentatious chastity of style can at all neutralize the fearful (self-fearful) and projective squeamishness that for successful adults churns around the seeing displayed of children in their ambition and thought and grievance [...]. Fortunately, the visibly chastised is by now my favorite style. (*T*

Where to begin with this passage? To start with, offhandedly, we might note that it feels like someone who has been spending a lot of time with Henry James. The syntax is complex, its three-and-four clause sentences puckered with asides. It gives the impression of direct insight into sustained thought: roving and twisting while maintaining coherence. Then: its referents are so slippery. ‘What comes late, here, is then not her claim itself, which both deserves and was denied respect because of its very commonplaceness, but the rhetorical group on which it alone can be made audible,’ Sedgwick writes. By the third clause of that sentence, it’s hard to remember what exactly is being referred to by ‘it alone’—the words that nonetheless bears the clause’s stress.

At this point, we don’t know that the ‘child’ is also Sedgwick’s problem poem, *The Warm Decembers*. All we understand is that ‘it’ refers to nine-year-old Eve’s claim to attention. The effect is to place great significance on that claim, while also obscuring it, and the exact nature of the child to whom the massive claim pertains. All of this contributes to our sense that when we talk about the child and her claim, we’re talking about something deeply polysemous and multilayered. Which is to say, in the context of this book, that when we talk about ‘Eve,’ we’re talking about ‘queer.’

The sentence—‘what comes late [...]’—refers, of course, to the power and capacity of which Sedgwick is now in possession as a renowned and tenured professor. This is the ‘space of professional success’ and ‘hyperconscious virtuosity.’ It is only with this power, Sedgwick insists, that she would be able to call our attention to the ‘commonplace’ demands of the ‘child.’ Once we understand that the child is, variously, the autobiographical figure of Eve Kosofsky, and the fraught network of anxieties around the lost poem, we understand Sedgwick’s gesture to her own virtuosity to be underlining her

unique critical capacities, even as she lovingly cradles the ordinariness of the object that her teacher's pointer is now tapping. Glancing back at Sedgwick's reading of Tomkins, we see here that something vastly heterogeneous has, as in this case, bloomed from a 'severe block.'

Even as the 'elegantly ostentatious' style of the opening expresses a rich heterogeneity, it has another and related purpose: to chastise us. We are being squeamish, Sedgwick suggests: she anticipates our squirming and projective shame at her pointing to her problem child. Confronting that recoil, Sedgwick makes a two-way gesture. She insists that our shame is misplaced, in the face of her 'professional success' and 'hyperconscious virtuosity'; and in insisting on that professional success, also forces us to engage with her self-description. The effect is combative, with Sedgwick repeatedly eliciting our shame and repelling it back to us. In the multi-way scene of discursive subject formation, we are the witnesses, interpellating Sedgwick's 'I' into being. Meanwhile, Sedgwick's 'I' refracts our shaming projection back on us, interpellating us in turn into the scene of queer polysemy that works to cradle the 'commonplaceness' of her critical object (both Eve and the poem).

In being called to attend to Eve, despite the 'hedge[s]' on our attention, we are drawn into the 'theater' (*T* 182) of humiliation at the center of the essay. Playing on what she calls the 'shifty passive voice' (*T* 177) in the famous title of Freud's 'A Child is Being Beaten,' Sedgwick examines the role of discursive subjects across two key critical themes: the relationship of 'spanking' and poetry; and what she feels to be a productive and palpable critical absence, the non-existent discourse of female anal eroticism.¹⁷⁴ Recalling being punished by spanking as a child, Sedgwick turns to the figure of theatre in order to engage

¹⁷⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'A Child is Being Beaten,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2., trans. James Strachey and Alix Strachey (New York: Vintage, 1999), 179-181.

the passivity or otherwise of the critical reader-as-performative-witness. ‘When I was a little child the two most rhythmic things that happened to me were spanking and poetry’ (*T* 182), she recalls. Far from a story of abused children, she writes that her childhood was ‘an attentive, emotionally and intellectually generous matrix of nurturance and pedagogy’ (*T* 182). Within that matrix, though, there would be moments of ‘another, breath-holding space’: ‘a small, temporary visible and glamorizing theatre around the immobilized and involuntarily displayed lower body of a child’ (*T* 182). In her memory, as in her depiction of the scene to the reader, the displayed child is isolated inside a kind of proscenium.

Like Freud in the title of ‘A Child is Being Beaten,’ Sedgwick imaginatively ejects ‘the graphic multi-character drama of infliction and onlooking’ (*T* 183) that constitutes the scene. The other characters in the drama are pushed from the frame. The effect, she notes, is to create ‘a free switch point for the identities of subject, object, onlooker, desirer, looker-away’ (*T* 182). If this seems at first to be a scene of queer polysemy, in which the de-differentiated characters in the tableau meld and mutate in unfixed relation, then nonetheless the performative subject that emerges from the scene is Sedgwick, the ‘child’ around which the tableau has been arranged. Like the queer subject who perverts the marriage act, and so disrupts the central theatrical moment of performativity, Sedgwick perverts the scene of her own childhood passivity. But she does so, in part, in order to restore herself to the authority of the foreground.

Enjambment is a key device of control, ‘power,’ or ‘authority’ by which Sedgwick interrupts the tableau. Recounting a poem from Louis Untermeyer’s *The Golden Treasury of Poetry* that influenced her early understanding of meter, Sedgwick notes that she knew ‘its two-beat line as well as I know my own pulse.’ She describes the poem as ‘giving me a

kind of power, a kind of power I still feel, though I no longer feel it in this poem. The name of that power [...] is enjambment' (*T* 182). Enjambment articulates the shift from passivity to a role of active intercession. Like the word *tableau*, in which Sedgwick is 'struck' by the importance of the French etymology (*table* and *theatre*), she's struck with the French etymology of enjambment. It signifies the 'straddling together of lines syntactically,' which prompts her to an image of the 'pushing apart of lines' (*T* 185). This perversion is clearly reminiscent of the scene of queer performativity, in which the queer subject makes themselves felt through their activity in the scene of interpellation.

Initially, the power that Sedgwick associates with enjambment is one in which she merely interrupts the repressive beat of spanking. Enjambment thrusts 'up out of the picture plane in protest,' she writes, intercepting the blows and momentarily 'wed[ging] apart with sense the hammering iteration of rhythm' (*T* 185-186). But quickly it becomes something more generative. The 'thrilling' effect of 'gut- or groin- level resistance' allows the child-poet to express her 'decisiveness.' Her ability to resist the beat of punishment becomes 'a power not to resist the poem but, more simply, to decide it; a power, if you like, to spank' (*T* 186). The shame of being attended to is reconfigured as power: the authority not just to call interest to one's own source of shame, but to generate a discourse that de-shames it.

Sedgwick's critical interest in devices that involve the rejection, fulfillment, or over-fulfillment of a presumed formal structure is illustrated in her teaching materials. In an undated class handout on 'Rhetorical Devices,' held in her digital archives, Sedgwick notes the theoretical 'potential' of *anacoluthon*, in its refusal of the 'implied sequence within a sequence': its 'concluding [...] differently than the grammar leads one to expect.'¹⁷⁵ In the

¹⁷⁵ Sedgwick, 'Rhetorical Devices,' *EveKosofskySedgwick.net* (Undated). Web. <<https://evekosofskysedgwick.net/teaching/rhetorical-devices.html>>. [Accessed 11 March 2024].

same handout, Sedgwick notes how chiasmus ‘presumes a context of parallel structure,’ which turns on itself to a sideways end. Like enjambment in ‘A Poem,’ which allows the child/poet to impose her ‘power’ to ‘decide’ on the scene of abjection, these devices that defy or over-fulfill cause Sedgwick delight, because of their interference in the plane of ‘presume[d] [...] structure.’

Sedgwick’s pedagogical and critical fascinations with devices of ‘decisiveness’ are echoes of powerful strains in her thwarted poetic career. Intercessions and perversions of enjambment are a consistent quality of Sedgwick’s poetry, which often transfigures a presumed structure in the act of altering the subject formation of the ‘tableau.’ In his rich introduction to *Bathroom Songs*—his 2017 edition of Sedgwick’s previously uncollected early lyrics—Edwards notes that many of Sedgwick’s short poems turn on the loss or inclusion of a final line. Often, her poetry is ‘comprised of a form peculiar to her: a kind of loosely-rhymed, thirteen-line, “thin,” sonnet-like/sonnet-light,’ he observes, whose titles, internal line breaks, or blank lines suggest or replace the fourteenth line.¹⁷⁶ These are the ‘thin’ lyrics of her 1994 collection, *Fat Art, Thin Art*. On occasion, a ‘fatter’ lyric is marked not by the restoration of the fourteenth line but the inclusion of a fifteenth.¹⁷⁷

In one of these ‘fatter’ lyrics, titled ‘The Use of Being Fat’ (*FT* 15), Sedgwick describes a ‘superstition,’ long held, that ‘no one I loved could come to harm/ enfolded in my touch.’ She learned that she was wrong, she says, ‘Held/ even held/ they withdraw to the secret scenes of their unmaking.’

But then I think

¹⁷⁶ Jason Edwards, ‘Bathroom Songs?’, 25

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

It is true they *turn away* inside.

It feels so like refusal (*FT* 15)

Including the title as a line, these constitute the twelfth to fourteenth lines of the poem. In them, Sedgwick bemoans how even as she enfolds the people she loves, they're able to 'turn away' inside themselves, and also inside her embrace. She can't keep them safe, in part from themselves and their own tendency to 'unmaking.' But the 'fat' fifteenth line resolves her anxiety: 'maybe still there is something to my superstition,' the poem concludes. The line has the kind of winking humility that animates the aside, in *Tendencies'* foreword, in which Sedgwick describes the 'I' as a heuristic: 'maybe a powerful one.' Having debated the tableau of her loved ones' unmaking, her organizing power intercedes—formally too, in the extra line. If it's Sedgwick's 'I' that 'does,' in 'Queer and Now,' here it is Sedgwick's 'I' that 'makes.' We recall her description of enjambment: 'A power not to resist the poem but, more simply, to decide it; a power, if you like, to spank.' As she puts it at the beginning of 'A Poem': 'The visibly castigated is by now my favorite style.' Here we are, castigated and in the process performatively *made* in her embrace.

For Sedgwick the poet, the capacity to 'make' is readily available in the genius of poetic device. When her muse leaves, though, she's left with 'virtuosity' and 'professional success' in criticism through which to make and unmake herself and her collective. The result is that she is driven to new formal avenues. It's in this period that her interest in experimental criticism becomes prominent. She taught a class, in the early 1990s, titled 'Experimental Critical Writing,' which explored the permeable boundary between criticism and poetry. *Tendencies* is another expression of that permeable boundary, with its fascination with the non-fixity of the 'I,' at times figured—as in 'A Poem'—as a kind of lyrical subject, overheard, witnessed, and so constituted by the 'we' of the queer collective.

She also foregrounds the cross-genre play of her thought in ‘A Poem.’ ‘[M]y meditation on the punishing of children has occurred forward and backward across the years, and across the gaps of poetry and theory—and so I’ll need to present it here’ (*T* 178), she writes. That forward and backward movement finds an echo in the rhythmic beat of enjambment-quanspanking, which in turn binds the scene of poetic ‘power’ to the queer ambitions of Sedgwick’s criticism in the 1990s. *Tendencies*, we recall, is about ‘passionate queer things that happen *across the lines that divide* genders, discourses, and “perversions”’ (italics added).

Sedgwick saw her critical practice in this period as being necessarily based in experiment, and the critics she most admired were those who held ‘increasingly elastic understandings of the kind of writing the genre of criticism might accommodate’ (*FT* 160). In the foreword to *Tendencies*, she reflects on her desire to ‘recruit,’ ‘denude,’ and ‘transfigure’ the ‘energies of some received forms of writing that were important’ to her. These include ‘the autobiographical narrative,’ ‘the polemic,’ and the ‘prose essay that quotes poetry’ (*T* xiv). She understood gay and lesbian studies, or as it was quickly becoming, queer theory, to be the natural home of those experiments. In turn, queer theory’s heterogeneous thought, she felt, had to be animated by formal play. Yet the kind of play for which she reached in critique remained rooted in her poetic ambitions. In a note accompanying the 1994 printing of *The Warm Decembers*, Sedgwick shows how the ‘extreme heterogeneity’ of her contemporary criticism blossomed from the dispersed energy caused by her loss of her muse.

‘Part of my motive as a poet was that the most writerly writing I could do, and the most thinkerly thinking, be shown not to be generically alien to each other’ (*FT* 160), Sedgwick

writes, in her explanatory note to the 1994 printing of *The Warm Decembers*. While her muse was ‘left [...] in the bath’ (FT 159) with Beatrix, where she remained *in situ* in the final lines of the poem, Sedgwick was abandoned to finding new joy in queer critique. Alongside her powerful sense of the urgency of queer critique in the face of sweeping homophobic policies and the AIDS crisis, then, Sedgwick openly mourned the possibilities that she sees as residing most powerfully in poetry.

Looking back [...] I feel it anew—in how many ways even the thinkiest narrative poem is a stranger to even the most writerly criticism. Ontological thresholds not to be denied or dissolved, but sought out with longing; where possible crossed and recrossed, even at the risks of estrangement, loss, deformation, abandonment. How should I even pretend to promise never to try it again? (FT 160)

The inadequacy of criticism to fulfill Sedgwick’s ambitions for her poetry is deeply felt here. We see, in the recurrence of the language of crossing and recrossing, how in her queer criticism she found some kind of alternative life for her unrealized, or less successfully realized poetic ambitions. Whereas she depicts her critical ‘I’ as the relational, performative force that coheres queer critique’s *troublant* movement, the ‘I’ of her poetry ‘risks [...] estrangement, loss.’ In the poetry, the ‘I’ becomes the focus of those ontological traversals that are otherwise the object of her queer critique. As she writes of *The Warm Decembers*: ‘I see the whole poem as gathering instances of [...] ontological thresholds and of the perverse, desiring energies that alone can move across them’: between a ‘child and adult’; ‘a writer [...] and a character; ‘an I and a she or he’ (FT 157). These dyads and triads aren’t negotiated by the poetic first-person singular, so much as simultaneous with it or constitutive of it. For: ‘one way to describe the poem’s first person is an attempt to make the difference between I and she or he no more weighty or unappealable than these other differentials’ (FT 157). She wanted the poem to be the fullest expression of her capacities. ‘My mind had billboarded [...] “your *tour de force* here!”’ (FT 158). Instead, that headline

spot had to be given to critique.

The first two thirds of ‘A Poem’ explore what Sedgwick calls the ‘three different non- or misrecognitions’ condensed in the lyric tableau of at the beaten child, ‘or in my “identification with” it’ (*T* 197).¹⁷⁸ The first misrecognition is of violence for nurture—which is then redressed by the agency that Sedgwick feels in enjambment. Sedgwick explicitly aligns this misrecognition, and her response to it, with professional success, describing the way that the ‘maturing child’ works through the learned recognition of spanking-as-care, ‘toward a position of sadism and cultural authority’ (*T* 197). The second misrecognition is multiple: it is the tangle of ‘meaning’ that gathers around the legibility or illegibility of the child’s body. ‘There is always potential for a terrifying involuntarity of meaning, in the body of the child,’ Sedgwick writes. This ‘leakage or involuntarity of meaning’ is ‘easily located in *the behind*’ (*T* 199). This leads us to the final misrecognition: by which female anal eroticism, having been marked by its absence from literary-historical discourse, misrecognizes itself ‘in its need to join a preexisting current of discourse through which to become manifest, to be fulfilled, manipulated, or even frankly repressed—to become, in short, meaningful’ (*T* 206). This final misrecognition propels an overarching and conclusive misrecognition of its own. The female critic, facing the ‘vastation of meaning surrounding women’s anality,’ and yet nonetheless driven by ‘attachment to her seat’ (*T* 210), is propelled ‘across gender, in a male homosexual identification.’ This is Sedgwick’s famous moment of ‘identification “as” a gay man’ (*T* 209).

Driving ‘A Poem’ then, and organizing these multiple misrecognitions, is Sedgwick’s

¹⁷⁸ On the political relationship between Freud’s essay, the ‘desire to be punished,’ and the social conditions of gender and sexuality, see: Wendy Brown, ‘The Desire to Be Punished: Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten,”’ in *Politics Out of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 45-61.

grappling with ‘the meaningless[ness] [of the] female grasp’ (T 212). Each of the misrecognitions, in her tableau, involve her sense of the impediments to women’s capacity to control the scene of interpretation, even, or especially, where it is most personal, most viscerally (anally) felt. Poetry is the beating heart of Sedgwick’s battle to *mean*. Faced with the loss of her muse, the critic is compelled to contemplate the wider dynamics of the loss of meaning and agency. Indicatively, the essay ends with a lyric, written in 1975, which Sedgwick insists is a redress: here ‘the meaningless female grasp has meaning’ (T 212). The lyric poses a voice addressing ‘Eve,’ and recounts a scene of intense sexual communication, with ‘Eve’s’ desire mirrored back to her. ‘Oh Eve,’ the lyric opens, addressing her as ‘you.’ The lyric subject dissolves in and out of the theatre of sexual humiliation that she’s witnessing: ‘you’re fighting tears, while down the broad half-gleaming/ back the raised ass is wedged conclusively/ open—and that’s me. I’m fond/ of identifying with your delight,’ the speaker tells ‘Eve’ (T 213). Or as the poem concludes:

[...] I needn’t wonder if your voice
hollows under mine, sounding delicate, or absent,
the gluttoned body of that voice being here. (T 214)

In this closing lyric, Sedgwick restores to herself the presence of her voice—‘being here’—in the essay about the loss of her voice.¹⁷⁹ And yet, pointing to Sedgwick’s anxiety over poetry and criticism in this period, those lines are disturbed in the almost incidental inclusion of what we might call the ‘fat’ line of the essay. After the lyric, ‘A Poem’ features a final footnote.

Part of the motivation behind my work on [‘A Poem’] has been a fantasy that

¹⁷⁹ While I don’t have space to fully engage it here, Julia Jarcho’s powerful argument that ‘A Poem’ performs what she describes as a ‘masochistic dialectic’—in which Sedgwick offers her autobiographical ‘I’ to be overwritten by theory, while also rendering the ‘I’ vulnerable to a differently masochistic ‘outside’—is highly pertinent. “‘Half Erased by Discipline: The Masochism of Sedgwick’s Autotheory,’ *Why Me? Conference*, Brown University (12 April 2024).

readers or hearers would be variously—in anger, identification, pleasure, envy, “permission,” exclusion—stimulated to write accounts “like” this one (whatever that means) of their own, and share those. (*T* 214)

In this closing gesture, we see not only Sedgwick’s generous ambitions for what her personal criticism might ‘permit’ in others, but also a kind of self-consoling hope, by which community, identification, ‘like’ minds and works, appear recompense for the absence of the poetry. Consistently associating poetry with ‘love,’¹⁸⁰ Sedgwick appears to replace it, in the scene of criticism and ‘professional success,’ with a different kind of love: the bolstering attachments of a queer collective, that might go some way to making up for the company of Beatrix. The proscenium or tableau of spanking at the heart of ‘A Poem’ is a version of what Sedgwick identifies as the queerness at the heart of the Austinian marriage example: a scene in which, by reorganizing the subject positions, attachments, and personal orientations of its actors, the emergence of the first-person, of singularity, of the present tense, and of the grammar of active and indicative, are all rendered ‘questions, rather than presumptions’ (*QP* 4). Yet from Sedgwick’s scene, as we see in the final moments of ‘A Poem,’ her own critical ‘I’ emerges preeminent. We are returned, finally, to the sentiment with which she began the essay: her first-person marking this ‘space of professional success and [...] hyperconscious virtuosity,’ in place of her truer ‘I,’ the ‘I’ of poetry.

‘Permeable we—me, plus anybody else’: *A Dialogue on Love* (1999)

As we’ve seen, *Tendencies*—and particularly ‘A Poem’—maps the often fraught, often richly productive relationship between Sedgwick’s budding critical persona, her unsteady experimental and poetic self, and the intimate collectivities that she saw as integral to their

¹⁸⁰ See e.g. discussion of love in *The Warm Decembers*, quoted ‘A Poem,’ 201.

negotiation and formation. *Tendencies* is exemplary of Sedgwick's mid-career in this respect. It crystallizes a moment in which Sedgwick was coming off the back of her receipt of tenure, the extraordinary reception of first *Between Men* and then *Epistemology*, and the 'professional success' and 'hyperconscious virtuosity' that she needed to bolster her 'I,' at the heart of the politically urgent queer theoretical project.

If the 'I' of *Tendencies* expresses a set of real tensions in Sedgwick's mid-career, *A Dialogue on Love* signals a shift: from anxious virtuosity, to the more affective and reparative impulses of her late career. Through her discussions with a new therapist, Shannon Van Wey, beginning in 1992, we see Sedgwick through a period of first enormous depression, following by a turn toward Buddhism, textile art, and ultimately the argument for repair, all of which would mark the remainder of her career. The work begins in a period of crisis, her meetings with Van Wey picking up in the wake of her most recent breast cancer diagnosis, chemotherapy, and double mastectomy. She describes her depression as manifesting in part as guilt. As she says to Van Wey, early in their sessions:

It's frightening to feel so little attachment to a life that's so full of the things other people long for—rightly long for, I think: a lot of intimacy, enough money, peace and privacy, intellectual stimulation, plenty of recognition, time for my own work, no violence, both parents living, mostly good health, a long, tender relationship with my fella, oodles of terrific friends. [...] But somehow the goodness of these good things doesn't find its way inside me. I go after them purposefully enough, but when they arrive it's as if I didn't know how to reach my hand out and pull them in. (DL 15-16)

Sedgwick's purpose for undertaking *Dialogue*, at least in part, is her need to reinscribe the discursive scene by which the 'I' is constituted in relation to a loved and loving community. It's not that the community doesn't surround her, it's that she's impeded from accessing its wealth of meaning-making, which underpins the capacity of her 'I.' Recalling her sonnet, 'The Use of Being Fat,' we see Sedgwick's depression expressed as an inability

to ‘enfold’ her loved ones in her ‘touch,’ seen here in her sense that all the ‘good things’ of her life can’t seem to ‘find [their] way inside [her].’ The blockage is two-way: she ‘go[es] after them purposefully,’ to no avail, and they similarly can’t ‘find’ their way to her. The mechanics of reciprocity are damaged. Sedgwick can’t work out how to ‘reach [her] hand out’ to the attachments that animated her earlier work. Her ‘stubborn little narrative’ feels lost, in its lack of confluence with the crashing wave of queer relation.

Sedgwick’s anxiety about her capacity to relate, or to enfold, at the start of *Dialogue* indicates her initial proximity to the ‘I’ of *Tendencies*. By the end of *Dialogue*, though, her sense of the first-person singular has shifted towards ambivalence, if not disavowal. The book is a *haibun*, a 17th century Japanese form that interweaves prose and verse, and in which personal and autobiographical themes have historically predominated.¹⁸¹ The *haibun* enacts a formal discursive interplay: the verse and prose sections echoing conversation between Sedgwick and Van Wey, and between Sedgwick and various ‘bits’ of herself.¹⁸² Even as the *haibun* form inscribes a set of shifting, multiple subjectivities at the heart of the work, it is also personal and autobiographical. We might read the *haibun* as motivated by Sedgwick’s depressive hunger for the kind of relation that underscores the authority and power of the ‘I.’ But in line with a gradual lifting of her depression, Sedgwick comes to distrust the individuated first-person singular. As the work unfolds, the multiplicity of the speaking voices, rather than the voices’ ability to bolster the first-person singular, becomes primary. As Van Wey reflects back to Sedgwick in his notes, near the book’s close, she has

¹⁸¹ William Wenter, ‘Haibun,’ in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Roland Greene et al, 4th ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 592. Bashō is seen as the 17th century master of the haibun. The form was revived in the U.S. in the 1980s and ‘90s, including by James Merrill, one of Sedgwick’s most important and lasting intellectual influences. See e.g.: Sedgwick, ‘The 1001 Seances,’ *GLQ*, 17.4 (2011), 457-481.

¹⁸² Sedgwick and Michael D. Snediker, ‘Queer Little Gods: A Conversation,’ *The Massachusetts Review*, 49:1 (2008), 194–218 (p. 198). See also: Teagan Bradway, ‘Permeable We!’ *GLQ*, 19:1 (2013), 79-110 (p. 85).

become reticent as to *Dialogue*'s reliance on the 'I': 'the first person is both labor intensive and felt to be constraining,' he writes, ventriloquizing her (*DL* 207). This is a far cry from the 'dense, accessible effects of knowledge, history, revulsion, authority, and pleasure' that Sedgwick tied to her 'I' in *Tendencies*.

One of the most potent expressions of Sedgwick's changing sense of collectivity and performativity in this period is in her discussion, around the halfway point of *Dialogue*, of the first-person plural, 'we.' Recalling her 'pride,' as a child, in 'going anywhere' with her older sister, Sedgwick reflects on

The extravagant
rightness of it! Intimate
sanction for us two,

to be sealed with my
favorite pronoun: the dear
first person plural.

[...]

Promiscuous we!
Me, plus anybody else.
Permeable we! (*DL* 105-106)

Reading this set of haikus with the 'I' of *Tendencies*, and on the line that I've been arguing, it's tempting to see Sedgwick as centering herself even as she gathers around her a queer, approving, and enfolded collective. In this reading, 'Me' is primary, and the identity of the surrounding witnesses secondary, even irrelevant: 'plus anybody else.' We might also, in this reading, pick up on the way that the 'dear/ first person plural' is made rosy by the light of Sedgwick's own delight in it; the fact that it is her 'favorite' placing her attachments at the heart of the 'we.' And, too, Sedgwick's sense of the 'extravagant/ rightness' of her intimacy with her sister seems rooted in the capacity of the plural pronoun to 'seal' them

together; an image of encompassing that recalls her ‘enfold[ing]’ of her loved ones, to make them signify. But these aren’t the only readings, and in them, we risk overlooking the changes to Sedgwick’s understanding of the first person singular that she tracks in *Dialogue*.

Teagan Bradway’s reading of *Dialogue* powerfully counteracts the above. She sees *Dialogue* as expressing a distinctly Buddhist conception of intimacy, with the work being underpinned by a ‘network of permeable relation’ in which ‘the transpersonal field [is] so large it confounds epistemology modeled on the scale of a single consciousness.’¹⁸³ In illustrating this, Bradway picks up on the way that ‘promiscuity’ is replaced by ‘permeability’ in the final stanza above. She points out that whereas promiscuity implies a dialogic movement among objects, permeability goes further: ‘the object itself, the “me,” is riven and open to movements within and through’ promiscuous relation.¹⁸⁴ This passage condenses then, for Bradway, the expansive and transitive interpersonal politics of *Dialogue* as a whole: a work in which queerness, in all its expansive relation, ‘undermines the self’s narcissistic desire for infinite reciprocity,’ replacing mere reciprocity with a radical splintering of the individualized ‘I.’¹⁸⁵ Sedgwick’s depiction of relation, Bradway argues, might even be called *impersonal*. Through the permeability of her ‘we,’ Sedgwick proposes a model of ethical intersubjectivity that consistently ‘fan[s] out beyond the two.’¹⁸⁶

In probing the distinction between these two readings, it’s useful to note the water imagery that floods the haikus above. In her prose meditations, wedged promiscuously

¹⁸³ Bradway, ‘Permeable We!’ 91.

¹⁸⁴ Bradway, ‘Permeable We!’ 90.

¹⁸⁵ Bradway, ‘Permeable We!’ 91.

¹⁸⁶ Bradway, ‘Permeable We!’ 104.

between the haikus, Sedgwick reflects that ‘it never surprised *me* that “we,” in French, meant yes’ (*DL* 106). As we’ve seen, Sedgwick’s preoccupation with anality is well-documented, but as Edwards has noted, she was also fascinated by ‘urethrality.’¹⁸⁷ Sedgwick plays on the flowing movement between ‘we,’ ‘oui,’ and ‘wee.’ In a move similar to her delight in the perverted slippages between, for instance, ‘table’ and ‘theatre’ in *tableau*, which serve to control our gaze on Sedgwick’s de-shamed lower half, she here weaves the urethral etymological associations around their central rhyme: ‘me.’ We’re reminded of the water imagery in *Tendencies*: the ‘crashing wave’ of the ‘we’ joining and substantiating the ‘little, stubborn current’ of individual desiring cathexis and cognition. Just as there she kept the readings open, in the haikus above we’re made conscious of the remarkable permeability of her ‘we.’ At the same time, we’re aware of the limits of discursive authority in a work that is ultimately a personal account of a literary critic’s experience of therapy.

The answer to whether Sedgwick is using queer collectivity to bolster her personal authority, or instead exploring a radically depersonalized Buddhist epistemology, may be simply: it’s both. This conclusion is more generative than it might first appear. Sedgwick’s love for the ‘permeable we’ should prompt some skepticism in her reader, as to its function in propping up the authority claims of the critic. Sedgwick, in fact, often doesn’t pretend otherwise, but points to her not-so-hidden agenda. Pointing is one function of the wit of her criticism, which is never more present than in her teasing reflections on her own ‘virtuosity’ and ‘power’: ‘Me, plus anybody else,’ she writes, and the joke is in the simultaneity of her self-absorption, and the witty humility that pointing to self-absorption

¹⁸⁷ Edwards, ‘Bathroom Songs?’ 31-37.

produces. There is a similar kind of wryness in her listing of the qualities of ‘a life that’s so full of the things other people long for.’ ‘A lot of intimacy, enough money, peace and privacy, intellectual stimulation.’ We are, simultaneously: intrigued by the elaborate recitation of the richness of her personal life; chastised, in the face of her recent battle with cancer and current depression; and amused by the quiet wit of the staging.

Sedgwick’s ‘virtuosic’ management of the staging of her ‘I’ is key to her ability to enfold collectivities into her critical-personal embrace, while also underlining her central role in their constitution—to say nothing of her personal *need* for reciprocity with them. Through carefully managed ambiguity, or a heterogeneity of readings, Sedgwick bridges the gap between arguing the performative force of her individualized and personal ‘I,’ and turning toward repair, Buddhist pluralism, and the open weft of textile art. This, ultimately, is how Sedgwick engages what I have in my introduction identified as the relationship between intimacy and personal writing: the negotiation between ‘me’ and ‘we.’ The two are always in relation, but in her virtuosity, Sedgwick is able through her critical first-person to make that relation really thrum, drawing out the ever-present plurality of pronominal grammar. ‘Promiscuous we!/ Me, plus anybody else./ Permeable we!’

Impersonality, repair, and *The Argonauts*

After *A Dialogue on Love* was published in 1999, an excerpt from the work was republished in the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* titled ‘Intimacy.’ Mapping some key trends in turn-of-the-millennium literary scholarship on sex, publicity and privacy, trauma, and affect, the collection also indicated the preoccupations of its editor, Lauren Berlant. Intimacy, Berlant argues in the introduction, is marked by ‘strong ambivalences.’ It is

enacted and sustained through institutions. Institutions of intimacy normalize certain narratives, which then serve in the creation of ‘compliant subjects,’ who are cruelly attached to those implied futures. Various essays in the volume also follow this line, which includes Berlant and Michael Warner’s ‘Sex in Public,’ Eli Zaretsky on charisma, and Elizabeth Povinelli on shame. *Dialogue*, with its optimistic ethics of relation and amusement at the autobiographical subject, stands out among these essays. At the same time, *Dialogue*’s inclusion indicates a shift, and some of the tensions, in what we’ve come to call the ‘reparative turn.’

Sedgwick’s essay, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You,’ had come out in 1997, as the introduction to the edited volume, *Novel Gazing*.¹⁸⁸ The essay, now known as one of the landmark texts in the method shifts in literary academia in the past forty years, took up Melanie Klein’s theorization of paranoia and depression, using Klein’s ‘positions’ as heuristics by which to critique trends in theory across the mid-to-late 20th century. Through the paranoid position, which describes an excessive ‘alertness’ to the scary, envious, and harmful ‘part-objects’ that surround us from childhood onwards, Sedgwick shed light on what she saw as the prohibitive techniques of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ with its obsessive focus on exposure. The depressive position, meanwhile, offered the possibility of ‘repair.’ Through repair, the paranoid ‘part-objects’ could be reassembled into ‘something like a whole,’ though ‘*not necessarily any preexisting whole.*’¹⁸⁹ In repair, then, Sedgwick advocated for a reconfigured orientation toward the critical object: one founded in the possibility of repairing or building something from the damaged detritus of contemporary

¹⁸⁸ Sedgwick, *Novel Gazing*, 1-37.

¹⁸⁹ Sedgwick, *Novel Gazing*, 8. Italics in original.

culture. As I mentioned in the introduction, this project of repair would crucially entail rich and sustaining opportunities for examining the relationship between ‘any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller.’¹⁹⁰

For Berlant, in an essay, ‘Two Girls, Fat and Thin,’ published first in *Regarding Sedgwick* (2002) and then *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Sedgwick’s turn to repair signaled a concerning tendency in her writing, indicative of queer critique more widely. Repair’s focus on the relationship between knowledge and the ‘seeker, knower, or teller’ hewed too closely to what Berlant worried was queer theory’s ‘orientation toward interiority.’¹⁹¹ Sedgwick’s vision for reparative critique is apparent in *Dialogue*—both in the sense she explores of new ‘wholes’ that might arise from unbounded relation—and in the text’s simultaneous fascination with what that process might mean for the autobiographical critic. Whereas Bradway understands Sedgwick as having cast off the self’s ‘narcissistic desire for infinite reciprocity,’ Berlant rooted the turn to repair in the value it served to the individual: ‘must the project of queerness start “inside” the subject and spread out from there?’ (*CO* 125).

The special issue, ‘Intimacy,’ marks then a fissure that was taking place in queer and affective critique in the period. Berlant’s introduction, and their essay with Warner, pointed toward what Seigworth and Pedwell have narrativized as affect and queer theory’s turn towards negativity after 2000.¹⁹² Sedgwick’s text points a different direction for critique: one oriented toward new trends in queer utopianism, queer optimism—or what

¹⁹⁰ Sedgwick, *Novel Gazing*, 4.

¹⁹¹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 125. All further references in the text.

¹⁹² Seigworth and Pedwell, ‘A Shimmer of Inventories,’ 1-59.

Patricia Stuelke identifies as neoliberalism's affective episteme: a 'casting of knowledge, self and world in the language of emotion and feeling.'¹⁹³ (She asks a revealing question: 'How has anti-imperialism become associated with feeling-as-practice and the rejection of historicism and ideology critique?')¹⁹⁴ The significance of this divergence, which is broadly summarized in the split between repair and the 'anti-social thesis,' is captured at the level of personal form—the significance of the 'I'—in 'Two Girls, Fat and Thin.' Berlant reads Sedgwick's turn to repair as an expression of a neoliberal ideological imperative to prioritize the value of any given knowledge for self-fulfillment and self-directed benefit.

In taking up Berlant's critique, I want to ask: to what extent can any individual instance of autobiographical criticism be understood as an expression of neoliberal ideological conditions? By this, I mean: how far can a single text, or an author's body of texts, be said to express what Berlant sees as the romance of neoliberal entrepreneurialism—the drive toward narratives that map effective self-management toward successful results? Sedgwick's oeuvre provides an uneasy ground for such critique, because of its extraordinary, and self-described, virtuosity and nuance. But in Sedgwick's legacy—and more broadly, the legacy of the reparative turn—we find reparative practices that showcase the heroic self-management and personal revelations of the autobiographical critic or author. Might we find, then, the neoliberal ideological politics of a given text manifest less in the 'virtuosic,' vibrant, and vastly complex weft of any given critic's oeuvre, than in the long discursive tail of their critical nebula? More specifically: can we usefully detach the political and critical legacy of repair from the generative and slippery

¹⁹³ Patricia Stuelke, 9. Stuelke is here quoting from Dierdra Reber: 'A Tale of Two Marats: On the Abhorrence of Verticality, from Laissez-Faire to Neoliberalism,' *Novel*, 15:2 (2018), 188-209 (p. 190).

¹⁹⁴ Stuelke, 9.

performances of Sedgwick's autobiographical 'I'?

The central reading of Berlant's 'Two Girls, Fat and Thin' is of Mary Gaitskill's novel of the same name. The two protagonists of the novel are Dorothy Never and Justine Shade, brought together in their battles for 'a good life' (CO 129) following childhood sexual trauma. Both girls cultivate 'habituated modes of being [that] are also techniques of self-annihilation and negation' (CO 133). Taught in childhood to alienate themselves from scenes of painful and traumatic closeness, as adults, Dorothy and Justine pursue habits that allow them to both dissociate from 'the engulfing world of normal intimacy' (CO 132) as needed, and also to find optimistic and embodied attachments. Their practices in this differ: Dorothy lives in 'beautiful and elaborate fantasies' (CO 131), epitomized in her idealization of Justine, her compulsive eating, and eventually her devotion to an Ayn Rand-ian movement, Definitism. Justine obliterates herself in S&M. Bookending Berlant's reading of the novel are sections that set up alternative girls: Berlant and Sedgwick. The two critics' identifications shift readily between the two characters of the novel, but there is a suggested alignment between Sedgwick's reparative, personal, and fat Dorothy, to Berlant's self-abnegating, impersonal, and ascetic Justine.

For Berlant, the figures of Dorothy and Justine dramatize some of the distinctions, if not antagonisms, between the personal qualities of repair, and the impersonal qualities that Berlant believes are important for a model of queer theory that resists the affective lure of neoliberalism. Berlant sees Dorothy and Justine as responding to trauma by pursuing impersonal practices of intimacy: they manage to attach to life while also resisting the idea that intimacy is predicated on the full exposure of the autobiographical self. This is in some ways a necessary line of argument for Berlant, for reasons that are themselves

autobiographical. Sedgwick's 'public stories about becoming possible'—Berlant gives the example of *Fat Art*, *Thin Art* and *Dialogue*—'recount a crowded world of loving family and friends' (CO 125); 'oodles' of loved-ones, as Sedgwick herself puts it. Berlant's own crowded scene of childhood trauma, by contrast, was marked by violence that they were forced to reconceive as impersonal: '*This isn't about me*' (CO 125). Despite the inevitable 'unpleasant effects' of this conclusion, Berlant describes how a world organized on lines of impersonality helped them to reattach to optimism, but an optimism that is importantly distinct from Sedgwick's more heroic model of reparative and self-fulfilling attachment.

The two valences of optimism that Berlant sets up mark fissures between personal and impersonal critique; heroic and anti-heroic visions of selfhood; narrative arcs of success and fulfillment, as opposed to more ambivalent imaginings of what is politically and personally possible; and neoliberal ideological and affective compulsions, as opposed to methods of resistance. For Berlant, proposing a critique modeled on impersonal intimacy, optimism is not an arc of flourishing so much as a traversal. As they put it in a 2011 interview with Jay Prosser, on the topic of autobiography: 'I am not interested in [...] my autobiography separately from my conceptualization of problems of disorganized, impaired, blocked, stuck, non-coherent being.'¹⁹⁵ As we've seen, such blockages are integral and productive features of Sedgwick's most personal critique: contemplating the loss of her muse, Sedgwick was prompted to experiment further in autobiographical theoretical writing. But Sedgwick's implied fascination with what Berlant calls the 'drama of the self' poses, for Berlant, a real political and critical concern: a risk that attaches to ongoing significance and possibilities of queer theory. 'It brings out my queerness to think

¹⁹⁵ Berlant and Jay Prosser, 'Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant,' *Biography*, 34:1 (2011), 180-187 (p. 186).

of living not only as self-extension but also as a process that interferes with the drama of the self,' they write (*CO* 125).

For Berlant, the risks that a heroic autobiographical mode pose to queer critique attach particularly to the turn to repair. 'I love the idea of reparative reading insofar as it is a practice of meticulous curiosity,' they write:

But I also resist idealizing, even implicitly, any program of better thought or reading. How would we know when the "repair" we intend is not another form of narcissism or smothering will? [...] I'm suggesting that the overvaluation of reparative thought is both an occupational hazard and part of a larger overvaluation of a certain mode of virtuously intentional, self-reflective personhood. (*CO* 124)

At stake, for Berlant, is the possibility that repair might in placing enormous value on the feeling and experience of the individualized critic, also overvalue what theory 'does' in the world. This is what Berlant calls a fallacy of 'heroic authorship' (*CO* 124) wherein the theorist imagines herself to have transformational force and potential, and in which she is accordingly heroically implicated and valorized. The echoes between 'virtuous' and 'virtuosic' are serendipitous: Sedgwick's virtuosic performances of reparative critical attention implicated in a broader, disciplinary overvaluation of 'self-reflective personhood.' The reparative model of personhood—the kind of personhood performed by the reparative critic—is one that Berlant contrasts to impersonality's willingness to detach from the narrative arc of self-directed, intentional self-fulfillment. 'There is no romance of the impersonal,' Berlant writes, 'no love plot for it' (*CO* 126). The figure points to the love plot that supports Sedgwick's personal flourishing, her busy landscape of loved ones. In the interview with Prosser, Berlant describes this flourishing as a narrative based in the 'transformative event.'¹⁹⁶ The transformative event illustrates the degree to which we are

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

impelled, and compelled, to ‘take up positions of clarity in relation to objects, worlds, and situations,’ and to foreground ‘being this or that kind of thing at a particular moment.’¹⁹⁷ But in doing so, it risks embedding an ever-flourishing, much-loved, clarified and entire critical subject as the heroic figure in a heroic model of highly effective critique.

Foregrounded in Berlant’s critique is the idea that Sedgwick’s reparative, personal, and epiphanic practices have had or will have enduring effects in queer theory. Where can we find those personal and impersonal, heroic and anti-heroic practices of queer critique being played out, in writing after Sedgwick? The case study that looms over 21st century queer literature is Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*. Soon after it came out, *The Argonauts* had already become the focus of op-eds and profiles; special issues and colloquia; podcasts and Substack posts. It has prompted both widespread identification and self-conscious backlash. Sam Huber, at a ‘Salon in Honor of Maggie Nelson’ at Barnard College, summarized the tension, expressing his own anxiety about ‘declaring [his] joy’ at the work, while ‘some queers I know have since posed as too cool—that is to say, too queer—for this particular readerly affect, especially in response to this universally beloved book.’¹⁹⁸

Many readers and critics, Huber included, identified *The Argonauts* as not just Sedgwickian, but specifically reparative. ‘That pose of too-cool or too-queer is related, of course, to all those other boxes on the radicalism checklist that *The Argonauts* would gently shake us loose of,’ Huber writes.

[L]ike the right things, but don’t be taken over by them; always be ready with an analysis; never be caught not-knowing or not-having-anticipated (those persistent

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Sam Huber, ‘The Argonauts: A Salon in Honor of Maggie Nelson,’ Barnard Center for Research on Women (14 April 2016). Web. <<https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/argonauts/>>. [Accessed 16 April 2024]. Huber is also referring to his review of *The Argonauts* in *Feministing*: ‘Feministing Reads: Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts* (22 May 2015). Web. <<https://feministing.com/2015/05/22/feministing-reads-maggie-nelsons-the-argonauts/>>. [Accessed 16 April 2024].

trademarks of paranoid reading as Sedgwick originally articulated it); be wary of beauty, of naturalized bodies, of the instrumentalization of queer pain. [...] How thrilling, then, to reread this book nearly a year later and find that it inspires the same joy, the same excessive attachment.

