Personal Effects

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My father didn’t finish high school and my grandfather, a first-generation Sicilian immigrant, left school even sooner. Very little prepared me for my life as not only a college graduate but a college professor, except my sense that my passage through higher education somehow finished a journey started almost a century earlier by my grandfather. In my family, the worst insult was “caffon” (“greenhorn”), a label that summed up a state of ignorance, at once academic (awkward grammar, bad spelling) and national (an inability to adapt to pot-melted “American” culture, a habitual repetition of “Old World” practices and beliefs). By attending college (much less graduate school), I set out to eliminate the last traces of “greenhorn” in my family tree, learning the lessons that would make me not only more learned, but a better American, fluent in the national lexicon.

That lexicon, as I quickly discovered, consisted in a series of abstractions: not only the notoriously ill-defined generalities of America political discourse (truth, justice, liberty), but abstractions away from other, previous forms of identification and belonging. I was learning, among other things, to forget: to distance myself from my family and its awkward adjustments to the New World, away from my body and the traces it bore of that history, away from the collective sense of self. The process of “abstraction” began long before I entered the Ivory Tower, with my grandfather’s passage through Ellis Island, with my father’s decision to move from his parents’ home and settle in a more “mainstream” suburb, in our increasing participation in the national economy. The essay that follows begins to tell that story.

While those “historical” thresholds have been well analyzed within literary and cultural studies, however, the role academia itself—its disciplines and its disciplined desires—plays in mediating between the ethnic and the national,
the collective and the individual, the emotional and the rational, the particular and the abstract, has remained far less scrutinized (the ground on which critics stand always being the last explored). Yet the process of learning to forget involves learning a way of thinking, of valuing, and of composing, and those ways are structurally connected to the nationalizing discipline of “good” citizens. By learning to think and write in a certain way I was learning to operate in the national lexicon, the outcome my family and I hoped for. Yet at the same time, less legibly, I was learning to forget the source of that desire, the beginnings of that process, and in so doing I denied other, potentially productive models of belonging, other means of making sense of the world, of composing my “self.”

In the essay that follows, I want to argue for the importance of making those (only ever half-forgotten) alternatives more visible, more critically central, within academia, using not only the stories of our movements through national pedagogy in order to understand as content the ways citizens must embody the interests of the nation-state, but also to analyze how the styles of academic writing—abstract, analytical, dispassionate—serve those interests as well. The reintroduction of the “personal” into scholarly essays potentially serves both ends, creating a hybrid of styles—emotional and analytical, particularized and generalized, distancing and collectivizing—that saturate the lived experiences of so many Americans and that are separate only in the disciplinary how-to’s of the national/academic pedagogy.

Nationalism both requires and presents itself appositionally to the “particular.” It requires competing cultural specificity, for only when emotion, collectivism, or particularity become the involuntary effects of certain (raced, gendered, sexed, classed) bodies can abstract knowledge be a privilege of others. At the same time, nationalism requires that members of those groups always believe themselves somehow inferior, marginalized, or incapable citizens. Locked in “identities” they must (but cannot, fully) disavow to enter full citizenship, members of particularized (hyphenated, gendered) communities exist in a liminal position that can potentially take the self-shaming form of national longing. But that liminality can also give rise to challenging forms of hybridity, and I am arguing for personal criticism as a potent form of strategic combination and culture-crossing. Not surprisingly, personal criticism has been taken up primarily by those with the most to gain from challenging and altering the forms of national belonging.1 While national citizens are said to occupy a publicity characterized by abstract and disinterested principle, the “personal” is supposedly private, particular, and embodied. Those furthest from full citizenship are, not coincidentally, most closely associated with “balkanizing” cultural identities, with private domestic spheres, and with the
markings and excesses of their bodies: women, gay men and lesbians, people of color, immigrants, the poor, the disabled. Members of those identity categories have taken up personal criticism in compelling and challenging ways to refuse the false divisions of body and mind, deriving and inventing, memory and theory. At the same time, its best practitioners use personal criticism to stress the mediated nature of the “personal,” questioning the transparency of self-knowledge. In so doing, personal criticism, like much poststructural theory, potentially deconstructs—and, unlike much poststructural theory, powerfully reconstructs—the national subject. Our “personal” lives (which is to say, our lives) are the place where national subjectivity is made and unmade, giving rise to an anxious tension that might be said to be the normative state of national affect. In our prose, academics have tended to bifurcate that process, crediting either the making or unmaking, normativizing or subverting, of citizenship, and in a parallel (but usually unrecognized) way, our style of analysis has effected similar splits between the personal and the analytic. By bringing those styles together I hope to suggest the complex dangers and pleasures of a family’s movements into and away from national subjectivity, and thereby to suggest an academic approach for those forced to live within the “personal.”

