

The Problem of the Personal
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In a notable moment from the foreword of Eve Sedgwick's 1993 critical essay collection, *Tendencies*, the newly-tenured, recently-Victorianist-turned-queer-theorist explains how she understands her own critical 'I'. 'There's a lot of first person singular in this book (and some people hate that)', she writes, '[but] 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.'¹ In fact, Sedgwick declares her 'I' to be 'a heuristic', faux-modestly and characteristically adding: 'maybe a powerful one'. A few pages later, she will implicitly tie that heuristic first person singular to the performative function of the term 'queer', and in doing so bind her growing personal and critical authority to queer's 'continuing moment, movement', its 'eddying' force, its '*troublant*' quality. 'There are important senses in which "queer" can signify only when attached to the first person', she writes, in the first essay in the book. '[W]hat it takes—all it takes, to make the description "queer" a true one is the impulsion *to* use it in the first person'.²

My doctoral research, provisionally titled 'Genres of Intimacy: the problem of the personal in four genres of nonfiction', maps the function and effect of first person singulars like Sedgwick's, which gather a collective in order to underscore the authority of the critical 'I'. These 'I's rove through late-20th and early-21st century North American criticism, as well as a host of para-critical genres and modes: since the mid-1980s, a close, autobiographical first person singular has come increasingly to define particular U.S. critical practices, notably those proximate to affect and queer theory, or shaped by the deictic qualities of the 'reparative turn'. These are discourses that build on the personal modes of 1970s and '80s feminisms—often, importantly, Black feminisms—and that see themselves as stylistically, as well as theoretically, responding to the perceived abstraction and joylessness of 'suspicious' schools of criticism. In this context, an 'I' like Sedgwick's—ingenious and witty; playful and occasionally broad—can feel, and indeed position itself as, liberatory. Yet typically, as I suggest across my research, these personal, authoritative 'I's are bolstered by an address,

¹ Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), xiv.

² Sedgwick (1993), 9.

appeal, and ultimately an attempted absorption of a wider critical or political collective, and frequently rely on flattening out (even occasionally while describing) collective difference and dissent.

To illustrate this further, we can turn to another moment in *Tendencies*' foreword, which opens on the 1992 Pride parade in New York City. Sedgwick's eye takes in the crowd's T-shirts, which proclaim: 'KEEP YOUR LAWS OFF MY UTERUS', worn by a 'muscular man in full leather regalia'; 'FAGGOT' and 'BIG FAG' the 'legends self-applied by many, many women'; 'DYKE' and 'LICK BUSH' by 'many, many men'; and everywhere, 'on women and on men', T-shirts that read simply, 'QUEER'. These joyous cross-identifications prompt, from Sedgwick, not a reflection on the radical signifiatory force of 'queer', but on queer's capacity to renegotiate the bounds of the self, or rather a particular self: the one here speaking, the critical '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 out?) the little, stubborn current of an individual narrative or obsession, an individual wellspring of narrow, desiring cathexis and cognition.³

If 'queer' is a feeling, is it here collective, individual, or something else? Who is 'the individual' in this scene, and what are they desiring? And most importantly, here: who constitutes the queerness of this collective? At first glance, the 'queer' feeling in which the 'individual' is participating seems to rebound among the crowd until, made collective, it 'overtakes' their 'little' narrative. In this, Sedgwick is 'the individual'—has good, queer feeling—but submits her narrative to the crowd, and in the process also loses her 'I' to the abstraction of 'the individual'. A slight variation on that scene of totalisation reads 'queer', here, as not negating the 'I' but amplifying her narrative alongside 'many, many' others, until all those desiring 'I's together become a queer 'wave', a crashing whole. In this instance, 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. Sedgwick appears initially to keep

³ Sedgwick (1993), xi.

both readings open, with her parenthetical, mid-sentence question: ‘(amplifies by drowning out?)’. But in interrupting her flow of thoughts, her aside reminds us that the queer feeling on display is made from that flow; the possibility of multiple interpretations managed by her critical understanding of the scene.

This passage, then, appears at first to celebrate the radical power of collective queer feeling, all the while illustrating the performative function of Sedgwick’s ‘I’ in realising and constituting the collective. The effect is to root not just this academic essay collection on ‘QUEER’, but the scene of queer activism and the dynamism of contemporary queer politics in the vision of the young critic’s stubborn little first person singular. In these scenes, as across much of Sedgwick’s mid-career critique—the same period in which she was establishing herself as a queer theorist—we see her virtuosic critical ‘I’ becoming associated with the experimental qualities of ‘queer’ as a ‘locutionary position’: her first person singular appearing to write into being queer’s richness; a richness that then appears to be grounded in Sedgwick’s own charismatic site of ‘knowledge, history, revulsion, authority, and pleasure’.