In Huber's summary, queer critical politics—aligned here with 'radicalism' or leftism more broadly—is the repressive, castigatory, cold, and unfeeling bad reader, to the joy and excess that Huber traces from Sedgwick to Nelson. The paranoid wing of queer theory is depicted as the overzealous, over-anxious graduate student, too insecure to admit to not being 'ready with an analysis.' Paranoid methods come off as naive, unfounded, scabbled together to serve personal insecurities. This is a critic who, rather than 'feed[ing] off' their 'stoic awareness of connections and consequences invisible to others,' as Rita Felski describes the paranoid reader, is instead starved of joy, jittery.¹⁹⁹ The reparative critic meanwhile, as the implicit inverse, comes off as bold, secure: a subject who, in Sedgwick's terms, has been equipped to repair the scary and harmful 'part-objects' that haunt the paranoid graduate student theorist. They are freed by their stable emotional grounding among 'oodles' of loved-ones.

The moral implications of this are explicit, even as they are disavowed by repair's stress on what Huber describes—of *The Argonauts*—as an 'expansive vocabulary for happiness.' Despite this stress on plethora and pleasure, personal judgments and affiliations attach remarkably readily to repair. We see a version of this in Berlant's discussion of Justine and Dorothy. Even as Berlant advocates for impersonal intimacy, they make that argument using a taxonomy of character: 'fat and thin'; compulsive and ascetic; traumatic backstories and vulnerable exposure. The girls resist neat categorization in terms of either paranoia or repair. But they also introduce a personal quality to Berlant's critique, with

¹⁹⁹ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 35.

their fleshed-out, vulnerable, and traumatic backstories, that seems to cling to debates around the reparative turn. *The Argonauts*, a work that has most often been read in terms of its generic expression of autotheory and Nelson's background as a 'confessional' writer, is an exemplary flashpoint, illustrating the way that reparative/paranoid debates elicit personal methods—and in the process, perhaps overvalue the political effectiveness of personal reparative response.

In *The Argonauts*, Nelson dramatizes the personal antagonisms that attend the reparative/paranoid scene in her own version of Justine and Dorothy. These are the warring figures of Rosalind Krauss and Jane Gallop, whose presentations at a City University of New York (CUNY) seminar devolve, in Nelson's recollection, into a brutal intellectual pile-on. Nelson was present at the seminar as a graduate student in 1998. 'I was excited,' she recounts. 'Back in college I had liked Gallop's heady, disobedient books on Lacan.'²⁰⁰ Krauss' work, meanwhile, 'I knew less well, but I gathered everyone was invested in her theories about the modernist grid, and I liked the plain matte cover of *October* magazine' (A 48). The tone is intently naive. Just as Sedgwick often manipulates the humility gesture to illuminate her deeply secure critical authority, so Nelson paints a gently humorous picture of herself as a new graduate student, dipping her toe into the dramas of contemporary theory. 'I felt as though I had truly arrived' (A 48), she writes, as the theorists take their places.

Gallop's presentation immediately identifies her as a warm, messy 'good enough mother,' in D. W. Winnicott's phrase, which resounds through Nelson's narrative. Gallop gives a slide show, which includes naked pictures of herself and her son. She describes her

²⁰⁰ Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House, 2015), 48. All further references in the text.

interest in the dynamics of being photographed and seen as a ‘a mother,’ exploring motherhood’s associations of the ‘troublingly personal, anecdotal, self-concerned’ (A 49). Nelson’s comments on the slideshow position Gallop in recognizably reparative terms. ‘I liked that Gallop was onto something and letting us in on it before she fully understood it. She was hanging her shit out to dry: a start’ (A 49). Gallop’s comfort with incompleteness and vulnerability is not just a critical method but an embodied performance, for Nelson, who describes her as ‘droopy-eyed and louche,’ with ‘endearing[ly]’ un-cool style (A 49). There is a close concordance with the language in which Huber describes the reparative reader, against the ‘too-cool’ figure of paranoia.

Krauss is Gallop’s inverse. Her face is ‘sharp’ to Gallop’s droop, ‘feline’ and ‘classy in a silk scarf, Ivy League, Upper East Side way’ (A 50). Nelson remembers her as initially praising Gallop’s early work, setting the bait before the inevitable switch. ‘The importance of this early work is why it is so deeply disturbing to behold the mediocrity, naivety, and soft-mindedness of the work Gallop has presented to us today’ (A 50), Nelson writes, ventriloquizing Krauss. Nelson quickly returns to her own perspective: ‘The color drained out of Gallop’s face’ (A 50). She recounts as Krauss ‘excoriate[s]’ Gallop, ‘dismembers’ her, and goes ‘in for the kill’ (A 50). The focus of Krauss’ critique is the excessively ‘personal’ quality of Gallop’s new work, her folly in ‘taking her own personal situation as subject matter, of having almost willful blindness to photography’s long history’ (A 50).

Though Nelson initially describes Krauss as having specifically critiqued Gallop on the quality and content of her scholarship, she quickly comes to read Krauss’ critique as founded in a general distaste for Gallop’s personal presentation. Krauss, Nelson writes, has

‘always been something of a pugilist, just as Gallop has always been something of a narcissist’ (A 51). Nonetheless, ‘the lashing Gallop received that day stood for some time in my mind as an object lesson’ (A 51). Krauss had acted ‘as though Gallop should be ashamed for trotting out naked pictures of herself and her son in the bathtub, contaminating serious academic space with her pudgy body and unresolved, self-involved thinking’ (A 51). Even though Nelson has just read Gallop in exactly these terms—valuing her mode of critique in close relation to her embodied, personal performance—she depicts Krauss’ elision of the personal and the critical as embarrassingly cruel.

Ultimately, Nelson paints Krauss’ critique of Gallop in the same terms—almost a paraphrasing—as a line of criticism often directed at personal writing, and particularly at autotheory. The tacit undercurrent to Krauss’ critique, Nelson now reflects, ‘was that Gallop’s maternity had rotted her mind—besotted it with the narcissism that makes one think that an utterly ordinary experience shared by countless others is somehow unique, or uniquely interesting’ (A 50-51). Nelson gives her own response to this ventriloquized lambasting of personal criticism’s narcissistic tendencies.

I didn’t have a baby then, nor did I have any designs on having one. [...] But I was enough of a feminist to refuse any knee-jerk quarantining of the feminine or the maternal from the realm of intellectual profundity. And, as I remember it, Krauss was not simply quarantining; she was shaming. In the face of such shaming, I felt no choice. I stood with Gallop. (A 52)

In this passage, Nelson doesn’t denounce the terms on which Krauss is critiquing Gallop, but instead reclaims those terms as valuable attributes of the feminine, the maternal, the personal, and the reparative. If Gallop is ‘messy’ and marked by ‘unresolved, self-involved thinking,’ then Nelson’s move is to claim those qualities as part of the space of ‘intellectual profundity.’ Yet even as the category of ‘intellectual profundity’ appears enlarged and enriched by Nelson’s insistent inclusion of ‘feminine’ messiness, she reinforces an internal

binary. The implicit antagonist to not just Gallop, but now to Nelson and all ‘feminists,’ appears to be a paranoid reader. If, for Huber, this is a reader terrified of appearing to intellectual disadvantage, in Nelson’s hands that becomes a terror of the feminine and the maternal. To read paranoically becomes anti-feminist; to have qualms about the rigor of personal writing becomes anti-maternal. Two camps are demarcated. As Nelson writes, pitching her flag: ‘I stood with Gallop.’

How does this reading of Gallop and Krauss—two girls, fat and thin—map onto Nelson’s description of Sedgwick, eleven pages earlier, as ‘almost sadistically intelligent?’ (A 37). Nelson recounts the passage in *Tendencies* in which Sedgwick declares that ‘what it takes—all it takes—to make the description “queer” a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person.’ She explains how Sedgwick might have a particular autobiographical attachment to this sense of the performative dynamics of queer, having for most of her life been married to a man with whom she had, ‘by her own description, mostly post-shower, vanilla sex,’ while giving lesbians ‘not much more than an occasional nod’ (A 36). Sedgwick, Nelson writes, ‘took heat for it.’ The moral value of ‘taking heat’ becomes clarified, and clarifies the description ‘sadistically intelligent,’ when read back via Krauss and Gallop. Nelson, it is true, has an abiding interest in intellectual sadism, as showcased in her book, *The Art of Cruelty*.²⁰¹ But here, we see how the value or otherwise of sadism and ‘taking heat’ get unevenly applied: Sedgwick is celebrated for her sadism, while Krauss is imputed to be anti-feminist; Sedgwick and Gallop are celebrated for ‘taking heat,’ while the heat Krauss—or paranoia—takes is merited by its alignment with repression, joylessness, and (at key points) *class*. Krauss is depicted as the Upper East Side, anal-retentive WASP

²⁰¹ Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

to Gallop's—and Nelson's, and Sedgwick's—rambunctious, solidaristic, loving, and queer collectivism. Repair comes off, as Heather Love puts it illuminatingly, as simply 'better':²⁰² 'at the level of ethics and affect,' 'at the level of epistemology and knowledge,' and, we might note, at a level that seems unavoidably personal.

Conclusion

It is this last point—about class, or rather about the social and cultural positions from which critique is issued—that directs us back to the start of the circle, and to the stakes of Sedgwick's legacy in U.S. criticism and nonfiction. Assessing the legacy of repair, Stuelke has in her recent book, *The Ruse of Repair*, delineated some of the political limitations that attend a reparative tradition, in which critical reading has come to be valued on its ability to provide the individual reader with amelioration, pleasure, nourishment, and comfort, even in the texts of capitalism and empire. Stuelke joins a body of scholars examining the reparative politics of late-20th century neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism, Berlant prominent among them. Building on Berlant's words, we might summarize one repeated concern of this body of scholarship as being that repair has tended to *overvalue* the autobiographical experience of well-intentioned political and theoretical actors, to the detriment of ideology critique, and even to the detriment of the left's practical capacity to organize within and outside the academy.

Stuelke illustrates how Sedgwick's insistence on the 'ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose

²⁰² Heather Love, 'Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,' *Criticism*, 52: 2 (2010), 235-241 (p. 237).

avowed desired has often been not to sustain them,²⁰³ has instilled in some areas of the academy a sense that the import of critique lies in its capacity to grant individuals the experience of repair.²⁰⁴ This is particularly true, for Stuelke, of a generation of U.S. students, graduate students, and political organizers, raised in the tradition of postcritique. At stake, she argues, is the question of whether these individualized experiences of reparative critique spill over into a wider politics of individualized experience as a leftist project. Put differently: if we identify with the rambunctious, solidaristic, loving, and queer collectivism depicted—in reparative literature—in figures like Sedgwick, Gallop, and Nelson, are we at risk of over-attending to how theory feels, and politics feels, at the level of the personal? Put differently again: if we over-attend to the personal, we may be at risk of overlooking Sedgwick’s equally important call, in her argument for repair, to find the most effective possible avenues into figuring out what theory ‘does.’ In these terms, Stuelke’s argument might be summarized as such: in its over-attention to the personal, the turn to repair has caused us to prioritize not what theory *does*, but what it does, individually, *for us*.

Casting back over Sedgwick’s legacy, and particularly her extravagantly talented and pleasurable first-person singular, we see how some of these tendencies of reparative reading crop up across her career, at the same time that the deep self-consciousness and wit of her writing resists always the easy slide into what has been read as a kind of neoliberal narcissism. As a young and ambitious critic, Sedgwick justifies centering her own anxiety about being unable to write poetry with the sheer beauty of her critique. She’s almost confrontational—and confrontationally lovely—as she binds her personal ‘I’ to the project

²⁰³ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150-151.

²⁰⁴ Stuelke, 6.

of theory. We find also, in Sedgwick's mid-career, a critic who is also always a queer activist and devoted friend, her 'I' continually interwoven with the authority of a loving collective, and whose rhetorical function is often to bolster her claims. In the turn to repair, we find Sedgwick casting toward what will be one of the most enduring and most cited aspects of her legacy, a major feature of which is her enabling and permissive function for critics and readers, but which slips with concerning ease into a parodic characterology of paranoia and joy.

One conclusion from this, it seems, is that there is a quality of personal writing that even if qualified, complicated, and constantly critiqued by the author—particularly after the turn to repair in the academy and elsewhere—draws that writing into a tradition that has leaned into a binary of kind and loving versus callous method, kind and loving versus callous readers. Posing an opposing argument for an impersonal set of critical practices does little to redress this. In fact, as David Kurnick has argued, the point lies elsewhere. The 'moralized characterology' of contemporary method debates is symptomatic of the strained conditions of academic labor. 'It is not our personalities or our psyches or our characters that have led to the depreciation of the humanities' stock,' he writes. '[O]ur current tendency to talk about our disciplinary woes as a set of personality problems is the real heroic fantasy, a last-ditch attempt to imagine that we can adjust our position in the world with a change of attitude.'²⁰⁵ Stuelke, characteristically, puts it more starkly: 'to imagine that things are broken and can be fixed with the best of intentions, with a labor of love, with a new way of reading (or a scaling back to an old one), is a category error neither the planet nor any of its inhabitants can afford.'²⁰⁶ In fact, as Kurnick concludes, it is

²⁰⁵ Kurnick, 369.

²⁰⁶ Stuelke, 218.

especially under such constrained and urgent conditions that ‘we should be wary of introjecting a rhetoric that offers an impoverished account of what it means to pay attention to texts.’ Sedgwick’s virtuosic ‘I’ continues to spur this attention, in all its complexity and risk. It might also productively spur attention to the personal turn of which it remains a part.

Afro-pessimism: Memoir and manifesto

Frank B. Wilderson III's 2020 memoir is titled after the critical movement to which he has devoted his scholarly career: *Afropessimism*. The discourse sprung up in the early 2000s, founded in the thought of Black studies scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spiller, David Marriott, and Orlando Patterson, and building on Marxist and psychoanalytical critical frameworks. By 2020, it had come to be seen in some areas of the U.S. academy as 'the most exciting and generative advance in black critical theory, which is to say critical theory,' of the era.²⁰⁷ There were schisms at the heart of Afro-pessimism: between, for instance, Fred Moten and one of Afro-pessimism's signal theorists, Jared Sexton, who debated the 'possibility' of Black social life.²⁰⁸ But the core principles of the movement remained. Wilderson described this as Afro-pessimism's 'comprehensive and iconoclastic claim': that 'Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness'; that 'there was never a prior moment of plenitude' for Blackness; and that 'Human' life is premised on Black 'social death.'²⁰⁹ For Wilderson, Afro-pessimism's ontological thesis, that Blackness is equable with social death, also entails a theory of narrative. He writes: 'the narrative arc of the slave who is Black [...] is not an arc at all, but a flat line' (*AP* 226).²¹⁰ How 'can the Black be

²⁰⁷ Fred Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),' *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 112:4 (2013), 737-780 (p. 737). I have chosen to capitalize Black and Blackness in this project, though many of the writers I am reading do not. This is represented in quotations.

²⁰⁸ Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness'; 'The Case of Blackness,' *Criticism*, 5:2 (2009); 'Black Op', *PMLA*, 123:5 (2008); 'Knowledge of Freedom', *CR: The Centennial Review*, 4:2 (2004). Much of this work was collected in a revised form in *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), the last of Moten's 'consent not to be a single being' trilogy of critical writings. See also: Jared Sexton, 'Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts,' *Lateral*, 1 (2012); 'The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,' *InTensions*, 5 (2011), 1-47.

²⁰⁹ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 102. All further references in the text.

²¹⁰ See also: Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, 'The Position of the Unthought,' *Qui Parle*, 13:2 (2003), 183-201.

framed if the Black, by definition, has no capacity to take place?’²¹¹

This chapter opens with Wilderson’s memoir, *Afropessimism*, to ask two driving questions. First: what formal choices does Wilderson make, in order to illustrate the ‘unnarrativizability’ of Blackness? Secondly, and consequently: what are the critical implications of arguing Afro-pessimism’s ‘comprehensive and iconoclastic claim’ in the form of the trade memoir? In the second half of this chapter, these questions motivate a final, resounding question. In Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s 2013 work, *The Undercommons*, I explore the alternative generic avenue that they have taken in articulating the ‘iconoclastic’ claim of Afro-pessimism: the form of the manifesto. This prompts me to ask, at last, how genre, and the pronominal grammar that attends genre, shapes the kinds of critical claims that Afro-pessimism seeks to make. Ultimately: does personal critique hinder the successful expression of a paradigmatic thesis?

Responding to a call by Christina Sharpe, this chapter turns to the form and genre of Afro-pessimism to find out what grammar does for liberatory critique today. She writes: ‘What happens when we proceed as if we know this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we are to attempt to speak [...] an “I” or a “we” who know, an “I” or a “we” who care?’²¹² Far from attempting to adjudicate the claims of Afro-pessimism then, I want to take up Sharpe’s proposition. Is personal critique the place we can most successfully articulate an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ who care? How do the political ambitions of the ‘I’ differ from the ‘we,’ in these texts? And how does this personal writing respond to anti-Blackness, if that is the ground from and against which criticism speaks?

²¹¹ Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). All further references in the text.

²¹² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 7.

Afropessimism

Afropessimism is Wilderson's third book, following his first memoir, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*,²¹³ which recounts his political organizing in South Africa during apartheid, and his scholarly study, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (2010). Like those earlier works, *Afropessimism* is born out of Wilderson's activism and scholarship: his involvement in the African National Congress (ANC) and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in South Africa; his participation in student movements in South Africa and the U.S.; his experience among Black Panthers, the Black Liberation Army, and the Weather Underground. Both earlier works lay the foundations for *Afropessimism*'s titular thesis in his latest memoir. Sexton, Wilderson's contemporary at The University of California, Berkeley—where he completed his doctorate—has described *Red, White & Black* as 'the signal articulation' of Afro-pessimism.²¹⁴ In this context, in which Wilderson had been writing about Afro-pessimism for at least a decade, the memoir was seen by observers as 'poised to fill the gaps in the many scattered journal articles that treated the subject and to explicate, for a more mainstream audience, what the thrust of this intervention into conversations on race is meant to achieve and how its ideas work.'²¹⁵ It would serve, as Jesse McCarthy suggests, 'if not as a manifesto for a wider movement, then at least a guide for the perplexed.'²¹⁶

When it was published in 2020, *Afropessimism* was in fact received with less stress on its critical fluency or theoretical detail than on, as Paul C. Taylor put it, the 'economy

²¹³ Wilderson, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

²¹⁴ Sexton, 'Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,' *Rhizomes*, 29 (2016). Web. <<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sexton.html>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

²¹⁵ Jesse McCarthy, 'On *Afropessimism*,' *Los Angeles Review of Books* (20 July 2020). Web. <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and poetry of [Wilderson's] provocations.²¹⁷ This was, in part, because of the formal 'challenge' posed by Wilderson's memoir. In arguing that the 'the narrative arc of the slave who is Black [...] is not an arc at all, but a flat line' (*AP* 226), Wilderson had refused generic structures of chronological narrative. The work found itself caught in what critics such as Vinson Cunningham saw as 'life [presented] as a series of cutouts': 'His memories are like scraps fished out of the shredder and reassembled into the shape of a monster; just to figure out the order of events relayed in the book is a task.'²¹⁸ In 'weaving the abstract thinking of critical theory' into 'blood-and-guts stories of life as it's lived' (*AP* x), Wilderson offered his theory in the form of a series of apparently anti-narrative snippets: less a 'guide for the perplexed' than actively perplexing for, if not wider readers, than certainly a number of critics.

The effects of Wilderson's pronominal grammar, as an expression of un-narrativizability, are well-illustrated in the book's central chapter, 'Hattie McDaniel is Dead.' This is the longest and most intensely personal section of the work, in which Wilderson weaves together his memories of 1978–1980. He had been kicked out of his undergraduate degree at Dartmouth University, following his participation in labor rights organizing, and begun living with Stella, his then-partner. The chapter revolves around two key encounters and their aftermath, which take place in late-1979, between Stella, a Black woman, and the couple's white neighbor, Josephine. These close, interpersonal encounters spark a violent and tangled series of events and reflections: suspected violence perpetrated

²¹⁷ Paul C. Taylor, 'What if the problem of racism has no solution?' *The Washington Post* (17 April 2020). Web. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/what-if-the-problem-of-racism-has-no-solution/2020/04/16/b5f43360-6183-11ea-845d-e35b0234b136_story.html>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

²¹⁸ Vinson Cunningham, 'The Argument of "Afropessimism,"' *The New Yorker* (13 July 2020). Web. <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

on Stella and Wilderson by Josephine, possibly in collaboration with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); Stella and Wilderson's consequent flight from their home; meditations on ontological anti-Blackness by Wilderson, in interpreting these events; and sustained readings of Steve McQueen's 2013 *12 Years A Slave*, and its inspiration, Solomon Northup's autobiography. These two encounters are the frantic heart of the chapter, and central to the memoir as a whole. They crystallize Wilderson's 'iconoclastic claim,' in the arc of his argument. They also illustrate some of the difficulties that attend the argument that Blackness is not 'narrativizable,' when that argument is made in the form of the memoir.

These encounters proceed one from the other. First: it is 1979, and Wilderson, Stella, and Stella's daughter, Malika, are eating dinner at the kitchen table in the condo that Stella rents. They are at the back of the house, and hear the front door open and close. It is their neighbor, Josephine, a woman who Wilderson describes as wearing clogs and subscribing to *Ms* magazine (AP 91). She and Stella have a friendly if casual relationship, often debating the safety or otherwise of nuclear energy, given Josephine's role as a nuclear technician at the University of Minnesota. Now:

Josephine appeared in the threshold of the kitchen with bushels of lilacs in a straw basket. She had picked them in the courtyard, just for us. No doubt, in her mind the gift of flowers offset her violation of our space. But, looking back on it, all I see is the extension of the master's prerogative in the way that Josephine treated Stella. (AP 72)

After this event, Stella has a conversation with Josephine about 'boundaries.' For Wilderson, recapping the intrusion, the moment is illustrative of the central interpretive claims of Afro-pessimism.

There's a scene in the film *12 Years a Slave* in which the master, Edwin Epps, bursts into the slaves' cabin while they're in bed. He dances in the middle of their sleeping quarters and commands them to rise and make "merriment" in the big

house with him. It has taken me forty years to understand how neither he nor Josephine had violated anyone's space. The cabin where they slept belonged to him as much as their flesh belonged to him. The regime of violence that made them his property and prosthetics of his desire made it impossible to see what he did as a violation. This is to say that I was wrong to think Josephine did something wrong. (AP 72)

Initially, this scene appears to register a shift: from the close attention of memoir, to a declarative interpretive stance. But reading more closely, it's clear that the passage registers less a shift than a confirmation, with Wilderson's argument embedded in his telling of Josephine's materialization in their house. In the way that the scene is blocked, we are reminded of Wilderson's background in film studies. Josephine 'appeared in the threshold of the kitchen,' as though looming into the frame. We see her outlined in the doorway, clutching a basket of softly colored lilacs. Her figure is threatening, while bearing heavy resonances of sentimentalized femininity. We are told that Josephine picked the flowers 'just for us'—Wilderson, Stella, and Malika—Wilderson's narrative voice echoing what we assume to be Josephine's speech to the three. Across each of these devices—the cinematic framing, the symbolically loaded figure of Josephine, Wilderson's adoption of her speech—the reader is made powerfully aware of Wilderson's organizing vision. When Wilderson turns to interpret the scene from the perspective of the confirmed Afro-pessimist, the reader has been primed for his argument: 'Looking back on it, all I see is the extension of the master's prerogative in the way that Josephine treated Stella.' Wilderson cinematically frames Josephine's intrusion, so that the master's prerogative, figured in white femininity, is also what we see.

In the ensuing passage, Wilderson's invokes Steve McQueen's film, *12 Years a Slave*, to help him interpret Josephine's intrusion. The move makes clear that Wilderson's cinematic framing of Josephine's intrusion not only manages the blocking of the scene for

the reader, but also renders the autobiographical filmic, such that it is laid out for interpretation by Wilderson, the film scholar. The anecdote is made into an object for criticism. This is the first of a number of strategic conceptual collapses. ‘It has taken me forty years to understand how neither [Epps] nor Josephine had violated anyone’s space,’ Wilderson writes. Pairing Epps with Josephine, Wilderson folds together the two instances of violation, and in the process, the filmic with the autobiographical; the fictive with the historical and material; the legal and economic regime of Atlantic chattel slavery with the legal and economic landscape of the U.S. in the 1970s. The concertina effect compresses into the tight thesis of Afro-pessimism, delivered from Wilderson’s perspective. ‘The regime of violence that made them [Epps]’ property and prosthetics of his desire made it impossible to see what he did as a violation,’ he writes. Wilderson has reached ‘understand[ing]’: it would be ‘impossible to see what [they] did’ in any other way. It is at this point that Wilderson’s autobiographical scene clarifies, arriving at its destination: the identification of the narrator with Afro-pessimism. ‘Eastern Seaboard slaves,’ he reflects, ‘had grown to believe in the elasticity of accumulation and fungibility’: they had, ‘like me and Stella in 1980,’ imagined that ‘their dwellings were also their homes.’ They were, like Wilderson and Stella forty years ago, wrong to think this. ‘In other words, slaves on the Eastern Seaboard were *not* Afropessimists’ (AP 72).

Discussing this moment in an interview, released shortly after the publication of *Afropessimism*, Wilderson clarifies that this passage is intended as ‘more diagnostic than finger wagging.’²¹⁹ The point, he says, is not in any sense to castigate Eastern Seaboard enslaved people, who are ‘of their time.’ Rather, it is to say, ‘we are of our time, but are

²¹⁹ Siddhant Isshar and James Padlioni, Jr., ‘“To Address Black Suffering is to Destroy the World” An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III on *Afropessimism*,’ *Interfere*, 1 (2020), 92-111 (p. 98).

also underneath this huge dome that is not of our making.’ This, he explains, is the difference between the legal designation of people as enslaved, in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the capital-S designation of ‘Slave,’ which stands in contrast with the ‘Human.’ He urges us not to ‘confus[e] what it means to be chattel with what it means to be Slave.’

We really have to stop thinking slavery definitionally through the lived experience of it. Until we can stop doing that, we really can’t understand—which is not to say *agree* with—the Afropessimist argument because the essence—I got a whole book here about lived experience, so don’t get me wrong—is not in the lived experience. [...] You’ve got to be able to think at a level of abstraction where there’s not any whips and chains and fields of cotton, to theorize the laws of slavery at the level of abstraction of the relation.²²⁰

In this articulation, Wilderson makes clear a tension between the theoretical function of ‘lived experience,’ as compared with the ‘level of abstraction’ on which Afro-pessimism relies. He explains that in order to understand Afro-pessimism, it is imperative to operate at a level of abstraction that makes it possible to ‘theorize the laws of slavery’ in terms of relation. That is to say: to comprehend the ‘essence’ of ‘Slaveness,’ as opposed to the material history of enslavement. Or as he has elsewhere summarized the scope of *Afropessimism*’s argument: ‘I wanted to think more about the general laws of abstraction at a kind of scaffolding level.’²²¹ In the passages above, in which Stella confronts Josephine for her intrusion in their space, Wilderson’s equivalencing of Josephine’s actions with Edwin Epps’, and of his own autobiography with Steve McQueen’s film, illustrates the level of abstraction that he understands as necessary to Afro-pessimism. Abstraction, in this context, helps the reader of *Afropessimism* to grasp that Josephine and Epps’ equivalence

²²⁰ Isshar and Padlioni, 100.

²²¹ Linette Park, ‘Afropessimism and the Futures of...: A Conversation with Frank Wilderson,’ *The Black Scholar*, 50:3 (2020), 29-41 (p. 29).

operates at the level of the ‘libidinal,’ as opposed to, for instance, the juridical. In shifting his own experience toward abstraction, however, Wilderson exposes the difficulty of abstracting the events of one’s own life: that those events risk being rendered significant only insofar as they illustrate a paradigmatic and abstract theoretical argument.

Interestingly, Wilderson’s sense of the value of abstraction puts his work in tension with the approach adopted by his most significant influences, in their relationship to autobiography. Christina Sharpe, for instance, is thanked in Wilderson’s acknowledgements to *Afropessimism*. In her now foundational Black Studies text, *In the Wake*, Sharpe describes her weaving of personal narrative with critical analysis as a means of ‘engaging and countering the violence of abstraction.’²²² Autobiography offers an opportunity to realize the inter-animation of ‘social and historical process and one’s own formation.’²²³ The implication of Sharpe’s point is that abstraction risks doing ‘violence’ to the particularity of experience, which is also expressive of the social and historical conditions of anti-Blackness. Wilderson, by contrast, aims to express ‘the essence’ of anti-Blackness as ontological. The outcome is to disavow the value of the autobiographical, while taking the autobiographical as proof. His syntax makes this clear, with his mid-sentence qualification marking the difficulty of expressing the paradigmatic thrust of Afro-pessimism’s argument in personal form. ‘The essence—I got a whole book here about lived experience, so don’t get me wrong—is not in the lived experience.’

The second time that Josephine intrudes into Stella and Wilderson’s space, Stella gives title to the chapter, ‘Hattie McDaniel is Dead.’ The couple has fallen back asleep in the

²²² Sharpe, *In The Wake*, 8. Sharpe is here quoting from Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts,’ *Small Axe*, 26 (2008), 1-14 (p. 7).

²²³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 8.

morning after having sex, Wilderson writes, when they hear someone moving around in the apartment. Wilderson is alarmed, paranoid: he has just moved in with Stella after a break-in at his own flat. Stella has meanwhile recently filed a suit against Minneapolis, alleging corruption in a local initiative, Urban Risers, created as part of Lyndon B. Johnson's Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968. They suspect they are being surveilled. With this in the background, Stella steps out to confront the intruder. It's Josephine. Stella is furious, after their conversation about boundaries. She 'yank[s]' Josephine onto the porch, telling her:

'Hattie McDaniel is dead. You're not welcome anymore. [...] You've been misled. I'm not here for your amusement; and your being a nuclear physicist at the University of Minnesota doesn't make you Scarlett O'Hara. [...] You're a parasite, no, a psychopath. You act like you own me.' (*AP* 82)

The dialogue, like Wilderson's blocking of Josephine's first intrusion, gives pause. What was an awfully predictable scene of a white woman's casual disrespect of a Black woman's privacy is made uncanny, in its sense of narrative artifice. First, Stella's confrontation of Josephine neatly expounds key plot points. She foreshadows the events of the chapter, as she recites Josephine's occupation: by the chapter's end, Stella and Wilderson will have fled their apartment, under suspicion that Josephine is poisoning them with radioactive particles stolen from her lab. Far from natural speech, Stella specifically mentions the full name of Josephine's employer; information that would hardly need to be reiterated between two women who, as has already been established, have discussed Josephine's employment often. Similarly, Stella re-stipulates the terms of the encounter at hand, telling Josephine, 'You've not welcome anymore,' and clarifying the crux of her, or Wilderson's, point: 'You act like you own me.' Her speech is also bookended by reference to her analogy's key characters, Hattie McDaniel and Scarlett O'Hara. The chapter at hand, we recall, is titled

‘Hattie McDaniel is Dead.’ Stella’s well-ordered invocation of McDaniel and O’Hara points to the structuring frame of the chapter, and in doing so, shifts Stella’s speech out of her mouth and into Wilderson’s, the interpreting Afro-pessimist narrator. In this context, the intimate detail of the couple’s having drifted off after having sex comes to feel like a framing device: their domestic warmth at sharp odds with Josephine’s alarming intrusion. The ordering of events and Stella’s speech, relayed by Wilderson, turns the encounter from a specific, grounded memory into an exemplum.

Reflecting on Josephine’s second intrusion into their apartment, Wilderson again invokes *12 Years a Slave*. He last saw Josephine’s face as it appears now, he writes, contorted horror and rage, in the face of Mary Epps, Edwin’s wife. Wilderson appears to pick up the thread of his reading in media res: we recall that Edwin has forced his slaves to make ‘merriment’ in the plantation house. Wilderson now recounts how Mary enters and brutalizes Patsey, her husband’s ‘concubine.’ She demands that Edwin sell Patsey, and Edwin refuses.

What’s telling about this scene is the way Patsey functions as an object, *but not a subject*, for both Edwin and Mary. Neither Edwin nor Mary ever turn to Patsey and say, [...] for example, Do you have a take on this mess?; or, in the case of Mary, How could you be so low as to steal my husband? (*AP* 83, italics in original)

[Wilderson continues]

[...] I don’t think Josephine was enraged because she had just been called a psychopath. I think she was enraged because Stella had dared to speak. Josephine’s slave had spoken. Period. This has less to do with the actual word Stella used (‘psychopath’) and more to do with the fact that an object meant merely for the pleasure of possession had gazed back at a Human subject. (*AP* 83-84)

These imagined moments of dialogue from Edwin and Mary have a similar effect to the uncanny artifice of Stella’s speech. We could read their addresses to Patsey as a kind of

horror humor on the part of Wilderson: the idea of Edwin turning chirpily to a woman legally designated as chattel, to say, ‘Do you have a take on this mess?’ illustrates the depths by which Patsey has been dehumanized, both in the historical context and for the contemporary reader of Wilderson’s memoir—as registered in the sense of disbelief at the idea of Epps treating Patsey as a ‘Human subject.’ This is not the only way in which the passage collapses the present moment with the history of Atlantic slavery. The equivalence is further apparent in Edwin’s modern turn of phrase; Epps imagined as speaking in Wilderson’s own register. As in the passage above, in which Stella’s reported dialogue pushes into the realm of conscious artifice, Edwin and Mary’s dialogue make us powerfully aware of Wilderson’s organizing interpretation of autobiographical events. In this moment, in which he claims that he and Stella are positioned as ‘objects’ of ‘possession’ rather than ‘Human subject[s],’ Wilderson draws our attention to his own interpretive ‘I’; an ‘I’ possessed of the authority claims of the paradigmatic theorist. ‘I think explanatory power is all that Afropessimism has to offer,’ Wilderson has said. ‘It does not have to offer tactical suggestions,’ it is ‘just simply an explanation of the structure of pain and suffering.’²²⁴ In the encounters between Stella and Josephine, the autobiographical anecdote gives structure to Wilderson’s ultimately declarative reading. Rather than the fallible ‘I’ of the memoir, we are repeatedly presented with scenes organized towards Afro-pessimism: the explanatory power of the scenes being their primary function.

We can usefully compare the explanatory function of Wilderson’s autobiography to the structure of his critical argumentation elsewhere. Prior to *Afropessimism*, Wilderson’s most cohesive articulation of his argument was in his 2010 monograph, *Red, White &*

²²⁴ Isshar and Padlioni, 105.

Black. The work expresses many of the key ideas of the later memoir. Rather than taking the autobiographical as his explanatory object, however, Wilderson turns to film. For instance, Wilderson in his commentary on the antagonism between Stella and Josephine describes how he had been ‘wrong to think’ that a master figure such as Josephine ‘did something wrong’ in violating his and Stella’s space. In *Red, White & Black*, this idea finds expression in a reading of Haile Gerima’s 1976 film, *Bush Mama*. Recounting a policeman’s rape of a Black girl in the film, Wilderson reflects that “‘Black home’ is an oxymoron [...]. The absolute vulnerability of Black domesticity finds its structural analogy—if it can be metaphorized as an analogy—with the domain known as the slave quarters’ (*RWB* 127).

In Wilderson’s monograph, *Bush Mama* prompts his discussion of the ‘circuit of mobility’ between ‘the social incarceration of Black life and the institutional incarceration of the prison-industrial complex’ (*RWB* 140). Wilderson’s reading is based in material history, even as it expands outwards into a declarative paradigmatic interpretation: ‘The Slave needs freedom not from wage relation, nor sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy,’ but ‘from the Human race’ (*RWB* 141). In the memoir, Wilderson reaches the same conclusion, but in the process is forced to turn his own specific experiences into an object for general theorizing. ‘Eastern Seaboard slaves’ become one with the younger, not-yet-Afro-pessimist-Wilderson and Stella, who are also one with both the historical and filmic figures of Northup and his wife. Josephine, meanwhile, becomes one with Epps, the institution of slavery, and the institutions of the modern police state. Wilderson’s reflections turn to Afro-pessimism as the only way of understanding these framed scenes of intrusion. In the form of the monograph, the film scene is taken to dramatize the operations of anti-Black

police violence; in the memoir, Wilderson's autobiographical experiences are made filmic, so that they might do the same.

The fact is that for Wilderson the scenes of Josephine's intrusion into his and Stella's space cannot be understood. Anti-Black violence is, he writes, 'immune to rational thinking and logical predictions' (*AP* 89). Wilderson makes clear the narrative implications of this in his depiction of the second antagonism between Stella and Josephine. After Stella tells Josephine, 'Hattie McDaniel is dead,' the white woman launches into a tirade. She accuses Stella of being a 'pedophile' (*AP* 84), given her relationship with Wilderson, who is 23 years old to Stella's 38. The argument has begun to attract attention from others living in the apartment complex, including the apartment manager, a man named Cody. 'I often saw him in the company of bikers,' Wilderson writes, 'and from his belt hung a leather sheath with a blade that was blacksmithed from a railroad tie' (*AP* 85). Cody quickly sides with Josephine, and Wilderson recalls returning to kitchen to find some kind of implement, possibly a knife or a screwdriver, it isn't clear in his memory. He describes how he knew in the moment 'that [he] was afraid of something much worse than death':

I feared a death without meaning. A death without a story to it, a chain of events that would make sense to those who survived me, a clear and logical chain of events that anyone could read and, when they finished, lift their heads from the page and say, I can see why he died. (*AP* 86)

In this passage, Wilderson clarifies the deep horror at the heart of his theory of narrative. Within a symbolic regime in which Black people are routinely subject to senseless violence, Blackness comes to seem dispossessed of 'a story': 'a clear and logical chain of events' that would make that violence rational. He hopes not just that his loved ones, 'those who survived me,' might be able to understand his senseless death, but 'anyone': a 'chain of events that anyone could read.' In shifting from the specific to the general, Wilderson

suggests that his hope is not only for an explanation of this event, but for a paradigmatic and generalizable explanation for anti-Black violence. ‘But anti-Black violence won’t cooperate with narrative,’ Wilderson writes: ‘When violence *is* the law [...] it presents the rules of narrative with a crisis; because what we have is a situation that resists retelling’ (*AP* 89, italics in original). The ‘causal principle’ (*AP* 89), he suggests, is missing.

Under pressure, Wilderson suggests, it might be possible to conjure up causal logic to explain anti-Black violence, given both perpetrators’ and victims’ investment in protecting themselves from the horror of its senselessness. Wilderson notes that Mary Epps might, for instance, explain her brutalization of Patsey by reasoning that Patsey ‘seduced [her] husband.’ But the rationalization falls apart when faced with the conditions of Blackness. As Wilderson points out, Epps’ rationalization is void once we recognize that Patsey lived ‘without consent’ (*AP* 90). This is an ontological state for Wilderson: ‘the violence is not a form of discrimination,’ he writes. ‘It’s a necessary ensemble of structures’ that allow for the constitution of the ‘Human.’²²⁵

Wilderson’s horror, in the moment of being faced with the potential senseless violence of Cody and Josephine, recalls what Calvin Warren, in *Ontological Terror*, describes as the ‘deep abyss’ of the ‘terrifying question’ engendered by the declaration, ‘Black Lives Matter.’²²⁶ Blackness, in Warren’s scheme, has become a container for the conception of metaphysical nothingness, framed in contradistinction to ‘Being.’ The declaration, ‘Black lives matter,’ causes such existential horror because it prompts the recognition that, as Warren argues, Blackness has in fact been metaphysically positioned as

²²⁵ Isshar and Padlioni, 96.

²²⁶ Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 1.

nothingness. This reckoning, Warren argues, causes Black people to shrink from full recognition of the fact that there is ‘no solution’ to anti-Blackness. In Wilderson’s terms, ‘Being’ is imbued with narrativizability, because it is possessed of the capacity for transformation: the arc of narrative. There is, meanwhile, ‘no narrative arc’ to the ‘problem of antiblackness.’²²⁷

Wilderson has in various places described the problem that this poses to his narrative, as to the narratives that strongly inform his own: historical narratives of enslavement. For Orlando Patterson, the originator of the concept of ‘social death’ on which the discourse of Afro-pessimism draws, ‘the condition of slavery did not absolve or erase the prospect of death.’²²⁸ The state of social death under slavery arises from three key components: the constant threat or application of gratuitous violence, which acted as a ‘substitute for death’; natal alienation; and ‘generalized dishonor’ of the enslaved.²²⁹ For Patterson, then, social death is a product of historical and material conditions: social death does not precede enslavement. For Wilderson, by contrast, the Black subject is ontologically positioned in contradistinction to the ‘Human.’ He has argued that Patterson’s scholarship gives the enslaved subject a narrative arc: free person to slave; narrative capacity to social death. But when faced with the senselessness of historical anti-Black violence, Wilderson argues, the supposed narrativizability of social death falls apart. ‘[W]hat happens [when] a Black person sits down to write a story [is that] the structure of story comes with this theoretical formation already’: a theoretical formation of

²²⁷ Warren, 3.

²²⁸ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

²²⁹ Patterson, 5-10.

narrativizability.²³⁰ To argue that Blackness is narrativizable, in this scheme, suggests for Wilderson that Black people are like ‘people in a story [who] experience violence contingent upon transgression.’²³¹ But ‘there is no such thing as contingency to the violence of Blackness.’²³² For Wilderson, this is clearly apparent in autobiographical narratives of enslavement, which are forced to grapple with the disordering force of senseless anti-Blackness.

Wilderson notes how a narrative such as Northup’s is posed with this problem: how to write about violence without reason. ‘[The] editor, number one, and the structure of narrative, number two, do not allow for writing in which violence happens without reason.’²³³ This informs a practice that he describes as ‘acknowledging the roadblocks, [...] to actually lance the boil and let the pus just fester on the page.’²³⁴ He puts this practice differently in the acknowledgements section of *Afropessimism*. Of his wife, Anita Wilkins, he writes that

[she] counseled me to “make the problem your subject” during those frustrating moments when seemingly insurmountable problems of writing haunted my forward momentum. More than that, she shared this intellectual journey with me in late-night discussions on the challenges *Afropessimism* presents to story-telling when the narrator is a Slave. (*AP xi*)

In the passages in which Wilderson reflects on Stella and Josephine’s antagonism, we see him grappling with what he feels to be an ‘insurmountable problem’: the unnarrativizability of Blackness, under a symbolic regime in which Blackness is figured as the ‘nothingness’ to ‘Being.’ In these moments, autobiographical narrative collapses under the weight and

²³⁰ Isshar and Padlioni, 96.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

senselessness of ontological anti-Blackness. We see ‘forward momentum’ stall, as Wilderson begins to revolve on his experiences, making the material of his life both ‘the problem’ and his ‘subject.’ Faced with what he sees as the senselessness of his own life events, however, anti-Blackness becomes explicable only through the lens of Afro-pessimism: a lens that imposes a paradigmatic and total interpretation designed to express the horrifying ‘wake’²³⁵ of Atlantic chattel slavery.