ROCKY NATIONALISM

I grew up in Emerson, New Jersey, a suburb of New York City and a typical “bedroom community.” In contrast to the public production of capital, the bedroom community is supposedly private, a secluded place of rest and repose. But what kind of bedroom contains not the solitary slumberer or even the tranquil family, but an entire community? If my hometown was a bedroom, it contained multitudes, and not all eyes were sleeping: as the term “bedroom community” suggests, the privacy of the suburb is collective and, therefore, highly scrutinized. Moreover, the generic term “bedroom community,” by rendering distinct townships interchangeable, suggests a linkage between suburbs and sameness that, however fictional, is the pride of the bedroom community, the source of its citizens’ mutual knowledge and shared interest. Sameness requires the surrender of particularized distinction to generalized abstraction, and suburbs encourage such surrender in their inhabitants. In these bedrooms, the community maintains a watchful eye over the private lives of citizens, turning the peaceful resident of the bedroom community into a disembodied cipher, a representative of abstract values—fair play and hard work, duty and liberty—rather than a dreaming, drooling, snoring subject.

The suburb might be said to form a nation threshold, on one side of which is affective loyalty and on the other a disembodied abstraction (“citizenship”) that allows bodies to circulate interchangeably within the national rhetoric.
Attaching affections experienced as private and particular to abstractions that promise a “sameness” that becomes the precondition of public belonging, suburbs are a nationalist training ground. Not surprisingly, the two things most ex-suburbanites can say of their hometowns is that they were indistinguishable from all others, and yet they inspired fierce civic pride. A particular pride in an interchangeable abstraction: this affective state is, finally, the birth of national emotion. That identification with abstractions ultimately puts the nation-state at the service of rhetoric (“the public”) and not of individual citizens (who become “private interests”) matters little compared to the entitlements (legal coverage, institutional power, geographic prestige) that citizenship confers.

In saying that national abstractions remove the state’s obligation to particular citizens, I don’t mean to imply that national “ideals” don’t serve the interest of particular citizens. Access to national abstractions and the citizenship they generate is, like virtually every form of access in the United States, economically determined. Despite its claims to generic—and hence, presumably, democratic—sameness, Emerson’s marked neighborhoods reveal the economic basis of national status. The town’s high-income neighborhood was called Soldier Hill, ostensibly in reference to a Revolutionary War battle fought in the vicinity. In contrast, the town’s lower income neighborhood, Frog Town, put residents so far from universal citizenship that they were hardly human at all. While lower income residents were naturalized, then, its wealthier residents were nationalized (the heart of the neighborhood was a field with a flagpole that flew the Stars and Stripes). “Universals,” as Emerson’s internal divisions demonstrate, are defined in relation to localized particulars, and if some citizens become “public” through identification with universalizing abstraction, other (quasi)citizens bear the “private” burden of hyper-embodiment.2

As will often happen in bedrooms, economic privilege and regulated conformity to interchangeable abstraction arose as self-generated desire at the level of our most cherished pleasures. A highlight of my youth was the March 1974 opening of the Paramus Park Mall one town over. Through the familiarity of its stores’ names and the regularity of its architecture, its musak and controlled climate, Paramus Park endorses on the level of its physical structure the interchangeable sameness that is reportedly the defining characteristic of bedroom communities. Like its shoppers, however, Paramus Park represents sameness as distinction, packaging mass-produced fashions as indicators of individual style and character. Even Paramus Park’s standardized architecture promises a different kind of sameness. As the area’s first enclosed mall, Paramus Park offered new attractions, especially the central food court overlooking a two-story tiered waterfall, unsoiled by the flock of paper birds hanging perpetually suspended above. The waterfall, by virtue of its status as
impromptu wishing well, rendered consumption not only natural but meta-
physical: by “throwing away” money, the mall promises us, we purchase some-
thing as intangible and satisfying as a wish, a desire. My family’s favorite
dinner spot was the mall’s franchised creperie, The Magic Pan, where we
could, while enjoying a family dinner, watch hundreds of others, carrying the
same bags and doing the same things we did. This remembered vista suggests
the connections between mass-production and the “nature” in/of the mall, the
“Park” betraying the suburb’s claim to organic sameness as an innocent ema-
nation of affinity. At the time, however, I experienced it as a natural enjoy-
ment, for the mall, with its cascading waters, tree-lined corridors, and origami
birds, soothingly naturalized uniformity and consumption.