The tendency to invoke a collective ‘we’ in order to shore up an individualised critical authority is, I’m suggesting, far from unique to Sedgwick in the period. But her articulation of the ‘I’, here, is a signal moment: it indicates the wider function of the personal in apparently liberatory theoretical movements in late-20th century U.S. academia, and how that ‘I’ will come to perform collectivity in the criticism of the reparative turn. For Sedgwick, the reparative was a redress to the ‘the very productive critical habits embodied in what Paul Ricoeur memorably called the “hermeneutics of suspicion”’, which she saw as being, by the 1990s, ‘nearly synonymous with criticism itself’.⁴ Suspicious critique, Sedgwick suggested, had had the ‘unintentionally stultifying side effect’ of making it less possible ‘to unpack the local, contingent relation between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller’; a failure that repair aimed to repair. By the 2010s, the critical trend had seemed to reverse: reparativity came to take suspicion’s place as the dominant mode of North American literary scholarship; a shift that, as Patricia Stuelke (among others) has recently illustrated, entailed a new privileging of the ‘seeker, knower, or teller’ over the material conditions of and under critique, and a tendency

⁴ Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You’, *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 124-141 (p. 124).

to ‘overestimate the legibility of state and capitalist violence’.⁵ The reparative turn in critique had also, in the same period, provided the theoretical foundation for much criticism-proximate work in 21st century U.S. and U.K. nonfiction, including new work bracketed as auto-theory, literary memoir, and lyric essay. An ‘I’ like Sedgwick’s, then, has since the mid-1980s and early 1990s filtered through nonfiction, bringing not just the brilliance of her critical voice with it, but also its authority, cemented through the ongoing gathering and reproduction of its surrounding collective.

Briefly, before I close this post, it’s worth noting some alternatives to the ‘personal’ that gained strength in these years. Apart from the personal’s homogenising effect, of course, there have been powerful critical impulses to speak with what Joshua Chambers-Letson calls ‘a many that is singular, a kind of provisional “we” at difference with itself from the inside out’.⁶ From the centrifugal force of Sedgwick’s ‘I’, my research turns to impersonal or depersonalised ‘we’s. These include Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s fugitive ‘we’ in *The Undercommons*, a work that I read through the genre of the manifesto, and against the ‘I’ of Frank Wilderson’s thesis-cum-memoir, *Afropessimism*. And, in a similar vein, Claudia Rankine’s subversion of lyric ‘I’s in her *American Lyric* series: her wayward deixis recalling Fred Moten’s ‘appositional’ relationship to supremacist institutions and traditions, and speaking also through Fred Moten to Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relation, to the will to ‘consent not to be a single being’.⁷

As my research progresses, I find these ‘we’s increasingly taking not an oppositional orientation towards the personal ‘I’—as to institutionality represented in and through the ‘I’—but instead a sidelong and fugitive one. In an increasingly precaritized, neoliberalised academic landscape, these ‘we’s find ‘provisional’ collectivity in organising inside academia, or writing within and underneath reparative modes in order to forward a more materialist or dialectical critique. That tendency, of working across and beneath repair and suspicion, is

⁵ Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 8.

⁶ Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018), p. xi.

⁷ The phrase ‘consent not to be a single being’ is a quote from Édouard Glissant, in conversation with Manthia Diawara in the course of Diawara’s film, *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation* (2009). For a published excerpt of this section of their conversation, see e.g.: ‘Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara’, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 28 (2011), 4-19 (p. 5). It is also the title of Fred Moten’s trilogy of critical essays, *consent not to be a single being*, published by Duke University Press.

then complicated by the fact that Sedgwick predicted it in 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' as an ongoing quality of reparative critique. It turns out that the long tail of Sedgwick's 'I' is inescapable in contemporary queer and queer-proximate theory (further illustrating the necessity and power of a fugitive rather than oppositional response to the reparative turn). And after all: who could argue otherwise, when faced with an 'I' that speaks to such 'dense, accessible sites of knowledge, [...] authority, and pleasure' as Sedgwick's? An 'I' that is, so obviously, a 'powerful one'?