The ‘challenges Afropessimism presents to story-telling when the narrator is a Slave’ are dramatized in the remainder of ‘Hattie McDaniel is Dead.’ The chapter consolidates the formal challenge that the book posed to critics when it was first released. We recall Cunningham’s description: ‘his memories are like scraps fished out of the shredder, [...] just to figure out the order of events relayed in the book is a task.’²³⁶ It is not hard to find examples of this disintegration of narrative chronology. For instance: Wilderson introduces his analysis of *12 Years at Slave* at two different points; each time, it is as though for the first time (*AP* 72, 83). He discusses Solomon Northup’s autobiography, and then only later gives an introductory explanation of the work, giving the impression that he had not mentioned the book previously (*AP* 91, 138). Later in the chapter, as the narrative starts properly to break down, Wilderson moves from straight prose to sectioned headings, beginning with ‘Day One.’ These mark a change: Wilderson and Stella have moved out of their flat to live in a borrowed car. But pausing on the text reveals that they moved out two days prior to ‘Day One’ (*AP* 105), making the chronological marker not just superfluous but actively confusing. On two occasions, Wilderson says that from afar people regularly mistake Stella for Angela Davis, giving no indication, the second time, that he has

²³⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

²³⁶ Cunningham, ‘The Argument of “Afropessimism.”’

already remarked on this fact (*AP* 67, 109). These examples compound each other, so that after a while they appear not entirely intentional. The effect is dreamlike, destabilizing. It suggests, on the one hand, the breakdown of a psyche under the pressure of paranoia and the threat of violence. But it also reads like a chapter in which specificity, structure, and chronology are secondary: placed below the ‘iconoclastic’ framework, the only framework by which they might be made to make sense.

For Jared Sexton, one of Wilderson’s key critical interlocutors and one of the foundational thinkers of Afro-pessimism, this is the effective function of Wilderson’s memoir: that it dramatizes anti-Blackness as ontological, dispossessed of a narrative arc. Sexton argues that critics have repeatedly failed to recognize that Afro-pessimism’s ‘major statement in an award-winning literary work of memoir’ is central to its theoretical argument. He suggests that critics have tended to overlook ‘the rhetorical dimensions of the discourse,’ and points to

the productive theoretical effects of the fiction it creates, namely, a meditation on a poetics and politics of abjection wherein racial blackness operates as an asymptotic approximation of that which disturbs every claim of formation of identity and difference as such.²³⁷

Sexton sees ontological anti-Blackness—as expressed in the asymptotic relation of anti-Blackness to the infinity of ‘Human’ subjectification—realized in the ‘productive theoretical effects’ of Wilderson’s ‘I,’ and the ‘fiction’ of the personal that it performs. Wilderson states this differently. He describes Afro-pessimism as a ‘metatheory,’ which ‘by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation’ (*AP* 14) interrogates the presumptive logics of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism. Theory, Wilderson suggests, rests on assumptions as to the ‘universal structure of all sentient beings’;

²³⁷ Sexton, ‘Afro-pessimism: The Unclear Word.’

assumptions that are disproven when ‘one looks seriously at the structure of Black suffering in comparison’ (AP 15). As a result, ‘Black people embody a meta-aporia for political thought and action—Black people are the wrench in the works’ (AP 15). This is what Sexton means when he writes that the rhetorical dimensions of Wilderson’s memoir illustrate how Blackness ‘disturbs every claim of formation of identity and difference as such.’ Wilderson’s ‘I,’ in this scheme, acts as the ‘wrench in the works’ that troubles presumptions as to how subject position and authority operates in not just theory, but through autobiography, in the personal and subjective as such.

If narratives of enslavement are a touchstone for Wilderson—troubling and informing his argument that Blackness is unnarrativizable—then modern narratives of liberation are a similarly complicated source for the memoir. It’s illuminating to compare Wilderson’s orientation to memoir to that of revolutionary Black feminist memoirists, notably Assata Shakur, in *Assata: An Autobiography*. For Patrice Douglass, writing from a declaredly Afro-pessimist position, *Assata* speaks closely to what I am reading as Wilderson’s theory of narrative. I have suggested that Wilderson’s memoir is predicated on its own internal collapse, with failures of legibility or continuity illustrating Wilderson’s argument as to the unnarrativizability of Blackness. Douglass puts this slightly differently, understanding *Assata* to operate much as Sexton understands the ‘productive theoretical effects’ of *Afropessimism*: as an expression of plurality, that disorders the very idea of the ‘Human.’ Douglass argues that *Assata* ‘is not a single story, nor is it a gesture toward inclusion in the Human’; rather it is ‘a mode of Black theorizing, the antithesis of Enlightenment notions that human progress is the self-evident product of presence.’²³⁸ As

²³⁸ Patrice D. Douglass, ‘Assata is Here: (Dis)Locating Gender in Black Studies,’ *Soul*, 22:1 (2020), 89-103 (p. 91).

Douglass and others have illustrated, the memoir as a mode of Black theorizing has roots in an autobiographical tradition that extends back through Shakur to Harriet Jacobs.²³⁹ She quotes from Kimberlé Crenshaw to illustrate how the theme of unnarrativizability speaks to Black gendered experience: ‘a location whose very nature resists telling,’ mapping ‘overlapping margins of race and gender discourse and the empty spaces between.’²⁴⁰

Shakur’s significance to Wilderson’s narrative is marked from the first page of *Afropessimism*. Wilderson’s dedication is split into three parts: to his current wife, Anita Wilkins, ‘for [her] love’; to his parents, ‘for molding [his] mind’; and to Assata Shakur and Winnie Mandela, ‘for everything.’ Speaking to the tradition of personal writing in Black feminisms, Wilderson binds the intimate and familial to the liberatory and critical. Shakur and Mandela are gathered into Wilderson’s family, such that the acknowledgement acts as a pantheon of inspirations personal and political. At the same time, however, Wilderson’s ordering also subjugates his wife and family to the significance represented by Shakur and Mandela. Ending the list, and thanked ‘for everything,’ they top the pantheon, illustrating Wilderson’s ultimate aspirations for the memoir. The acknowledgements crystallize Wilderson’s formal tendency to abstraction, and to paradigmatic explanation. Faced with the impossibility of articulating a narrative arc for Blackness from his own experiences, his political and critical voice pushes into the frame to draw paradigmatic meaning from the events. Just as Afro-pessimism is tasked with comprehensive ‘explanatory power,’ Shakur and Mandela are thanked ‘for everything’: the political bearing the weight, for Wilderson,

²³⁹ On *Assata* as an inheritance of Harriet Jacobs’ narrative of enslavement, see e.g.: NaTosha Briscoe, ‘The Struggle for Survival in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century African American Women’s Autobiography: Black Women’s Narrative of Incarceration and Freedom,’ *Journal of African American Studies*, 26 (2022), 100-112.

²⁴⁰ Douglass, 94.

of totality, giving structure to the disorganized ephemera of autobiography.

If *Assata*, for Wilderson and critics such as Douglass, constitutes a ‘mode of Black theorizing’ that charts the way that the experience of Blackness ‘resists retelling’—the theorization of the personal by white, second-wave feminist critics is predicated on access to what Wilderson sees as the ‘institutions’ of authority and authorship, granted to ‘junior partners.’ For a critic such as Nancy K. Miller, the personal and autobiographical has offered the potential to ‘reclaim theory: turning theory back on itself,’ troubling what Jane Tompkins has called the ‘authority effect’ of critical language.²⁴¹ For Wilderson, meanwhile, such recourse to and recognition of institutions of authority—even in opposition—is void in the face of his ontological thesis. Reading from R. A. Judy’s theorization of institutionality, Wilderson argued in *Red, White & Black* that Blackness does not have the ‘capacity to be essentially exploited and alienated (rather than accumulated and fungible) in the first ontological instance’ (*RWB* 42).²⁴² Here, to ‘be known as anything but Black—worker, woman, man, gay, lesbian, and so on’ (*RWB* 100) constitutes a ‘feigned’ institutionality. Blackness does not have access, in Wilderson’s reading, to those capacities granted to ‘White men and their junior partners in civil society,’ including ‘transformative capacity’ within narrative (*AP* 102). For Wilderson, ‘Black “institutionality” [...] is not simply impossible; it is unthought and unimaginable’ (*RWB* 100).

As we have seen in the introduction to this project, 1990s feminist critics such as Miller and Tompkins saw the personal as a means of troubling the authority claims of

²⁴¹ Miller, *Getting Personal*, 5; Tompkins, *The Intimate Critique*, 31.

²⁴² R. A. Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

‘masculine’ criticism. Practices of ‘intimate critique’ were intended to introduce markers of identity into the faux-objective stance of traditional theory. For Wilderson, though, the Black writer doesn’t have access to the ‘institutions’ of identity that Miller and Tompkins seek to express. Even to reject or trouble the personal as a source of authority is, in Wilderson’s argument, to assent to the idea that the subject has the capacity to claim ‘institutions’ of identity, such as ‘woman, man, gay, lesbian, and so on’ (*RWB* 100). Stripped of these identity categories, Wilderson’s autobiographical ‘I’ is tasked with presenting nothing more or less than the ontological thesis that Blackness is not possessed of ‘Human’ subjectivity. The personal and autobiographical therefore becomes, in Wilderson’s memoir, a means of dramatizing the narrative limitations of Blackness.

Wilderson describes the kind of personal experience, aligned with identity positions such as womanhood by a theorist like Tompkins, as being expressive of the figure of the ‘junior partner.’ The ‘transformative promise of a narrative arc belongs to White men and their junior partners in civil society,’ he writes (*AP* 102). These are ‘non-Black immigrants, White and non-Black people who are queer, and non-Black women’ (*AP* 102). Unsurprisingly, this term has caused some indignation among critics. The Afro-Surinamese sociologist, Gloria Wekker, for instance, illustrated the emotive spark of the phrase by describing it in her scholarly review of *Afropessimism* as being ‘quite intentionally already sound[ing] nasty,’ remarking, ‘this body of thought [...] lapses into the old laziness of not being intersectional in any way.’²⁴³ Undoubtedly, prickliness is one of Wilderson’s goals in deploying the phrase. He feels that his paradigmatic thesis has to be didactic, given the ontological absoluteness of anti-Blackness: the only way, we recall, that he believes these

²⁴³ Gloria Wekker, ‘*Afropessimism*,’ *The European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 28:1 (2021), 86-97 (pp. 88, 86).

scenes can be understood. The rhetorical quality of that didacticism is often actively confrontational. As he writes in *Afropessimism*:

Anyone who thinks nineteenth century slave narrative are reports on the past isn't paying attention. Such a person will experience the analysis of Afropessimism as though they are being mugged, rather than enlightened; that is because they can't imagine a plantation in the here and now. (AP 101)

Wilderson suggests here that if we fail to accede to the core ontological argument of Afropessimism, it is because of our imaginative failings: an inability to 'imagine the plantation in the here and now.' Because the senselessness of anti-Black violence across the *longue durée* precludes its expression in narrative, the reader is tasked with accepting Wilderson's thesis wholesale. The conditions that give rise to Blackness as 'social death,' which is only comprehensible through Afro-pessimism, cannot be relayed in personal experience, nor can they be trusted to elicit empathy. Here, Wilderson engages what he describes as the 'two moves' of Saidiya Hartman's formulation of empathy in her classic study, *Scenes of Subjection*.²⁴⁴ The first of these moves, in his reading, is that 'empathy is a reciprocal dynamic,' he writes: 'in order to be empathetic towards Black suffering, the scene of empathy, and the narrative, has to insert a white body into that suffering.'²⁴⁵ The second is Hartman's famous theorization of consent: that for a Black woman to be legally understood as having been raped, she must be legally understood to have the right and ability to consent. 'The ultimate endgame of that argument,' Wilderson suggests, 'is that it's really impossible to imagine Black suffering.'²⁴⁶

Afro-pessimism enters this scene of impossibility and unnarrativizability as

²⁴⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²⁴⁵ Isshar and Padlioni, 107.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

enlightenment. ‘Now we have a discourse called Afropessimism that can explain this to the victim in ways that are unapologetic,’ Wilderson says.²⁴⁷ The declarative drive of his argument in *Afropessimism* underlines his sense that its thesis must be ‘unapologetic’ in order to make any sense of a world in which Blackness is excluded from structures of empathy. Wilderson’s tendency to turn his autobiographical experiences into exempla, used to argue that total thesis, illustrates his anxiety about his capacity to elicit empathic response in the reader. In a regime in which senseless anti-Black violence reigns, Wilderson cannot rely either on a story that makes sense, or a reader who will be predisposed to read his story, ‘and, when they are finished, lift their heads from the page and say, I [understand].’ Faced with the senselessness of anti-Black violence, Wilderson interestingly resorts to an appeal to the personal. He invokes imaginative sympathy in the act of disavowing the possibility of that appeal. Imaginative sympathy is made to equate to radical theoretical and political understanding—a dynamic that risks reproducing the very sympathy model that Wilderson’s major influences in his thinking on institutionality, such as Hartman, have placed at the center of their critique. The move is central to the dynamics of Afro-pessimism’s expression in the form of the memoir. Wilderson’s stress on sentiment is the direct result of his appeal to the authority of the personal—which then, in accordance with Wilderson’s sense of the impossibility of such an appeal, collapses under its own weight.

After Cody and Josephine face down Stella and Wilderson, and the moment disperses without apparent violence, the pair begin to feel the creeping effects of their white neighbors’ anger. Wilderson describes seeing Josephine, Cody, and another man carrying

²⁴⁷ Isshar and Padlioni, 108.

boxes into Josephine's house. Not long afterwards, the radiators begin to hiss. 'It wasn't long before we felt first heat, then stinging, then slight burning sensations on our skin,' Wilderson writes. 'It seemed most intense at night' (*AP* 97). Wilderson and Stella suspect that Josephine, who we recall works in a nuclear lab at the University of Minneapolis, is poisoning them through radiation. They are referred to a specialist, Dr Zhou. Assuming they must work with radiation, Zhou urges the pair to report their employer for negligent practices. "'The woman upstairs did this to us,'" Stella explains to her. Zhou is skeptical. '[She] implied that Stella was lying because she was afraid of on-the-job retaliation; or worse, because of some misplaced loyalty to her employer' (*AP* 98). Frank and Stella leave without recourse, but as they are leaving, Stella tells her: 'The Japanese internment camps didn't teach you a thing' (*AP* 99). Zhou is Chinese. Nonetheless, for Wilderson looking back, Stella is right to think of her as a 'junior partner.' Zhou, in his reading, is unable to see 'that nineteenth century slave reports [aren't] in the past.' As Wilderson now reflects:

The master has been dispersed across the entire racial spectrum of people who are not black. Dr Zhou is as much a master as Edwin and Mary Epps [...]. In fact, the twentieth century shot the Eppses through a prism—they are not just people, they are ideas. (*AP* 101)

The statement is instructive as to Wilderson's interest in abstraction. He is unable to read Zhou's skepticism as a viable expression of concern as to unsafe unemployment practices. Zhou urges Stella and Wilderson to report (what she assumes to be) their employer, and to protect their colleagues. Wilderson, by implication, interprets her concerns as useless indulgences in 'institutionality.' He and Stella, he understands from the vantage of Afro-pessimism, are barred from the institutions of identity that Zhou has access to as a junior partner. They are dispossessed from social, political, or economic categories such as

worker, feminist, American, or Chinese, being positioned as the ‘nothingness’ that gives meaning to the ‘Being’ contained in such groupings. Zhou’s failing, then, is not only that she fails to properly listen to Stella and Wilderson, or to take their concerns seriously, but also that she is operating on what Wilderson sees as a naive and un-‘enlightened’ understanding of their respective ontological positions. Zhou is not an Afro-pessimist. This is important, in illustrating that Afro-pessimism shapes the scene of their encounter.

Wilderson’s sense of the impossibility of the Black subject accessing ‘institutionality’ finds expression in his anti-coalitional politics. As he declares in *Red, White & Black*, Afro-pessimism seeks to ‘shit on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*’ (*RWB* 143). Glossing Wilderson’s statement, Sexton writes that Afro-pessimism is not simply opposed to coalitions because they ‘tend systematically to render supposed common interests as the concealed particular interests of the most powerful and privileged elements of the alliance’; but also because coalitions require ‘a logic of identity and difference, of collective selves modeled on the construct of the modern individual.’²⁴⁸ Where, for Wilderson, the ‘institutionality’ of ‘exploited and alienated’ identities might find expression in coalition, in those identities’ access to the ‘construct of the modern individual,’ Blackness by contrast ‘can only meditate, speak about, or act politically as a worker, as a postcolonial, or as a gay or female subject—but not as a Black object’ (*RWB* 142). Blackness, in this scheme, is inevitably subsumed by coalition. The autobiographical ‘I,’ in *Afropessimism*, is tasked then with ‘articulating the ethical dilemmas of the Slave’s position without [...] appeal to some shared proletarian or White feminist ensemble of questions’ (*RWB* 143). Wilderson’s solution to this is to appeal, instead, to the impossible authority of

²⁴⁸ Sexton, ‘Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word.’

the ‘I’ constituted by ontological anti-Blackness, an ‘I’ that cannot in Wilderson’s schema be articulated, or relied upon for an ‘indexical’ authority.

For political theorist Nica Siegel, Wilderson’s resistance to coalition clearly has biographical roots. Siegel reads Wilderson’s deep distrust of coalition as a product of his years as a member of uMkhonto we Sizwe, the paramilitary wing of a coalition forged between the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party in the years prior to the abolition of apartheid. ‘How might we square the dominant reading of Wilderson, as a figure marked by his systematic refusal of hope,’ she asks, ‘with its uncanny double, a figure who refused to give up, to demobilize?’²⁴⁹ Betrayed and exhausted by the collapse of revolutionary politics in South Africa, with the ascension of the ‘rainbow nation’ under Nelson Mandela and the ANC, Wilderson, Siegel suggests, felt compelled to rewrite the struggle in paradigmatic terms. Abandoning the label ‘Marxist’ and adopting Afro-pessimism, Wilderson ‘refus[ed] the specificity of apartheid and therefore the exceptionalism of South Africa’s historical struggle,’ in preference of ‘an ontology in which Blackness in general is the site of social death that enables “the World.”’²⁵⁰ In *Incognegro*, Wilderson positions himself as being ‘in control of the narrative,’ setting up a scene in which ‘little was possible,’ per the ontological structure of Afro-pessimism. For Siegel, then, Afro-pessimism makes the failure of radical Black struggle in South Africa seem inevitable. This is what Melvin Rodgers has referred to as Afro-pessimism’s tendency to determinism. He argues that the effect of Wilderson’s

²⁴⁹ Nica Siegel, ‘Exhausting Democracy: Ontology, Commitment, and Frank B. Wilderson’s South Africa,’ Chapter draft shared at *Brown University Political Theory Colloquium* (5 October 2023). For a reading of *Afropessimism* in terms of a ‘systematic refusal of hope’ see e.g. Greg Thomas, ‘Afro-Blue Notes: The Death of Afro-Pessimism (2.0)?’ *Theory & event* 21.1 (2018), 282–317.

²⁵⁰ Siegel.

absolutist appeal to history is to ‘obscure a background determinism’: ‘Where Black lives are concerned, the story of the United States’ moral and political growth necessarily becomes a closed tragedy. The citizenry is closed off from tragedy’s insights and we deny its educative function.’²⁵¹

Siegel’s and Rodgers’ arguments play out in some of the more contradictory qualities of Wilderson’s form. On the one hand, as I’ve suggested, Wilderson carefully depicts intimate, interpersonal scenes, injecting his first-person singular into their midst as an interpreting authorial presence. On the other hand, he extricates himself from those scenes, reflecting on them in a highly charged, didactic affective register. Not only that: he also renders his own autobiography abstract, actively artificial, tuned toward his ultimate argument. In these tendencies, we see him shrinking from the specific and grounded political context that caused him such disappointment. The memoir-cum-thesis is a vehicle by which he can dramatize his refusal of the specific, personal, and autobiographical, in favor of the paradigmatic thesis of Afro-pessimism. Similarly, this refusal shapes Afro-pessimism’s educative qualities. For Rodgers, the educative function of history lies in the material shape of events, and the lessons we might glean from the process of historical analysis. By contrast, for Wilderson the educative structure of Afro-pessimism is shaped by the absolutism of its argument. It must, as we have seen, ‘enlighten’ the reader—ushering us in a sweeping movement into the light of understanding. Wilderson’s confrontational rhetoric is part and parcel with this tendency to enlightenment: either you accept the thesis, or you do not. Such rhetorical absolutism reflects Wilderson’s suspicion of coalition politics.

²⁵¹ Melvin Rodgers, *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 3-4.

Wilderson clarifies these component parts of Afro-pessimism—suspicion of the personal; rejection of coalition politics; didactic and confrontational rhetoric; and ontological thesis—in the chapter that follows ‘Hattie McDaniel is Dead,’ titled ‘Punishment Park.’ The chapter recounts a working trip to Europe. In Copenhagen, Wilderson is due to address a small left-wing press’ launch of an anthology featuring his writing. Afterwards, in Berlin, he will deliver a conference paper on Peter Watkins’ 1971 film, *Punishment Park*, hosted by the Berlin post of a ‘well-endowed’ (AP 147) American university.²⁵² The chapter revolves around Wilderson’s engagement with his audiences—first activist, then academic—and his parallel reading of the film. In it, a group of young Communist organizers, Civil Rights activists, feminists, and student anti-war protestors are rounded up and tried by a kangaroo court of military men and figures representing family values; a literalization of Richard Nixon’s ‘Silent Majority.’²⁵³ When the activists are inevitably convicted, each is given the choice between prison and a race across the desert, pursued by police and military, to capture an American flag, after which they will walk free. All are killed in the process. Wilderson’s reading of the film encapsulates his argument against coalition politics, with a young white woman activist, Nancy Jane Smith, being tried based on questions around the fraught integrity of the ‘White’ family. Meanwhile, a young Black male activist, Charles Robbins, is tried based on the tribunal’s positioning of him in terms of the ‘nothingness’ of Blackness. They consequently have ‘no need for [his] actual testimony’ (AP 161).

Across these two distinct educational contexts—activist space, and academic

²⁵² Peter Watkins, dir. *Punishment Park* (Project X Distribution, 1971).

²⁵³ Richard M. Nixon, ‘Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,’ *The American Presidency Project*, University of California, Santa Barbara (3 November 1969). Web. <<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-war-vietnam>>. [Accessed 16 April 2024].

conference—Wilderson explores the affective dimensions of Afro-pessimism’s compulsion to ‘enlightenment.’ These affective dimensions revolve around the authority claims of identity, and his reception by ‘junior partners.’

I arrived in Copenhagen steadfast in my conviction that even the most persecuted White women are *a priori* positioned as masters. [...] [T]he violence that positions Nancy Jane Smith as a White woman and as a Human being is structurally different than the violence that positions Charles Robbins and the unnamed black woman in the desert as Blacks and Slaves. [...] The challenge this argument presents is not intellectual, but rather it is emotional; especially when it comes from a cisgender Black man who critiques the paradigm of White femininity in less than dulcet tones. (*AP* 166)

Implied in Wilderson’s argument is that Nancy Jane Smith, like Josephine, is ‘*a priori* positioned as [a] master.’ This draws on long histories of the violence of sentimentalized white femininity in the affective and legal context of North American chattel slavery.²⁵⁴ For Josephine, the antagonism between Stella and Josephine revolves on Josephine’s sense of Stella having an unequal claim to subjecthood. This registers in Josephine’s inability to perceive, appreciate, or empathize with Stella. For Wilderson, these fissures—ontological and epistemological—have to be drawn out in his framing of the antagonism, to illustrate the paradigmatic anti-Blackness underpinning the scene. Stella’s artificial speech indicates that she will never be understood by Josephine: Wilderson’s ‘iconoclastic’ imposition. Edwin and Mary Epps, similarly, are positioned as subjects to Patsey’s status as object; hence the strangeness of their imagined address to her (‘what do you make of this mess?’). Wilderson again illustrates this argument in the case of Nancy Jane Smith: that white women, as ‘junior partners,’ are treated as subjects, including at the level of speech, in comparison to people. For Wilderson, this distinction—encapsulated by the treatment of

²⁵⁴ See e.g.: Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers, *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

Smith versus Robbins—revolves around Smith’s alignment with the politics of the personal, versus Robbins’ necessarily structural antagonism.

During her questioning, the tribunal puts to Smith that she has been given a diagnosis of schizophrenia. The tribunal is attempting to discredit Smith’s revolutionary credentials, to make out that her politics are mere feminine hysteria. Smith rejects the diagnosis, but in answering in the terms of the tribunal, submits to their pressure to ‘steer the conversation from position and power, to identity and personal choices’ (*AP* 157). Wilderson argues that this indicates that Smith is ‘equally invested in the status and integrity of the White family’ as the members of the tribunal, as evidenced by her insufficient attempts to restructure the interrogation.

For Wilderson, the tribunal’s diagnosis of Smith indicates their political relationship to her white femininity. In declaring her hysterical, they ‘right off the bat [...] make clear that Smith has a mind, a mind about which they are all concerned’ (*AP* 158). In a parenthetical, Wilderson insists that we ‘bracket the fact that their concern mimics Victorian views of female hysteria’ as they ‘cannot extend to women.’ As a result, while the violent histories that underlie the tribunals’ questioning of Smith ‘remain important,’ these concerns take ‘a backseat to the more essential dynamic, which is how it fortifies and extends the paradigm of Human relations between the tribunal and Smith’ (*AP* 158). Here, again, we see how Wilderson’s drive toward a paradigmatic interpretation of a given scene leads him to overlook and sideline key political dynamics. In this aside, he doesn’t just ‘bracket’ the treatment of Smith, but also the question of how the violence of diagnosis has shaped, for instance, the medical inequality suffered by women.²⁵⁵ Even as the tribunal nullifies

²⁵⁵ Wilderson is implying, in this aside—per Hartman’s argument regarding consent—that Black women have not historically been positioned as female subjects, and so aren’t even diagnosed ‘hysterical.’ On the question

Smith's agency, then, Wilderson understands them to be treating her as the Epps could never treat Patsey; as Josephine ontologically could never treat Stella; and crucially, the structure of those antagonisms being the same. His insistence on this paradigmatic reading takes the form of a literal bracketing: a parenthetical aside. As if catching the reader before our focus slips to Smith, or doubts arise as to his paradigmatic reading, Wilderson's voice pushes into the foreground in service of arguing the importance of a total thesis.

Wilderson compares Smith's interrogation with that of Robbins. Smith's tribunal might have been hostile, he argues, but the questioners are nonetheless 'concerned' about her mind. 'In stark contrast,' Robbins' interrogation 'begins with an assault, in the guise of an assertion' (*AP* 159). The tribunal tells Robbins that only a small number of people lead the People's Army, and that they're not supported by the wider community. Robbins is not positioned as 'someone's wayward son, in the way that Nancy Jane Smith is someone's wayward daughter' (*AP* 160). For Wilderson, Robbins is not subject to the laws of civil society, by which there is putatively a causal link between transgression and punishment. Instead, he is subject to what Wilderson theorizes as unnarrativizability: deprived of the transformational and causal arc of the 'Human.' The tribunal ends in an intensification of its opening. Robbins is bound and gagged, unable to either be understood or to speak. For Wilderson, then, Smith is a figure of sentimentalized white femininity, imbued with an identitarian and 'personal' set of concerns, given her status as a 'Human.' By contrast, 'like objects in a grammatical structure,' Robbins is positioned as an object 'upon which the

of Black women's madness, including its 'appropriation' by white women writers, see e.g. Debonair Oates-Primus, 'Racialized and Gendered Madness: Decolonizing Psycho-Social Hysteria in African American and Postcolonial African Black Women's Fiction,' PhD Thesis, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (2019). On the violent history of Black women's bodies in medical science, see e.g.: C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

subject of a sentence acts, and the stability of the Human race depends on these roles never being altered or reversed' (AP 165).

This interpretive structure informs the remainder of the chapter. Wilderson proceeds to Copenhagen, where he will address not only the book launch but also a workshop of activists. There, his reception is 'thoughtful and engaged,' with the activists willingly sitting in a prolonged discussion that challenged '*much of the foundation upon which their organizing was based*' (AP 170, italics in original). He tells the group that contrary to their focus on 'reformist objectives—like stopping police brutality and ending racist immigration policies,' that '*anti- violence is a paradigm of oppression for which there is no coherent form of redress, other than Frantz Fanon's "the end of the world"*' (AP 171, italics in original). The italicization of these sections stresses the degree to which Wilderson understands his message to be didactic, hard-to-swallow, and ultimately a refutation of the activists' existing political framework. It also implies his surprise when they do seem to wholeheartedly embrace it.

It is important for Wilderson's argument that he cannot give a clear explanation for why the conference attendees in Berlin receive his argument so differently. 'There is no point-for-point pilgrim's progress that can explain [...] why the same analysis went south when I got to Berlin': a 'mob had packed its bags to meet me' (AP 171, 170). Just as Josephine's violence resists narrativizability, so the reception of Wilderson's ideas resists narrative explanation. His ideas are made the object of anti- violence: he depicts his argument as being dispossessed of narrative causality within a scheme of senseless brutality. Nonetheless, just as Stella and Josephine's antagonism is framed through the interpretive and filmic gaze of the Afro-pessimist narrator, so the antagonism in Berlin is blocked in

preparation for Wilderson's paradigmatic reading. Folkets Hut, where the activist workshop takes place, is depicted as a haven of solidarity: it 'smelled lived-in, contested, a room which weed and teargas had each called home,' a place where 'the windows had broad sills where comrades who came late sat' (*AP* 172). The Berlin conference room is a 'sad, milquetoast menagerie' (*AP* 172), all swipe cards and white bone chinaware.

The contrast prefaces the emotional terms of the encounter in Berlin. Wilderson delivers his lecture on *Punishment Park*, and as the foreshadowing has led us to expect, the room strongly objects. The content of the criticisms is diverse, as Wilderson tells it, but what they share is a tenor of resentment and aggression: the same attributes that Josephine displays when Stella tells her 'Hattie McDaniel is dead.' Continuing Wilderson's readings of Josephine and Nancy Jane Smith, two of the most affectively charged responses that he encounters come from women. Professor Li-ling Chen explains how 'mad' Wilderson's 'junior partner' analysis makes her. Wilderson pairs this response with that of Sandra Dove, a British art historian, who 'felt hurt and disappointed—perhaps betrayed' (*AP* 182). Wilderson describes their interventions as, at least, 'honest.' Whereas various white men in the room 'conjured red herrings about [his] ahistoricism' and similar lines of critique, Wilderson sees Chen and Dove as speaking truthfully, in the sense that their input is driven by emotion.

The overwrought emotional response that Wilderson expects from his audience, as he proposes to them this reading, ties together Nancy Jane Smith, Josephine, and white femininity's histories of instrumentalized sentiment. Nonetheless, rather than banishing the affective tenor of the debate to the space of white femininity, Wilderson appears to lean into confrontation. We recall: 'The challenge this argument presents is not intellectual, but

rather it is emotional; especially when it comes from a cisgender man who critiques the paradigm of White femininity in less than dulcet tones' (*AP* 167). His blunt address suggests not only his exhausted and infuriated response to the critique he anticipates, but also the value that he places on emotional response. Wilderson expects a largely emotional rather than critical and analytical reception, but also seems to encourage it. The passage suggests that 'enlightenment' by Afro-pessimism is the only possible resolution to the recognition that white women are positioned as masters. Wilderson risks a tautology: the debate may be emotional, but that is only because of critics' resistance to the totality of the position; the totality of the position, meanwhile, makes the debate necessarily a question of emotion rather than content. 'The challenge this argument presents is not intellectual' (*AP* 167), he writes, both predicting an emotional response, and dismissing the viability of any genuinely rigorous critique.

It becomes clear that Wilderson understands there to be only two viable routes for the reception of his paradigmatic thesis. One: to reject his argument, on grounds that are clearly emotional, based in self-preservation, and therefore invalid. Two: to become 'enlightened.' Wilderson objects to the emotional tenor of Chen and Dove's interjections, suggesting that 'their responses did *not* manifest in an actual engagement of my argument but, instead, foregrounded the way my lecture made them *feel*' (*AP* 182). Nonetheless, the 'White men's' engagements are described as 'red herrings,' covering over the critics' clearly emotional resistances to Afro-pessimism.

In this series of antagonisms and affective battles, we see how Wilderson's paradigmatic thesis results in a zero-sum educative framework. This is certainly not true of Afro-pessimism in a wider educational context: Afro-pessimism has bloomed debates in

high schools and on social media; in academic conferences and in scholarly monographs. But the form of the memoir leads Wilderson repeatedly to insist on an absolutist interpretation of events, approached in the language of scholarly debate but the framework of the memoir: of high-emotion, personal confession, and a self, under judgment at the center of the work. Structuring *Afropessimism* into a narrative becomes a necessarily impossible task: the work must ‘somehow be indexical of that which exceeds narration’ (AP 246), and in fact, Wilderson suggests, its failures become proof of its success. In refusing to ‘index’ ness, Wilderson argues that readers’ ‘incomprehension’ of the work is illustrative of ‘the indices [...] actually escap[ing] the narrative’ (AP 246). Crucially, that goal of failure is predicated on not only the artifice, but the theoretical limitations produced by the partial and yet totalizing autobiographical ‘I.’

The Undercommons

From Wilderson’s totally personal thesis, and concordant rejection of both coalition politics and narrative coherence, I want now to turn to the depersonalized, collectivist, and utopian strategies of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s *The Undercommons* (2013). Moten and Harney’s collaboratively written text, and its successor, *All Incomplete* (2021), are wayward manifestoes *against* institutionality as represented in the university, and *for* a more collective, optimistic, and loving life of the social.²⁵⁶ The position of being *for* something does not, as Jack Halberstam points out in their introduction to *The Undercommons*, mean proposing a plan with neat political solutions. Nor does it mean, as

²⁵⁶ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe and New York: Minor Compositions, 2013); *All Incomplete* (Wivenhoe and New York: Minor Compositions, 2021). All further references in the text.

in the case of Wilderson's memoir, resolving the impossibility of 'indexicality' with autobiography. Rather, the book's exploration of 'fugitive planning and study' is 'mostly about reaching out to find connection': it is about 'making common cause with the brokenness of being,' where brokenness 'is also ness, [...] remains ness, and will, despite all, remain broken because this book is not a prescription for repair.'²⁵⁷ I read *The Undercommons*, here, as akin to the historical, Enlightenment-born manifesto in its declarative and impersonal qualities, its scathing critique of institutionality, and its call to the collective. But unlike that genre, it is not premised on a political program, a projected and absolute resolution, or indeed a neat logic of opposition. Instead, *The Undercommons* takes a 'fugitive' and 'appositional' relationship to the manifesto. Their orientation lets Moten and Harney express Afro-pessimism in a sense markedly distinct from Wilderson's memoir: as I'll argue, a sense much less reliant on the text's own structural collapse.

In suggesting that *The Undercommons* is for a loving life of the social, I hope to underline the work's removal from Wilderson's anti-social thesis, and to indicate its orientation to the tradition of the manifesto. As Janet Lyon points out in her study of the modern history of the genre, the manifesto has—from the French Revolution and Chartism, to late-nineteenth century anarchist movements, the Paris Commune, and later Latin American revolutions—'functioned to circumvent ordinary parliamentary avenues of public redress, and to challenge the ostensible universalism that underpins modern democratic formulations.'²⁵⁸ In the process, the manifesto has often fallen prey to a different shade of universalism. In marking the 'exclusions and deferrals experienced by those outside the

²⁵⁷ Jack Halberstam, 'The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,' in *The Undercommons*, 2-13 (p. 5).

²⁵⁸ Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 2.

“legitimate” bourgeois spheres of public exchange,’ manifestoes construct an ‘us’ that claims the ‘moral high ground of revolutionary idealism,’ and a ‘them’ characterized by ideological tyranny and corruption.²⁵⁹ In speaking into being an unimpeachable collectivity of the overlooked and oppressed, the manifesto finds itself caught in a series of paradoxes, expressive of what Lyon describes as modernity’s ‘signal crisis’: the question of ‘how to negotiate between radical individualism and forms of representation.’²⁶⁰ In other words, the manifesto’s core concern—of an ‘us’ versus a ‘them’—creates its distinctive contradictions. How can the manifesto best speak a collective into being without succumbing to ‘the ostensible universalism that underpins modern democratic formulations’ of representation? How can it realize the human force and experience of the individual worker, artist, colonial subject, or feminist, in a necessarily depersonalized, collectively voiced form? How can it best manipulate what Wilderson describes as the ‘inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*’ without alienating or homogenizing the collective for which it claims to speak?

These questions are not resolved in the manifesto but become its central tensions. As Lyon suggests, the manifesto’s paradoxes are born out in a genre ‘at once political and aesthetic, rational and irrational, angry and restrained, and always poised between the violence of the armed insurrection and the stasis of the written word.’²⁶¹ The manifesto is forced to negotiate these contradictions, in part, because of the totality of its position. Because it attempts to claim a unilateral authority and ‘resolute oppositionality,’ it leaves itself open to equally sweeping critique.

The literary and political manifestoes that flag the history of modernity are usually

²⁵⁹ Lyon, 3.

²⁶⁰ Lyon, 5.

²⁶¹ Lyon, 5.

taken to be transparent public expressions of pure will: [...] a manifesto is understood as the testimony of a historical present tense spoken in the impassioned voice of its participants. [...] [T]he syntax of a manifesto is so narrowly controlled by exhortation, its style so insistently unmediated, that it appears to say only what it means, and to mean only what it says. The manifesto declares a position; the manifesto refuses dialogue or discussion; the manifesto fosters antagonism and scorns conciliation. It is univocal, unilateral, single-minded. It conveys resolute oppositionality and indulges no tolerance for the fainthearted [...].²⁶²

Lyon echoes the recitative style of many manifestoes, with their short-clauses or numbered tenets which repetitively underline key ideas in evolving their arguments. In doing so, she illustrates the partialness produced by the controlled, exhortatory syntax of the manifesto, in which what is said is what is meant, and what is meant is total in its declarative spareness. The great manifestoes of modernity are ‘usually taken to be transparent public expressions of pure will’ not because of the details of their argument, the nuance of their critique, or the genius of their planning, but because of their formal and affective qualities of resolution, and the sense they give of not brooking faintheartedness. While Lyon’s argument shifts, from here, into the historical and textual analysis of the academic monograph, this passage indicates how the relative absence of critical argument, or the subjection of a critical analysis to declarative statement, lets the manifesto lean into an absolute thesis. It plunges into what Julian Hanna calls ‘a kind of storytelling,’ where ‘fiction is dressed as fact.’²⁶³ The result is that where the manifesto shuts down possibility, removing any individual deviation from its vision of collectivity, it also invites speculation. In its opposition to institutionality, it sets itself up as another immovable institution. In closing down debate, it stimulates conversation and argument, outlining through opposition

²⁶² Lyon, 9.

²⁶³ Julian Hanna, ‘Manifestos: A Manifesto,’ *The Atlantic* (24 June 2014) [Web] <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/06/manifestos-a-manifesto-the-10-things-all-manifestos-need/372135/>> [Accessed 15 March 2024].

the qualities of the ‘ostensibl[y] universal’ mode. In its totality, it becomes reflexively fabulative. And because it speaks with a unilateral ‘we,’ rather than a personal ‘I,’ its argument engages the collective—rousing collectivized response—so that in refusing ‘dialogue or discussion’ it becomes material for general debate.

Moten and Harney’s *The Undercommons* adopts a fugitive, wayward relationship to the absoluteness of the manifesto which illuminates the genre’s willing contradictions and, in concert, the totalizing impulses of Wilderson’s *Afropessimism*. As we have seen, Wilderson’s memoir deflects debate, illustrating how the personal might be instrumentalized in furthering a manifesto-like certainty, without indulging in the manifesto’s wilfulness, its optimistic paradoxes and fictiveness. Where the manifesto opens itself to critique through its total argument, Wilderson joins his argument to personal experience, so that to doubt the thesis is also to doubt the man. The manifesto avoids this difficulty in its construction of a collective; but Wilderson scorns collectivity, meaning that the manifesto’s intolerance ‘for the fainthearted’ becomes unavoidably personal. In this, Wilderson not only rouses response but ‘fosters antagonism and scorns conciliation.’ There, to be sympathetic is to be enlightened, and to feel otherwise is to erroneously feel oneself ‘mugged.’

This is decidedly not the speaking position, argumentative position, or formal strategy of *The Undercommons*. Moten and Harney’s work—through its depersonalized, multi-authored speaking voice, its shifting, hard-to-pin-down lyrical style, its refusal to declare a plan, so much as to meditate on planning, and its sense of inevitable incompleteness—adopts a sidelong relationship to the tradition of the manifesto, and to the institutions that those manifestoes were engaged in debating. In doing so, *The Undercommons* critiques the forms

of critique Moten and Harney associate with the university, and with systematized racist and imperialist power more broadly. In other words, in reading Wilderson's and Moten and Harney's work through and against the manifesto, we see dramatized many of the contradictions that dog a written redress to institutionality—and many of the distinctions between Wilderson's, and Moten and Harney's, sense of how to approach institutionalized and even ontological antinomy.

Just as Assata Shakur is a dominant presence in Wilderson's formulation of memoir, Fanon shapes Moten and Harney's fugitive and appositional relationship to the manifesto. In the famed concluding chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, with its impassioned clarity and assurance, Fanon subverts and comments on the epistemological underpinnings of Western thought and politics. In the process, he suggests a critique of the manifesto form on which he is drawing. In his portrait of European thought, and his vision for a departed, decolonized political future, Fanon's conclusion 'invites reaction and action—a manifesto.'²⁶⁴ 'Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their streets, in all the corners of the globe,' he writes, of the hypocrisy of Enlightenment philosophy used as a justification for colonial policy.²⁶⁵ He depicts European thought as paradoxically myopic even as it expands ever outwards, unfolding in places 'increasingly more deserted and more encircled by precipices.'²⁶⁶ Against European solipsism, his vision is a radical departure into relation, indicated at the level of form. Where the Enlightenment manifesto speaks

²⁶⁴ Xavier Guegan, 'Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*: Embodying Anti-Colonial Action,' in *Revolutionary Moments: Reading Revolutionary Texts*, ed. Rachel Hammersley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 167-174 (p. 169).

²⁶⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 311.

²⁶⁶ Fanon, 313.

didactically of universalism, while addressing only itself, Fanon insists:

No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men. The caravan should not be stretched out, for in that case each line will hardly see those who precede it; and men who no longer recognize each other meet less and less together, and talk to each other less and less.²⁶⁷

Under colonial regimes, Fanon argues, colonized peoples have become alienated from themselves, as expressed in the crippling question, ‘in reality, who am I?’²⁶⁸ Against this violent epistemological scheme, Fanon urges ‘the company of all men,’ who must continue to ‘recognize each other’ across difference.

On the first page of *The Undercommons*, Moten and Harney offer a Fanonian critique of the absoluteness of the manifesto, and of totalizing political systems more broadly.

Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler’s armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence occasions this self-defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common—the general and generative antagonism—from within the surround. (*U* 17)

Here, the oppositional politics of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is figured through the opposition of the ‘surround’ to the isolated protection of the colonial settlement. The commons is the ‘surround’: the place of the people, cut off by high walls from the seat of power. Yet rather than reinforce this demarcation, Moten and Harney shift our attention to within the ‘surround’: the ‘real danger,’ they write, is after all not the armed incursions with which the settlement, the institution, or the locus of representational power penetrate the commons, but the recourse that the commons might readily reach for. The recourse to self-possession, individualization, and ‘politics’ is a sickness that comes from within the commons itself.

²⁶⁷ Fanon, 314-315.

²⁶⁸ Fanon, 250.

Politics here constitutes a dangerous individualizing of the struggle which acts within and necessarily against the ‘general and generative antagonism’ of the collective.

In Moten and Harney’s critique, politics is the creeping, solution-based, reparative thinking that dilutes radicalism, and it is directly born of radical individualism being figured in antagonism with representational power. As such, politics maps onto what Lyon’s sees as the signal crisis of modernity—or onto the crisis that occasions the contradictions of the manifesto. Moten and Harney’s solution to the problem of politics is, crucially, not to double down on oppositional binaries—neither ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ nor ‘us’ versus the ‘them’ within the surround—but to shift the grounds of debate. From here, they redirect us from the ‘commons’ towards the ‘undercommons,’ thereby refusing to reinforce the boundaries set out by the institution. The undercommons, unlike the ‘commons,’ is not plagued by the issue of ‘politics,’ because it is removed from the binarism of inside and out: instead, the undercommons exists against but always within the institution; underneath and subversive of the illimitable spaces of power. By refusing to position the commons in neat, and neatly homogenized antagonism with the totality of power, Moten and Harney refuse the ‘signal crisis’ of modernity that the manifesto has historically encountered: the question of representation versus individualism.

This undercommons mentality, of subversive relation to representation as to individualism, is reflected in Moten and Harney’s impersonal but collaborative form. Where Wilderson performs a total theory through the authoritative ‘I,’ Moten and Harney eschew the responsibilities and political dangers of representation through their discursive but depersonalized collective voice. ‘An abdication of political responsibility?’ they write. ‘OK. Whatever. We’re just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We

aren't responsible for politics. [...] We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented' (*U 20*). Rather than attempting to represent the undercommons, thereby falling into the trap of totalizing the collective under the gaze of an interpreting speaker, Moten and Harney play with and against the concept of representation. 'We aren't responsible for politics,' they write, in a move that both refuses the problem of representation and refutes the authority of their own voice, which has just defined 'politics' and foregrounded its significance. It's a maneuver that recurs cross the text, with Moten and Harney conjuring a term and then, rather than opposing it, simply sidestepping it. In doing so, they create a fugitive relationship to the institutions and institutional concepts they are representing, including the genre of the manifesto. Far from the manifesto's binary contradictions, Moten and Harney embrace a dialectical operation of unresolved tensions. They sidestep the contradictions that persist in the genre, instead creating a distinctive, shifting practice that interrogates binarism. That interrogation centers on their unrepresentable and nonetheless declarative 'we': 'We cannot represent ourselves,' they write. 'We can't be represented.'

Wilderson's belief in the un-representable quality of Blackness leads him to abstract his own autobiographical experiences, in service of arguing his paradigmatic thesis. His intimate experiences are rendered as textual objects, with the goal of illustrating his argument. In *The Undercommons*, by contrast, Moten and Harney's refusal to refuse to represent the Black undercommons results paradoxically in deeply intimate scenes. Their depersonalized formal landscape is home to remarkable closeness, forged, for instance, through figurations of the undercommons worker and the Black everywoman. In these figures, who are part of a collective 'we' together with the authors and their readers, Moten and Harney create an unrepresentable community at internal difference from itself. In a

section titled 'Debt and Refuge,' Moten and Harney reverse the presumptive logic of private and public spheres, revealing in the process the intimacy that lies in public undercommons collectivity.

We went to the public hospital but it was private, but we went through the door marked 'private' to the nurses' coffee room, and it was public. We went to the public university but it was private, but we went to the barber shop on campus and it was public. (U 65)

They contrast this to the way that public institutions, pretending accessibility, demand credit. Credit, or debt, comes with recognition by the institution. 'We were granted citizenship,' they write. 'We honored our debt to the nation' (U 65). Meanwhile, beneath this context of accumulation, another world is operating.

Then we went to the barbershop and they gave us a Christmas breakfast, and we went to the coffee room and got coffee and red pills. We were going to run but we didn't have to. [...] They showed us this was the public, the real public, the fugitive public, and where to look for it. Look for it here where they say the state doesn't work. Look for it [...] anywhere bad debt elaborates itself. Anywhere you can stay, conserve yourself, plan. (U 65)

In these scenes of undercommons collectivity, intimacy is evoked not through individualized, autobiographical experience, but through the relation of every-person figures. The university and the hospital offer 'us' debt. But in these scenes, 'we' find food and community in the barbershop; healthcare and support in the nurse's break room. In these passages, Moten and Harney offer a vision of *recognition* that doesn't recreate the recognition-by-debt-and-credit that structures the undercommons worker's relationship to 'public' institutions. Instead, Moten and Harney propose recognition on Fanon's model, in which 'men who no longer recognize each other, meet less and less together and talk to each other less and less.' They create pockets in which people meet and talk to each other, provide for each other, hidden from the subsumptive recognition imposed by centers of power. Their collectives are fugitive, in that they operate underneath the state, but they are

also productive, revolutionary. They don't run, because they have each other. As a result, these collectives can organize. They enable each other to 'stay.' Speaking to and from such spaces, Moten and Harney can, in a fugitive version of the manifesto's exhortation, urge the collective to action: 'conserve yourself, plan.'

The every-person figures gathered into Moten and Harney's 'we' also subvert the standard progress narrative, but in a form distinct from Wilderson's fracturing personal narrative qua paradigmatic thesis. For Moten and Harney, the subversive intellectual is able to subvert, in her relationship to the institution, the time and space of 'enlightenment.' Wilderson battles with sentiment, which poses a problem in his memoir: in critiquing anti-Black structures of empathy, he also implores his reader to be emotionally primed for 'enlightenment' by Afro-pessimism. In *The Undercommons*, Moten and Harney's undercommons operator escapes from the overground site of progress and resolution, which risks trapping Wilderson even as he illuminates it.

She disappears into the underground, the downlow low-down maroon community of the university, into the *undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong. (*U* 26, italics in original)

The overground from which the subversive intellectual disappears is the professional space of accomplishment and reward. In the underground, the 'downlow low-down' community beneath the university, teaching, or what Moten and Harney call 'the beyond of teaching' (*U* 27), is far removed from the progress narrative of the institution. (The typesetting forces a hyphen into 'low-down' but not 'downlow,' creating a break and asymmetry that is possibly intentional, likely not, but nonetheless echoes the waywardness of Moten and Harney's practice.) '[I]t is teaching that brings us in,' they write, before the work of 'grants, research, conferences, books, and journals,' and before 'the research post with no teaching,

[...] before the string of sabbaticals, before the permanent reduction in teaching load' (*U* 27).

Against the movement towards institutionalization, the undercommons subverts 'enlightenment' through its program of 'fugitive planning and black study,' which is beyond and below teaching-to-progress. Enlightenment here doesn't describe the revelatory and absolute embrace of a total thesis, *qua* Wilderson, but a way of occupying the underground. Upending the illuminating image of enlightenment—of stepping into the sun—the 'undercommons of enlightenment' suggests a subverted, subterranean relationship to 'the work' of knowledge production. Rather than refusing the terms of the institution, Moten and Harney adopt and rework those terms—teaching, work, study—turning institutional forms and ideas against the institution from within.

Moten and Harney's sense of the 'critical academic,' absorbed by the institution, recalls Wilderson's depiction of the left. For Wilderson, the 'we' of the left is an insidious collective given to the promotion of existing privilege, as evidenced not only in Josephine's weaponization of feminism, but also in the faux-critical attitude that he sees in Professors Chen and Dove's objections to Afro-pessimism. Their objections are not viable, for Wilderson, because they are grounded in emotion. They are reactive, expressive of an ontological position of power. Wilderson choice of the memoir form suggests that he sees one method of rebutting the coalition politics of the 'we' as being to opt for an individualized expression of suffering under anti-Blackness. As Wilderson frames his autobiography to be exemplary of his argument, his critical and interpretive authority pushes into shot. The result is that even in moments of complexity, or confusion, Wilderson's oppositional voice is primed to argue that the scene is underpinned by an

oppositional paradigm: whiteness and the ‘junior partners,’ figured in contrast to Blackness.

Moten and Harney’s depiction of this dynamic is different, though they also understand it to be the ontological relation that structures modernity. Their subversive form attempts to sidestep the binary logic of oppositionality. The undercommons student-cum-academic isn’t removed from the university, but stays, ‘committed to black study in the university’s undercommon rooms’ (*U* 67). In remaining, the undercommons subject subverts ‘interest’: refuses to recognize the progress narrative of the institution, and refuses to be recognized by it. For Moten and Harney, the solution to the co-option of a ‘we’ by the centers of power is not to resist and refuse that co-option. This would be to be ‘against’ and therefore ‘recognized’ by and via those centers of power. Rather, their goal is to refuse the logic of opposition. Their depersonalized, dialectical form performs their refusal, or rather, their *refusal to refuse*. ‘[T]he maroons refuse to refuse professionalization, that is, to be against the university’ (*U* 31), they write. Through a refusal to refuse, they also sidestep recognition by the state, represented in the form of the institution. ‘The university will not recognize this indecision’ (*U* 31). Put differently: Wilderson rejects coalition because it has historically been tainted by the politics of actors such as Dove, Chen, and Josephine. Moten and Harney, by contrast, refuse the oppositional politics that would infect the ‘surround.’ Instead, their appositional and dialectical relationship to the formulation of a ‘we’ holds open the prospect of solidarity across difference.

Moten and Harney repeatedly dodge the oppressive politics of representation which dog the manifesto tradition. We see this again in their treatment of students’ interest and debt to the university. The student, they write, ‘has no interests.’

The student’s interests must be declared, purged, assessed, counselled, and credited. Debt produces interests. The student will be indebted. The student will be

interested. Interest the students! [...] Governance is interest-bearing. Credit and debt. There is no other definition of good governance, no other interest. The public and private in harmony, in policy, in pursuit of bad debt, on the trail of fugitive publics, chasing evidence of refuge. The student graduates. (*U* 67)

The meanings of ‘interest’ proliferate, complicating from within the language of the institution with each repetition. The student is granted interests, or specializations, that are approved, ‘counselled, and credited’ by the institution. With those academic interests, the student accumulates—is given—debt and debt’s interest, and together interest and debt allow her to graduate. Like the teacher who works towards ‘the permanent reduction in teaching load,’ the student’s progress is away from absence, taken as a lack of recognition by the university—‘the student has no interests’—and towards institutionalization. She is destined to be defined by indebtedness to the institution, and the recognition that brings. Criticism of the university is, significantly, absorbed by the university: ‘[T]o be a critical academic within the university is to be against the university, and to be against the university is always to recognize it and be recognized by it’ (*U* 31). The critical academic, here, makes a career of criticizing the university and equivalent institutions. Through that critique, they are able to progress to the ‘research post with no teaching,’ which marks their removal from the material conditions under critique. To critique the university is, like the manifesto’s total critique of total power, to recognize and be recognized by the institution under critique. The student is also enmeshed in this bind: their debt to the university ‘produces interests,’ just as the academic’s need for recognition—debt—to the university produces and shapes critique. The academic is given the ‘research post with no teaching’; the student graduates. As Lyon argues, the manifesto, in its struggle between an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ becomes caught in a series of contradictions that are dictated by an oppositional logic shaped by the seat of power. Moten and Harney suggest that in the same way, the

institution all too readily absorbs opposition. Hence: they refuse to refuse.

Where the repetitions of the historical manifesto, echoed by Lyon, underline what the manifesto is for and against, the repetitious quality of Moten and Harney's writing dances around and away from solutions and resolutions, upsetting the syntactical temporality of progress. This is a practice that draws consciously on what Saidiya Hartman figures first as fugitive practice, and later as 'waywardness.'²⁶⁹ In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman turns our attention from the spectacle of suffering, represented by the scene of Aunt Hester's beating as recounted by Frederick Douglass. That 'terrible spectacle,' she suggests, is too easily reproduced and reproduces slavery's 'diffusion of terror and violence.'²⁷⁰ She points, instead, towards the everyday operations of enslaved people, including everyday, fugitive rebellion.

Exploiting the limits of the permissible, creating transient zones of freedom, and reelaborating innocent amusements were central features of everyday practice. Practice is, to use Michel de Certeau's phrase, "a way of operating" defined by "the non-autonomy of its field of action," internal manipulations of the established order, and ephemeral victories. The tactics that comprise the everyday practices of the dominated have neither the means to secure a territory outside the space of domination nor the power to keep or maintain what is won in fleeting, surreptitious, and necessarily incomplete victories. [...] Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility.²⁷¹

Hartman's turn away from the 'pained body' is not a refusal or rejection of what Moten, writing on Hartman, describes as the 'weight of anti-blackness in and upon the general project of black study.'²⁷² Rather, she points to the 'diffusion' that attends the horrors of historical anti-Blackness. She insists, accordingly, on attending to those 'scenes in which

²⁶⁹ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

²⁷⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3.

²⁷¹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 50-51.

²⁷² Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), viii.

terror can hardly be discerned.’²⁷³ Hartman draws attention to scenarios in which enslaved people carved out the ‘limits of the permissible,’ and in doing so, to the diffusing dynamics that attach to the study and recognition of slavery’s terrors. Exploring everyday practices that enabled enslaved people to briefly ‘secure a territory outside the space of domination,’ Hartman places these activities in dialectical relation to ‘the demands of the system’ and the ‘internal manipulation[s] of the established order.’

Hartman’s scholarly method has been a touchstone in Moten’s work, as he indicates in the preface to *Black and Blur*, the first of his *consent not to be a single being* trilogy. He frames the essays as an attempt to grapple with Hartman’s identification of the diffusion of anti-Blackness: in their ‘interanimation of thinking and writing,’ Moten writes, his essays tarry ‘with Hartman’s notion of diffusion, which is inseparable from a certain notion of apposition conceived not as therapy but alternative operation.’²⁷⁴ For Moten, apposition describes an ‘alternative operation’ at both the level of critical method and of conceptual intent. Apposition expresses Moten’s sense of how he might write ‘in and against the demands of the system.’ We have seen this in Moten and Harney’s refusal of oppositional politics. It hews closely to what Hartman describes as fugitivity, or the utopian project of waywardness.

Wayward, related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild. To inhabit the world in ways inimical to those deemed proper and respectable [...].
Waywardness: the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police. [...] The social poses that sustain the dispossessed [...]. Not the master’s tools, but the ex-slave’s fugitive gestures, her traveling shoes. Waywardness articulates the paradox of cramped creation, the engagement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity [...]. It is a *beautiful experiment* in how-to-live [...]. Waywardness is an

²⁷³ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3.

²⁷⁴ Moten, *Black and Blur*, viii.

ongoing exploration of *what might be*.²⁷⁵

Reaching from Audre Lorde's figure of the 'master's tools' back through 'the ex-slave's fugitive gestures,' waywardness expresses a recalcitrant, errant, and troublesome operation that joins contemporary Black Studies to the insurgent everyday practices of the enslaved—without collapsing the two together. In her speech to the 1979 Second Sex Conference in New York, in which she articulated the concept of the 'master's tools,' Lorde told the academic audience: 'Only with [the] interdependency of different strengths [...] can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters' (*SO* 111). Waywardness points to the Black feminist history of acting 'where there are no charters,' and in depicting it through the intimate actions of the ex-slave, as through the rebellious experiments of the Black scholar, creates a wayward collective in 'the wake.'²⁷⁶ The 'ex-slave's [...] traveling shoes' traverse that history, marking the *longue durée* of the terrible institution in the gestures of a Black everywoman figure, recalling the collectivism expressed in Moten and Harney's undercommons worker.

Hartman's 'paradox of cramped creation,' meanwhile, calls to Moten's conception of apposition. His appositional rather than oppositional method allows he and Harney to articulate the 'the engagement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity': a dialectic at the heart of *The Undercommons*. Adopting wayward gestures that are appositional to the 'master's tools,' Moten and Harney's undercommons actor disrupts the ontological and formal 'field of action' from within. Importantly, this Black feminist collectivism is founded in acknowledgement of the difference within the collective, which is also

²⁷⁵ Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 227-228.

²⁷⁶ Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

difference within and across history. The figures of the Black everywoman, the ‘ex-slave’ with her fugitive gestures, are animated as individuals in Hartman’s rich and fabulative restoration of the archive in *Wayward Lives*. Hartman’s relationship to her historical figures is impersonal, not in the sense of faux-objective but in the sense of an attentive and imaginative honoring of the experiences of another. In her methodological process—which moves from the general to the historically specific, from the abstract to the impersonally intimate—she explores the forms of attention (‘interest’) that animate ‘what might be.’

We see more evidence of Moten and Harney’s dialectical reading of history, and their grounding in Black feminisms, in their discussion of Harriet Jacobs in *All Incomplete*. Looping antebellum histories of natal alienation back round to advanced modern capitalist debt structures, Moten and Harney don’t collapse anti-Blackness across history but illustrate how social and economic histories have shaped and continue to shape Black subjectification and sociality.

Harriet Jacobs teaches us that because we are invaluable, we can never pay for ourselves. Nevertheless, we are required to pay. [...] We pay, and pay, and pay, but not to own. Even our mothers, even our children, are not ours. We never come to terms, and this is too terribly beautiful for words. Our indebtedness is all we have, and all we have is what we owe to ‘one another.’ It’s what we hand, and feel, as feel, in the defiance we pay to payment [...], until one and another fail to signify, [...], until one and another are no-bodies. Here’s how we’re supposed to pay our debt to society: Master, this is who you are; Master, this is where you are; Master, this is when you are. He’s always asking us to tell him who he is; this motherfucker won’t leave you alone.²⁷⁷

Through the grammatical knot of the first sentence of this passage, Moten and Harney indicate that Black sociality and subjectivity exist not only apart from the anti-Black economic terms by which it has historically been defined, but in contradistinction. ‘Harriet Jacobs teaches us that because we are invaluable, we can never pay for ourselves,’ they

²⁷⁷ Moten and Harney, *All Incomplete* (83).

write. Jacobs teaches Moten and Harney that ‘we are invaluable’ because her life and her relation of it, in her autobiography—*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)—illustrates the productive impossibility of defining Black subjectivity in terms defined in anti-Black institutional histories. Jacobs’ narrative depicts her attempts to purchase her freedom and that of her children—of having to operate within the ‘space of domination’ and the ‘demands of the system,’ as Hartman puts it—illustrating, for Moten and Harney, how ‘we can never pay for ourselves’ in terms outside of a racist capitalist ideological system.

‘We pay, and pay, and pay, but not to own,’ Moten and Harney write, indicating not only modern finance capitalism’s legal origins in chattel slavery, but relatedly, Hortense Spillers articulation of how objectification figured the captive body ‘a metaphor for value,’ realized in the dictat of ‘Partus Sequitur Ventrem’: that the child ‘follow the condition of the mother.’²⁷⁸ As Spillers writes, in this context kinship ‘loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations.’²⁷⁹ Against this loss of meaning, Moten and Harney rearticulate debt and indebtedness. Debt becomes, against and through its unavailability, ‘too beautiful for words.’ ‘Our indebtedness is all we have, and all we have is what we owe to “one another,”’ they write. ‘It’s what we hand, and feel, as feel, in the defiance we pay to payment.’ In this passage, they suggest, debt is inevitably shared among the ‘we’ who are ‘invaluable’ within its bounds. Only through collective defiance and collective feeling for ‘one another’ do debt and mastery ‘fail to signify.’ In refusing debt—or rather, in acknowledging and refusing debt, ‘refusing to refuse’—the grammar of property relations is subverted. At core, this constitutes, for Moten and Harney,

²⁷⁸ Hortense Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,’ *Diacritics*, 17:2 (1987), 64-81 (p. 68).

²⁷⁹ Spillers, 74.

a refusal of anti-Black objectification. When debt and mastery fail to signify, the result is that ‘one and another [become] no-bodies.’ ‘We’ and ‘you’ merge in this dissolution of grammar, this dissolving of debt, with a call to a collective refusal to refuse. ‘This motherfucker won’t leave you alone,’ they write: so ‘our indebtedness’—to the social, to ‘each other’—‘is all we have.’

Barber shop, break room, conference hall, house party

I opened this chapter with three central questions. How does Wilderson illustrate the ‘unnarrativizability’ of Blackness? What are the implications of arguing Afro-pessimism’s ‘iconoclastic’ and paradigmatic claims in the form of the memoir? And: how does genre, and its pronominal grammar, shape the ambitions, possibilities, and liberatory imaginings of ‘black critical theory, which is to say critical theory’?

Looking at Moten, Harney, and Wilderson’s responses to the last of these questions sheds light on both the political limitations and vast potential that lies in first-persons singular and plural. For Moten, the problem revolves around a distinction between what he describes as Wilderson and Sexton’s ‘pessimism’ and his appositional ‘optimism.’ In his 2013 essay, ‘Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),’ Moten says that he writes ‘out of love for the common project, [...] out of love for black people, out of love for blackness.’ It is out of that love that ‘the tension comes.’

I have thought long and hard, in the wake of [Wilderson and Sexton’s] work, [...] about whether blackness could be loved; there seems to be a growing consensus that analytic precision does not allow for such a flight of fancy, such romance, but I remain under the impression, and devoted to the impression, that analytic precision is, in fact, a function of such fancy. [...]

What I assert is this: that black life [...] is irreducibly social; that, moreover, black life is lived in *political* death or that it is lived, if you will, in the burial ground of the subject by those who, insofar as they are not subjects are also not, in the

interminable [...] analysis, “death bound.”²⁸⁰

For Moten, a loving critical orientation reveals the possibility that lies under and against what has been figured as ‘nothingness.’ He expresses an optimism for Black social life, against the pessimism of Black social death. His love finds sociality under and against the ‘protocols’ that govern and institute anti-Black figurations of subjectivity. He argues that far from love muddying his critique, analytic precision is a ‘function’ of love. His analytic precision proceeds from the barber shop and the break room. It speaks to Hartman’s fugitive slave’s traveling shoes, or the intimacy that she imagines for Black queer women in Philadelphia bedrooms, in *Wayward Lives*. Moten’s ‘love’ speaks to and from the ‘we’ that can’t represent itself, cannot be represented, in forms that historically positioned the ‘Human’ in antagonism to Blackness. Whereas for Wilderson, this repressive force of form delimits his ability to narrativize Blackness, for Moten it is a gift. For Wilderson, Blackness cannot be represented in the transformative arc of a narrative, as dramatized in his memoir: the only sense that he might make of the mess of autobiography, and the effects of anti-Blackness on his own life, is to be found in the ordering framework of Afro-pessimism and its ‘iconoclastic’ thesis. Moten sidesteps this ‘interminable [...] analysis.’ Where Wilderson positions the anarchist meeting house in sharp antagonism to the Berlin conference hall, Moten’s critique positions itself in the spaces the surround, abut, and burrow below the metropole: the break room, the barber shop, the house party.

In Joshua Chambers-Letson’s *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, the ‘party’ is a space of collective feeling, mourning, celebration, and in total, what Moten and Harney call ‘fugitive planning.’ The party, in Chambers-Letson’s formulation, is practical.

²⁸⁰ Moten, ‘Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),’ 738-739.

It suggests the real formation of a new communist party. But it is also an ‘organic entity, a living, breathing being, a gathering together of the multiple in the one, [...] a many that is singular, a kind of provisional “we” at difference with itself from the inside out.’²⁸¹ In describing and formulating this provisional collective, Chambers-Letson quotes Moten’s at-the-time unpublished manuscript, the second of his *consent not to be a single being* trilogy. The party, he quotes Moten as writing, ‘could be called a house party but don’t let that mislead you into thinking that house implies ownership.’²⁸² The house party is ‘of and for the dispossessed, [...] the ones who, in having been possessed of the spirit of dispossession, disrupt themselves.’²⁸³ In Moten’s house party, the ‘I’ isn’t negated but empowered through collectivity to ‘disrupt [itself].’ Each member of the ‘we’ is at difference ‘with itself’ and from each other. This tension and difference gives way to action. ‘Insofar as they are not subjects,’ Moten writes, Black people are ‘also not, in the interminable [...] analysis, “death bound.”’ Here, similarly, the non-subject is ‘dispossessed’ in the sense of being liberated from repressive structures of definition.

It’s not possible to assess how productive or effective Afro-pessimism’s interventions into critical and political discourse have been, across the past two decades of its rise. Even if there were a way to thoroughly analyze the effect of Afro-pessimist discourse in undergraduate classrooms, high school debates, and on social media, there would be no way to isolate direct political action resulting from its diffuse and varied reception. Rather, I want to suggest that the personal as a set of generic and formal practices might lend itself—as in Wilderson’s memoir—to a critique that is predicated on its incapacity to

²⁸¹ Chambers-Letson, xi.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

articulate a rigorous and cross-historical thesis. Whether that failure leads to revelations outside the text is open to debate. But it is worth noting, I think, that such revelation relies on the internal collapse of the text's narrative, and on the repeated assertion of a paradigmatic argument.

Moten and Harney's work operates differently. As the manifesto itself shows, no work can be entirely stripped of the personal: the most impersonal manifestoes rouse personal response in their deflections of individuality; and far more manifestoes than that are intensely reflective of their writers, and the interpersonal dynamics of a movement or group. In thinking, however, toward both 'analytical precision' and the 'romance' and 'love' of radical sociality, it is significant that Moten and Harney opt for the depersonalized 'we.' That 'we' allows them to approach the difficulties of representation—whether representation of their own argument, or of the apparent non-subject that lies beneath and against 'politics' and institutions—waywardly and sidelong. In doing so, they point us toward the wider possibilities of not just oppositional thinking, but of criticism that works in the impersonal relation and possibility of the house party. This impersonal relationality, in their hands, is not just a route to subverting the institution of the manifesto and its totalized collective. It is also a means of subverting and sidestepping, without entirely rubbishishing, the authority of the 'I.' Is the impersonal, then, a way in which we can speak crookedly to the authority claims of the first-person singular? Is a fugitive 'we' a means by which we can speak not in vain rejection or refusal of the personal, but of a more capacious and collective alternative? What new horizons of possibility for critique might be opened in oppositional dialectic deixis, within and below the illimitable forms of institutionality? What might we do with a 'we' that refuses to refuse to fail?

‘Be ambiguous, be white’: Claudia Rankine’s *American Series*

How many ways can we read Claudia Rankine’s injunction to the would-be-successful artist, in the second section of *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014): ‘be ambiguous; be white’?²⁸⁴ Read the second clause as an amplification and explication of the first, and whiteness is both the expression and imperative result of ambiguity. Whiteness would then be like a vacuum, sucking up the proliferation of meaning and devouring nuance. Any form of otherness, any other vectors of light on the spectrum, become white. In this reading, complexity disappears into whiteness’ maw: misunderstanding, differences of perspective, fissures in experience, eradicated by whiteness’ power in the scheme of signification.

But we can also read the phrase differently. A semicolon is just as readily used to indicate antithesis as to express amplification or continuation.²⁸⁵ In this view, ambiguity doesn’t disappear into whiteness, but resists and opposes it. Holding amplification and antithesis in suspension, it turns out both readings can be true at once: ambiguity resists whiteness; whiteness attempts to absorb it. This recognition raises questions that disrupt the sucking force of whiteness. Does whiteness need to subsume ambiguity because of the very power of ambiguity’s resistance? Does whiteness exist only through the subsumption of ambiguity? Is the key device of Rankine’s phrase, in fact, not ambiguity but aporia: the semicolon that results in the proliferation of meaning, exposing the lie in the apparent imperative of whiteness?

²⁸⁴ *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin Random House, 2015), 36. All further references in the text.

²⁸⁵ *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* gives antithesis as one of the primary functions of the semicolon: ‘They were poor; and yet they were happy.’ ‘Semicolon,’ *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, eds. Tom McArthur et al., 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Oxford University Press, 2018). Web. <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199661282.001.0001/acref-9780199661282-e-1095>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

This chapter explores Rankine's injunction and the political claims that attend what I am calling her poetics of ambiguity. The three books of the *American* series are *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), *Citizen* (2014), and *Just Us* (2021); the former two subtitled *An American Lyric*, the latter, *An American Conversation*. In each, in different ways, Rankine adopts strategies that inject ambiguity into the text at the moment that structures of power are being most insistently underlined, or most insidiously and silently presumed. The first part of this chapter focuses on Part II of *Citizen*, which deals with a series of unjust interpretations inflicted on the tennis player Serena Williams. I explore these moments in which Blackness elicits a sense in audiences of either *excess* meaning, or *lack*, the latter of which Rankine shows whiteness attempting frantically to sublimate. By insistently reinforcing these moments with ambiguity—including, but far from ending with her deployment of a second-person lyric subject—Rankine interferes with the consumptive force of whiteness. I then return to the first book in the series, to explore the relation of lack and excess to the impasse of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. The book's post-9/11 affective environment exposes, by proximity and contrast, the possibility that lies in aporia, as opposed to impasse's deadening stuckness. Finally, I propose that Rankine's *Just Us* moves beyond lyric ambiguity toward the positive figure of conversation. In *Just Us*, I suggest, we see Rankine's vision of what might result from a capacity to hold and prosper ambiguity: an American collective forged in productive difference from itself.

It becomes clear, as we trace this progression across Rankine's *American* series, that her turn from lyric toward the essayistic figure of *Conversation* expresses key shifts in her political thinking. The injunction, 'be ambiguous, be white,' is directed at Serena Williams, but through Serena Williams at the figure of the artist. The function of art, and the

racialized subject's role in art's marketplace of value, is a persistent concern of Rankine's *American* series. One key site in which this arises is Rankine's engagement with the history and theory of lyric. Lyric, and the ways in which certain examples of lyric can be said to be 'innovative,' become a ground on which Rankine problematizes the subsumptive force of whiteness. Through poetical devices that raise ambiguity, and the repetition of mutating phrases and questions—'What do you mean?' (C 47); 'What did you say?' (C 43); 'Haven't you said this yourself?' (C 7)—Rankine destabilizes not only lyric perspective, but the presumed ground from which this lyric, and lyric more broadly, is evaluated as 'innovative.' In doing so, she raises questions as to what real innovation might constitute. For Rankine, I argue, innovation lies in the capacity to stay in the uneasy, resistant space of ambiguity, against the assimilative force of the values that she aligns with whiteness.

The question of innovation taps into conversations that have in central decades been central to not just lyric criticism but via lyric, critique more broadly. In the introduction to a 2002 collection, *American Women Poets in the 21st century*, edited by Rankine and Juliana Spahr, Spahr foregrounds the anthology's 'emphasis on innovation': 'Lyric is by definition innovative. When it stops being innovative it is no longer lyric.'²⁸⁶ Her formula makes a copula. 'Many poets here speak of lyric as the genre of and about impossibility and difficulty,' she suggests. 'In short, when they talk about innovation, they often talk about lyric.'²⁸⁷ Lyric is defined by innovation and innovation is in turn lyrical, a knot revolving around the requirement that lyric be 'of and about impossibility and difficulty.'²⁸⁸

Rankine's poetics of ambiguity pry at Spahr's knot, asking to what extent lyric's difficult

²⁸⁶ Juliana Spahr, 'Introduction,' in *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*, eds. Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 1-17 (p. 13).

²⁸⁷ Spahr, 2.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

and definitive innovativeness has historically been accorded from the grounds of whiteness. Where is Blackness read as ‘difficult,’ and celebrated as innovative in terms of its racialized expressivity? Where is ‘difficulty’ subsumed into a mere challenge to ‘whiteness’?

In insisting that we engage with proliferating ambiguities, Rankine relates to lyric as a practice of innovative *critique*—a means of thinking and critiquing innovation. By the early 2000s, Mary Poovey had observed the ‘lyricization of literary criticism’—the reliance of contemporary critique on ‘the genre of the romantic lyric.’²⁸⁹ Virginia Jackson described this tautological operation of lyric reading: ‘The reading of the lyric produces a theory of the lyric that then produces a reading of the lyric, and that hermeneutic circle rarely opens to dialectical interruption.’²⁹⁰ One of Rankine’s key lyric innovations, I hope to show, is the way that her insistence on ambiguity interrupts that hermeneutic circle. She posits that this is a circuit by which power continues to operate, attempting to foreclose the possibility of multiple readings and experiences. In this way, the circle of lyric reading expresses the operation of power in language, knowledge, and understanding at the broader level of the social. If we nestle into the aporia of the semicolon above, Rankine asks, what might we perceive of how power informs structures of ‘understanding’ or ‘recognition’? Through ambiguity and aporia, how might we destabilize the short-hand for power at the level of language that is—as in her injunction above—whiteness?

²⁸⁹ Mary Poovey, ‘The Model System of Contemporary Literary Criticism,’ *Critical Inquiry*, 27:3 (2001), 408-438 (p. 436).

²⁹⁰ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 10.

Citizen

Part II of *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) opens with a reading of Hennessy

Youngman's, aka Jayson Musson's, *Art Thoughtz*.²⁹¹ The series is a satiric commentary, posted on *YouTube* between 2010-12, discussing the politics of contemporary art-making.

The video that Rankine discusses is titled 'How To Be A Successful Black Artist,' and in it Youngman lays out a series of 'principles' for the black artist to follow in order to successfully commodify their Blackness for the marketplace. First, they should cultivate an 'angry n— exterior,' for instance by watching videos of white supremacist violence while working, such as the video of Rodney King being brutalized by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1991.²⁹² Next, in what he calls the 'Jazz Principle,' Youngman suggests that because 'white people [...] want to consume the "exotic other," then 'we got to keep them guessing, we got to be different': 'if they understood you, you'd be just like them' and 'white people don't want their n— artists to be just like them.'

Youngman then suggests that the Black artist might want to make use of terms like 'post-black'—the word 'GIBBERISH' flashes silently onto the screen as Youngman speaks—'and honestly I don't know what the fuck that means, because it means, like, after-Black, and n—s is still n—s.' Next up is the 'Dogs Playing Poker' principle: 'paint n—s doing white shit, historically white shit. [...] [T]hey love seeing the other doing shit like what they would do, but still kind of detached and different.' This principle conjoins with the final one, Youngman says, which is simply 'slavery.' 'I'm saying if you got nothing up your sleeve, you at the poker table of the art world, pull out slavery and—royal flush.' He

²⁹¹ Hennessy Youngman, 'ART THOUGHTZ: How To Be A Successful Black Artist,' *YouTube* (2010). Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L_NnX8oj-g>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

²⁹² 'Rodney King FBI Tapes,' University of California, Berkeley, Office of Media Services (3 March 1991). Web. <<https://avplayer.lib.berkeley.edu/Video-Public-MRC/b22139628>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

ends the video in summary: ‘you should appear to be angry, be unpredictable, and exotic to white folks’; appear ‘to be in line with Black intellectual fads and what have you’; and to ‘exploit slavery in the production of art objects in order to satisfy the voyeuristic needs of bourgeoisie white consuming audiences.’ You are, he concludes, ‘doing it to *challenge* them, so that [...] when they leave your provocative and challenging solo exhibition, they have something to talk about while they eat dinner.’

The consumptive force of whiteness is literalized in this scene of white art audiences processing the ‘challenge’ of Blackness, just as they digest their food. The scene resounds in contemporary art reception: for instance, in the significant public response to artist Kara Walker’s 2014 installation, *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, which opened shortly after the publication of *Citizen*. Walker’s installation, like her wider oeuvre, crystallizes not only many of Youngman’s observations about the art market, but also the hazardous operations of Rankine’s injunction, ‘be ambiguous; be white.’ *A Subtlety* was an instant phenomenon when it opened: a 35-foot high, 35-foot wide, and 75-foot-long figure that soon became referred to as the ‘mammy sphinx,’²⁹³ coated entirely in sugar and taking up much of the vast floor of the decommissioned Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn. Attracting much attention online and in the media, and drawing ‘long weekend lines for two increasingly hot summer months,’ Walker’s work spurred proliferating interpretations.²⁹⁴ The ‘sphinx’ posed a riddle figured in the sexualized, feminized, racialized, and spectacularized body. It engaged the idea that Spillers explicated as ‘the

²⁹³ E.g.: Valérie Loichot, ‘Kara Walker’s Blood Sugar: *A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*,’ *Southern Spaces* (2014). Web. < <https://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby/>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

²⁹⁴ Tavia Nyong’o, *Afrofabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 118.

captive female body locat[ing] precisely the moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange.’²⁹⁵ The sphinx made ‘exchange’ present in endless sticky layers: a market of financial trading, forged in the trading of commodified Black bodies; a market of art; a market of representational meaning; and a dialogue or discourse between parties seeking to trade understanding.

Illustrating the tricky politics of understanding, Walker’s installation left the public who attended the installation, as Tavia Nyong’o suggests, ‘not so much with a shared worldview as an affective image of its own [...] dissensus.’²⁹⁶ Some audience members described the ‘difficulty of the work’: ‘the ways it was hard on the body and soul.’²⁹⁷ Others, meanwhile, stuck ‘eager hands in the pools of red goo’ as the molasses melted on the final day of the installation.²⁹⁸ The ‘difficulty’ of *A Subtlety* persisted and multiplied across the period of its showing, confronting audiences with the convergence of uneasily resolved political and social vectors. Christina Sharpe has drawn out this quality of Walker’s art, in writing of another of her installations, her famed series of black silhouettes on a white background, with titles such as, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994). Sharpe observes that the silhouettes, in which figures ‘fuck, fight, stab, shit, suck’ and are ‘fucked, fought, stabbed, shit upon, suckled,’ spur in audiences an ‘unmetabolized terror and pleasure.’²⁹⁹ Like the ‘mammy sphinx,’ the images produce meaning that can’t be readily processed in the consumptive impulse of the public body. They persist: despite all

²⁹⁵ Spillers, 75.

²⁹⁶ Nyong’o, 117.

²⁹⁷ Robert Shelton, former Domino Factory employee, quoted by Sharpe: *In The Wake*, 99.

²⁹⁸ Nyong’o, 117.

²⁹⁹ Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 156, 183.

their excesses of experience, they ‘*nonetheless survive*.’³⁰⁰ Similarly, the ‘terror and pleasure’ of Walker’s work ‘haunts and constitutes the post-slavery subject; its excesses circulate still.’³⁰¹ For Sharpe, part of the force of Walker’s art is that its ‘excesses’ of signification and affective response mean that it continues to circulate past the moment of reception, reflecting the continued circulation—the wake—of Atlantic slavery’s abundant signifiatory violence. Seemingly in response to such plethora, *A Subtlety* ended with audiences’ literal consumption of the work. Their consumption couldn’t eradicate the installation’s many lines of critique, but did underline audiences’ vain and hungry attempts to absorb its flowing viscosity of meanings, to make it into a digestible ‘challenge.’

In Walker’s work, excess is the result not of soft nuance but of the ambiguities that grow from starkness. As Nyong’o writes, the ‘mammy sphinx’ appeared to be ‘anything but subtle,’³⁰² or as Hilton Als put it, ‘gorgeously divisive’; his adjective expressing the lush abundance of Walker’s interpretive field.³⁰³ Youngman suggests that the divisiveness of Black artists risks commodification, readily absorbed as a mere ‘challenge’ to whiteness. Even a proliferation of meaning risks being subsumed in this way: as he puts it in the ‘Jazz Principle,’ ‘we got to keep them guessing [...] if they understood you, you’d be just like them’ and ‘white people don’t want their n— artists to be just like them.’ Walker is acutely aware of this dynamic, by which a rich plane of signification is read flatly as an expression of Blackness-turned-art-object. ‘Am I forever [...] Chained to you at the ankle as a new representative of Negro Emancipation?’ she has asked of her audience. ‘Will I be Caged

³⁰⁰ Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 156.

³⁰¹ Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 184.

³⁰² Tavia Nyong’o, 113.

³⁰³ Hilton Als, ‘The Sugar Sphinx,’ *The New Yorker* (2014). Web. <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-sugar-sphinx>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

together with every pickaninny bucknigra mammy prissy scarlet [...] ever exhumed to the thrill and horror of audiences all’?³⁰⁴ The Black body, and particularly the Black feminized body—a site of ‘converging political and social vectors’—acts, for Walker, as a ‘blank space into which people projected their fantasies.’³⁰⁵ If the ambiguities that collected around the Black feminized body led all too readily to white projection, then her task was to turn the ‘blank space [...] into something concrete.’³⁰⁶ The vast form of the ‘mammy sphinx,’ like Walker’s silhouettes, forced ‘new questions’ in their abruptness, reflecting audiences’ projected fantasies ‘back into the projector’s unsuspecting eyes.’³⁰⁷ By making ‘concrete’ the projections of her audiences, Walker shines a light on the way that audiences will do all they can to absorb and eradicate what is right in front of them: the ongoing history of slavery made manifest in her figures; the avoidant and shame-filled impulses of their reception; the vast white space that gives shape to, is shaped by, her black silhouettes.

Speaking to Lauren Berlant in 2014, on the release of *Citizen*, Rankine mentioned how she had visited *A Subtlety* at the Domino Sugar factory the day previous. ‘[I] was surrounded by people saying things like, “I am not into the slavery thing right now,”’ she recalls.³⁰⁸ People were ‘taking selfies in front of the sculpture of the black Mammy sphinx, posing in ways that appear to be touching her breasts or cupping her buttocks.’³⁰⁹ The group with which Rankine had attended the installation felt, she says, ‘injured and exhausted by the spectacle.’ In this, Rankine saw a call from Walker to Black audience

³⁰⁴ Tommy Lott, ‘Kara Walker Speaks: A Public Conversation on Racism, Art, and Politics with Tommy Lott,’ *Black Renaissance*, 3:1 (2000), 69.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Lauren Berlant, ‘Claudia Rankine by Lauren Berlant,’ *BOMB Magazine*, 129 (2014). Web. <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/claudia-rankine/>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

members. 'I sometimes wonder if Walker's intention is to redirect the black gaze away from the pieces themselves and onto their white consumption.'³¹⁰ Rankine's exhaustion was a response to the consumptive drive of white audiences: to the overbearing everyday of their refusal to recognize themselves in Walker's scenes. For Rankine, lunch after the exhibition was a 'subdued affair'; a far cry from white audiences' delighted digestion of the works' 'challenge.'

If Rankine experiences Walker's work as prompting already-exhausted Black audience members to further contemplate the consumptive violence of the white gaze, *Citizen* interpellates the (white) reader into the scene of recognition. Part II of Rankine's *American Lyric* traces a series of bad 'calls' made against that artist of sport, in the marketplace of interpretation: Serena Williams. First, there were the five unfair calls in a 2004 quarter-final match by lineswoman Mariana Alves, which result in Williams' loss. Then there was the U.S. Open, five years later, when in a semi-final match against the Belgian player, Kim Clijsters, a lineswoman calls a foot fault that even the partisan ESPN tennis commentator describes as 'way off' (C 29). In 2012, having won two out of three gold medals in tennis for the U.S. at the Olympics, Williams' brief celebration was reported in the media as 'Crip-Walking [...] immature and classless,' a 'gangster' dance.³¹¹ Later that year: the scene that closes Part II of *Citizen*, consolidating each of the preceding instances of violent interpretation. In an exhibition match, the Danish player Caroline Wozniaki stuffed towels into her top and shorts, in a parody of Williams' physique.