As a scrutinized location for merging, through an economic nexus, “pri-
ivate” desire and “public” conformity into the sameness of knowledge and the
oneness of interest, bedroom communities, like their malls, are national pro-
ductions. That my hometown is named Emerson adds a particular layer of
national irony to this sleepy suburb. The community in which being “differ-
ent” was tantamount to being a communist or, worse, a bad consumer, took its
name from America’s philosopher of independence, self-reliance, and individ-
ual transcendence. On our way to becoming true Emersonians, our most
deply-held belief was that, as we came to identify with the scripts of nation,
we would lose the excesses of our particular bodies so as better to merge into
the “oneness” that is the precondition of belonging. The dream of most of the
boys in my high school class was to be on the football team, the Cavaliers,
working out every day until their bodies became trim instruments of town
pride, their distinction ironically marked by donning uniforms. These were the
sons of second and third generation Italian Americans and Eastern European
Jews who understood well the incentives to trim off what one was born with in
order to achieve the American Dream, even when that dream amounted to lit-
tle more than not getting picked on in the locker room. On fall afternoons,
crowds of Emersonians poured out to worship these living products of routine
discipline, personifications indeed of their hometown.

Even though I didn’t play football, the dream of translating my marked,
excessive body into abstract citizenship nevertheless suffused what was, for me,
the most “private” space in that bedroom community: my particular bedroom.
On the wall over my bed was a poster of Sylvester Stallone as Rocky Balboa, the
media idol of the bicentennial year. An out-of-shape Italian-American boxer
who gets a shot at the heavyweight title when he’s selected to fight the champ,
Rocky was for me a hero who transcended the squalor of his ethnically marked
friends and family to participate in the national culture that promises eco-
nomic success and fame if one can erase one’s past and eliminate competing
loyalties. Little wonder that Rocky appealed to the Castiglias’ oldest son. My mother worked as a self-taught bookkeeper for a large machinery manufacturer, while my father slowly made his way from butcher and truck driver to a salesman for and eventual president of a wholesale hardware firm. While my parents worked, I lived with my grandparents in their house decorated with framed jigsaw puzzles of The Last Supper and occupied by aunts and uncles with names like Chappie and Pippi who sat at a large table in the basement and screamed at each other in broken English over meals that seemed to melt into one another. By the time I entered high school, my parents had acquired a suburban home in Emerson, and my father, expelled in eighth grade for throwing a classmate out the schoolroom window, became the town’s mayor. Like Rocky, he had worked from his ethnic roots to the American Dream: the leader of all Emersonians, he had become a Representative Man.

Continuing in my parents’ footsteps, I enacted my ethnic disloyalty by applying to college, writing out my applications on my bed, under the eyes of my hero. My plan to go to college was the great secret of my adolescence, but I had internalized communal scrutiny and mine was the open secret the whole town shared. In attempting to differentiate myself, I continued the same paradoxical logic that drove my parents’ lives; I imagined, as they did, that Americanness waited always around the next corner, in that mysteriously elusive public sphere of entitlement that I would enter if I could only learn the national idiom.

At the end of the movie, Rocky realizes that he has been used by promoters who have no real intention of letting him win the title, at which point he is unable to return to his old friends who, in any case, have acknowledged their own ethnic shame by cheering his rise into a national symbol. We ignored this ending, however, to our own detriment. Having momentarily reached his dream, my father lost his bid for a second term in the year of Reagan’s reelection, his business during the Bush presidency, and his Emersonian house in the first year of Clinton’s term. I too achieved and lost my dream: having been accepted to Tufts University, I declined the offer, unable to tell my parents I was going to an elite private school. Eventually, after attending a state university for a few years, I transferred to the kind of privileged institution I dreamed of attending and did gain a greater proximity to national knowledge. As a result of the road that began in that bedroom (community), linking national belonging and “private” affect, today I enjoy the benefits of education, but the satisfaction I imagined would come remains elusive, as one can see from the fact that in writing this essay I continue to “trade in” (in both senses) my family to earn academic credentials. The search continues. For me as for my parents, the desire for full citizenship keeps us all working for something that exists solely
as a promise, an incentive, that took its being only in our moments of desire, as what we lacked.