Rankine, reflecting on this concluding scene, notes that there are 'a number of ways

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ Clinton Yates, 'Serena Williams and the Crip Walk,' *The Washington Post* (5 August 2012). Web. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootdc/post/serena-williams-and-the-crip-walk/2012/08/05/ade59954-df25-11e1-a19c-fcfa365396c8_blog.html>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

to interpret [Wozniaki's] actions.' But the profligacy of interpretation resolves in the consumptive force of whiteness.

Wozniaki [...] finally gives the people what they have wanted all along by embodying Serena's attributes while leaving Serena's "angry n—— exterior" behind. At last, in this real, and unreal, moment, we have Wozniacki's image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time. (C 36)

It is in this section that Rankine introduces Zora Neale Hurston's phrase, which many critics have read as underpinning *Citizen*: 'I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background' (C 25). The 'people' who, in the image of Wozniaki impersonating Williams, get 'what they have wanted all along' are descriptive of this 'sharp white background.' Whiteness, in this scheme, hungers for the signifiatory assimilation that is Wozniaki's parody. William's body is figured as a literal excess: towels bunched and bulging under Wozniaki's sportswear. At the same time, the 'smiling blond goodness' that grounds the parody sublimates the profusion. Williams' resistance to the assimilative pressures of interpretation gets white-washed: her 'angry n—— exterior' reconfigured as palatable in the form of Wozniaki's grin. If Williams' performances inspire what Sharpe, regarding Walker, describes as an 'unmetabolized terror and pleasure' in white sports fans, Wozniaki's form now attempts to consume and digest those spilling excesses of feeling.

As 'the people's' urge to sublimate Williams' anger shows, her anger isn't of the kind that Youngman describes as being profitably marketable. Rankine notes that 'Youngman doesn't describe this kind of anger': 'the anger built up through experience and the quotidian struggle against dehumanization every black or brown person lives simply through skin color' (C 24). This kind of anger, insofar as it's not readily commodified, overflows legibility. Bounding ahead of 'common sense,' it reads as having the excessive

qualities of madness.³¹² When expressed, Rankine writes, it might ‘make the witness believe that a person [is] “insane”’ (C 24).

And insane is what you think, one Sunday afternoon, drinking an Arnold Palmer, watching the 2009 Women’s US Open semi-final, when brought to full attention by the suddenly explosive behavior of Serena Williams. Serena in HD before your eyes becomes overcome by a rage you recognize and have been taught to hold at a distance for your own good. [...] Oh my God, she’s gone crazy, you say to no one. (C 25)

The scene described takes place on the afternoon on which Williams, in her match against Clijsters, responds to the lineswoman’s foot fault call by telling her, ‘I swear to God I’m fucking going to take this fucking ball and shove it down your fucking throat, you hear that?’ The encounter neatly charts a confluence that La Marr Jurelle Bruce describes as one of the key dynamics in the history by which blackness has been figured as the alternative to Enlightenment Reason. When Black people ‘articulate rage in American public spheres,’ he writes, they are ‘often criminalized as threats to public safety, lampooned as angry black caricatures, and pathologized as insane.’³¹³ Rankine describes the latter process: the conflation of Black anger and Black insanity, which, Bruce notes, is the archetype that gives meaning to the Anglophone confluence of madness meaning anger and madness meaning insanity. ‘In short, when black people get mad (as in angry), antiblack logics tend to presume they’ve gone mad (as in crazy).’³¹⁴

Rankine’s reader is made to see the structural dynamics by which anger is

³¹² On the racialized epistemological structures underlying ‘common sense,’ see for example: Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 2011); Kara Keeling, *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). “‘Common sense’ delineates implicit epistemic frameworks, which turn out also to be the grounds for ideology’s connection to culture.’ Shotwell, 30.

³¹³ La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How To Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 8.

³¹⁴ Ibid.

misrecognized as ‘crazy,’ as the reader is interpellated into the scene of misrecognition. This interpellation takes the shape of an ambiguity. Who ‘recognize[s]’ Williams’ rage? Who says, aloud to no one, ‘she’s gone crazy’? In the passage preceding the scene, Rankine says that a ‘witness’ reads black anger as insanity, the judgment floating in a third-person, comfortably apart from the speaker or reader. Now, though, ‘you’ are thrown into the deictic frame. ‘Insane is what *you* think,’ Rankine writes. ‘She’s gone crazy, *you* say’ (C 25; italics added). You are hailed, but ambiguously racialized in the process. You may be positioned such that you intimately ‘recognize’ Williams’ rage, but if not, you are interpellated as doing so. In any case, the interpretive dynamics that underpin Williams’ rage have the same consumptive force of whiteness: regardless of the reader’s positionality, Williams is judged ‘crazy.’ Rankine embeds ambiguity into the racialized subject position of the interpreting gaze, such that the consumptive force of whiteness is made apparent. Whoever you are, whiteness sees Williams as mad, and ‘you’ are complicit.

A few pages later, the deixis of that judgment—‘oh my God [...], she’s gone crazy’—changes again. After the U.S. Open, Rankine notes, Williams suggests that she should rightly have addressed her anger at the lineswoman toward Mariana Alves, the umpire who years earlier had made five unfair calls against Williams in a quarter-final match. Her fury was a product of years of suffering bad calls. Maybe, if she had been angry at Alves instead, Williams’ words ‘might have snapped Alves back into focus.’ Now, however, ‘Serena’s reaction is read as insane’ (C 30). The moment of ‘you’ being interpellated into the scene of judgment is over. The decision that Williams is ‘insane’ is issued instead by a non-specific public: she is passively ‘read,’ rather than recognized by an active subject. The effect is to not only to paint the passive framing as normatively white—the activity of

‘reading’ the event as something that issues from an assumed ‘sharp white background’—but to paint the deictic ‘you,’ the ‘you’ drinking the Arnold Palmer, as similarly and unsettlingly white, or at least interpreting from a position of white (mis)understanding of the scene. A misunderstanding of Williams’ experience, and a non-comprehension of her anger.

The shifting subject position of these passages implies that the subject who ‘hold[s] [rage] at a distance’ is only uneasily distinguishable from the subject who judges Williams as having gone ‘insane.’ The effect is that both subjects are mutually implicated in white reading structures—precisely because those white reading structures are passively normalized. At the same time, the fact that the deixis of these passages can shift so readily between differently racialized subjects indicates a sphere of expression beyond that normalized ‘sharp white background.’ Rankine depicts whiteness as a kind of standard position, which lays its dominant interpretation on moments of ambiguity. The text’s play with ambiguity then opens a space in which misunderstanding and incomprehension are not solely dictated by whiteness, but might—returning to the threat of incoherence initiated by whiteness’ non-comprehension of the Black subject and their anger—in fact disrupt whiteness’ coherence. The position from which Williams is ‘read’ as ‘crazy’ seems so total, so passive, as to encompass everything including the Black subject. Rankine’s shifting ambiguity of address then suggests what Spillers describes as the ‘richness of possibility’ that gathers around Blackness: possibility that proceeds not from the world that white supremacy ‘understands’—absorbs, contains—but that lies in the ambiguous space beyond containment. Spillers calls this the ‘*nowhere at all*,’ a paradoxical locus of abundant

possibility.³¹⁵

Anthony Reed, in *Freedom Time*, examines Rankine's work of accounting and understanding the process of 'reading' race through the paired concepts of 'racialized reading' and 'postlyric.' For Reed, 'the abstractness of black experimental writing' and its push for what he calls 'radical unlearning' of the 'preemptive understandings of black life' often results in Black writers' work being excluded from literary genealogies 'except through claims remarking the text's "resistance."' ³¹⁶ Black writers' work, in other words, is judged by the degree to which it 'resists' the material conditions of Black life, or perceived norms of literature and literariness. This 'particular kind of misreading, which locates texts within a preemptive black tradition of black social location' he terms 'racialized reading': a misreading marked by a 'selective, occasionally prescriptive account of the project of black aesthetics as one of rejoinder, protest, or commentary,' which figures Black writing as 'reactive rather than productive.'³¹⁷

Against this delimited mode of reading or misreading, Reed, as in his thinking on Rankine, attends carefully to the 'surface': to the devices through which Black writers' experimental work 'says the impossible.' He argues that in saying 'the impossible,' Black writers 'bring into existence thinking obscured by dominant ideologies of race.'³¹⁸ At the same time, he suggests, attention to the surface of the text enacts a parallel 'deconstruction of the possible' through the stress that that kind of reading puts on 'the ways this writing does not make itself available to epigrammatic expression.'³¹⁹ Following Reed, we can see

³¹⁵ Spillers, 72.

³¹⁶ Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 7.

³¹⁷ Reed, 8.

³¹⁸ Reed, 22.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

how Rankine’s ‘postlyric’ poetics adapt recognizable lyric strategies to ‘trouble and reconcile ideas of voice and identity, emphasizing the moment of self-expression as a moment of self-othering.’³²⁰ As Rankine troubles of the formal qualities of self-expression she disturbs the universalism that accrues to the figure of the lyric subject, and to the ways that lyric is presumptively read. As Reed writes: ‘The ideology of the stable voice, typified by a certain critical hermeneutics of “the” lyric,’ is one backdrop against which this writing works to ‘break the common sense link between poetry as personal and group expression without claiming some reified notion of the “universal.”’³²¹

Rankine’s interpellation of ‘you,’ the reader, into the deictic frame is rare in the history of lyric. As Jonathan Culler points out, lyric address is usually indirect.³²² Lyric’s tendency is toward ‘triangulation,’ and when the second-person address is used, it hails something or someone that stands in for the reader, rather than addressing her directly.³²³ With this in mind, we can understand the reader who experiences themselves as being directly interpellated by Rankine as assuming a kind of priority: they are assuming that any hailing is posed directly to them. This might equate to an experience of whiteness: a belief that if someone is being addressed, it must be ‘you,’ your figure filling the frame—rather than anticipating ‘you’ as being addressed as a mere triangulated figure in a message that is being directed elsewhere. Read this way, Rankine’s ‘you’ acts much like her experience of Walker’s *A Subtlety*. The ‘mammy sphinx’ appeared to white audiences to direct itself to them, eliciting a furious consumptive anxiety. For Black audiences, as for Rankine, the installation triangulated whiteness, ‘redirect[ing] the black gaze away from the pieces

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Reed, 97.

³²² Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 191.

³²³ Culler, 186.

themselves and onto their white consumption.’

This idea that Blackness is the triangulated subject of Rankine’s hailing is one she addresses directly. ‘The second person for me disallowed the reader from knowing immediately how to position themselves,’ she has said, but ‘I also found it funny to think about blackness as the second person. [...] Not the first person, but the *second* person, the *other* person.’³²⁴ In this comment, the branching ambiguities of Rankine’s second-person address are made apparent. The reader (of whatever racialized subject position) is ‘disallowed’ from knowing immediately how to position themselves. This corresponds with Blackness being addressed as the ‘second person,’ hailed with a kind of bleak humor even within a scene in which ‘knowing’ one’s ‘position’ is disallowed. If whiteness feels itself primarily addressed by ‘you,’ then that’s not untrue, but the ‘second’ or ‘other’ person within the ‘you’ is the Black subject, whose hailing is then no longer secondary but simultaneous.

The ambiguity that this simultaneity describes speaks to William Empson’s ‘most ambiguous [type of ambiguity] that can be conceived.’³²⁵ This is his seventh type, and describes ‘when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context.’³²⁶ The effect of the contradiction is, he says, ‘such as one finds in a gridiron pattern in architecture because it gives prominence neither to the horizontals nor to the verticals; [...] it is at once an indecision and a structure.’³²⁷

Like the gridiron cross-hatching of Empson’s seventh type of ambiguity, Rankine’s second-

³²⁴ Meara Sharma, ‘Claudia Rankine on Blackness as the Second Person,’ *Guernica* (17 November 2014). Web. <<https://www.guernicamag.com/blackness-as-the-second-person/>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

³²⁵ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd ed. (London: New Direction, 1953), 192.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

person address requires that we hold in mind the possibility that any given racialized subject could be being equally and simultaneously addressed. The reader is disallowed from ‘knowing’ the racialization of the addressee. The effect is to interrupt the subsumptive pull of the ‘sharp white background’ on which structures of understanding and ‘knowing’ play out.

The experience of this kind of ambiguity is said by Empson to be incredibly rich. In addition to the gridiron pattern, he compares it to ‘two beasts [depicted] in exactly symmetrical attitudes of violence, as in supporting a coat-of-arms’; ‘the difference of sound heard by the two ears, which decides where the sound is coming from’; and ‘the stereoscopic contradictions that imply a dimension.’³²⁸ These equal tensions produce a ‘kind of intensity,’ as well as a sense of ‘reassuring impossibility.’³²⁹ Reassuring because ambiguity equates to a kind of overwhelm, with the receptive subject ‘drawn taut between the two similar impulses into the stasis of appreciation.’³³⁰ It is the density of the scene of understanding that grants the ambiguity its sense of overwhelming wholeness, to which we are made to submit. Like the excess of Walker’s vast sugar figure, and the overflowing histories contained in her silhouettes, Rankine’s ambiguous ‘you’ abounds with meaning: addressing multiple, dense and simultaneous subject positions. These are, like the cross-grid, equally weighted. Rankine thereby destabilizes epistemological structures that have historically preeminenced whiteness. The effect is not only to draw attention to the ‘sharp white background,’ but to prompt us to ask: if interpellation is so racially ambiguous, how can racialization be said to functionally operate at the level of the sentence?

³²⁸ Empson, 192-193.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Empson, 193.

James Martel has described this experience, in which you are addressed but productively misrecognized in the process, as ‘misinterpellation.’³³¹ Reading from Louis Althusser’s articulation of interpellation as the moment when the subject is hailed and thereby subjectified by the state, Martel notes that Althusser builds misinterpellation into the scene. ‘One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns around.’³³² ‘What do we make of this mistakenly hailed subject?’ Martel asks, referring to the one subject that isn’t ‘the right one.’³³³ The fact of misinterpellation ‘suggests a flaw in the formula, a problem with the method by which authority is internalized and mapped onto human subjects.’³³⁴ For Martel, the misinterpellated subject disrupts the mirror-structure that is set up by the state: ‘The state does not recognize itself, does not get recognized, in a misinterpellated subject because that subject is not “really [...] who was hailed.”’³³⁵

Reading with Rankine, and her ambiguous second-person address, we might go further. Misinterpellation isn’t incidental to the act of hailing by which power recognizes itself, but constitutive.³³⁶ In *Citizen*, whiteness is constantly battling to subsume complexity and otherness into its interpretive scheme: to hail all possible subjects, and so recognize itself. This is how whiteness—in Rankine’s scheme—hails Williams, calling her ‘crazy’ in a refusal to recognize her fury, her response to the ‘built up’ experience of

³³¹ James Martel, *The Misinterpellated Subject* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

³³² Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and the State,’ in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126 (p. 118).

³³³ Martel, 37.

³³⁴ Martel, 38.

³³⁵ Martel, quoting: Louis Althusser, ‘Ideology and the State,’ in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126 (p. 118).

³³⁶ On the flaws that can be opened up in how the state sees itself in relation to subjects and communities that refuse to be legible or ‘recognized,’ see: James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Glenn Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

‘dehumanization.’ Williams ‘calls out’ her treatment, refusing to be subjectified by the calls made against her. This only intensifies whiteness’ drive to get her to see herself as hailed.

Perhaps the committee’s decision [to institute a fine and two-year probation] is only about context, though context is not meaning. [...] In any case, it is difficult not to think that if Serena lost context by abandoning all rules of civility, it could be because her body, trapped in a racial imaginary, trapped in disbelief—code for being black in America—is being governed not by the tennis match she is participating in but by a collapsed relationship that had promised to play by the rules. Perhaps this is how racism feels no matter the context—randomly the rules everyone else gets to play by no longer apply to you, and to call this out by calling out “I swear to God!” is to be called insane, crass, crazy. (C 30)

There are two sets of ‘rules’ at play here: those that govern the game of tennis, and those that govern proper or ‘civil’ behavior. The latter are rules by which subjects are made to understand themselves as being hailed and recognized by ideology: by a racist ‘racial imaginary.’ ‘Civil’ behavior—the constitution of civil society, which understands itself in hailing its subjects as subjects—is rewarded, because it underscores the continuation of state ideology. When ‘bad calls’ are made against Williams in tennis, she understands that she has also been mis-hailed by this racist system. She refuses to be incorrectly hailed; points out that they are not playing by the rules that they ‘promised’ they would; ‘call[s] this out by calling out.’ The relationship has collapsed.

The more Serena attempts to point out that she is being misinterpellated, the more the rule makers attempt to discredit her as ‘crazy’ for refusing to turn around and recognize herself as being hailed. The trio of interpellations thrown at Williams—‘insane, crass, crazy’—reveals ‘crass’ to be the hinge: the other two terms shown to be, in fact, just further ways in which Williams is told that she is violating the rules of ‘civility.’ Whiteness’ attempts to subsume her heighten the more she ‘calls [them] out.’ She has pointed out that there is an alternative reading of the situation—insists on ambiguity, against the hard calls of the rule makers; insists on the fissures in the scene of interpellation—and the injunction

comes back: 'be white.' This, it turns out, is what 'context' 'means,' the 'sharp white background' against which Blackness is hailed.

Williams' refusal to be interpellated—to understand herself as being misinterpellated—is a refusal of the rules of 'understanding' imposed by the ideological systems made up of people making 'bad calls.' Rankine suggests that if you want to stay sane then you can't try to 'understand' these rules, because they are premised on subsumption. 'Serena's frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair-minded way,' she writes, 'because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary' (*C* 32). Rankine makes a chiasmus of the concept of understanding—'you understand not to try to understand [...] because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self.' These repetitions recall the figuration of 'calling,' above, where 'to call this out by calling out, "I swear to God!" is to be called insane, crass, crazy.' In both instances, repetition adds to the plane of meaning, much like the gridiron pattern of Empson's seventh type of ambiguity.

In these examples, Rankine discusses 'understanding' first as a kind of prior perception, or anticipation of a known and predictable effect; then as a critical or ethical engagement, an attempt to puzzle out in order to gain insight; and finally as buried knowledge, the acknowledgement of which is unbearably painful. Similarly, she figures 'calling' as: calling out, pointing to an injustice; calling out, crying aloud in fury and self-defense; and called, to be hailed unfairly, to be pinioned by someone's description. These repetitions create vectors of ambiguity that crisscross the 'rules' of understanding, judgment, and recognition being imposed on Williams, or on 'you.' Rankine's ambiguities points to the abundance of meanings that reside in the scene of interpellation. Ambiguity stands as a direct antagonism

to the subsumptive drive in ‘be white.’

For Rankine, the injunction ‘be white’ points to the way that whiteness hungers to consume alternative modalities of thought, speech, or existence—expressed by the tensions that arise between ‘bad calls’ and other models of ‘understanding.’ For a critic such as Calvin Warren, whiteness’ hunger is expressive of its ontological structure. As noted in the previous chapter, Warren has argued that whiteness has through ‘an accretion of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions’ imposed ‘nothing onto blackness,’ an ‘unending domination/eradication of black presence *as* nothing incarnated.’³³⁷ Reading with Heidegger, Warren argues that Blackness is the ‘nothingness’ to whiteness’ ‘Being,’ where Blackness holds a place very much like the role of death in establishing the grounds of *Dasein*. ‘What is hated about blacks is this nothing, the ontological terror, they must embody for the metaphysical world.’³³⁸ Blackness, then, ‘allow[s] the human to engage in a fantasy—the domination of nothing.’³³⁹ The urge to subdue the vast horror of the void is, he suggests, projected onto Blackness. In this way, ‘the human seeks to dominate nothing by dominating black being, to eradicate nothing by eradicating black being.’³⁴⁰

Rankine engages this idea of Blackness-as-nothingness as a vast and terrifying feeling, one that arises from a sense of being repeatedly and dehumanizingly misread—rather than as an ontological given. In *Citizen*, the relationship of Blackness to nothingness is repeatedly constituted in scenes of relation: of hailing and interpretation. This means that it is open to being destabilized, even at the level of the sentence. Writing of her perception of Williams’ anger as the kind that is ‘built up through experience and the quotidian struggles

³³⁷ Warren, 9.

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Warren, 21.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

against dehumanization,’ Rankine suggests that this kind of anger is ‘really a type of knowledge.’ ‘It responds to insult and attempted erasure simply by asserting presence,’ even as it is ‘accompanied by visceral disappointment: a disappointment [...] that no amount of visibility will alter the ways in which one is perceived’ (C 24).

Recognizing this continued erasure—the sense of being seen, in Warren’s terms, as ‘nothing’—might cause the subject to disintegrate in horror. ‘Recognition of this lack,’ Rankine writes, ‘might break you apart.’ But there is an alternative. ‘Recognition might illuminate the erasure the attempted erasure triggers’ (C 24). In this passage, grappling with one’s ‘lack’ of recognition may be an alternative way of knowing and understanding, antagonistic to the kind of understanding that attempts to erase the Black subject. This is one key effect of Rankine’s ambiguities. She insists on an abundance of alternatives to the singular, dominating epistemological and interpretive practices she summarizes in the idea of whiteness. Far from aligning Blackness with ‘nothingness,’ Rankine’s poetical ambiguities create a textured grid of excess meaning. At the level of the sentence, they suggest something closer to what Spillers described as Blackness’ ‘richness of possibility.’

If Warren argues through Heidegger that Blackness is the ‘nothingness’ that gives shape to ‘Being’ or *Dasein*, we might read Rankine, by contrast, through the open contradictions of Derridean *aporia*. For Jacques Derrida, *aporia* describes a ‘contradiction.’³⁴¹ Extending the classical philosophical idea of *aporia* as related to ‘dilemma’ or ‘debate,’³⁴² Derrida poses in *aporia* a ‘seemingly insoluble logical difficulty’ that produces an ‘excess’ that ‘can

³⁴¹ Gayatri Spivak’s glossing of *aporia*: ‘Afterword,’ in *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida, trans. Spivak, 40th anniversary ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 364.

³⁴² See Derrida on Husserl’s ‘aversion for [...] *aporia*’: Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 193.

only be conceived as neither this nor that, or both at the same time.’³⁴³ An archetypal example of the rhetorical figure of *aporia* is Hamlet’s soliloquy: ‘To be, or not to be?’ Here, *aporia* signifies indecision, drawing us up short. It stages an irresolvable situation, forcing us to interrupt and suspend ‘established programs, norms, conventions, moralities, duties, and expectations.’³⁴⁴ *Aporia* asks us to grapple with the possibilities that abound in its impossibility. As Maria-Daniella Dick and Julian Wolfreys suggest, the very difficulty of *aporia* is in that it asks us to ‘pass through’ it.³⁴⁵ We stop ‘to dwell on an act of thinking that not only determines the pause but also defines that temporary experience of a limit to thinking.’³⁴⁶ In other words: in thinking about *aporia*, we both encounter a pause and experience that pause. We experience and (impossibly) think a limit to thinking at the same time. This is productive, unlike Heidegger’s figure of death, or Warren’s of Blackness. For Heidegger, *Dasein* is grounded in the impossibility that accompanies its possibility: the final horizon of death defines what is ‘proper’ in Being. *Aporia* points to impossibility containing alternative possibilities, as illustrated by our ability to think the apparently impassable border of death.

We experience an *aporia* in ‘be ambiguous; be white’: it is both a contradiction in terms and an agreement, hinging on a caesura that acts as a pause. Stopped in the middle of the phrase, Rankine asks the reader to interrogate ‘established programs [and] conventions,’ asking how the injunction is informed by its ‘sharp white background.’ In forcing this question, Rankine illustrates that other possibilities not only can be thought against the

³⁴³ Alan Bass, ‘Translator’s Introduction,’ *Writing and Difference*, ix-xxii (xvii).

³⁴⁴ Simon Wortham, *The Derrida Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 15.

³⁴⁵ Maria-Daniella Dick and Julian Wolfreys, *The Derrida Wordbook* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 10.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

impassable problem of whiteness, but are already present in the injunction to ‘be white.’ The command rings hollow, abounding with excesses and alternatives that undermine whiteness’ consumptive imperative. The aporia feels like a kind of radical practice of recognition. ‘Recognition of this lack might break you apart,’ Rankine writes of Williams’ experience of being dehumanized by ‘calls’ made against her, just as they are made against other Black subjects ‘because of skin color.’ ‘Or,’ she says, building in the contradiction, ‘recognition might illuminate the erasure the attempted erasure triggers’ (C 24). In whiteness’ attempted erasure of Williams, there is already the possibility of ‘illuminat[ion],’ produced by ‘recognition.’ Unlike the nothingness that Warren ascribes to Blackness, Rankine’s ambiguities suggest that despite whiteness’ attempts to make Blackness into a ‘lack,’ there is always already the illumination of the subject’s knowledge and experience.

Don’t Let Me Be Lonely

Don’t Let Me Be Lonely, the first in the *American* series, illustrates the degree to which, for Rankine, relation is how meaning becomes propulsive: a source of potential, of temporal and political movement. If *Citizen* maps a series of humming and unstable interactions, riddled with productive ambiguities, then *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* maps a series of circlings and blockages. This frustrated circularity is marked from the first page. The book begins with two epigraphs, the first from Aimé Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, the other from philosopher Jill Stauffer’s *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*.

And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, a man who

wails is not a dancing bear...³⁴⁷

Ethical loneliness is the isolation one feels when one, as a violated person or as one member of a persecuted group, has been abandoned by humanity, or by those who have power over one's life possibilities.³⁴⁸

Arranged ostensibly in conversation on the page, the two quotes repel each other by their closeness. Through Césaire, Rankine voices an urge to the lyric subject to be part of the world that she is observing: to relate, 'even in thought,' rather than to 'sterile[y]' spectate. In Stauffer, though, a blockage emerges. Urged to relation, on the one hand, the lyric subject is faced with an oppressive ethical isolation on the other. The result is stasis, imposed by 'those who have power over one's life possibilities,' but played out at the level of a private interaction on the page. At the moment that Rankine's subject reaches toward agency, movement, engagement, and attention, she is returned to the role of 'violated person' and 'member of a persecuted group.' Just as the conversation starts, the subject is interpellated as isolated and violated, effectively resolving the attempt.

Repeatedly, this frustrated attempt at communication plays out through the disordering of the lyric 'I.' The subject of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is disordered in many senses: depressed, hopeless, and possibly suicidal; disarranged, moving unsteadily between speakers within a single page; and displaced in time, stripped of what Reed calls the 'temporal coherence of the subject.'³⁴⁹ Early in the book, Rankine explicitly distinguishes this disordering from the happenstance of happiness. The passage sets the tone of the book to come: a meditation on disorientation, without the propulsive, transformative, or

³⁴⁷ Aimé Césaire, *The Original 1939 Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Bilingual edition. eds. James A. Arnold and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 17.

³⁴⁸ Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1.

³⁴⁹ Reed, 121.

reparative potential of happy coincidence.³⁵⁰

Am I dead? Though this question at no time explicitly translates into Should I be dead, eventually the suicide hotline is called. You are, as usual, watching television, the eight-o'clock movie, when a number flashes on the screen: 1-800-SUICIDE. You dial the number. Do you feel like killing yourself? The man on the other end of the receiver asks. You tell him, I feel like I am already dead. When he makes no response you add, I am in death's position. He finally says, Don't believe what you are thinking and feeling. Then he asks, Where do you live?

Fifteen minutes later the doorbell rings. You explain to the ambulance attendant that you had a momentary lapse of happily. The noun, happiness, is a static state of some Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue. Your modifying process had happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause. [...] By law, I will have to restrain you. His tone suggests that you should try to understand the difficulty in which he finds himself. This is further disorientating. I am fine! Can't you see that! You climb into the ambulance unassisted.³⁵¹

Each of the moments that make up this event has a quality of randomness.³⁵² At no point, the speaker tells us, did her suicidality find intentional form in the idea, 'Should I be dead,' but rather the number 'flashes on the screen' while she is doing something else, watching her regular evening movie. Posed with a prompt to own her feelings by the receiver—'Do you feel like killing yourself?'—her responses appear insane, in their defiance of rational temporality. 'I feel like I am already dead,' she tells him, clarifying, 'I am in death's position.' His only response is to insist on the impossibility of her experience, or—given that she is 'in death's position'—of her state of being. 'Don't believe what you are thinking and feeling,' he says. Faced with the inexplicability of her experience, his response displaces her from the position that she has claimed. Like the epigraphs at the book's

³⁵⁰ Stauffer considers 'repair' to be one redress to ethical loneliness. Repair is frequently frustrated, in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*.

³⁵¹ Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (London: Penguin, 2017 [2004]), 7. All further references in the text.

³⁵² On the role of the 'event' in Rankine's *American* series, see: Grant Farred, 'Citizen, A Lyric Event,' *Diacritics*, 45: 4 (2017), 94-113; Arthur Z. Wang, 'Situation, Occasion, Encounter: Claudia Rankine's Citizen and Lyric Theory in the Historical Present,' *Contemporary Literature*, 60:4 (2019); Andrea Long Chu, 'Study in blue: trauma, affect, event,' *Women & Performance*, 27:3 (2017), 301-315. On the concept of 'event,' see: Lloyd Pratt, 'In the Event: An Introduction,' *Differences*, 19:2 (2008), 1-8.

opening, the speaker has attempted to place herself somewhere—‘I am in death’s position’—only for that place to turn out to be the nowhere of death; a nowhere that she is insistently returned to by the isolating interpellation of the ‘receiver.’

When the ambulance arrives, the randomness of these events clarify into a poetic method and message. The speaker explains that she has had ‘a momentary lapse of happily’ (*DLM* 7). The ungrammatical use of the term creates a pause, which might prompt the reader to turn to the notes at the back of the book (though the fact that there are notes goes unmarked in the main body of the text—a further disorientation.) The notes give information about the National Hopeline Network in the U.S. This is followed by three dictionary definitions: for ‘happily,’ the adverb form of happy (‘not to be confused with *haply*’); for ‘happiness,’ the noun form of happy; and for ‘happy,’ the adjective, meaning first ‘favored by circumstances,’ second, ‘contentment, joy,’ third, ‘exactly appropriate to the occasion,’ and fourth, ‘intoxicated, or irresponsibly quick to act’ (*DLM* 133-134). Informing all of these definitions is a citation: to Lyn Hejinian’s lyric collection, *Happily*.³⁵³

With the notes as a guide, we learn that the speaker’s ‘lapse of happily’ refers not only to a pause in contentment or joy, but more foundationally and strangely, to a sense that there has been a faltering in the process by which circumstance and chance constitute meaning. In a 2006 essay on *Happily*, Rankine reads Hejinian’s work as an interrogation of ‘hap,’ or ‘more prosaically, one’s lot in life, one’s fortune.’³⁵⁴ ‘In the world Hejinian

³⁵³ Lyn Hejinian, *Happily* (New York: Litmus Press, 2024 [2000]).

In what follows, I focus on Rankine’s poetic conversations with Hejinian. For her work’s conversations with figures such as Robert Lowell, see e.g.: David Ulin, ‘The Art of Poetry No. 102,’ *The Paris Review*, 219 (2016), 139–66; Kamran Javadizadeh, ‘The Atlantic Ocean Breaking on Our Heads,’ *PMLA*, 134:3, 475–490.

³⁵⁴ Rankine, ‘Some Thoughts on Lyn Hejinian’s *Happily*,’ *Poets.org* (5 December 2006). Web. <<https://poets.org/text/some-thoughts-lyn-hejinians-happily>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

unfolds, context, our surround sound, can exist for itself alone,' Rankine writes. 'We can reason our way onto a path of expectancy, but given nature's oblivion such reasoning [...] is fantastically imprecise.' The role of language, in this scheme, is not to give order to oblivion, but to 'reintroduce the chance that habit, tradition, protocol or reason can factor out, block from view.' To illustrate the relationship of habit, or reason, to the branching root of hap, Rankine quotes: 'And more is left than usefulness/ It's this that happiness achieves.' Happiness is far from static though. Rankine summarizes: 'Happily is the experience of the mind's *flourishing* toward a life that remains larger than our reason can imbue or imbrue.'³⁵⁵

Reading again the speaker's disordered interactions with first the hotline receiver, then the ambulance driver, it would be tempting to interpret in her illogical expressions and inability to communicate as a lapse in her capacity to make order out of events. In this interpretation, 'happily' would be equated with the happy capacity to apply a rational framework. But in Rankine's reading of Hejinian, we discover that the speaker of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is in fact experiencing a break not with rational capacity, but with the ability to experience something 'more [...] than usefulness'; to experience the excess that both is achieved by and constitutes 'happiness.' It is this excess that grants happiness its relationship to movement and propulsion: both Hejinian and Rankine prefer to focus on the adverb, 'happily,' suggesting the way that happiness overflows use, defies 'expectancy.' Rankine's speaker is wary of the 'the noun, happiness,' which 'is a static state of some Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue.' But if the static noun—'happiness'—feels unreachable, then the dynamic adverb—'happily'—has also lapsed for Rankine's speaker,

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

replaced with the unseeing and unhearing rationalism of the receiver and driver. ‘I am fine! Can’t you see that!’ she tells the ambulance driver, and like Serena on the tennis court, he—a representative, like the umpire, of the interpolative violence of state power—cannot see or understand. The problem is not that the speaker can’t forge meaning out of random events. It’s that people keep trying to impose meaning on her.

Whereas *Citizen* allows multiple vectors of interpretation to bloom in moments of misinterpellation or ambiguity, the subject of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* finds herself stuck, unable to access the intention and purpose implied in ‘happily.’ A few pages after the event of the ambulance, a similar set of circular dialogues recur. The speaker makes reference to the images of static-filled television screens that lurk frequently at the bottom of the book’s recto page.³⁵⁶ ‘I leave the television on all the time,’ she says, switching to the second-person from the first-person of the passage above: ‘You are, as usual, watching television,’ she writes there. Now, the television speaks largely to an empty room, except when she occasionally returns to listen to its conversation for snatches of time. She overhears a man interviewing a juvenile offender, and their conversation is displayed on the screen, in place of its usual static. They are revolving around the idea of death. The equivalence—static for stasis—is clear.

Man: He is deceased?

Boy: He is dead to me.

Man: So he is not deceased?

Boy: [...] He’s been dead to my life.

Man: [...] Did you tell someone he is dead?

Boy: All right, he is dead. (*DLM* 15)

³⁵⁶ On the significance of ‘static’ to the politico-poetic landscape of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, see: Andrew Gorin, ‘Lyric Noise: Lisa Robertson, Claudia Rankine, and the Phatic Subject of Poetry in the Mass Public Sphere,’ *Criticism*, 61:1 (2019), 97-131.

In a moment of not-uncharacteristic bleak wit, Rankine's speaker's only comment on the dialogue is: 'umm pa pa' (*DLM* 16). The short phrase suggests, most immediately, the circular propulsions of a waltz beat, with dancers rotating in suspended time. It also suggests, less immediately, the bud-um-chi sound of a drum-and-symbol, made to mark a chintzy punchline. Isolated on the page, it also has a quiet plaintiveness: a child-like call for a parent. The comment reads ultimately as a dry joke about being stuck in the language that revolves around death, as well as a plea for escape: 'Don't let me be lonely.' The plea element finds form in the second part of the dialogue, which this time gets staged between the speaker and herself. She recounts how later that day, unable to work, she writes in the margin of her notebook:

I thought I was dead.
You thought you were dead?
I thought I was.
Did you feel dead?
I said, God rest me.
God rest your soul?
I thought I was dead.
You tried everything?
I waited.
You spoke aloud?
I said, God rest me.
You'd let me be lonely?
I thought I was dead. (*DLM* 16)

Three times the speaker writes, 'I thought I was dead,' and responds to herself—or imagines someone responding—with a question. As in the dialogue with the suicide hotline receiver, these questions are less receptive than burdensome. 'I thought I was dead,' the dialogue begins, only to have that information reflected meaninglessly back to her. The effect is like the receiver's questions on the hotline: 'Do you feel like killing yourself?' He asks, then responds with silence to her declaration, 'I am in death's position.' Here,

similarly, the speaker declares her experience, only to have her ‘position’ go unreceived. The interaction suggests the degree to which the subject is constituted by being seen and understood—while at the same time, interpellation carries an oblitative violence. In both dialogues, the speaker is neither understood nor successfully interpellated. This isn’t like the liberation of Martel’s figure of misinterpellation, but instead a state of ethical loneliness that feels like non-being: ‘I thought I was,’ she writes, and the ‘was’ could refer both to ‘was dead,’ and to the infinitive, ‘to be.’ ‘I thought I was,’ then, reads as a hopeless response to the questioner: a result of the fact of being unreceived.

The numbing interaction between the speakers in this dialogue point to the relationship between a subject endowed with the capacity for futurity—‘happily’—and one who is aligned with death. Hejinian, in *Happily*, writes for instance, that while ‘reason describes an artificial (there is no other) paradise and succumbs to/ lethargy, indifference, the world changing, unchanging,’ still ‘perhaps it is the role of art to put us in complicity with things as they happen.’ She concludes: ‘Nothing is not so.’³⁵⁷ Rankine writes of this passage that it ‘embraces possibility and is pointed [...] towards a future that allows anything to happen.’³⁵⁸ This vastness of possibility is, in Rankine’s reading of Hejinian, a product of the binding between life and language. ‘Life always wins,’ Rankine reflects on *Happily*, and quotes again: ‘What matters must be concerned with what will come to matter: the future.’³⁵⁹

If *Happily* is concerned with unfolding, at the level of language, the way that ‘mattering’ is formed in relation to futurity, then *Don’t Let Me Lonely* is concerned with

³⁵⁷ Quoted Rankine, ‘Some Thoughts.’

³⁵⁸ Rankine, ‘Some Thoughts.’

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

how to write those lives that don't 'matter.' As the speaker reflects: 'sadness lives in the recognition that a life can not matter. Or, as there are billions of lives, my sadness is alive alongside the recognition that billions of lives never mattered' (*DLM* 23). Often, in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, this kind of recognition is elicited by a piece of penetrating information from the news, or—as in the dialogue between interviewer and juvenile offender—from the otherwise static television set. In this instance, the sense the 'a life can not matter' is prompted by the fact of George Bush having won the presidency, 'the same Bush who can't remember if two or three people were convicted for dragging a black man to his death in his home state of Texas' (*DLM* 21). The man was James Byrd Jr., unnamed in the text but present in his photograph, which is printed on the following page. He was murdered by three white supremacists in Jasper, Texas. The speaker finds herself talking to Bush on the television screen: 'You don't know because you don't care.' Bush's 'lapse' in memory reveals the degree to which the state deems Black lives not to 'matter.' Bush denies Byrd a past in forgetting the specifics of his murder, as well as a future: he doesn't 'care,' and consequently consigns Black lives to not 'mattering' in the eyes of the state.

Rankine's speaker's misery at Bush's consignment of Black lives to 'not mattering' has nowhere to go, no possible action or propulsive force, no capacity for 'hap.' 'I write this without breaking my heart, without bursting into anything. Perhaps this is the real source of my sadness' (*DLM* 23). The passage weaves a complex web, in which what 'matters' is dictated by state powers that devalue the lives and futures of Black people. In the process, the state denies the speaker the future-oriented operation of hope, by which she might have felt able to imbue something with 'matter.' As she reflects: 'Cornel West says this is what is wrong with black people today—too nihilistic. Too scarred by hope to hope,

too experienced to experience, too close to dead is what I think' (*DLM* 23). This, again, marks a distinction between *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Happily*. In her essay, Rankine describes *Happily* as being attended by a constant 'shadow': the 'oldest and nearest question,' the question of death.³⁶⁰ *Happily* is productively engaged with death because it is productively engaged with the future. By contrast, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* deals with the question of how to write of death without futurity. The speaker is defined by the static temporality of her political environment: neither dead nor alive, yet 'too close to dead'; neither dead nor alive, yet 'I thought I was.'

Faced with the knowledge that Bush 'can't remember if two or three people were convicted,' the speaker of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* attempts to emotionally engage, only to be plunged back into ethical loneliness. The interaction replays that of the book's epigraphs: attempting to reach beyond the 'proscenium' of the 'sea of grief,' she is returned to the position of 'a violated person,' forcibly isolated by 'those who have power over one's life possibilities.' The dynamic comes into startling clarity toward the end of the work, in a passage which promises, initially, something like hope. Reading *The New York Times* at breakfast, the speaker discovers that at last, after initial blockading by the pharmaceutical industry and then intervention by President Clinton, the final hurdle has been removed to South Africans with HIV being provided with antiretrovirals: the initiative has the support of President Mbeki. 'My body relaxes,' she writes. She had not realized that her distress had 'physically lodged itself like a virus within me' (*DLM* 117).

Rather than allowing relief to unfold into hope, though, the work remains ambivalent. The speaker's experience becomes temporally disordered. 'It is not possible to

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

communicate how useless, how much like a skin-sack of uselessness I felt' (*DLM* 117) she continues, and it's not immediately clear whether she is recalling how it felt to be distressed before reading the paper—or whether this is simply the speaker's hopeless response even to purportedly good news.

Is she dead? Is he dead? Yes, they are dead. One observes, one recognizes without being recognized. One opens the paper. One turns on the television. Nothing changes. My distress grows into nothing. (*DLM* 117)

The reason that the antiretrovirals had been denied from South Africans so long is that in 1998, thirty-nine drug companies had filed a joint suit to prevent the country's manufacture of AIDS drugs.³⁶¹ The company's names are listed on the verso page, opposite the speaker's discovery of the news, and they stand like a warning—another deadening point of dialogue—threatening to overcome this gain for human life. The pharmaceutical companies are individually named, whereas the deaths that they have caused become unidentifiable, merging together in the speaker's hopeless syntax: 'Is she dead? Is he dead? Yes, they are dead.' The companies are observed by the speaker and by the page: recognized, without bestowing recognition on the subjects killed by those companies' pursuit of profit. In this context, the speaker finds not just herself, but people more generally rendered 'useless.'

The speaker's pronoun changes across the passage as her enforced hopelessness grows: from the first person singular—'how much like a skin-sack of uselessness I felt'—to the indefinite pronoun 'one.' Unlike the vibrant 'we' and 'us' that we've seen in the utopian imaginings of writers like Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, 'one' here indicates a collapse between those whose lives are deemed not to matter by the pharmaceutical companies—'is she dead? Is he dead?'—and those observing without being recognized. The South African

³⁶¹ Pat Ridley, 'Drug companies withdraw lawsuit against South Africa,' *BMJ*, 322:7293 (28 April 2001). Web. <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1120171/>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

dead and the speaker, ‘too close to dead,’ become ‘one.’ As in the speaker’s recognition of Bush’s callous response to the murder of James Byrd Jr.—‘I write this without breaking my heart, without bursting into anything’—she again finds that her emotional response has nowhere to go. Dehumanized, and rendered powerless, she is forced into stasis. ‘Nothing changes. My distress grows into nothing.’

As the page turns, a minute transformation happens: finds ‘hap.’ Though she has said that her distress grew ‘into nothing,’ the speaker now recounts that ‘its entrance by necessity slowly translated my already grief into a tremendously exhausted hope’ (*DLM* 118). This is ‘perhaps [...] simply because I am alive. The translation occurs as a form of life’ (*DLM* 118). By fact of being a body, persisting in the world, the speaker finds herself resisting the obliterative force by which she is deemed unrecognizable, or not to ‘matter.’ As is so often the case in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, the thought then finds the form of a dialogue.

Life is a form of hope?
If you are hopeful.
Maybe hope is the same as breath—part of
what it means to be human and alive.
Or maybe hoping is the same as waiting.
It can be futile.
Waiting for what?
For a life to begin.
I am here.
And I am still lonely.

Reading this passage as a dialogue, it is unclear which lines to attribute to either side—anticipating the shifting subject positions of *Citizen*. The structure of the dialogue is just enough different from the speaker’s marginal jottings earlier, which began: ‘I thought I was dead.’ There, the thirteen lines end inevitably on the reiteration of the first speaker’s opening, so that the dialogue doesn’t move forward, but simply ends up in the same

position of having not been ‘recognized.’ Here, though, the poem’s twelve sections suggest the slightest forward movement—even if that movement is so minor as to be barely there, ending as the poem does on the hopeless admission, ‘And I am still lonely.’ Nonetheless, the dialogue shifts from being a circular series of questions and answers, to something a little closer to recognition. The opening lines are not encouraging: ‘Life is a form of hope?/ If you are hopeful,’ suggesting a tautology akin to that by which lives that are deemed not to matter are deprived of futurity, furthering condemning them to not mattering. But the questioner then becomes meditative. ‘Maybe hope is the same as breath—part of what it means to be human and alive.’ This gently hopeful note means that the speaker can also shift her role in the exchange. ‘Or maybe hoping is the same as waiting. It can be futile.’ These are not optimistic lines, but the movement from unseeing question and answer to mutual, content-full exchange is significant. The passage suggests, at last, that possibility resides even in the stalemate that is reached at the end. The final line—‘And I am still lonely’—comes to read both with a flat and hopeless finality, and as a plea, recalling the plea of the work’s title, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*.

If the conclusion of this last dialogue is hardly a propulsive movement toward hope, relation, and understanding, then it nonetheless indicates a trajectory across Rankine’s *American* series. In *Citizen*, as we saw, the rich polysemy of ‘hap’ finds expression in a series of productive ambiguities and aporias, which assert the co-existence of competing planes of interpretation—a challenge to the deadening, oblitative force of the ‘stark white background.’ This is a progression from the circular dialogues of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, in which—try as she might to break the proscenium of grief—the speaker finds herself repeatedly forced back into the position of ethical loneliness, her sense of what ‘matters’

blanked out by her uncaring political and semantic environment. Reed, in his chapter on *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, argues that in the poem 'the "we" hinted at in the phrase "American lyric" is put on trial.'³⁶² Rather than calling for an expansion of the sphere of public sympathy, or redefining personhood, the poem calls for 'rethinking the demos and those procedures through which some human lives can be made structurally insignificant and disposable, visible only in narrative as a reminder of some people's proximity to disappearance.'³⁶³ Yet, as he notes, 'the work stops short of prescribing the forms that any future community might make.'³⁶⁴ To go one step further, I'd suggest that *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* dramatizes, in its series of failed and circular communications, the way that those deemed structurally insignificant are barred from prescribing the forms of future community. Rankine's poetics illustrate the stymied relationship between meaning and 'mattering,' futurity and political community. *Citizen's* ambiguities are a move toward reasserting the possibilities for community. But her ultimate expression of possibility comes in the *American Conversation of Just Us*.

Just Us

Discussing the publication of *Just Us: An American Conversation* with an interviewer at the University of York in 2021, Rankine recounted an incident of non-recognition by a white man which became a motivating factor in writing the last in her *American* trilogy. Rankine told the interviewer about an incident in which, during a Q&A after a talk that she had given about *Citizen*, a man had asked her what *he* could do. 'How can I help you? This

³⁶² Reed, 121.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

is horrible, what's happening to Black people. How can I help you?' Rankine explains that she told him, 'I'm fine, but you might think about the world you live in.' She turns the question back on him. 'How can you help yourself in this society?' 'He got very angry,' she said. 'He just said: "if you're going to answer questions like that, nobody's going to ask you anything."' ³⁶⁵ As she tells it, the moment was clarifying. 'I thought, I really need to reposition the work.' Even as *Just Us* 'looks at the same thing' as the previous two books in the series, she reflected, the final book—the *American Conversation*—was a way of 'engaging with everybody': 'it *involves* the people who are doing the violence.' ³⁶⁶

One of the ways in which *Just Us* set out to involve the people 'doing the violence' was the insistent change in its form. As Rankine has put it, 'the genre [...] shifted very aggressively into the essay.' ³⁶⁷ Interspersed with passages of lyric poetry, the majority of the book takes a verso-recto format. Rather than the static television screens of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, or the unsettling artworks of *Citizen*, the verso of *Just Us* acts typically as a place of scholarly citation. In this sense, one major 'conversation' of the book—that between its open pages—is between essayistic experience and evidence. This interaction between experience and scholarship helped Rankine, as she puts it, to use the essay as not 'an argument towards a thing' but an 'opening of a thing.' She wanted the essay to be 'a line of inquiry': 'so that we could join each other in this line of inquiry; in the mode of questions; in the *interest* in each other.' ³⁶⁸ Rather than the stunted questioning of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the questions of *Just Us* require involvement and interest from those who are

³⁶⁵ Lola Boorman, 'Just Us: A Conversation with Claudia Rankine,' York University (11 March 2021). Web. <<https://www.york.ac.uk/english/about/events/2021/justusaconversationwithclaudiarankine/>>. Quotes from my own transcription.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

structurally positioned to isolate the lyric speaker in ethical loneliness. The essay acts a forcing of relation: justice, forged from the intensity of *Just Us*.

Before the essayistic body of *Just Us* gets underway, Rankine opens with a series of lyrics which ground the book in a question, which is also what she calls an ‘imperative’: ‘what if.’³⁶⁹ The first of these lyrics indicate the historical breadth of the American Conversation, made to span the *longue durée* of racialization, and the retribution and restitution of the present. ‘How does one say/ what if/ without reproach? The root/ of chastise it to make pure.’ The speaker observes ‘the impossibility of that,’ to ask: ‘is that/ what repels and not/ the call for change?’ (*JU* 5). These opening lines indicate that the conversation of *Just Us* will eschew any attempt to purify—an image that has its own suggestion of a worryingly blank white background. Instead, the speaker continues:

I am here. Whatever is
being expressed, what if,
I am here awaiting, waiting for you

in the what if, in the questions,
in the conditionals,
in the imperatives—what if. (*JU* 7)

These lines invert the hopeless and enforced position of the speaker of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*. Where the interlocutors of that first book circle—‘I am here/ And I am still lonely’—the speaker of *Just Us* asserts her liveness, placing the responsibility for relation on her addressee. ‘I am here. [...] I am here awaiting, waiting for you.’ This, as she writes, is not just a question or a wondering, but an imperative. Rankine indicates that this book, more than either of the previous, will enact what Reed suggests *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* stops short of: ‘prescribing the forms that any future community might make.’ While the

³⁶⁹ Rankine, *Just Us: An American Conversation* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 7. All further references in the text.

American Conversation isn't a prescription for policy solutions, it is a prescription—an impulsion—towards relation. Where the ambiguities of *Citizen* suggested deep grids of polysemy, *Just Us* turns uncertainty into a clarion call: 'the imperatives—what if.'

The opening essay of the book was published first in *The New York Times* under the title, 'I Wanted to Know What White Men Thought About Their Privilege. So I Asked.'³⁷⁰ In *Just Us*, it takes the sparer title, 'liminal spaces i.' The essay revolves around a series of interactions with white men in the liminal space of airports and airplanes. Interspersed with these interactions, Rankine inserts reading and reflections related to an undergraduate course on the politics of whiteness, which she began teaching in 2016 at Yale University. Together these threads weave a conversation that echoes that of the verso and recto, experience and scholarship.

At first, Rankine is hesitant to directly engage her white male interlocutors on the subject of race. When two men step in front of her as they wait to get a cross-country flight, she tells them, 'I am in this line,' and one says to the other, 'You never know who they're letting into first class these days' (*JU* 23). In a second encounter, a group of white men arrange themselves next to the line waiting to board, instead of at the back of it. Rankine turns to one of the group: 'Now, that is the height of white male privilege,' she tells him. He laughs, and they proceed to board (*JU* 33). In a third encounter, a flight attendant repeatedly forgets to bring Rankine a drink and a white man intervenes, telling the attendant, 'You have brought me two drinks in the time you have forgotten to bring her one' (*JU* 37). He and Rankine discuss their recent trips to South Africa, but skirt histories

³⁷⁰ Rankine, 'I Wanted to Know What White Men Thought About Their Privilege. So I Asked.' *The New York Times* (17 July 2019). Web. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/17/magazine/white-men-privilege.html>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

of racialization and contemporary politics. She doesn't ask him about his whiteness. In a fourth encounter, Rankine gets talking to a man in the lounge, who on finding out that she teaches at Yale, tells her that his son hasn't got in on early admission: 'it's tough when you can't play the diversity card' (*JU* 41). After some conversation, the encounter resolves because she assures him: 'Wherever your son goes will work out, and in five years none of this will matter' (*JU* 47).

The fifth and final encounter is the one in which Rankine poses some of the questions and knots that she has been relating to the reader, but not to her interlocutors, across the course of the essay. Sitting next to each other on a flight—presumably first-class, as has been the case across the rest of the piece—she finds herself in easy conversation with a man, 'like stepping out the door in late spring when suddenly the temperature inside and out reads the same on your skin' (*JU* 49). The image recurs, indirectly and contorted, when he later tells her, despite their apparent ease of relation, that he doesn't 'see color': his sense of blankness populated all too readily by whiteness, like the air that doesn't register as a temperature change. She responds: 'Ain't I a black woman?' echoing Sojourner Truth, 'as if testing the air quality' (*JU* 49), and he realizes his mistake, or appears to: 'What other inane things have I said?' (*JU* 51). For Rankine, the response constitutes a change. 'I was pleased he was not passively bullying,' she reflects,

And just like that, we broke open our conversation—random, ordinary, exhausting, and full of longing to exist in some image of less segregated spaces. (*JU* 51)

The image of breaking open 'our' conversation recalls the opening lyrics of *Just Us*. There, the speaker reflects, 'I stand in your considered thoughts also broken.' The message of that lyric is that the subject is, to some degree, inevitably and always broken, even in the other's 'considered thoughts'—always unassimilable. Yet against that fact is, for Rankine, the

imperative of conversation: 'here, I am here.' Rankine's insistent presence asserts the necessity, and in fact possibility, of communicating in spite of brokenness. In Rankine's image of the momentary relief of seeing and being seen, we glimpse a kind of political 'hap': 'random, ordinary, exhausting, and full of longing,' their successful communication points to a possible if unprescribed mutual future. They long, together, 'to exist in some image of less segregated space': the vagueness of 'some image' both deflating the moment of connection, and the crux of its unfinished potential.

One of the richest, intertextual fleshings of the relational dynamic entailed in 'what if,' is Rankine's engagement with Édouard Glissant's phrase, 'consent not to be a single being.' The reference is prompted by Rankine's second encounter with a white man: the one who steps in front of her while they are both boarding a flight. After his casual aggression toward her, directed not even directly to her but to his companion, he proceeds to glance at her regularly throughout the flight. Rankine likens his glances to the legally enshrined white privilege of 'stand your ground' laws; laws that 'mean whites can claim that fear made them kill an unarmed black person' (*JU* 25).

How angry could I be at the white man on the plane, the one who glanced at me each time he stood up the way you look at a stone you had tripped on? I understood that the man's behavior was also his socialization. My own socialization had, in many ways, prepared me for him. I was not overwhelmed by our encounter because my blackness is consent "not to be a single being." This phrase [...] gestures toward the fact that I can refuse the white man's stereotypes of blackness, even as he interacts with those stereotypes. What I wanted was to know what the white man saw or didn't see when he walked in front of me at the gate. (*JU* 31-33)

There is something faintly shocking about the tone of measured curiosity that Rankine adopts in this passage. Unlike the numbed circlings of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, or the humming vibrancy of *Citizen*, Rankine's rhetoric is that of the opinion writer or magazine essayist. Her stance is analytical: stereotypes 'interact'; phrases 'gesture' toward 'facts';

‘socialization’ is used twice in so many sentences. Her distance, in the face of a series of othering gestures by the man, reflects a new role for Rankine, the lyric speaker-turned-essayist. The verso page of this event features an excerpt from a famous conversation between Manthia Diawara and Glissant on board the Queen Mary II, transcribed from Diawara’s film, *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation* (2009).³⁷¹ ‘What does departure mean to you?’ Diawara asks Glissant, referring in part to the departure of the great cruise ship, and in part to the ‘departure for the Africans who are captured for the first time and pushed onto a boat.’ Glissant responds:

It’s the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity. I think that’s what’s important in all the movements of the world, and we, the descendants, who have arrived from the other shore, would be wrong to cling fiercely to this singularity which had accepted to go out into the world. [...] [I]f we don’t think about that properly, we won’t be able to understand what we ourselves can do, as participants in this African diaspora, to help the world to realize its true self, in other words its multiplicity, and to respect itself as such. (JU 30)

In her citation of this dialogue between Diawara and Glissant, Rankine suggests that her attitude toward the man at the gate is that of a ‘participant in [the] African diaspora,’ helping ‘the world to realize its true self,’ its ‘multiplicity,’ and ‘to respect itself as such.’ This is not a reparative stance, and certainly doesn’t suggest easy, soothing relation. It might, in fact, challenge the politics of relation at its root. As Fred Moten writes, at the opening to *Black & Blur*, ‘the term *consent* doesn’t merely defy but rather unravels a set of normative discourses on agency that are either denied to or unsuccessfully salvaged for those who remain in middle passage which is [...] eternal.’³⁷² Writing with and against

³⁷¹ Manthia Diawara, dir. *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation* (2009). Transcriptions can be found in various publications, including: Diawara, ‘One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara,’ *NKA*, 28 (2011), 4-19.

³⁷² Moten, *Black & Blur*, xv.

Glissant's 'poetics of relation,' Moten positions his work as thinking 'against the grain of relation and the individuation that relation seems unable not to bear.'³⁷³

Invoking both Glissant and Moten, Rankine's analytical observation of the man's quiet violence towards her expresses both a claim to agency—a distanced and powerful interest in the event—and at the same time interrogates the 'normative' structure of relation and individuation by which he positions her as an object. He relates to her, she notes, as a kind of minor impediment, 'a stone you had tripped on.' Her observation of his isolated unity, his sense of complete individuation, interferes with that scene. When Rankine writes that 'consent not to be a single being' gestures 'towards the fact that I can refuse the white man's stereotypes of blackness, even as he interacts with those stereotypes,' she insists on a presence—'here, I am here'—that contests the man's supposed individuation. Glissant reflects that the space of the boat is one in which 'you can't flee or run anywhere,' forcing you to be 'closer to yourself'; in contrast to a plane, in which 'you're really detached from yourself' (*JU* 30). In her observation of the man, Rankine indicates his detachment from himself, expressed in his inability to see his attachment and relation to her: to their shared multiplicity.

Rankine's gaze doesn't so much as force multiplicity into the man's imagined sphere of unity, as indicate the deep fallacy of his belief in his own, sovereign isolation. The essay slowly and insistently unfolds her desire to know 'what the white man saw or didn't see' when he disregarded her presence. Her approach toward this 'image' is not oppositional but relational: it takes the form of a probing conversation towards 'some image of less segregated spaces,' of multiplicity and difference, that is not pre-formed but held in

³⁷³ Ibid.

potential in the *American Conversation*. Recalling the interlocutor above, who ‘broke open [...] conversation’ for Rankine, we see that the possibility of ‘change’ lies in the ability to understand non-understanding: to move, through conversation, to an understanding of difference. In this, conversation becomes not just a conduit but a reflection and metaphor for difference: always unresolved and irresolvable, it realizes the non-coherence of the interpellated subject.

At the very end of *Just Us*, Rankine makes clear that her interpretation of Glissant’s and Moten’s poetics of multiplicity are part of a wider political goal for the work: what she terms ‘a strategy.’ ‘A friend finished reading the final pages of *Just Us* and said flatly, there’s no strategy here,’ she recounts. ‘How to tell her, response is my strategy’ (*JU* 334). There will be new political pathways, Rankine writes, but ‘until then, to forfeit the ability to attempt again, to converse again, to speak with, to question, and to listen to, is to be complicit with the violence of an unchanging structure contending with the aliveness and constant movement of all of us’ (*JU* 334). The wide and encompassing address of the first-person plural becomes a dominant rhetorical feature of the final pages, as Rankine issues a call to ‘all of us’ to ‘sign up for the long game’ (*JU* 334). She gives the example of Ruby Sales, who in 1965 survived when a white man took a shotgun blast aimed at her, which was fired by another white man, Tom Coleman. ‘She says she stood between the best and worst our democracy has to offer.’

The murkiness as we exist alongside each other calls us forward. I don’t want to forget that I am here; at any given moment we are, each of us, next to any other capable of both the best and the worst our democracy has to offer. [...] What I know is that an inchoate desire for a future other than the one that seems to be forming our days brings me to a seat around any table to lean forward, to hear, to respond, to await response from any other. Tell me something, one thing, the thing, tell me that thing. (*JU* 334-335)

These closing lines of the book mark the vastness of the space between Rankine’s

American Conversation and her *American Lyrics*. Positioning the book as a repeated and renewing ‘attempt’ to ‘lean forward, to hear, to respond, to await response,’ Rankine ultimately urges a model of relation that resists what Moten calls ‘the individuation that relation seems unable not to bear.’³⁷⁴ Rewriting relation entails, as she shows, rewriting subjectification to disrupt the individuating and isolating faux-unity of whiteness. In place of the sharp white background, Rankine indicates the ‘murkiness’ that inevitably attends ‘exist[ing] alongside each other,’ and it’s in that murk that she finds futurity. It is what ‘calls us forward.’ This murk is different from *Citizen*’s ambiguities. Where in *Citizen*, misunderstandings and mis-communications spoke to a vibrant array of competing possibilities, *Just Us* eventually decides to cast off ambiguity. The work ends on a call for clear-eyed pragmatism. ‘Tell me something [...], the thing, tell me that thing,’ she writes, and the implication is that she won’t just be heard, but has to be, because of the inextricability of our ‘exist[ence] alongside each other.’

Conclusion

Hilton Als, writing on Kara Walker’s *Sugar Baby*, reflected that her work over the 25 years running up to the installation had been like a diary—but not a diary of the usual kind. Instead of relating the personal experiences and events of Walker’s life, the diary Walker keeps is impersonal, historical, and public. ‘It’s a historical ledger filled with one-line descriptions about all those bodies and psyches that were bought and sold from the seventeenth century on, when slavery became the American way of life and its maiming shadows pressed down on black and white souls alike.’³⁷⁵ Her diaristic ledger is a call to

³⁷⁴ Moten, *Black & Blur*, xv.

³⁷⁵ Als, ‘The Sugar Sphinx.’

the collective, whether they want to be hailed or not: to ‘all those bodies and psyches’ who have struggle beneath weighted shadows.³⁷⁶

Als’ formulation of the crushing historical force of slavery on Black and white souls alike conjures few writers as insistently as James Baldwin. As Baldwin writes, in ‘The White Man’s Guilt,’ ‘the history of white people has led them to a fearful, baffling place where they have begun to lose touch with reality—to lose touch, that is, with themselves.’³⁷⁷ He continues:

No curtain under heaven is heavier than the curtain of guilt and lies behind which white Americans hide. [...] One can measure very neatly the white American’s distance from his conscience—from himself—by observing the distance between White America and Black America. [...] They thus will barricade themselves behind this curtain and continue in their crime, in the great unadmitted crime of what they have done to themselves. White man, hear me! A man is a man, a woman is a woman, a child is a child. To deny these facts is to open the doors on a chaos deeper and deadlier, and, within the space of a man’s lifetime, more timeless, more eternal, than the medieval vision of Hell.³⁷⁸

Rankine, in the years running up to the publication of *Just Us*, was embedded in Baldwin’s words. As she notes in a 2016 collection that she produced with Beth Loffreda and Max King Cap, titled *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, no writer was more integral to the shape of her thinking in this period than Baldwin. In the introduction to that work, Rankine and Loffreda reflect on the structural dynamics of imaginative sympathy: the space not only between experience—between modes of ‘socialization,’ as Rankine has it in *Just Us*—but also between white Americans and their conscience, themselves. Rankine’s solution to ‘the great unadmitted crime’ of white American history—what Als calls the ‘maiming shadows’ that press down on ‘black and

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 724.

³⁷⁸ Baldwin, 725-726.

white souls alike’—is the provocations of art. ‘We acknowledge that every act of imaginative sympathy inevitably has its limits,’ Rankine and Loffreda write. ‘Perhaps the way to expand those limits is not to “enter” a racial other but instead to inhabit, as intensely as possible, the moment in which the imagination’s sympathy encounters its limit.’³⁷⁹ This, ultimately, is the arc that Rankine draws across her *American* series. From the stymied attempts of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* to pass through the proscenium of grief, to the aporias of *Citizen* which dramatize ‘the distance between White America and Black America,’ Rankine resolves in *Just Us* to urge white Americans to sit in the continually-renewing moment: ‘in which the imagination’s sympathy encounters its limit.’

³⁷⁹ Rankine and Beth Loffreda, ‘Introduction,’ *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, eds. Rankine, Loffreda and Max King Cap (Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2016), 13-22 (p. 17).

‘The dread word “essay”’: *The Best American Essays, 1986-2022*

Between the late-1990s and the 2010s, there was a flourish of discussion around the ‘personal essay.’ At the heart of that discussion was the age-old question, made new in the context of the internet, the rise of Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programs, the conglomeration of publishing, and a range of further socio-economic contexts: the question, *what is it?* Entailed in that question was a set of further questions around, for instance, when and where the category of the personal essay arose; what forms the personal essay distinguishes itself from; and what is personal about the personal essay. Some of these questions were less generic than political. But also: what were the personal essay’s politics, and the demographic makeup of its practitioners? Who publishes personal essays, and—bluntly—should they? Plus of course, the question that always dogs essay subgenres: what does ‘essay’ mean, when we say, ‘personal essay’?

This bubble of interest was a response to an emerging proliferation of work identified and identifying itself as personal essaying. A lot of the discussion happened online, but a significant portion also happened in the prefatory materials of essay anthologies and instructional essay writing volumes. A noticeable number of essay anthologies entered the culture between 1990 and 2010, in part responding to the uptick in personal essaying and in part attempting to cultivate and capitalize on that trend. Among these volumes were: Philip Lopate’s *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1995); Robert Atwan and Joyce Carol Oates, *The Best American Essays of the 20th Century* (2000); John D’Agata’s trilogy, *A New History of the Essay* (2003, 2009, 2016); and—more recently, and reflecting on the past two decades—Lopate’s *The Contemporary American Essay* (2021).³⁸⁰

³⁸⁰ Phillip Lopate, ed. *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*

These anthologies, which were designed to address a literary public of essay readers, were accompanied in the academy by a significant number of guides, designed to instruct writing students in how to ‘craft’ the personal essay. The instructional volumes, intended largely for use in first year composition writing courses, were accompanied again by mass market instructive trade books. Many of these books overlapped, with composition textbook authors producing anthologies; anthologists producing trade books.³⁸¹ From Sheila Bender’s *Writing Personal Essays: How to Shape Your Life Experiences for the Page* (1995), Dinty W. Moore’s *Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Non-Fiction* (2010), and Sandra Faulkner’s *Writing the Personal* (2016), to Adair Lara’s *Naked, Drunk, and Writing: Shed Your Inhibitions and Craft a Compelling Memoir or Personal Essay* (2010), there has been no shortage of material, starting from the mid-1990s, designed to help students and readers manage their personal experiences into personal essays.³⁸²

That these volumes did aim to both define the essay and help would-be essayists to manage their experience onto the page, is marked in their prefaces. Moore, for instance, writes that the essay is an ‘artful attempt to perceive something fresh and significant,’

(New York: Anchor Books, 1995); Robert Atwan and Joyce Carol Oates, eds. *The Best American Essays of the 20th Century* (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, 2001); John D’Agata *The Next American Essay* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2003); *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (Graywolf Press, 2009); *The Making of the American Essay* (Graywolf Press, 2016); Lopate, *The Contemporary American Essay* (New York: Anchor Books, 2021).

³⁸¹ Dinty Moore, for instance, author of *Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Non-Fiction* (London: Writer’s Digest Books, 2010), collaborated also on: Kevin Haworth and Dinty W. Moore, eds., *Lit from Within: Contemporary Masters on the Art and Craft of Writing* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011); Renee K. Nicholson, Erin Murphy, and Dinty W. Moore, eds. *Bodies of Truth: Personal Narratives on Illness, Disability, and Medicine* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

³⁸² Sheila Bender, *Writing Personal Essays: How to Shape Your Life Experiences for the Page* (Blue Ash, OH: Writer’s Digest Books, 1995); Moore, *Crafting the Personal Essay* (2010); Sandra Faulkner, *Writing the Personal* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016); Adair Lara, *Naked, Drunk, and Writing: Shed Your Inhibitions and Craft a Compelling Memoir or Personal Essay* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2010).

indicated by its ‘graceful, wise, and always surprising’ unfolding of thought.³⁸³ He encourages the would-be personal essayist to read attentively, with the goal of learning how to keep one’s own reader constantly engaged: ‘if you [...] find yourself confused, bored, or frustrated, [...] back up’ and ‘form a theory as to how, when, or where the prose went bad.’³⁸⁴ Engagement is crucial, and two key ways in which prose is likely to ‘go bad’ are in argumentation (‘lecture or diatribe’) or adherence to a formula.³⁸⁵ Despite the instructional nature of the personal essay writing anthology, it is important that the personal essay not be likened to the five-paragraph essay; nor the college admissions essay (an ‘uncomfortable exercise in clumsy self-aggrandizement’); or, least of all, the academic essay (‘dry and tasteless as day-old toast’).³⁸⁶ Underpinning these generic descriptions was, meanwhile, a stronger and more insistent bent, designed to educate readers in self-perception. Moore repeatedly stresses the reader’s particular capacity for self-expression, and the limitless value of their perspective and experience. As he writes: ‘each of us has a miraculous mind full of associations, ideas, and richly remembered experiences.’³⁸⁷ The personal essay was accordingly of great significance, in direct corollary with the significance of the individual.

Lopate and D’Agata’s collections take a more literary and less obviously instructional tack, their apparent ambivalence about the grace and wisdom of the individual lightly concealing the equal heroism of the essayist-as-curmudgeon. As Lopate writes, ‘it takes a fair amount of ego to discourse on one’s private affairs and offer judgments about life.’³⁸⁸ He is most interested in personal essays that are fascinated with limitations, the cul-de-sac

³⁸³ Moore, 6.

³⁸⁴ Moore, 11.

³⁸⁵ Moore, 5.

³⁸⁶ Moore, 4.

³⁸⁷ Moore, 7.

³⁸⁸ Lopate, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Art of the Personal Essay*, xxiii-liv (xxxi).

of the self, where ‘what one doesn’t understand, or can’t do, is as good a place as any to start investigating [its] borders.’³⁸⁹ Much of the genius of the personal essay is in its discursivity: ‘The trick is to realize that one is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish.’ This is why he says that ‘the hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy.’³⁹⁰ At the heart of the personal essay’s intimacy is understanding—what Lopate calls ‘identification’³⁹¹—in which reader and essayist seek themselves reflected in the personal form. The yearning, even if impossible to realize, is that from the essay’s ‘incomplete shards’ and ‘changeableness and plasticity,’ reader and essayist might accumulate a whole and entire self.³⁹² In this view, the force of the personal essay is its siren promise of an authenticity that points the way to completion: a ‘genuine unmasking.’³⁹³

Ultimately, as we find in D’Agata, the promise of a ‘genuine unmasking’ is what distinguishes the apparently high literary value of the modern American personal essay. In *The Next American Essay*, he huffs that the question, ‘what is an essay,’ has become a sociological one. This is what he hopes to rectify.

For your records: there are 19 men in here, 13 women. Twenty-nine [sic] are Americans; 1 is a Mexican; 1 is Canadian. There’s a Native American, a Korean American, an African American, a Thai American. I’ll bet you there are probably some gay people, too. There’s someone who’s 25, another who’s 90. I know for a fact there are poor people included, as well as a few others who are relatively rich. Four are dead. [...] They have first books, no books, 40 books, e-books—348 book in all, 4 of which are memoirs.³⁹⁴

³⁸⁹ Lopate, xxvii.

³⁹⁰ Lopate, xxiii.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Lopate, xxviii.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ D’Agata, ‘To the Reader,’ in *The Next American Essay*, 1-2 (p. 1).

The purpose of this list is to interpellate today's reader of 'nonfiction' as uptight, in need of reorientation so as to more properly appreciate the 'art' of the essay. The bad reader, D'Agata implies, is obsessed with identity categories, so focused on the politics of representation that they keep personal 'records' in order to better document and register indignation at the makeup of the volume. D'Agata actively elicits this indignation. We are told that there are 19 men and 13 women, as though the figures themselves were sufficient to ward off curiosity over the discrepancy. The Canadian author doesn't take an indefinite article, but the Mexican author does, which feels a bit odd within the same sentence. There's a faint prurience in his jocular aside, 'I'll bet you there are probably some gay people.' Less noticeably, but nonetheless interesting, is his touch of the cap to memoirs: a detail which has no obvious function other than possibly to imply that it's slightly embarrassing to have written one. Overall, though, the effect of D'Agata's opening is to indicate how far the personal essay's dominance has advanced in the landscape of the essay form. Identity, he's saying, has become primary.

Readers who fixate on any demographic details of the anthology's contents have lost sight of the value of the genuine essay in favor of a lust for facticity, D'Agata suggests. 'I'm telling you this now,' he comments on his list, 'because I know that you are expecting such facts from nonfiction.'³⁹⁵ This line of argument is not surprising from D'Agata. He's infamously the author of *The Lifespan of a Fact*, a 'knock-down, drag-out fight'³⁹⁶ in book form, staged between him and Jim Fingal, his fact-checker at *The Believer*, over D'Agata's

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Jennifer B. McDonald, 'In the Details,' *The New York Times* (21 February 2012). Web. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/books/review/the-lifespan-of-a-fact-by-john-dagata-and-jim-fingal.html>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

factual inaccuracies in a 2005 essay published by the magazine.³⁹⁷ But his rubbishing of facts ('from the same Latin root,' he reminds us, as 'artifice,' 'counterfeit,' and—importantly—'superficial') is part of a positive agenda for the essay form. Henceforth, 'I want you preoccupied with art in this book, not with facts for the sake of facts.' He quotes from Emerson: 'there are no facts, only art.'³⁹⁸

We can draw few facts about the makeup of the volume from D'Agata's portrait of a culture in the grip of anxiety about 'identity politics' and the canon wars. But what we do get is a picture of the muddled debates about what the 'art' of the essay constitutes, when the essay is conceived as increasingly personal, even as demographic descriptors of identity are dismissed as superficial. Art, for D'Agata, eludes the kind of reader interested in racialization or gender. At the same time, his proposed method of reading reinscribes the pre-eminence of the individual over aesthetics that he's busy lambasting. He describes his collection as 'a book about human wondering,' but D'Agata is the key human doing the wondering. The anthology—which posits itself as cataloguing the developments of the modern and future essay—begins in 1974 because that was the year in which D'Agata himself began consuming essays, with his mother reading him Cicero and Montaigne while still in utero. 'I get now why I feel some essays in my blood,' he writes.³⁹⁹ D'Agata's proposed solution to the identity politics that plague the essay, then, is not dissimilar to the quantifying method that he abjures. Both ultimately make recourse to the personal over attention to specifics of form or genre. Insofar as D'Agata can describe it in the anthology paratext, the 'art' of the essay proves to be little more than Moore's description on the first

³⁹⁷ D'Agata, *The Lifespan of a Fact* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

³⁹⁸ D'Agata, *The Next American Essay*, 1-2.

³⁹⁹ D'Agata, *The Next American Essay*, 2.

page of his composition textbook. ‘The personal essay is, of course, *personal*, meaning of you,’ Moore writes, the emphasis his own nod to the tautology.⁴⁰⁰

What do we learn from the introductions to these anthologies? First: that for these anthologists, a central aim of the personal essay is to discover and communicate a unique expression of selfhood. Second: that that expression can be taught, but that its teaching runs contrary to the way we learn academic essay writing, and indeed the way we learn how to express selfhood in contexts that aren’t essayistic. In other words, the essay is uniquely equipped to express the uniqueness of American selfhood. Third: that the essay, and therefore the essay anthology, is to be prized in direct relation to its resistance to definition, to structural or generic norms, and to sociological markers of identity, which detract from our rarified natures as personal essayists. Fourth: the less possible it is to express a rubric of judgment, or even to observe the specific qualities of personal essay, the more useful the personal essay anthology, and the more rarified the ideal of personhood being taught and expressed. Finally, we learn that starting in the 1990s, the essay was becoming increasingly understood in personal terms in a variety of contexts: academic, literary, and mass market. This trend has not abated today.

In this chapter, I take up a set of essay anthologies in order to expand on these points and the questions they prompt. Where does the 21st century personal essay emerge from, in the literary landscape of the 20th century? What forms and ideologies of personhood does it perform or reflect? What is the relationship between institutional forms of essaying—in the undergraduate composition course, or creative writing programs—and then mass-market nonfiction, and literary essaying? My archive, in asking these questions, is *The Best*

⁴⁰⁰ Moore, 5. Italics in original.

American Essays, which has released an anthology annually since 1986. Breaking the series into two periods—1986-2003, and 2004-2022—I take two main routes into the personal essay. The first of these is the history of the anthology as a means of educating Americans in citizenship and liberal personhood; a line of discussion that leads to the 1990s canon wars, and various kinds of anthology format as they both speak to and break from the university. The second is conglomeration, processes of rationalization in literary publishing, and the evolving stress on the role of the author, which corresponds with the deepening of neoliberal ideological imperatives toward self-management and entrepreneurship. I find, ultimately, that the essay has become increasingly ‘personal’ since the founding of *The Best American*. The personalization of the modern essay is, I’ll suggest, an essential component of ‘the personal turn.’

Mark McGurl has remarked of the history of U.S. fiction since 1960 that it has ‘grown so large and internally complex that few scholars even attempt anymore to gather its splinters.’⁴⁰¹ This observation is also true of nonfiction, and the scale—if we include all roughly nonfictional works published online—may be far greater. While much of the concern of essayists, from Montaigne onwards, has been in defining or refusing to define the contours of the essay genre, that project has grown considerably more complex in the face of the sheer volume of nonfiction that has muscled into regular circulation in the late-20th and 21st centuries. This period sees a peak in the significance of cultural critics, figures like Susan Sontag and James Baldwin, in the 1960s and ‘70s; the ‘boom’⁴⁰² in memoir in the 1990s; the blossoming of creative nonfiction in close relation to the growth of the MFA

⁴⁰¹ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), x.

⁴⁰² Julie Rak, *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).

program; the consolidation of autotheory as a marketable publishing category; the fits and starts of the personal essay industrial complex, quasi-academic blogging, and platforms like Substack; and throughout, continual harkening back to the grand old tradition of the American essay, said to be dying in the same breath that it is newly invoked.

It's in part because of the vastly complex and often contradictory landscape of U.S. nonfiction that, as Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy have recently observed, 'the field of critical work on the essay is sparse.'⁴⁰³ The characteristics of the essay are 'precisely those from which the professional study of literature had to distinguish itself, in order to make a claim to the systematic and methodical qualities that would win it respectability as a university discipline.' In other words: the history of literary critical professionalization is also the history of the essay's neglect, and self-definition. It is also because of this context that *The Best American Essays* series offers such a rich, while condensed, expression of recent changes in the essay and its generic conception. As Karshan and Murphy point out, the series' paratexts—each issue: a foreword by Atwan, the series editor, and an introduction by that year's guest editor—are 'taken together, one of the most substantial recent bodies of thought on the essay.'⁴⁰⁴

The American essay in the 20th century

Cynthia Ozick offers an interesting case study for both the history of *The Best American*, and the growing personal bent of the essay before and after the 1980s, when the series was founded. Ozick is a significant player in the series, with the four decades of its run charting

⁴⁰³ Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy, 'Introduction: On the Difficulty of Introducing a Work of this Kind,' in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, eds. Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Abingdon, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1-30 (p. 17).

⁴⁰⁴ Karshan and Murphy, 17-18.

some of the most productive years of her nonfiction career. Her essays are collected in nine editions, of the thirty-eight published to date: 1986, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2007, and 2009. She's name-checked in two further volumes—1988 and 1990—in which that year's editors bemoan not being able to include her work in their collections. Ozick was also guest editor of *The Best American* in 1998. This is not surprising, and points to the close correlation between essayists frequently collected in the series and those that serve as editors. It also suggests something of the limits of the pool from which *The Best American* has tended to draw. The limits of that pool point us toward some of the key characteristics of a *Best American* essay: work that, in the vein of the 20th century public American genre, has tended towards the anecdotal, the personal, and the middlebrow. To learn what a *Best American* essay is and isn't, a useful comparison is found in comparing *Partisan Review* and *The New Yorker*; a comparison that Ozick herself drew in *The Best American*.

Ozick's essay in the inaugural edition of *The Best American* stages the *Partisan* versus *New Yorker* debate. It's titled 'The First Day of School: Washington Square Park, 1946,' and in the essay Ozick recounts her ill-fated first day at New York University, on a 'colorless February morning in 1946.'⁴⁰⁵ The excitable and nervous seventeen-and-a-half-year-old gets muddled and shows up a day early to class. Nonetheless, she's introduced to all the world captured in Washington Square Park. There's the pretzel man, and the whirling doors of Chock Full O' Nuts. There are a selection of satirical archetypes, arranged to equally satirize the teenager's sense of fully realizing the great truths of humanity. She casts her eye over the Communists, 'readily recognizable cantankerous zealots'; the philosophers, who are 'all existentialists'; the poets, 'all influenced by *The*

⁴⁰⁵ Cynthia Ozick, 'The First Day of School: Washington Square Park, 1946,' in *The Best American Essays: 1986* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1986), 219-226.

Waste Land’; the engaged girls, who ‘flash their rings and tangle their ankles.’ Everything is certain to her: ‘There is no feminism and no feminists: I am, I think, the only one.’⁴⁰⁶ All this hubristic portraiture bundles us toward the essay’s central revelation. Among all the types and swirling world of Washington Square Park is the newsstand. On the newsstand, *Partisan Review*.

Ozick’s teenage self doesn’t buy a copy of *Partisan* on first encounter—‘all the money I have is my subway fare... the price of *Partisan* in 1946 is fifty cents’—but the names in its pages feel like a ‘small conflagration flaming in the gray streets.’⁴⁰⁷ From then on, Ozick loiters regularly at the newsstand, ‘drilling through the enigmatic pages of *Partisan Review*.’ She ‘can’t understand a word’: ‘I don’t know what cold war means. Who is Trotsky? I haven’t read *Ulysses*.’⁴⁰⁸ Nonetheless, she persists, entranced by the promise of the names in *Partisan*’s pages. Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Hardwick, Alfred Kazan, Clement Greenberg, Saul Bellow, Simone de Beauvoir, and George Orwell were just some of the writers that appeared in the paper around that time. ‘I mean to penetrate every one of them,’ Ozick recalls.⁴⁰⁹ The present tense reinforces the earnest dedication of the teenager, making the 1940s literary scene feel both terribly present and at the same time a far-distant ideal.

One function of Ozick’s portrait of the teenager in thrall to *Partisan* is to mark a distinction between the essay of the 1940s, in all its supposed sparkling intellectualism, and the essay of the 1980s, which Ozick is writing here for *Harper’s Magazine* (where it was published before being collected *The Best American*.) The distinction between two

⁴⁰⁶ Ozick, 223.

⁴⁰⁷ Ozick, 221.

⁴⁰⁸ Ozick, 225.

⁴⁰⁹ Ozick, 221.

instantiations and eras of the essay maps onto the distinction between the idealistic teenage Ozick and the older essayist, anxious about her place in literary history, and, accordingly, about her essay that she's now penning.⁴¹⁰ For the teen Ozick, *Partisan* represents an ideal in which the essay is a powerful spark, animating and illuminating her literary-political awakening. This is set against the amused, indulgent stance of the older essayist, who chooses to cast this glow on the essay of the 1940s, as against that of her own time. The result is that the high-political, typically impersonal, often argumentative, and frequently critical-academic essay of *Partisan* in the mid-20th century is illuminated against what Ozick depicts as the relative gray of the form in which she's now writing.

Ozick's essay is of a markedly different sort to the typical *Partisan* essay of the 1940s and '50s. It's observational and anecdotal, inflected with an essayistic 'I' that gives an impression of a rounded literary persona, with cosmopolitan things to say to a cosmopolitan audience who will grasp her gentle and reflexive wit. It's resolutely autobiographical, while ostensibly centering a cultural object. It's the kind of essay that will come to be marked by its association with magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Harper's*. In 1946, meanwhile, *Partisan Review* featured essays by Hannah Arendt, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus; Philip Rahv on Tolstoy, Paul Valéry on Flaubert, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty on Cezanne.⁴¹¹ Few, if any, are personal in style. Even Valéry's essay on Flaubert, which opens with the poet admitting 'to having a weakness for *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*' quickly shifts into an impersonal, critical-philosophical register—a mode of criticism in

⁴¹⁰ A hallmark of Ozick's essay writing is her frequent expression of anxiety over her failings as a writer, and her fraught sense of own achievements. For more, see: Charlie Tyson, 'Cynthia Ozick's "Outcry of Failure,"' *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 43: 1 (2024).

⁴¹¹ E.g.: Hannah Arendt, 'What Is Existenz Philosophy?' *Partisan Review*, 1 (1946); Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The Root of the Chestnut Tree,' *Partisan Review*, 1 (1946); Albert Camus, 'The Myth of Sisyphus,' *Partisan Review*, 2 (1946); Philip Rahv, 'Concerning Tolstoy,' *Partisan Review*, 4 (1946); Paul Valéry, 'Temptation of (Saint) Flaubert,' *Partisan Review*, 2 (1946), 201-206; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cezanne's Doubt,' 4 (1946).

which observation appears to derive from inhabitation of the object's perspective: 'It would seem that Flaubert was carried away by what was accessory and lost sight of what was essential.'⁴¹²

It took a little while before *Harper's* or *The New Yorker* found their association with the kind of worldly-wise personal essay that Ozick is writing in the 1980s. *The New Yorker* was founded in 1925, and from its inception pitched itself as bridging a gap between the old world and the new. As the magazine's first editor, Harold Ross, put it in his founding statement, *The New Yorker* set out to 'be a reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life'; to 'be human,' its 'tenor [...] one of gaiety, wit and satire,' but 'more than a jester.' It would not be 'what is commonly called radical or highbrow,' but would 'assume a reasonable degree of enlightenment on the part of its readers.'⁴¹³

In the early years, much of the magazine's nonfiction output reflected this stress on humor and ironical play, with quippy formats like 'The Talk of the Town' dispatched by a worldly and anonymous 'we.' E. B. White began his long career at the magazine by writing short humor pieces, mostly parodies of advertising copy.⁴¹⁴ As Ned Stuckey-French has shown, elements of White's writing—its humble, ironical humor—would go on to characterize not only *The New Yorker* but, inextricably, the middlebrow American essay for much of the rest of the 20th century. White's satirization of advertising clichés crystallized key dynamics of *The New Yorker* in the 1920s and '30s: a period when American advertising was becoming increasingly personal and directed toward the consumer, whose

⁴¹² Paul Valéry, 'The Temptation of (Saint) Flaubert,' 201-206 (p. 205).

⁴¹³ Harold Ross, 'Prospectus: Announcing a New Weekly Magazine,' *The New Yorker* (1924). Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library. Web. <<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/d5d30af0-f527-0138-a373-0242ac110003>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

⁴¹⁴ On E. B. White's early career at *The New Yorker*, see e.g.: Ned Stuckey-French, *The American Essay in the American Century* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011), 142-144.

individualism was more and more insistently figured in relation to their habits of consumption. The magazine's gentle irony soothed all manner of reader, whether plagued by high-class snobbery, working class snobbery, or middlebrow pretension.⁴¹⁵ As Stuckey-French puts it: '*The New Yorker* had broken [...] with the Victorian dream of uplift and so was more modern, but in actuality it was offering a hipper, more urbane form of the *Good Housekeeping* seal of approach.'⁴¹⁶ Its ironic tone didn't lessen its advertising chops: '*The New Yorker* was selling New York and modernism in a way the colyumnists had only dreamed of.'⁴¹⁷

The magazine's capacity to advertise the modern world to itself as it shifted from its focus on humor and satire to a more expansive nonfiction output as the century progressed. Major reviewer-essayists like Edwin Denby gave American readers a profound sense of the importance of the art that was being performed in their cities. His observations on contemporary American dance foregrounded the unavoidable particularity of the critic's eye—working alongside the energetic particularity of modern America, as observed by writers like Maeve Brennan. These writers were responding to as well as forging a new American public, emerging in the wake of the Second World War. Between 1941 and 1951, subscriptions of *The New Yorker* nearly doubled. The makeup of the new readership was more varied than it had been in its first two decades. By the late-1940s, half the magazine's readership lived outside the New York Metropolitan Area. 13% of subscribers had not attended college. 26% listed their occupation as 'housewife.'⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁵ Stuckey-French, 144.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Trysh Travis, 'What We Talk about When We Talk about The New Yorker,' *Book History*, 3 (2000), 253-285 (p. 255-256).

Under William Shawn, who edited the magazine from 1952 to 1987, the ‘high middlebrow’ essay became a staple of *The New Yorker*, addressing this newly (relatively) diverse public of readers. As Tamar Katz and Ben Yagoda have each suggested, this was a readership who longed to belong to an intellectual public, by which they could understand their role in a rapidly modernizing America.⁴¹⁹ As Travis earnestly puts it: the threat of an increasingly ‘impersonal modern nation’ prompted readers toward *The New Yorker*’s promise of a ‘loving community of thinking individuals.’⁴²⁰ *The New Yorker*’s nonfiction output under Shawn was a cohering force for an American public primed for bourgeois essaying. Amused, worldly, it addressed a public both educated and broad, sophisticated and intently commercial. It balanced qualities of ‘personalism’⁴²¹—encouraging individuated empathy and a focus on the local and particular—with an affirming engagement with cultural objects. The personality of the reviewer or essayist, with her glimmering but accessible voice, gave American readers their sense of the same.

By the 1980s, *The New Yorker* had become a brand: a weathervane in the opening stages of what Dan Sinykin has called ‘the conglomeration era.’⁴²² Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 caused a loosening of the barriers to consolidation and vertical integration.⁴²³ Heralding the new era that Reaganism would precipitate, magazine magnate Si Newhouse acquired Random House, and began to build a media empire that included

⁴¹⁹ Tamar Katz, ‘Anecdotal History: *The New Yorker*, Joseph Mitchell, and Literary Journalism,’ *American Literary History*, 27:3 (2015), 461-486; Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and The World It Made* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2001).

⁴²⁰ Travis, 273.

⁴²¹ Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). See also: Katz, 463.

⁴²² Dan Sinykin, *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).

⁴²³ On Reaganism and conglomeration, see e.g.: Sinykin, 7.

Condé Nast, with *The New Yorker* gathered under the conglomerate umbrella.⁴²⁴ A major feature of this new landscape for publishing was its dispersal of power out of the hands of editors and authors, and into a commercial network in which the interests of agents, booksellers, marketing departments, and corporate shareholders factored into what could and could not be published.

This was a more intense change for novelists than essayists, but the overlap was not insignificant or incidental. Knopf, with its astute commercial culture, funneled its writers into the magazine's pages. *The New Yorker* served as a 'guarantor, a stamp of legitimacy,' which allowed literary authors to weather the conglomerate system with 'a degree of aesthetic freedom from its consequences.'⁴²⁵ Many Knopf fiction writers were also essayists for the magazine, including John Updike and Cynthia Ozick. As Sinykin argues, these writers' insulation from the conventionalizing force of conglomeration on fiction itself produced an aesthetic quality of the era. Among the three major aesthetic trends of conglomeration that Sinykin identifies is the rise of a greater reflexivity and self-consciousness in fiction—which, as we will see, also inflects the essay. Autofictional strategies became a way for authors to perform 'a reclamation of authorship against distributed agency.'⁴²⁶ *The New Yorker*, which already operated as a flattering mirror by which an American cultural public could reflect the critics' urbane perspective back on themselves, was a key location for the new era's self-reflexive auto-methodology.

The New Yorker essay is in many ways the essay of *The Best American*. Of the 813 essays published in *The Best American* between 1986 and 2022, 101 were originally

⁴²⁴ Sinykin, 73.

⁴²⁵ Sinykin, 103.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

published in *The New Yorker*—around 12%. If we add *Harper's* to that number (73 essays), the two magazines combined account for more than 20% of all *The Best American's* output. Interestingly, these figures hardly change across the series' run. If we break the series into two periods, 1986-2003 and 2004-2022, we see that *The New Yorker* remains the dominant periodical before and after the 2000s, accounting for roughly 13% and 12% of the essays in each period respectively. Compare this to the influence of review magazines, often para-academic, and often aligned, like *Partisan*, with the New Left of the mid-to-late 20th century. 50 of the 390 essays published 1986-2003 come from the *Georgia Review* (12), *Yale Review* (5), *New York Review of Books* (13), or *American Scholar* (21) combined—fewer than originate in just *The New Yorker*. The makeup of the volumes changes in other senses after 2004. There is growing representation of work from a new generation of internet-oriented magazines, such as *The Believer*, *VICE*, and *Salon.com*. But *The New Yorker*, and its house style, continue to define what the series' editors believe to be 'the best' of the American form.

As Ozick's essay suggests, this is a form that marked itself against the left-wing intellectualism of a magazine such as *Partisan*, while also nurturing a self-reflexive, amused, and ironized orientation to its own workings. Despite the fact that Ozick often wrote for *Partisan* through the 1980s, she wistfully consigns its style to the dreamy past of teenage enlightenment. The period in which she's now writing, she implies, is marked by a different mode: one far more personal, non-specialist, faintly anxious about the author's value and independence. It is an essay that captures Ozick's sense of the capacity for self-expression in American nonfiction in the 20th century. Though she does not put it so didactically, the essay draws a distinction: between the lofty freedom of early-century

impersonality, and the intensified bourgeois personhood in the late-century. As we've seen, that trend towards the essay as an expression of light, bourgeois modernity and self-ironic individualism had begun in *The New Yorker* well before Ozick's conflagrant encounter with *Partisan* in 1946. But in her casting back through the years, Ozick indicates the new norm for the form, one which will only become increasingly invested in the reflexive self-identification of the author, and forms of personal expression that stand for agency in the era of deepening conglomeration and neoliberalism.

'Schoolmaster to the nation': the American anthology

As we've established, the 20th century saw the broadening cultural dominance of a particular kind of essaying: an anecdotal, bourgeois, personal, and self-reflexive essay, characterizing particularly venues such as *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Magazine*. But what was happening in the anthology at the same time? How did the function of the anthology change, up to and across the 20th century? What was the relationship between an educational collection of canonical texts, and a literary paperback annual like *The Best American*? What was the relationship between the late-20th century personal turn in the essay, the anthology's historically pedagogical function, and the essay canon? More generally: how does the emergence of bourgeois essaying in American culture relate to the anthology format? I'll turn now to the history of the anthology as, first, a lively miscellany, and later, a source of instruction in liberal personhood and citizenship.

The history of the anthology begins in the 18th century, with the opening up of copyright laws. Its general format can be traced back to roots in the commonplace books of

humanistic education, and the florilegium of Montaigne's *essais*.⁴²⁷ Printed miscellanies of short or excerpted materials had been available only to a small class of readers. The form and politics of the anthology, as we understand it today, was originally a product of booksellers' and printers' new powers to create and publish miscellanies after the 1774 defeat of copyright. At that point, as Barbara Benedict and Leah Price have each shown, the anthology began its journey toward enforcing and dictating a Western literary canon. In this context, the anthology would become a primary mechanism for establishing 'the rules by which future literature would be transmitted'; to 'form and reform canons, confirm literary reputations, and establish taste and cultural literacy for generations of readers.'⁴²⁸ By the turn of the 19th century, literary culture had seen an influx of such anthologies.

Schoolrooms were coming to rely on the format, with collections like Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts: or Useful and Entertaining Passages in Prose Selected for the Improvement of Scholars in Classical and Other Schools* (1784) circulating widely. The mode of reading that anthologies like Knox's encouraged lent itself to the new influx of printed books; a convergence that Knox himself flagged, writing that 'the art of printing has multiplied books to such a degree' that it is necessary to 'pick out [...] the best parts.'⁴²⁹

Whereas earlier readers had been encouraged toward what Benedict describes as a carnivalesque and collaborative engagement with miscellanies, later collections—like Knox's—trained young men to read excerpts for moral content.⁴³⁰ They grew more uniform, in the length and type of their contents, with the effect of presenting 'native

⁴²⁷ On *florilegium* and the essay tradition, see e.g. Karshan and Murphy, 11.

⁴²⁸ Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 67. Barbara Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 3.

⁴²⁹ Price, 4.

⁴³⁰ Benedict, 10; Price, 6-11.

literature as the coherent reading experience of a consistent ideology.⁴³¹ Works such as Knox's were popular enough to spur the production of meta-anthologies, including *Elegant Extracts...Abridged from the Larger Volume*, which together gained a 'near-monopoly' in classrooms.⁴³² Like the major anthology publishers of today, Knox's collections, in their popularity, had a role in cohering education across a nation in the process of modernization: they instituted a 'uniformity of English books, in schools,' which enabled 'all students of the same class' to read together and towards, if not a single purpose, then the purposes of a single anthologist.⁴³³ From its first entry into schools, the anthology's function was to establish not only an English tradition, but a literary citizenry in the shared space of the classroom; a space in which not only the texts were shared, but the methods of reading imposed or encouraged by their anthologized form. The modern function of the anthology—as a mechanism for mediating between individual readers and literary culture⁴³⁴—was foundational from the form's earliest years.

In America, the pedagogical function of anthologies and miscellanies took on new significance with the battle for independence from the British. Early anthologies, such as William Holmes McGuffey's *Eclectic Readers* (1836-1857), straddled multiple functions: part instruction in literacy and letters, part moral and religious exegesis, and part primer in canonical English and emergent American settler colonial literature. Their pedagogical effect came not just from their selections—typically poetry, literary excerpts, and passages from the Bible—but also and importantly the anthology's prefatory materials.⁴³⁵ The initial

⁴³¹ Benedict, 6.

⁴³² Price, 67.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Benedict, 3.

⁴³⁵ For a wider assessment of types and styles of early anthologies and their relation to the 'composition reader,' see e.g.: Jean Ferguson Carr, Stephen L. Carr, and Lucille Schultz, eds. *Archives of Instruction: Nineteenth Century Rhetorics, Readers, and Composition Books in the United States* (Pittsburgh, PA:

38 pages of McGuffey's 'Fourth Reader' of 1844, for instance, are dedicated to explanations in both how to read generally, and specifically how to read the work at hand. Sections include 'Directions For Reading' and 'Suggestions To Teachers'—mostly comprising brief lessons in reading aloud ('Falling Inflection'; 'Rising Inflection'; 'Monotone')—but also a dogmatic preface. 'All [the reader] knows, and, not unfrequently, more than he knows, will be put in requisition by the questions appended to the lessons,' McGuffey declares, laying stress on the authority of the anthologist's own instructional writings rather than on the excerpted selections.⁴³⁶ McGuffey's anthology is 'deliberately intended to lead the mind of the pupil, as often as practicable, beyond the pages of the book in his hands.' The book was, as McGuffey declared, 'intended to aid and stimulate the teacher, as well as the pupil.'⁴³⁷ The message of the prefatory material is, repeatedly, to trust in the authority of the anthologist and his capacity to teach all manner of readers to live more wisely, morally, and dutifully in the new America.

The authority of the anthologist was key in ensuring that from the wide variety of his selections, a sense of coherence could be maintained, and with that, a coherent American literary culture. While, as McGuffey notes in the preface to the 'Fourth Reader,' the majority of the anthologies draw 'copiously [...] from the Sacred Scriptures,' they also place Nathaniel Hawthorne shoulder to shoulder with Samuel Johnson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. English essayists such as Leigh Hunt are excerpted beside contemporary American writers such as Louisa May Alcott, in turn beside Shakespeare, Milton, and

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

⁴³⁶ William Holmes McGuffey, *McGuffey's Newly Revised Fourth Reader* (Cincinnati, OH: W. B. Smith, 1844), 13. Web. <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081988903&view=1up&seq=19>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

anonymous verse. This variety, as Joe Lockard and Jillian Sandell have argued, spoke to the emergent nation's sense of its own diversity. Wide selections aided in fostering a 'sentiment for national literature' in which 'what counts as American comes from a range of sources.'⁴³⁸ The anthologies were hugely popular among isolated and immigrant pioneer communities, as well as in schools. In Lockard and Sandell's account, they became one of the most widely used textbooks in America in the 19th century, selling at around the same volume as the Bible and Webster's dictionary. The collections spoke to a cross-generational population of readers, with a voice that implied that a set of shared, national reading practices could be forged through the unifying pedagogical vision of the anthologist. The anthologies were designed to set up the anthologist as, in Dolores P. Sullivan's words, 'schoolmaster to the nation.'⁴³⁹

Today, the anthology has many echoes of the early American format, while also being unrecognizable in its division into consolidated marketing categories. Anthologies like McGuffey's were broadly accessible primers, addressed to a varied population of readers, and organized around the authority of a named and personal anthologist. By the late-20th century, one major association of the format had become its being a supplement to the English undergraduate syllabus, addressed to an undergraduate audience, and organized around the impersonal authority of the educational institution and scholarly publisher. For many readers, whose main exposure to anthologies has been as part of the undergraduate literary studies curriculum, it has become more standard to talk of 'The Norton' anthology

⁴³⁸ Joe Lockard and Jillian Sandell, 'National Narratives and the Politics of Inclusion: Historicizing American Literature Anthologies,' *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 8: 2 (2008), 227-254 (p. 231).

⁴³⁹Dolores P. Sullivan, *William Holmes McGuffey: Schoolmaster to the Nation* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994). On McGuffey's role as educator to the nation, see also: Richard David Mosier, *Making the American Mind: Social and Moral Ideas in the McGuffey Readers* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1947).

of modernist poetry, or ‘The Oxford’ handbook in Victorian literature, than to refer to collections on the basis of their editor or anthologist. At the same time, essay anthologies addressed to literary publics, to creative nonfiction students, and to first year composition students, proliferated around the turn of the millennium. Many of these works, including Lopate’s and D’Agata’s, center an identifiable and personable ‘I’ as the guiding authority. Alongside these forms were the composition anthologies and craft books for the trade market, which I noted in the introduction to this chapter. What caused the uptick in all these kinds of collections? What caused their division? And what kind of personal essaying do they promote? Some answers are to be found in the ideological and economic conditions that shape the personal turn.

By the late-20th century, the anthology format had split into three main categories: the kind used to teach the literary studies undergraduate syllabus; the kind used to teach the first-year composition course; and the kind addressed to a literary public, and, later in the century, to creative nonfiction writers and graduate students. By the 1990s, and the advent of the so-called canon wars, the anthology format had come to be understood by the literary academy as a means of teaching students how to conceive of themselves as political subjects. The literary studies undergraduate anthology had become a key ground of contest in debates over the politics of representation and cultural capital. These anthologies became more impersonal, rigorously cohering a set of texts into a tradition. Meanwhile anthologies like *The Norton Reader* (‘100 Ways to Inspire Your Students to Think, Write, and Reflect,’ soon to be in its 16th edition) continue key functions of early miscellanies.⁴⁴⁰ While the composition course had, by some accounts, begun in the 1870s as a means for Harvard to

⁴⁴⁰ Melissa A. Goldthwaite, Joseph Bizup, and Anne Fernald, *The Norton Reader* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, forthcoming).

lobby for better secondary education, it soon became a central tool in shaping students toward becoming more efficient white collar workers and effective bourgeois individuals, capable of writing and addressing a letter as much as analyzing a poem.⁴⁴¹ Filled with essays on ‘timely issues and enduring ideas,’ and appended with ‘trusted introductions [and] notes,’⁴⁴² the composition course anthology was clear in its intention to shape and guide students as they worked out how to express their personal experience and individuality. It carried on the work of the early British and American collections. Where those works maintained ‘longstanding goals of preparing men for politics, the law, or the pulpit,’⁴⁴³ the composition course anthology came to prepare students for the world of work and bourgeois social belonging.

In this sense, the college composition course picked up where the university admissions essay left off. Instituted in the 1920s—again by Harvard—as a mechanism for discriminating against Jewish applicants, the admissions essay aimed to measure a ‘character standard.’ It was designed, as Merve Emre has put it, to encourage students to demonstrate their commitment to ‘an idealized model of private and rational individualism.’⁴⁴⁴ Such acute expressions of individualism then ironically marked applicants as well-suited to higher education. The applications essay aimed to discover

⁴⁴¹ John C. Brereton, *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College, 1875-1925: A Documentary History* (Pittsburgh, OH: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 26-131, 437-544. Brereton’s account is contentious, and there are many competing accounts as to when and how college composition became a field. For an overview of some of these debates, see: Kelly Ritter and Paul Key Matsuda, ‘Introduction: How did we get here?’ in *Exploring Composition Studies: Sites, Issues, Perspectives*, eds. Ritter and Matsuda (Denver, CO: University of Colorado Press, 2012), 1-10.

⁴⁴² Publisher’s description for *The Norton Reader*. Web. <<https://www.norton.com/books/9781324070436/about-the-book/description>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

⁴⁴³ Carr, Carr, and Schultz, 22.

⁴⁴⁴ Merve Emre, ‘The Illusion of the First Person,’ *The New York Review of Books* (3 November 2022). Web. <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/11/03/the-illusion-of-the-first-person-merve-emre/>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

students likely to go on to contribute productively to an economy predicated on bourgeois actors' belief in their individual capacity to advance. The composition course was developed with a view to honing that drive at the level of form.

We see some of these functions of the composition and literary studies anthologies reflected in an essay of John Guillory's, collected in *The Best American* in 1992 and guest edited by Susan Sontag. Guillory's essay is titled 'Canon, Syllabus, List: A Note on the Pedagogic Imaginary,' and it prefaces some of the material of *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, which would be released the following year.⁴⁴⁵ The essay is remarkable in the span of *The Best American*. Rigorous, impersonal, and dealing entirely and upfront with a matter of academic debate, it is miles apart from the amused warmth of Ozick's autobiographical reflections. In its very distinctiveness, Guillory's essay marks a sea-change in the series, as well as in the fortunes of the modern American essay. It is one of the last occasions in the series of a high-critical essay making the cut. It captures a set of discourses crucial to the changing status of the essay form, namely the confluence between the canon wars in the academy, and the essay form's fraught engagements with the political value of personal experience and identity.

Guillory's essay makes the argument that is expanded across the first half of *Cultural Capital*. First: the word 'canon' doesn't describe a stable collection of texts so much as a particular crisis in academic literary criticism canon. Second: contemporary debates over the politics of representation in the canon only have currency in the university, as the place in which the syllabus is instituted. Third: the canon is 'never other than an imaginary list,'

⁴⁴⁵ John Guillory, 'Canon, Syllabus, List: A Note on the Pedagogic Imaginary,' in *The Best American Essays: 1992*, eds. Robert Atwan and Susan Sontag (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), 158-180; *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

and the syllabus its expression. Thus, changing the syllabus to reflect more diverse social identities ‘cannot mean in any historical context overthrowing the canon because the very construction of a syllabus institutes once again the process of canon formation.’⁴⁴⁶

Diversification, as a result, cannot be confused with any real structural change to the makeup of the educational institution. Key to this argument is Guillory’s observation that incommensurability is the defining quality of the relation between race, gender, and class. The imaginary of the canon, and its instantiation, the syllabus, operate on an opposing logic: that of absolute unity, and representational totality, whereby a handful of texts stand for a handful of authors, who in turn stand for the interests and experiences of a social totality. Texts written by African American and/or women authors are spuriously tasked with expressing the historical contingency of African American and/or women’s existence and experience.

Guillory’s essay—and book—were timely. *Cultural Capital* addressed a set of raging contemporary debates as to whether representation could produce structural effects. The inclusion of his 1992 essay in *The Best American*, meanwhile, suggests Sontag’s sense that there was a growing critical tendency to consider a text’s literary value in relation to historically contingent social categories. In featuring the essay, Sontag implicitly engages with a declared goal of *The Best American*. In its title, the series announces its intention to project an archetype for the modern American form: to define the essay, as much as to describe the essay through its inclusions. By choosing Guillory’s piece, Sontag implies that the definition and valuation of the essay ought not to be based in the capacity of an individual author to represent, through their ‘experience,’ a wider social category.

⁴⁴⁶ Guillory, 1992, 171.

Guillory's essay is in some ways an indication of the growing preponderance of the personal essay, in line with what he, and possibly Sontag, saw as a contemporary collapse of personal experience with structural effects.

The canon wars emerged from a moment in which Reaganite economics entailed increasingly greater emphasis on what Rachel Greenwald-Smith describes as 'the necessity of personal initiative.'⁴⁴⁷ At the same time, the spread of neoliberal ideological modes of subjectification corresponded to a greater investment, in the academy, in literature conceived 'as a means to an ethical encounter with the specificity of personal experience.'⁴⁴⁸ These joint impulses were expressive of what Jason Read has identified as neoliberalism's primary characteristic: 'a new production of subjectivity.'⁴⁴⁹ Far from transforming the mode of production, neoliberalism is distinguished by its rapacious transformation of the 'mode of subjection.'⁴⁵⁰ Greenwald-Smith and Mitchum Huehls describe this as the 'sociological and ontological' stage of neoliberalism, which only reached real intensity into the 1990s and 2000s.⁴⁵¹ It was in this period, in their view, that neoliberal ideological imperatives became riven into literary form. Like conglomeration, itself an expression of neoliberal ideological conditions, the economic rationalization of the 1980s and '90s came to color the formal practices that writers adopted as they sought to 'make sense of the realities they represent.'⁴⁵² Each of the three categories of anthology that

⁴⁴⁷ Greenwald-Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Jason Read, 'A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity,' *Foucault Studies*, 6 (2009), 25-36 (p. 32).

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Mitchum Huehls and Greenwald-Smith, 'Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature,' in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, eds. Huehls and Greenwald-Smith (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 1-20 (p. 3).

⁴⁵² Ibid.

I've outlined differently express this impetus toward self-expression, the ethical importance of encounter with personal experience, the value of personal initiative, and the anxieties that inevitably attend such impulses. In this sense, anthologies signal patterns in the personal turn as they appear differently in the academy, the mass market, and literary publics. They mark the evolving politics of an era of intensifying ideological conditions of neoliberal subjectification.

The first of the three anthology types is the literary studies anthology. This form became a focus of canon war debates in its manifestation of the imaginary totality of the canon. Its selections were tasked with representing to students and teachers their own diverse social identities—or, as Guillory has it, with encouraging in liberal audiences an 'identity politics of self-affirmation': the belief that changing the syllabus would effect a change in the diversity of student populations.⁴⁵³ The literary studies anthology, like the syllabus, was a site in which readers wanted to see themselves represented, even if that representation had an as-yet-unclear relationship to structural change. This type of anthology, then, crystallized a set of hopes and anxieties characteristic of the personal turn: about the ability, as well as the value, of institutions to represent marginalized personal and cultural experiences; about whether individual instances of writing by marginalized populations could speak to and across difference within those communities; and, behind much of this conversation, a set of questions around the structural value or otherwise of writing about oneself.

The composition course anthology, meanwhile, gave students and teachers a means by which to *represent themselves*. The 1990s was marked by a wealth of scholarship on the

⁴⁵³ Guillory, *1992*, 163.

democratic value of the composition classroom.⁴⁵⁴ Like the post-canon-war literature syllabus, the 1990s and 2000s composition course was conceived as a means of enabling students to express the specificity of their cultural experiences. At the same time, that education relied—as in readers such as Moore’s, cited at the top of this chapter—on fostering in the student an individualistic capacity to express their unique personhood, on which, per Harvard’s original intentions, they might be judged ready for the white-collar labor market, and liberal bourgeois citizenship.

Finally, a third category of anthology: collections that, like Lopate’s and D’Agata’s, interpellate a public of literary readers, aspiring writers, publishing industry workers, and MFA students. They share many of the structural features of the literary studies and composition anthology. They include prefatory materials that instruct readers in how to approach the texts. They suggest, in their selections, the imaginary totality of a canon. They imply an audience, or a public to which the reader might belong in their consumption of the collection. But at the same time, the literary marketplace anthology takes the educational institution as a major point of opposition. The literary studies and composition course anthologies are impersonal, whereas the marketplace anthology retains the personality of the anthologist at its heart. The literary studies and composition course anthologies guide students through their para-syllabus, attached to the purposes of the university. They are intended to teach students what, for instance, an essay is, and through the prefatory materials, how to write and read one. The marketplace anthology, meanwhile, is far more reflexive about its role in guiding the reader. Anthologies such as Lopate’s, D’Agata’s, and *The Best American* offer a sense of their contents as being marked by ineffable high-literary

⁴⁵⁴ A classic example of this argument is James A. Berlin’s *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Cultures: Reconfiguring College English Studies* (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2003 [1996]).

value: indescribable, almost spiritual, and, implicitly, not readily teachable. If the literary studies and composition anthologies broadcast their intention to instruct, the marketplace anthology buries its purposes in gestures toward what D'Agata calls 'art.'

As we will see in the final section of this chapter, *The Best American* repeatedly casts the essay form as radical, a daring underdog, to the faintly squalid and naive identity politics of students and the university. In marking itself in this way, the series reflects what Sinykin identifies as an ingenious marketing strategy of the conglomerate era. Analyzing the rise and rise of Barnes and Nobles under the stewardship of literary fiction book buyer Sessalee Hensley, from 1989 to 2020, Sinykin observes that 'her corporate taste was, by necessity, catholic.'⁴⁵⁵ In the varied shelves of the megastores literary fiction, a reader could find herself seduced into believing that she might 'find a book that could change [her], make [her] the kind of person who would be defined in *opposition* to this very space.'⁴⁵⁶ Put differently: the marketplace anthology tells its readers that in its pages, we can learn how to read and *be* differently from the trained and cultivated reading and being of the educational institution. The marketplace anthology allows readers to understand themselves as part of an ante- or even anti-institutional public; a dynamic remarkably expressive of the literature of 1990s and 2000s ideological conditions.

This ultimately is why Guillory's essay stands as a flag marking the changing fates of the essay, during the run of *The Best American*. It is one of the last examples in the series of an essay that treats seriously a critique of the university, contemporary debates around representation, and underlying questions about the relationship between personal expression and structural change. It does not seem incidental that it is also one of the last

⁴⁵⁵ Sinykin, 68.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

instances of an impersonal, academic style of writing in the series. The marketplace essay anthology would come increasingly, through the 1990s and 2000s, to pose itself as the self-reflexive, varied, hybrid, and unpredictable home of the form, as against the rigid syllabi of the literary studies or composition anthology. In the process, it began to detach from the critique of identity that was underway in the academy. In setting itself up in opposition to the university, and in the process to rigorous critique, *The Best American*, as we will see, became quietly invested in a naturalized idea of personhood. Emre has described this as the primary function of the personal essay: ‘to persuade us not just that personhood is beautiful or good, but that it is primordial.’⁴⁵⁷ It’s this idea that gives shape to the central lie that subtends bourgeois individualism: ‘that individual subjectivity and its expressions exist prior to the social formations that gave rise to it.’⁴⁵⁸ Guillory’s 1992 essay is one of the final instances of engagement with the social formations that give rise to the speaking ‘I’ of the essay, before the deepening personal turn of the post-millennium.

Confession, epiphany, revelation: 2000s and 2010s

How was the changing political environment of the 2000s and 2010s reflected in form? Or: what exactly is personal about the personal turn? In the decade or so after the millennium, *The Best American* captured the changing landscape in the essay: one increasingly reflective of what Greenwald-Smith describes as the three ideological qualities of the era, represented at the level of aesthetics. First, the emergence of personal feeling as a primary lens by which to ethically and aesthetically evaluate literature. Second, and relatedly: the reframing of sociality and intimacy in terms that pre-eminenced how social relation might

⁴⁵⁷ Emre, ‘The Illusion of the First Person.’

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

lead to ‘the enrichment of the self.’⁴⁵⁹ Third: the reconceiving of emotion in terms of ‘resources to develop and manage.’⁴⁶⁰ We see these tendencies in two flourishing qualities of the post-millennium essay: confession and revelation. Katz argues of *The New Yorker* of the mid 20th century that the magazine’s essays were often organized around not just an autobiographical ‘I’ but also ‘an evolving epiphany—structured toward a potential, if ironically withheld, revelation of meaning at the essay’s end.’⁴⁶¹ By the 2000s, the personal essay was coming to be marked by not just epiphany but the greater feeling and conclusiveness of revelation; less by autobiography than confession. These were to be key features in what has come to be known as the ‘personal essay industrial complex,’ with its complex ties to the rise of the creative nonfiction MFA program.

We see the development of confessional and revelatory devices in comparing the 2006 edition of *The Best American*, guest edited by Lauren Slater, to the 2013 edition, by Cheryl Strayed. In Slater’s guest editor introduction, she recounts a visit, early in her writing career, to the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference. She describes herself as struggling with a presiding dictum of the period: ‘show, don’t tell.’ The phrase was a ‘number one rule in those Bread Loaf days’: to ‘never, ever directly say what a character felt or thought.’⁴⁶² All interiority, she felt, was to be ‘crammed into action,’ and to write otherwise was ‘the stuff of expository writing, of college essays’ and ‘of middling masses who could hope to not much more than pass their course in freshman comp.’⁴⁶³ She longed, she remembers, to ‘be able to just say something straight.’ Reading frantically in the ensuing years, she

⁴⁵⁹ Greenwald-Smith, 6.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Katz, 463.

⁴⁶² Lauren Slater, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays: 2006*, eds. Robert Atwan and Lauren Slater (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin) xv-xxii (xvi).

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

searched for ‘revelation.’⁴⁶⁴ She discovered the essay, in the form of *The Best American* edition of 1988. This contained Elizabeth Hardwick’s ‘The Heart of the Seasons,’ and Slater found herself transported. ‘The essay as an artery connecting the mind of the reader with the writer, the writer bare and unpretentious, [...] without the veil of character.’ It was ‘the literary equivalent of skinny-dipping—I see you—and it made me feel found.’⁴⁶⁵

The essay that Slater recalls of Hardwick’s is a remarkably impersonal while lovingly attentive reflection on seasonality, that takes as its springboards the new catalogue for the Terra Museum of American Art in Chicago, a story by Chekhov, a poem by Robert Lowell, and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. The word ‘I’ appears only twice in its six pages.⁴⁶⁶ Slater’s interest in it, however, is a sign of the 2000s particular preoccupations with the essay form. Slater first values Hardwick’s essay according to the degree to which it appears to lay bare the essayist—to realize a true and unveiled selfhood on the page. From here, she turns to its real measure: the extent to which the reader is able to ‘find’ herself in the work. Illustrating that the function of the essay for Slater is to motivate ‘revelation,’ she describes how the encounter with Hardwick prompts her to ‘pick up [her] pen again’ and being to write, ‘directly, honestly, [...] showing, telling, pausing, contradicting, setting the frayed contents of my mind down on plain paper.’⁴⁶⁷ Slater recounts the ensuing success of and backlash against her 2004 nonfiction book, *Opening Skinner’s Box*, which pulled down a tide of criticism from lay readers and scientists alike. The book made Slater the target of online attacks, which she attributes largely to its blending of ‘personal reflections’ and pop-

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Slater, xvii.

⁴⁶⁶ Elizabeth Hardwick, ‘The Heart of the Seasons,’ in *The Best American Essays: 1988*, eds. Robert Atwan and Annie Dillard (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 185-190.

⁴⁶⁷ Slater, xvii.

science. 'Being the object of such predation [...] has led me to think a lot about the critical role of kindness in writing and in life,' she writes. Ultimately: 'I now believe that good writing [...] must have a core of gentleness.'⁴⁶⁸

There is something of a discrepancy between what Slater ultimately values in the essay—'its core of gentleness'—and the essayistic style of a writer such as Hardwick. The discrepancy should point us toward what, in fact, Slater is reading for. Her introduction appears to read in Hardwick's moments of crystalline observation, a kindly mirror for the reader in search of personal revelation. Slater is interested in the ways in which the reader might evince ethical instruction from another's confession. She therefore reads confession into even such an impersonal essay as Hardwick's. As the reader undergoes an affective response, she is—in Slater's depiction—led to reflexive examination of her own response, and thereby to ethical consciousness. Feeling is only collective in glimpsed moments—the initial connection with Hardwick, the appeal to a 'core of gentleness' in writing more broadly—but quickly gives way to Slater's sense of the self-directedness of reading. Having 'found' herself in what she experiences as Hardwick's self-exposure, Slater is surprised when others don't find themselves similarly confirmed and reflected in her 'pseudo-memoir.' The text has failed what she believes to be its measure: its capacity to spark sympathetic emotion in the reader. She is disappointed and responds by urging her readers to greater sympathy.

This network of self-directed sympathetic responses is reflected in the wider volume. Many of the essays collected in the 2006 edition are not solely personal essays: their object is often something other than the relating of the anecdotal, autobiographic

⁴⁶⁸ Slater, xix.

experiences of the writing ‘I.’ But even as many of these essays involve research, revolve around reportage, or attend to a literary or cultural object, the structuring tropes of the personal essay are present. Consistently, we see arcs of revelation, the pursuit of sympathetic feeling, and ultimately the gain of self-knowledge through reflexive consideration of the essayists’ own affective response.

In Laurie Abraham’s essay, ‘Kinsey and Me,’ for instance, originally published in *Elle Magazine* and collected in the 2006 *Best American*, the writer visits the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University, named after the groundbreaking mid-century sexologist, Alfred Kinsey. As well as reporting on the ongoing operations of the institute, and reflecting on the changes institutional funding models have wrought on the sex-positive spirit of Kinsey’s research, Abraham submits to tests, which examine her own sexual proclivities. Equipped with a vaginal plethysmograph, for instance, she is shown video clips of animals, men, softcore pornography, and a scene from *Sophie’s Choice*, while researchers gauge her levels of arousal, and assess her susceptibility to risk-oriented behavior. This is the middle stage of the essay’s arc of revelation: the confessional core around which sympathy and self-knowledge evolve.

This confessional middle section is bookended by two scenes of marital intimacy. The first, at the essay’s opening, is Abraham’s humane portrait of two of Kinsey’s subjects: Mr. and Mrs. R. C. Young, whose barebones ‘Record of Marital Frequency’ Abraham plumbs for information about their private lives. ‘You know Mr. Young is the one who became sick and died,’ she reflects, because ‘Mrs. Young was on top only sporadically until the spring of 1949,’ after which they ‘always use that position; he must be too weak to

do otherwise.⁴⁶⁹ Abraham brings them to life from the record. ‘Mr. Young’s pain and fear recede only, I think, when he’s looking up at her, his wife of so many years.’⁴⁷⁰ Abraham’s essay then ends with a return to the Youngs, though to the very beginning of their recorded sex life. She observes that for the first two years of their sex diary entries, all that they note down is ‘1 male orgasm.’ Then, ‘as the crocuses start to open in the spring of 1932, you read, in script as neat and lovely as my grandmother’s: “Wednesday, April 13, 1932: 1 male orgasm, 2 female orgasms.”’ Enveloping Abraham’s confessional experiments at the Kinsey Institute, the Young’s reports—animated by Abraham’s sentimental investments—give revelatory structure to the piece. The final sentences of the essay complete the arc, folding the Youngs into Abraham’s own life, as she arrives home from the Kinsey Institute to her own husband.

I get into bed, still thinking of the Youngs, [...] of the devotion of Alfred Kinsey. I press into my husband. ‘Is this the Kinsey Institute?’ He asks, laughing a little. ‘Yeah,’ I say.⁴⁷¹

The function of the Youngs in Abraham’s essay and—as the final lines indicate—of the Kinsey Institute as a whole, is to mirror the writer’s personal arc, in which she comes to understand and value her sex life, her intimacy with her husband, and her own sexual tendencies. Abraham states that she is taking the Kinsey tests with an object: her ‘personal desire-enhancement project.’ The revelatory learning is that ‘desire enhancement’ isn’t necessary, but self-knowledge and self-awareness are. Through her sympathetic identification with the Youngs, Abraham becomes aware of what she has in her marriage, and through confession, comes to appreciate and understand her own proclivities. The

⁴⁶⁹ Laurie Abraham, ‘Kinsey and Me,’ in *The Best American Essays: 2003*, eds. Robert Atwan and Lauren Slater (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 1-10 (p. 1).

⁴⁷⁰ Abraham, 1-2.

⁴⁷¹ Abraham, 10.

process of personal essaying allows her to manage and develop her emotions, which act as resources as well as form in the journey toward a more enlightened conclusion. At no point are emotions at risk of becoming unmanaged. From the moment that the stakes of the essay are made clear, the reader knows to expect a complete narrative arc.

The function of this return to the beginning, of the budding crocuses and the neat, old-fashioned handwriting of the young woman as-was, recalls the ending of Ozick's essay, in which she looks back on 1946. There, she reflects, 'Washington Square will wake me': 'In the spring, all of worldly Washington Square will wake up to the luster of little green leaves.'⁴⁷² The revelatory shape of these insights, realized through the essay's tropic structure, is illustrated in the recurrence of certain images of unfolding, typically placed at the end point of the essays. Ozick's spring buds preface her teenage self, blossoming into intellectual maturity; Abraham's epiphanic intimacy with the Youngs crystallizes and concludes with their discovery of the female orgasm, at the moment when 'the crocuses start to open in the spring of 1932.' In another essay in Slater's 2006 volume, Toi Derricotte visits the grave of her 'terrifying, unpredictable, mad, shame-inducing, self-involved' mother, and the final paragraph revolves around another sign from the natural world: 'her African violet bloomed for the first time on my windowsill three years after her death, on the first day of her death month.'⁴⁷³ In the personal essay of the new millennium, the most recognizable and classical of tropes—spring flowers blooming as an expression of youth, awakening, and change—becomes expressive of the modern essay form's revelatory personal structure.

As the 2000s turned into the 2010s, as Slater's reading of Hardwick suggests, essay

⁴⁷² Ozick, 226.

⁴⁷³ Toi Derricotte, 'Beginning Dialogues,' in *The Best American Essays, 2006*, 48-53 (p. 53).

readers and writers had come to expect this managed progress of emotion and confession toward self-directed revelation. And not just essay readers, but the new generation of creative nonfiction writers. Stuckey-French has noted that creative nonfiction courses were the fastest growing of all graduate writing programs between 1990 and 2010.⁴⁷⁴ The most prestigious of these programs—such as the Iowa Writer’s Workshop—were founded on what McGurl has called an ‘obsessive concern for “craft.”’⁴⁷⁵ In fiction writing workshops, this was expressed in the injunction ‘show, don’t tell.’ Slater portrays the essay form as a redress to the minimalism of the MFA, but as her introduction indicates, contemporary nonfiction’s impulse toward exposure was founded in a comparable valorization of authorial truth-telling. This is apparent in the program statement of the periodical, *Creative Nonfiction*, founded in 1993, written by editor Lee Gutkind, which made a number of essays into *The Best American* in ensuing years. As Gutkind put it, creative nonfiction might mean ‘different things to different people,’ but in general it describes ‘true stories [...] enriched by relevant thoughtful ideas, personal insight, and intimacies about life and the world we live in.’⁴⁷⁶ Put differently: the creative nonfiction of the era was widely conceived as a bid for truth, underscored by personal revelation, and honed through writer’s workshop-style craft.

Cheryl Strayed’s 2013 edition of *The Best American* neatly condenses these arcs of revelation, taught to a new generation of essay writers and instilled in readers, into a pedagogical philosophy.

When I teach writing I tell my students that the invisible, unwritten last line of every

⁴⁷⁴ Stuckey-French, 6.

⁴⁷⁵ McGurl, 22.

⁴⁷⁶ Lee Gutkind, ‘What is Creative Nonfiction?’ *Creative Nonfiction* (Undated). Web. <<https://creativenonfiction.org/what-is-cnfi/>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

essay should be *and nothing was ever the same again*. By which I mean the reader should feel the ground shift, if only a bit, when he or she comes to the end of the essay. Also there should be something at stake in the writing of it. Or, better yet, everything.⁴⁷⁷

Strayed's italicized dictum contains two implicit subjects: the autobiographical essayist and the reader. The essayist is tasked with plumbing her life for writing material after which it might convincingly be said that *nothing was ever the same again*. The reader, meanwhile, is tasked with empathizing to the point of similar revelation. Strayed says that it is the reader who should 'feel the ground shift' by the end of the essay. In her pedagogical criteria, the essay is judged by the degree to which it will elicit emotional and ethical shifts in the reader—or personal growth. The extent to which this is achievable is directly proportional to the personal 'stake[s]' of the essay: the greater the risks taken—implicitly, the greater the extent of confession—the greater the possibility of inducing change.

Strayed clarifies this feeling as 'like a punch in the nose and a kiss on the lips [...]. An *ouch* and a *yes*.'⁴⁷⁸ The essays that make up her volume of *The Best American*, she writes, 'share a powerful drive toward emotional and intellectual inquiry' that 'deepens into a dazzling unfolding.'⁴⁷⁹ The goal, as this phrasing makes clear, is to manage emotions toward a state of epiphany that ends with agreement, or at least affirmation: 'unfolding' toward 'a *yes*.' The interaction that Strayed envisions in the personal essay is not one in which either writer or reader is challenged by the requirement that they inhabit the experiences of a strange other. Rather, recalling Greenwald-Smith's argument as to the affective landscape of neoliberalism's 'ideological' stage in literature, confession is

⁴⁷⁷ Cheryl Strayed, 'Introduction,' in *The Best American Essays: 2013*, eds. Robert Atwan and Cheryl Strayed (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2013), xv-xvii (xv).

⁴⁷⁸ Strayed, xvii.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

understood to lead ‘largely [...] to the enrichment of the self.’ The essayist risks ‘everything’; the reader feels ‘the ground shift’; each in isolated, sympathetic identification, and ultimately toward self-directed revelation.

The idea that the personal essay should begin with the premise that ‘nothing would ever be the same again’ is marked in the essays in Strayed’s 2013 volume. While these pieces, like those in Slater’s edition, often involve research and sustained attention to an object beyond the autobiographical experience of the essayist, their revelatory structures embed ‘enrichment of the self’ in the essayist’s outside attentions. One example is Jon Kerstetter’s essay, ‘Triage,’ which was first published in *River Teeth*, one of the new generation of creative nonfiction publications that sprang up around the millennium.⁴⁸⁰ Kerstetter was a military doctor during America’s 2003 invasion of Iraq. His essay takes the death of an American soldier in Baghdad as the focus of a meditation on the process, principles, and experience of combat medical triage. Like Abraham’s essay, Kerstetter’s forms an envelope structure, in which intimate, autobiographical scenes encase a middle portion of research or reporting. These are: the initial encounter with the dying soldier, who Kerstetter is forced to judge ‘expectant’ of death, in the terms of combat triage; a central portion dedicated to the issues attendant on triage; and closing with a return to the soldier’s bedside, and the personal essayist’s reflections.

‘I think about that expectant soldier every so often,’ Kerstetter concludes. He reflects on how, when he tells his medical colleagues this story, he insists that ‘triage is a necessary part of war.’ It is ‘the exercise of a soldier’s final duty.’

Occasionally, though, I think about telling them how I wished I could have done something, anything. But then I realize I cannot tell them that, because in fact I did

⁴⁸⁰ Jon Kerstetter, ‘Triage,’ in *The Best American Essays: 2013*, 123-131.

do something [...]. I am left with my own understanding that we who are soldiers are all triaged.⁴⁸¹

In the final lines of this paragraph, the triage of the dying soldier is subsumed into the ultimate triage of the essay: that of the essayist. ‘We who are soldiers are all triaged,’ Kerstetter writes, metaphorizing the process of assessment charted by the essay. Triage, which has been seriously treated as a process of sorting the dying from the wounded, ends as a movement toward self-knowledge. The imperial politics of the Iraq war are entirely absent from this picture, with almost all context reduced to the interaction of a handful of individuals in a triage room. All figures remain nameless beyond that of the essayist and the general who accompanies him on his rounds. While these absences are almost certainly designed to protect the privacy and security of soldiers, the dichotomy of named and unnamed causes the dying man to recede into the background, while the essayist’s emotional stakes take center stage.

Veteran’s writing was a significant part of the creative writing MFA in the late-20th century, and its effects continued in the programs which became hothouses for epiphanic and confessional essaying after the millennium. Patricia Stuelke, in her recent examination of the politics of repair in the era of U.S. imperial neoliberalism, has shown how the Vietnam War became imbricated with reparative attitudes to U.S. militarism through MFA programs. Vietnam veterans, who in the 1970s and ‘80s ‘dominated U.S. creative writing programs, both in person and as objects of representation,’ regularly served as figures by which writers could make claim to ‘both the specificity of [...] suffering and universal human feeling (or feeling universally human).’⁴⁸² This capacity ‘signified the veteran’s

⁴⁸¹ Kerstetter, 131.

⁴⁸² Stuelke, 156.

embodiment of that classic MFA aesthetic logic': 'the universal arises out of the particular.'⁴⁸³ This phrase, which Stuelke attributes to the writer Junot Diaz, recalls Gutkind's statement of purpose in *Creative Nonfiction*, in which he stresses the importance of 'personal insight,' and an 'intima[te]' orientation to 'the world we live in.' The result of this kind of personally-directed attention is, Stuelke argues, to stage scenes 'of recognition':

moments of reparative reading that transform state violence and dispossession into private wounds that can be repaired through fantasies of reciprocity and collectivity achievable through empire's resurgence.⁴⁸⁴

This is precisely the arc of Kerstetter's essay. Its conclusion is not in horror of war, but in a fantasy of continued personal repair, growth, and self-knowledge, predicated on the continued necessity for combat triage.

The growing significance of the MFA program in nonfiction literary publishing is marked in the contents of *The Best American* in the years after the millennium. The issues published between 2004 and 2022 contain a total of 422 essays. Of these, as discussed above, around 20% were published in *The New Yorker* or *Harper's*. The makeup of the remainder, however, changes somewhat. The 2005 edition sees the first inclusion of *River Teeth* in the series, a creative nonfiction journal tied to Ashland University, in Ohio. *Creative Nonfiction* appears the following year. *Tin House Magazine*, produced by the institution famous for its writing workshop and founded in 1999, makes its first entry in the 2008 volume, and recurs six more times before the periodical stopped publishing in 2019. Dave Eggers-initiatives such as *The Believer* and *McSweeney's* begin to make appearances starting in 2011. These magazines drew strongly on the creative nonfiction program, to the degree that by 2022—as we'll see at the end of this chapter—the series was spotlighting

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

authors such as Elissa Washuta, Melissa Febos, and guest editor Alexander Chee, for whom their own experience in MFA programs is a prominent source of confessional content.

Strayed's charge to her students, to write only of those moments after which *nothing was ever the same again*, doesn't necessarily equate to a call to write only of extraordinary or traumatic experiences: any moment in the writer's life might be granted gravity in the personal essay. But in 2013, as Kerstetter's essay on combat triage illustrates, Strayed's injunction clarifies a moment in essay writing in which the form became equated with a bid for personal revelation, coming to plumb ever greater confessional depths—or as Strayed puts it, 'stakes.' These arcs of confession, empathy, and revelation registered first by Slater's, then Strayed's collections of *The Best American*, are characteristic of what became known as the 'First-Person Industrial Complex.' The phrase was popularized by Laura Bennett, in a 2015 article on *Slate.com*, in which she argued that while 'first-person writing had long been the Internet's native voice,' we were now 'in the midst of an unprecedented moment in the online first-person boom.'⁴⁸⁵ *Slate.com* made it into *The Best American* the year of Strayed's volume, 2013. The inclusion indicates the degree to which the rise of the first-person industrial complex was accompanied, illuminatingly, by personal essays commenting on its own workings.

Anne Helen Petersen, a staff writer at *Buzzfeed* at the time, wrote a review for *The New York Times* in which she placed the phenomenon as having occurred in the period exactly between Slater and Strayed's editions of *The Best American*. 'There was a moment, sometime between 2008 and 2010, when a woman's insides—her exploits, her eating

⁴⁸⁵ Laura Bennett, 'The First-Person Industrial Complex,' *Slate.com* (14 September 2015). Web. <https://www.slate.com/articles/life/technology/2015/09/the_first_person_industrial_complex_how_the_harrowing_personal_essay_took.html>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

habits, her feelings, her sex life—became a lucrative internet product,’ Petersen writes.⁴⁸⁶

The primary feature of the first-person industrial complex was the exploitation of women’s most personal experiences by editors and readers rapacious for what only at first appeared to be insight into the lives of the writers. As Petersen argued, the heart of these essays was less reflection than the capacity of confession to elicit affective response in the reader.

‘Showing, after all, is the heart of the personal essay,’ she writes: ‘People are enthralled less by the conclusions the author makes about her life than by the details that allow readers to come to their own.’

The focus, for Petersen, was on the essay’s capacity to enthrall—rather than the kinds of political and ethical ‘conclusions’ that readers might reach. Migrating from early internet blogging sites, such as *LiveJournal* and *Tumblr*, the personal internet essay (as it became known) became a staple on new media entities including *The Awl*, *Hairpin*, and *xoJane*. Where those early blogs had given amateur writers a venue to explore their intimate and possibly mundane lives, the personal essay site required an intensification of confession, driven by the requirement of virality. As *xoJane* founder, Jane Pratt, put it, ‘the more personal and vulnerable a writer is, the better.’⁴⁸⁷

It is not coincidental that we hear in Pratt’s philosophy a ring of Strayed’s call to her students: ‘there should be something at stake in the writing of it. Or better yet, everything.’ Strayed shades the stakes of the essay for the essayist into the possible effect on the reader. Pratt goes further. She recalls the example of an infamous *xoJane* column, ‘It Happened to Me,’ which captured the personal essay’s tendency to read like a ‘reverse engineered

⁴⁸⁶ Anne Helen Petersen, ‘Tales from the Personal Essay Industrial Complex,’ *The New York Times* (23 February 2017). Web. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/23/books/review/how-to-murder-your-life-cat-marnell.html>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

⁴⁸⁷ Quoted Peterson, ‘Tales from the Personal Essay Industrial Complex.’

headline.’⁴⁸⁸ (Not surprisingly, ‘It Happened to Me’ became the subject of its own personal essay by one of its editors, Mandy Stadtmiller, who rehashed both her conflicted feelings about, and skill at, exploiting women for their stories.)⁴⁸⁹ Of ‘It Happened to Me,’ Pratt writes that the personal essay’s attraction comes not from a sense of freedom or relief—an empathic catharsis, born of confession—but instead the sense, for the reader, that the essayist’s experience is *identical* to their own. The column was ‘liberating to read,’ she said, ‘because often you have gone through the same thing but didn’t feel you could admit it.’⁴⁹⁰ Far from bridging gaps between experiences of difference, Pratt saw the personal internet essay as reflecting back to readers a confirming and affirming image of their worst selves, now cleansed by the scouring light of publicity.

Many of the essays gathered under the heading of the personal internet essay, or the personal essay industrial complex, are markedly distinct from the kinds of essays that we see in *The Best American*, even in peak years of confession. The peak years, in fact, were short-lived. As Jia Tolentino declared in a 2017 piece for *The New Yorker*, ‘the personal essay boom is over.’⁴⁹¹ She implied that the conditions of its rise had been tied to its inevitable, brisk fall, as for much of its life, the personal essay boom had described the kind of essay that ‘everyone seemed to hate.’ She identified that boom with exposure, often by women, typically in online magazines. These essays had titles like ‘My Gynecologist Found a Ball of Cat Hair in My Vagina’⁴⁹²; or were associated with the kind of confessional

⁴⁸⁸ Bennett, ‘The First-Person Industrial Complex.’

⁴⁸⁹ Mandy Stadtmiller, ‘It Happened to Me: How I Became a First-Person Human Trafficker,’ *The Cut* (September 2015). Web. <<https://www.thecut.com/2015/09/happened-to-me-happened-to-me.html>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

⁴⁹⁰ Quoted Stadtmiller, ‘It Happened to Me.’

⁴⁹¹ Jia Tolentino, ‘The Personal-Essay Boom is Over,’ *The New Yorker* (18 May 2017). Web. <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-personal-essay-boom-is-over>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

⁴⁹² Michelle Barrow, ‘My Gynecologist Found a Ball of Cat Hair in My Vagina,’ *xoJane* (September 2015).

oeuvre of a writer like Cat Marnell, who explored her experience of addiction in kaleidoscopic detail. Much of this writing was marked by its sensationalism, as well as its open, self-reflexive relationship to the exploitation of budding young women writers (exploitation, indeed, provided plenty of material for confessional essay writing.)⁴⁹³ But looking at the long spread of personal essaying in the period of *The Best American*, we can see how the stylistic tendencies of the personal essay industrial complex—and its boom—aren't anomalous so much as symptomatic of a wider, slower shift in U.S. nonfiction. Comparing the essay of Slater and Strayed with that of Sontag and Guillory in the 1990s, we see a clear shift after the millennium toward an idea of the 'best' of the American essay that consistently reflected the formal qualities that the personal essay boom had over-distilled: revelation, exposure, an undeveloped equation of women's confession with progressive politics—and an appeal to a reader, to look for an image of themselves in the redemptive experiences of the essayist.

Christy Vannoy, in an essay first published in *McSweeney's* and then collected in *The Best American*, depicts the contemporary form as a series of ludicrous types. 'I am a Personal Essay and I was born with a port wine stain and beaten by my mother,' she begins. Along with *The Essay Without Arms*, two *Gay Essays*, *The Refugee Essay*, and the *Divorce Essays*, the *Personal Essay* attends a workshop in which each hope to 'out-devastate the other and nail ourselves a freelance contract.'⁴⁹⁴ She's confident, bolstered by her experience of everything from 'Exercise Bulimia' to 'a year in sex slavery' to losing

[No longer available at its original web source.]

⁴⁹³ See e.g. Cathy Bouris, 'Coming of Age in the Era of the First Person Industrial Complex,' *Medium* (24 September 2017). Web.< <https://catherinebouris.medium.com/coming-of-age-in-the-era-of-the-first-person-industrial-complex-14e0224719bc>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

⁴⁹⁴ Christy Vannoy, 'A Personal Essay by a Personal Essay,' in *The Best American Essays: 2011*, eds. Robert Atwan and Edwidge Danticat (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2011), 210-212 (p. 210).

her memory from ‘crank.’ ‘I’ve developed something of a reputation in the industry for taking meticulous notes on my suffering,’ she declares.⁴⁹⁵

Vannoy’s language directly parodies other personal essayists’ reflections on mining their life for content. Meaghan O’Dea, in a 2021 Substack piece on her experience as a personal essayist a decade earlier, recalls how as an alt-weekly opinion columnist in her ‘mid-sized hometown,’ she began ‘building [a] career one tale of trauma at a time.’

I was young and hungry, sorting through the battered emotional baggage of my teens and twenties, on a Blues Brothers-style mission from god to help other people feel less alone in their experiences—starting with myself.⁴⁹⁶

Vannoy’s Personal Essay is much more smug than O’Dea’s image of her younger self. O’Dea’s tone, after all, is ambivalent: part self-mocking, with the ironic hyperbole of a ‘mission from god,’ and part earnest, in her empathy toward her ‘battered’ younger self. But Vannoy hones these recognizable justifications to a point. ‘If you haven’t looked death straight in the eye or been sued by a sister wife, you won’t see yourself in my story,’ the Personal Essay reflects. ‘But you will find solace in knowing your own problems are petty and banal.’⁴⁹⁷ The Personal Essay’s self-involved cruelty crystallizes what O’Dea more gently derides in her younger self: the supposed mission of helping ‘other people feel less alone in their experiences’ melting before the flame of ‘myself.’

Vannoy’s satire enhances the arc of exposure, empathy, and personal revelation that we see even in the ‘best’ of the public American essay in this period. Despite the intensification of extreme trauma narratives in this period, the neoliberal affective

⁴⁹⁵ Vannoy, 211.

⁴⁹⁶ Meghan O’Dea, ‘The Cost of Building a Career on Trauma,’ *One More Question*, Substack (10 September 2021). Web. <<https://onemorequestion.substack.com/p/the-cost-of-building-a-career-on>>. [Accessed 15 March 2024].

⁴⁹⁷ Vannoy, 212.

landscape of the personal internet essay is one way of understanding its seemingly paradoxical tendency toward growth, development, and ethical and emotional profit. The object of eliciting genuine empathy in the reader is always secondary to this structural trope. In this context, while writers of the millennial personal essay discuss the form as a means of ‘help[ing] other people feel less alone in their experiences,’ their worthy goal takes a backseat to the essay’s structural prioritizing of aspirational longing. The word on which Vannoy closes her essay distills the arc of progress, definitive of the genre in the period. ‘I have ascended victorious from the ashes of immeasurable self-doubt and pain,’ *The Personal Essay* concludes. ‘And I have not simply survived, I have flourished.’⁴⁹⁸

Personal crisis: the literary value of the essay

As the inclusion of Vannoy’s essay in *The Best American* indicates, the personal essay boom’s approaching zenith posed a problem for the series. *The Best American* presented itself in the market, within its pages, and on its front cover, as an expert selection of the ‘best’ of the form. The series’ prefatory materials—and particularly Robert Atwan’s forewords—repeatedly depicted the anthology as a major new contribution to the Western essay tradition, with frequent references to figures such as E. B. White, William Hazlitt, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Michel de Montaigne. The series’ sense of the canon in which *The Best American* was participating was very similar to that of the undergraduate composition anthology. To indicate the series’ public value, in distinction to that of the institutional anthology, the prefaces often insisted on the essay’s daring, its radical tendencies, and its upstart, underdog attitude. Distancing itself from the composition

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

anthology, on one side, the series found that it had on the other side to distance itself from the increasingly confessional, predictable, and revelatory model of the form being published online. As the 2000s and 2010s wore on, the series seemed to find itself embattled. It came to insist continually on what the essay is not—not the university essay, not memoir, not confession, not predictable—while making increasingly hard-to-substantiate claims for what it is: radical, indefinable, incomparably literary, utterly unique.

As we'll see, *The Best American*'s struggles with self-image escalated over the period of its run, but its self-mythologizing began in earnest around the turn of the millennium. The 2003 volume's prefaces are dedicated to discussion of the series' founding. Atwan recalls how in the 1980s, when he was first looking for a home for the series, he had a hard time convincing editors of its value. He initially pitched it as *The Emerson Awards*—‘in honor of America's greatest essayist’—but the name didn't stick.⁴⁹⁹ Not only did the title prove ‘a risky proposition’ to editors, ringing as ‘academic and obsolete, perhaps even pedantic,’ but the form that Emerson's name represented was apparently verboten. ‘At that time publishers were so worried about using the dread word “essay” in any way, shape, or form,’ he insists.⁵⁰⁰ Anne Fadiman, in her 2003 guest editor introduction, repeats his account. ‘Bob [...] successfully resist[ed] the advice of one publisher who, leery of the word essay, told him, “It's a lovely idea, but shouldn't we call it something else?”’ She writes.⁵⁰¹ The word carried the ‘taint of the schoolroom,’ sounding ‘stiff, stuffy, textbook-ish.’⁵⁰²

⁴⁹⁹ Robert Atwan, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Best American Essays: 2003*, eds. Atwan and Anne Fadiman (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), ix-xii (ix).

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Anne Fadiman, ‘Introduction,’ *The Best American Essays: 2003*, xiv-xxiv (xvi).

⁵⁰² Fadiman, xv.

The Best American romantic memories of crisis—and accordingly, mythologizing of the essay genre at large—recur across four further instances in the following years. In 2005, at the 25 year mark of the series, Atwan repeats his story about how when he first began work on it the ‘timing didn’t look promising’: the essay was a ‘hard sell’ to reader and editor alike.⁵⁰³ He attributes to editors a tendency to see the essay as a kind of ruminative and indulgent ‘thumb sucking.’⁵⁰⁴ Essays were published ‘here and there,’ and he describes not being sure that there would be a sufficient pool of essays to sustain the award: ‘I had my fingers crossed that—as I promised—“there would be plenty more where these came from.”’⁵⁰⁵ In 2010, five years later, Atwan updates the telling for new technology, wondering what the release of e-readers will mean for the essay—and nonetheless finds the climate far more encouraging than ‘twenty-five years ago, when the first volume of this series appeared.’⁵⁰⁶ In 2015, five years later again, he reflects that while the series was at first beset with difficulties, the essay now enjoys a solid prosperity. ‘Here was a new series of books calling attention to a genre that at the time the literary world did not take very seriously.’⁵⁰⁷ Its precarious founding, though, was apparently short-lived. In Ticknor & Fields—then a subsidiary of Houghton Mifflin, who would take over as named publisher—the anthologies found their home. In 1988, just two years after the first issue, Atwan was able to begin his foreword on a far brighter note than his later recollections might suggest. The essay, he wrote, was making ‘a remarkable literary comeback.’⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰³ Atwan, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2005*, eds. Atwan and Susan Orlean (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), ix-xiv (ix).

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ Atwan, 2005, x.

⁵⁰⁶ Atwan, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2010*, eds. Atwan and Christopher Hitchens (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010), ix-xv (xiii).

⁵⁰⁷ Atwan, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2015*, eds. Atwan and Ariel Levy (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2015), ix-xiv (ix).

⁵⁰⁸ Atwan, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Best American Essays, 1988*, eds. Atwan and Annie Dillard (New York:

A primary function of the series' origin story is to demarcate the work of *The Best American* in the 21st century from the kind of nonfiction circulating in mass culture. Atwan achieves that move through repeated reference to the dread prospect of the form in the all-too-recent past. The 1990s, as we've seen, was a period of real change for *The Best American*: willing to embrace academic styles of critique in the early years, as in Guillory's 1992 inclusion, its representation of the essay was by 2004 far more markedly personal. At the same time, the 1990s had seen a sharp uptick in the popularity and supply of mass-market nonfiction. The 'memoir boom' of the 1990s was spurred in part by the rise of big box bookstores, and cultural phenomena like Oprah's Book Club. Best-sellers such as Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1998) established a new set of generic norms for personal narratives: well-paced arcs of testimony, revelation, and conversion. Later, these traits would reappear in the writings of the personal essay industrial complex. They are, of course, also qualities reminiscent of those we have also seen in essays of the period, including in *The Best American*. The series, as a result, had to separate itself from this devalued mass production of nonfiction. If the turn toward more personal, anecdotal, and testimonial nonfiction in the style of *The New Yorker* distinguished the essays of *The Best American* from the 'stuffy' work of teaching anthologies—the series' insistence on the essay's rarified and ever-threatened nature was intended to raise its value, against comparable work in the mass market.

One key way that Atwan sought to do this, alongside the repeated re-tellings of the series' fraught founding, was to insist with increasing regularity on the 'literariness' of the essay. Strains of this bid by Atwan occur early in the series, as in his 1994 foreword, in

Ticknor & Fields 1988), ix-xii (x).

which he discussed to Hazlitt's essay, 'The Fight.' The foreword shows the series' anxiety over contemporary mass-market literature, particularly the memoir. Hazlitt's canonical essay serves Atwan in painting the essay form, essayist, and essay reader alike as intrepid figures in the landscape of genre—marked in the essay's differentiation from other, less literary forms. He begins by quoting Hazlitt: 'Where there's a will there's a way. I was determined to see this fight, come what would, and see it I did, in great style.'⁵⁰⁹ Atwan then reflects: 'You can consult all the handbooks on literary nonfiction of all elements of style, structure, and composition,' he writes, 'but you'll rarely find mention' of what Hazlitt foregrounds: 'determination,' the 'literary value' of which is 'inestimable.'⁵¹⁰

What makes the literary value of the essay 'inestimable' is its association with qualities of 'determination' and 'difficulty.' It is the literary quality of the essay that marks it off from memoir, and it is the literary quality of difficulty that characterizes *The Best American* project.

That effort, it seems, is what finally transforms a piece of nonfiction prose into a memorable literary work. The best writers of essays or creative nonfiction seek out challenges, go for the toughest questions on the board. ... [They] resist the plodding memoir, the facile discovery of identity, the predictable option, or the sudden, life-altering illumination. As a great essayist, Gertrude Stein, audaciously put it, 'If it can be done, why do it?'⁵¹¹

Atwan's stress on difficulty associates the essay with a Bourdieuan scheme, in which the form is marked as valuable both in terms of its cultural autonomy, and the intensity of labor required to create it.⁵¹² Atwan makes out that the essay is extraordinary in its trickiness, suggesting its distinction from the low-value, high-productivity churn of the memoir or—

⁵⁰⁹ Quoted Atwan, 'Foreword,' in *The Best American Essays, 1994*, eds. Atwan and Tracey Kidder (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), viii-xiv (viii).

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Atwan, 1994, ix.

⁵¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

later—the internet essay. Difficulty is also what marks the essay as culturally autonomous, high value in its daring engagement with ideas and experiments unreachable by other forms.

Atwan's assessment of the essay's cultural value is also tinged with a powerful moralism, by which he sets up the essay and its readership as better, tougher, and more free-thinking subjects, in contrast to either the dullness of the memoir reader, or the predictable and credulous personal essay reader: a form marked by facile 'illumination.' The implication of Atwan's portrait of the nonfiction landscape is that only an essay reader is willing to take on the challenge of the true essay, by which they might better themselves. This is what 'transform[s]' nonfiction into a 'literary work.' That transformation that is never complete, never in fact fulfillable, because the genuine 'literary work' recedes constantly from view. As the reference to Stein indicates, if it has been done, it is no longer worthy of the 'challenge' status of the essay. In this way, the form is constantly remade and in crisis, and *The Best American* constantly and urgently needed in literary culture, as the series and its reader pursue the retreating ideal of the essay form.

The qualities of the essay reader, in Atwan's scheme, are those of the ideal liberal democratic subject. Readers of memoir and personal essay are made out to be 'predictable' and 'plodding' people. The essay reader is part of a community of skeptical free-thinkers. Yet, as we've seen in looking at the ironical constitution of *The New Yorker's* public, there is nothing more solidly middlebrow than the winking invitation to an apparently rarified scene of cultural belonging. The dynamic of that wink is always that membership to the public is highly accessible, even as it implies otherwise. In the case of *The Best American*, all a reader needs to do to mark themselves as daring and tough—instead of plodding and

facile—is to read a piece or two from a pre-packaged paperback anthology. In this way, Atwan also sets up the anthology as a site of ante-institutional political discourse. He writes of the essay’s ‘determination to take on tough assignments,’ suggesting a kind of derring-do pedagogy that sets up the series as a thrilling, high-impact, and yet eminently accessible alternative to the academy.

As the essay becomes more predictably personal, and more predictable in its tendencies toward confession and revelation into the 2000s and 2010s, Atwan’s insurances on the high value daring of the essay form gain in fervor. If his depiction of the plodding memoir marked his anxiety over the rapid proliferation of mass-market nonfiction in the 1990s, by the 2010s the essay’s key point of differentiation has shifted to a new bogeyman: the undergraduate. The figure begins to appear with startling regularity, drawing similar terms of condemnation as the memoir, or the personal essay, did in earlier years. In 2014, for instance, Atwan again bemoans the predictability of much nonfiction. Now, though, the moral implications for readers are less implicit. ‘The conclusions predictable, the prose predictable, the perspective predictable,’ he writes. This ‘oppressive predictability is born of the current ‘polarized social and political climate,’ for these are essays that don’t ‘want to engage in the struggle of ideas.’⁵¹³

One hopes that ‘trigger warnings’—however well-intentioned or psychologically prophylactic they might be—don’t indicate an American society becoming increasingly censorial and overly protective. [...] Says our impressionable liberal arts student, ‘Why did you even mention cruelly harpooning sperm whales? Now I can’t sleep at night.’⁵¹⁴

Putting aside the fact that many academic instructors would be delighted if their students

⁵¹³ Atwan, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2014*, eds. Atwan and John Jeremiah Sullivan (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014), ix-xvi (x)

⁵¹⁴ Atwan, *2014*, xiii.

were so invested in *Moby Dick* as to be kept awake at night by vivid dreams of sperm whales—we can infer that Atwan places fault less with students themselves, than with what he suggests is a wider culture of reading. The students are weathervanes of this political climate, but they are also buffeted in the wind of an imagined left-wing dogma. Atwan’s portrait suggests how far the series has departed from Guillory’s essay in Sontag’s 1992 edition. Guillory’s essay is one of the last instances of the series seriously and critically engaging with questions of representation, and the relationship of representation to the structural makeup of the canon. In the years after, as the essay became more standardly personal, and the necessity of differentiating the form from apparently lower-value instances became more urgent, the series became increasingly less able to engage with the politics of the essay. Less able, also, to reflect on the anthology’s relationship to canonization, representation, and the politics of the form.

Instead, the series doubled down on the essay’s apparently intrinsic relationship to liberal ideals. Where undergraduates are said to be too sensitive for literature, the essay is a beacon of audacity. ‘Such an opinionated, partisan atmosphere makes essaying a risky and endangered method of communication,’ Atwan writes.⁵¹⁵ These ideas recur. In 2016, for instance: ‘Trigger warning: Emerson’s essays are not “safe spaces.” Not even for himself.’⁵¹⁶ Again, in 2018, he invokes the idea of a readership divided, not between right-wing repression and free speech, but between left-wing sensitivity and liberal toughness. Wondering whether Montaigne will remain ‘relevant and vital,’ he expresses skepticism: ‘I guess it all depends on how much future generations will prize free inquiry and open

⁵¹⁵ Atwan, *2014*, xi.

⁵¹⁶ Atwan, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Best American Essays 2016*, eds. Atwan and Jonathan Franzen (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2016), ix-xiv (xi).

discussion.’⁵¹⁷ In an ‘increasingly polarized society’ we are too liable to ‘slippery-slope conclusions’: contemplate a given opinion, and ‘next thing you know you’re a bigot, a communist, or a Nazi.’⁵¹⁸ Again, it does not seem incidental that as the essay becomes more and more concerned with how a given set of experiences will reflect and affirm the ethical self-conception of essayist and reader, the series becomes more and more insistent on the essay’s not being a soft form, on its being bold, difficult, and tough. Insisting doggedly on the essay’s hardened free-thinking, Atwan’s forewords grow less and less reflective about the politics of the essay form. Critical engagement slips to such a degree—is on, in fact, such a slippery slope—that being a communist becomes equivalent to being a Nazi.

Atwan’s growing insistence in the 2000s and 2010s on the essay’s unique daring, is both a response to contemporary shifts in the landscape of nonfiction, and a logical continuation of an accretion of generic descriptions that had been ongoing in *The Best American* paratexts since its founding. Almost every paratext of *The Best American* makes at least some gesture toward the necessity and challenge of defining the form. Typically, these gestures invoke one or more of a limited set of tropes. Most are immediately guessable to anyone who has read an essay on essays. Hardwick, in her guest introduction for the inaugural volume, heralds one key trope: ‘can there be a reflection upon the essay without the dropping of this sacred name?’⁵¹⁹ She writes, of course, of Montaigne. The 36 editions published by the series between 1986 and 2022 contain 72 forewords: by my

⁵¹⁷ Atwan, ‘Foreword,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2018*, eds. Atwan and Hilton Als (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2018), ix-xvii (xiv).

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Hardwick, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 1986*, eds. Atwan and Hardwick (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1986), xiii-xxi (xx).

count, 24 of these mention Montaigne by name.⁵²⁰ 14 mention Emerson;⁵²¹ nine mention E. B. White.⁵²² Many of the paratexts discuss, directly or indirectly, the essay's relationship to weighing and measuring, or its associations with 'attempt' and 'assaying.' Leslie Jamison, like Hardwick, nods to the predictability of the etymology trope. 'If you've ever read an essay about essays, then you've read the root of the word: from the French essayer, to try.'⁵²³ These are just the beginning.

Most significant are the forewords' insistences on the essay's resistance to definition, systematization, or categorization. A perhaps unsurprising number of the paratexts directly invoke the problem: Hardwick, for instance, writes of the 'barbarism' of the term 'essayistic' nonetheless indicating the form's general 'struggle for definition.'⁵²⁴ Atwan explicitly mentions 'hybridity' and genre 'bending' in a number of his forewords, writing for instance that 'essays can be many things, maybe too many things'; that the 'truest examples of the form' enact an 'ever-shifting process' of 'minds and moods.'⁵²⁵ Annie Dillard, in 1988, writes of the essay as being 'all over the map': 'there is nothing you cannot do with it [...] no structure is proscribed.'⁵²⁶ Thomas Kaplan describes the essay as being 'like an eel [...] it wriggles between narcissism and detachment, opinion and fact,'

⁵²⁰ Briefly: Atwan, 1986; Hardwick, 1986; Atwan, 1987; Atwan, 1989; Atwan 1992; Sontag, 1992; Joseph Epstein, 1993; Tracy Kidder, 1994; Atwan 1996; Ozick, 1998; Atwan, 1999; Edward Hoagland, 1999; Atwan, 2003; Fadiman, 2003; Atwan, 2007; Hitchens, 2010; Sullivan, 2014; Atwan, 2015; Franzen, 2016; Atwan, 2018; Als, 2018; Atwan, 2020; Andre Aciman, 2020.

⁵²¹ Hardwick, 1986; Atwan, 1988; Dillard, 1988; Joyce Carol Oates, 1991; Ozick, 1998; Hoagland, 1999; Atwan, 2003; Mary Oliver, 2009; Atwan, 2013; Atwan, 2016; Franzen, 2016; Atwan, 2018; Atwan, 2020; Aciman, 2020.

⁵²² Atwan, 1986; Atwan, 1992; Epstein, 1993; Atwan, 2005; Atwan, 2007; Adam Gopnik, 2008; Atwan, 2013; Atwan, 2015; Atwan, 2022.

⁵²³ Leslie Jamison, 'Introduction,' in *The Best American Essays, 2017*, eds. Atwan and Jamison (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017), xvi-xxvi (xviii).

⁵²⁴ Hardwick, 1986, xiv.

⁵²⁵ Atwan, 'Foreword,' in *The Best American Essays, 2012*, eds. Atwan and David Brooks (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2012), ix-xvi (xiv).

⁵²⁶ Dillard, 'Introduction,' in *The Best American Essays, 1988*, xiii-xxii (xxii).

such that there is little ‘you can safely say’ about it.⁵²⁷ Sontag lists a series of essay sub-genres then flatly resolves that ‘an essay can be any or several of the above.’⁵²⁸ Geoffrey C. Ward observes that ‘it’s probably far easier to say what [the essays in his 1996 volume] are not than what they are.’⁵²⁹

These persist. Edward Hoagland describes the essay as ‘diverse and supple.’⁵³⁰ Kathleen Norris says simply that a ‘genuine essay that is doing its job feels right.’⁵³¹ Susan Orlean submits that it ‘is ultimately impossible and probably unnecessary to define what an essay is.’⁵³² David Foster Wallace, in a pleasingly resistant move against the essay’s indefiniteness, writes that ‘just about every important word on [the volume’s] front cover turns out to be vague, debatable, slippery, disingenuous, or else “true” only in certain contexts that are themselves slippery.’⁵³³ Adam Gopnik understands the essay as being ‘grafted, hybrid’; ‘strong because it is varied, a mixed genre without being a mixed-up one.’⁵³⁴ Jamison, though as noted chary of essays on essays, writes of the form as resisting ‘the easy binaries we draw between interior and exterior,’ and ‘liv[ing] in moments of disruption.’⁵³⁵ Hilton Als harkens back to Hardwick, quoting her thought that the essay is a ‘slithery form, wearisomely vague and as chancy as a fish in the open hand.’⁵³⁶ These are

⁵²⁷ Thomas Kaplan, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 1990*, eds. Atwan and Kaplan (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1990), xiii-xix (xiv)

⁵²⁸ Sontag, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 1992*, xiii-xix (xiii).

⁵²⁹ Geoffrey C. Ward, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 1996*, eds. Atwan and Ward (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996), xii-xiv (xii).

⁵³⁰ Edward Hoagland, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 1999*, eds. Atwan and Hoagland (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), xiii-xix (xiv); Alan Lightman, REF

⁵³¹ Kathleen Norris, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2001*, eds. Atwan and Norris (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), xiv-xvi (xvi)

⁵³² Susan Orlean, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2005*, xv-xviii (xvii).

⁵³³ David Foster Wallace, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2007*, eds. Atwan and Wallace (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin), xii-xxiv (xii).

⁵³⁴ Adam Gopnik, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2008*, eds. Atwan and Gopnik (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), xiv-xxiii (xv).

⁵³⁵ Jamison, xxv.

⁵³⁶ Als, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2018*, xviii-xxiv (xxvi).

varied expressions, in varied contexts. But over the years, they begin to cohere and coalesce, giving the sense less of a slippery fish or wriggling eel than a gesture of uncritical summary. A lack of engagement with the form as it's being practiced: not at the level of individual essayists, but at the level of the series, and possibly the discursive culture of commentary on the essay more broadly.

What can we take away from these strains in *The Best American*? What do we learn from Atwan's stories of perpetual crisis, his insistence on the essay's unique daring, and the forewords' wider repetitions of the essay's uncategorizable generic merits? All these tendencies are historical traits of essay criticism. The idea that the essay is indefinable threads back in different forms through essays-on-essays, from Theodor Adorno to Montaigne.⁵³⁷ The idea that the essay is constantly under threat from whatever new mass media form is as relevant to Virginia Woolf as to the discourse of the 'personal essay industrial complex.'⁵³⁸ But in *The Best American*, we see evidence that the period between the mid-1980s and late-2010s provoked a degree and intensity of anxiety over the essay form—and an interesting and related growth in the gap between the way a series like *The Best American* discussed the essay, and the way it was actually being written. Put more starkly: the more personal the essay became in the era of deepening ideological neoliberalism, the less willing the essay-on-essays became to look critically at itself.

Ultimately, this is what I want to point to as a defining feature and danger of the personal turn. As we've seen, *The New Yorker* was a major influence on 20th century American essaying, coming to stand as a cultural beacon for what Atwan and his editors

⁵³⁷ See, e.g. Stuckey-French, ed. *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2012).

⁵³⁸ See e.g.: Virginia Woolf, 'The Decay of Essay Writing,' in *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3-5.

would understand as the ‘best’ of the form. This form was typically erudite, brisk, non-specialist; often reflexive and ironical; often colored with the specific wit and experience of the essayist. By the 1980s, the personal qualities of the essay were beginning to crystallize. But it wasn’t until the 1990s and early 2000s, with the advent of the memoir boom, the rise of the MFA creative nonfiction course, the growing significance of freshman composition, the turn towards the conglomeration era in literary publishing, and—underpinning all—the intensification of neoliberal ideological imperatives toward self-management and personal entrepreneurship, that the essay would become more personal by default. The personal essay industrial complex, and its concordant reflexive commentaries, were an intensification of these energies, but they were also so intense as to be seen as frivolous, gimmicky, and inevitably short-lived. Instead, *The Best American* wanted to understand the essay as a high literary genre, defined by indefinability; marked by skeptical free thought; radical, heretical, and unpredictable at the level of both form and personhood. As the personal turn deepens, in other words, the imperative to repetitiously, vaguely, and ahistorically insist on the form’s radicalness deepens also.

Recalling Guillory, again, we can see how his essay was motivated by an investment in structural change: if a liberal politics of representation fails to secure a more diverse academy, what might? *The Best American* illustrates how the personal turn results in a move in the other direction. As *The Best American* essays came to feature more and more prominently the ethical evolutions of the individual, and by proxy, of the reader, that trend was absorbed as an inevitable ethical good by the series. As the essays became more predictable, the essay was said to be more daring. As personal essays became more present in the culture, the essay form was said to be increasingly marginal. The perpetual crisis of

the essay becomes the perpetual crisis of the liberal individual. But is it good practice, or even accurate, to assess *The Best American* essays on the basis of their formal daring? Is it accurate to assess a body of *New Yorker* essays in terms of their radically free and unpredictable thought?

Conclusion: what next?

The last essay in my archive is Alexander Chee's 2022 edition—Atwan's penultimate, before his retirement in 2023. The volume is an important closing case study: an indication of the trends in the series up to this point. It's also an indication of what might be to come.

We can start with its contents page. Of the 23 essays in the volume, four originated in either *The New Yorker* or *Harper's*—the standard 20-ish percent, which persists across the series as a whole. Reflecting perhaps Chee's own background as a personal essayist, an MFA graduate, an MFA instructor, and—now—a faculty member at Dartmouth, the majority of the volume then come from prestige periodicals. These fall into one of three main buckets: review periodicals; literary magazines associated with an academic institution; or the kind of literary magazines that command outsized cultural significance, compared with their relatively small readerships. There are 11 essays from these magazines: *The Yale Review*; *New England Review*; *Harvard Review*; *Virginia Quarterly Review*; *The Sewanee Review*; *Granta*; *Ploughshares*; *Prism*; *Guernica*; and *n+1* (which makes two essays into the volume). The volume also contains work from majority-online publications such as *BuzzFeed*, *Wired*, and *The Believer*. And as Chee notes in his editor's introduction, this is 'possibly the first year for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Harper's Magazine* to

be included alongside each other.’⁵³⁹

The volume, in other words, is relatively catholic in the sources it draws from. In other ways, it is less so. Of the 23 essayists featured, at least 15 have attended MFA programs. At least four have previously taught at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, and at least 10 are currently teaching in creative writing or MFA programs. 11 of the 23 are known mainly as writers of personal essays, memoir, or autobiographical-but-genre-bending nonfiction (Brian Blanchfield; Elissa Washuta; Debra Gwartney; Melissa Febos; Anthony Veasna So; Jung Hae Chae; Alex Marzano-Lesnevich; Angelique Stevens; Jason Brown; Calvin Gimpelevich; Erika J. Simpson.) The rest are writers predominantly known for other forms—novelists, journalists, opinion-writers, review essayists, historians, academics, literary critics—but it is the more personal edge of their output that appears in the volume. The essay of critic Andrea Long Chu’s that is chosen for the volume recounts her experiences of transcranial magnetic stimulation for the treatment of what turns out to be bipolar disorder (‘Are you gonna write about this?’ The technician asks her. ‘Probably a little fictionalized, some first person stuff,’ she responds. Part of the narration is addressed by, and part addressed to, her own brain.)⁵⁴⁰ Other examples include *New Yorker* writer Gary Shteyngart’s ‘My Gentile Region,’ a meditation on circumcision, the provoking incident of which is the discovery that a ‘tiny hair [has] formed a tourniquet around a skin bridge’ on ‘the underside of [his] penis.’⁵⁴¹

In other words, the essays are mostly by graduates of MFA programs, half of them are by personal essayists, and almost all of them are personal essays. They represent the

⁵³⁹ Alexander Chee, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2022*, eds. Atwan and Chee (Boston, MA and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2022), xix-xxv (xxv).

⁵⁴⁰ Andrea Long Chu, ‘China Brain,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2022*, 165-181 (p. 167).

⁵⁴¹ Gary Shteyngart, ‘My Gentile Region,’ in *The Best American Essays, 2022*, 190-207 (p. 190).

personal turn that I have been tracing in this chapter, as it carves itself through *The Best American* since the 1980s. This is an essay that takes a confessional, autobiographical mode as its default, and that tends to follow an arc of revelation—major or mild—by which the essayist learns something about themselves, and the reader can expect to find themselves educated by empathy in the process. Where an art object, or critical object, is present—as in Long Chu’s essay, or Shteyngart’s—the essay’s insight into its cultural history or symbolic significance resolves in its real significance, which is what the experience has taught the essayist.

The question for the future of the essay, it seems to me, is not whether or not it should become more or less personal: the personal turn is a set of complex responses to social, cultural, and economic conditions shaping nonfiction writing. Rather, the question is whether the politics of the essay will be assessed honestly, and with rigor, in a landscape in which the essay’s watchwords remain somehow reminiscent of Adorno’s celebration of the form: its heresy, hybridity, and play, which work to resist the totalitarian impulse to contain and constrain knowledge.⁵⁴² As this project has repeatedly shown, it is not in eradicating the personal that writers find forms of collectivity, intimacy, solidarity, and the understanding of difference. Rather, intimacy bubbles up out of writer’s serious examination of the limitations of the personal, which presents itself as an ideological given. The personal all too readily appears as not just an immovable fact of writing, but an immovable political and conceptual framework, fixed in the writer’s own modern American iteration. As the work of Claudia Rankine, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Eve Sedgwick and Lauren Berlant, Elizabeth Hardwick and Hilton Als, all differently suggest: when the

⁵⁴² Theodor Adorno, ‘The Essay as Form,’ in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 3-23.

politics of the personal are challenged, but the necessity of the personal is acknowledged, nonfiction finds innovative ways of speaking against the personal's limits—and towards an other.

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