SLY SEXUALITY

If my bedroom registered and reinforced my national desire, it was the site of other, less predictable if equally emblematic desires as well. Besides my Rocky poster, my walls were decorated with scores of Playbills. To the right of my bed was a record player and along one wall ran my record collection, comprised of the soundtracks of Broadway musicals. Holding a candle in place of a microphone, I would croon broken-hearted laments or belt out-show-stoppers, but only when the house was empty: staying home from football was one thing, staying home to rehearse “Some Enchanted Evening” was quite another. At fifteen I was a major homo—or at least a homo major—learning the lessons that would allow me to imagine other belongings that would take me (I believed) out of the suburbs and the life (marriage, children, lucrative career) it seemed to require. Lying in bed at night so I could stare at his overdeveloped pectorals, I made Stallone the object of my desiring gaze, turning Rocky into my own private knock-out.

What’s a boy to do? On the one hand, my hero promised the privileges of ethnic transcendence and disembodied citizenship. On the other hand, the same hero occasioned a knowledge of my body that marked me as “different,” as deviant, and as dangerous. Once, on Room 222, a boy was being picked on by his classmates because he had VD. “What’s VD?” I asked my parents, but all my mother said was, “Watch the show.” Her response told me that VD had something to do with sex, and from the show I gathered that sex led to ostracism and, in the viewing scenario, family silence. If that’s what VD led to, what would come of masturbating with Stallone? That boy on TV became the focus of everyone’s gaze, his diseased, abnormal body—which is to say, his body—constantly on display while his tormentors became increasingly invisible, taking the final form of anonymous graffiti on his locker. Karen Valentine may have saved him eventually, giving her English class an essay assignment instructing them that sex was really love and that love was natural or that tolerance was groovy. I don’t remember. What stood out for me was the shame of his embodiment, a lesson I had already begun to learn in my own school during, say, “war ball,” the game we played weekly in gym class, in which the loser is the person standing alone, his body bombarded by rubber balls fired from across the gym by anonymous enemies. My classmates became anonymous by targeting a (more often than not, my) body, for only when deviants are embodied can the citizenry achieve effective abstraction, become normal to the point of oneness. Far from the disembodied cipher of national belonging, then, I, like the boy in Room 222, was undeniably embodied.
Growing up in Emerson, I learned through my body that the ontological stability of the suburb’s most fabulous and destructive ideal—“community”—and its constituent abstraction relied on the marking and (at least fantasized) banishment of bodies, an exile that took literal form in the Hudson River, which separated us from the decadent city, home to the suburb’s nightmare “others.”

Despite its fantasies of group-coherence-through-banishment, however, “queers” were always at the heart of the suburb, not just because, as the liberation slogan runs, “we are your sons and daughters,” but because, as my story suggests, the popular culture that mediated suburban life was also the “stuff” of urban queerness. I’ve come to realize that precisely such mediations—records, radio, television, theater, movies, malls—not only created suburban repression, but also brought me suburban relief. Instead, my national memories are filtered through movies, television, and records, proving Berlant’s point about the mediated nature of modern citizenship. If the disembodied citizens of the bedroom community had their transparent eyeballs on my body, my embodiment became the source of mediated pleasures that revised the disciplined regularity I experienced in my everyday life.

My favorite teacher in high school was Ed Peretti, the chorus director, who taught us the scores of *Pippin* and *Man of La Mancha* and cast me as Pappy Yokum in my first musical, *Li’l Abner*. Mr. Peretti gave me a way to think about and to resist the relationship between my body and the “fictive ethnicity” inscribed upon it. If chorus is itself a fitting symbol of the “community,” creating harmony out of potential discord, Mr. Peretti, by introducing me to musicals, was offering distinctly dischoral materials. Musicals are notoriously conventional affairs: if you can’t tell the entire plot from the first ten minutes, you’re not really watching a musical. At the most predictable moments, however, an actress (men never have big numbers on Broadway; women, not men, are the embodied subjects *par excellence*) steps out of the plot and delivers a showstopper, a term that indicates the disruptive quality of the performance. These numbers present the body as a register of unconventional longings: No longer a set piece in a routine script, the actress becomes, for a moment, a spectacular exception, whose presence as longing body—where else is that breath-grabbing music coming from?—will force us to clap, to cry, to stand and shout—in short, to remember that we, too, have bodies. Not surprisingly, my favorites continue to be concert reenactments of musicals that include the audience reactions: the surprised gasps, the ecstatic cheers when, say, Angela Lansbury comes on stage, making my listening part of the performance, linking performance and sensation into an “imagined community” that would reassure but not reincorporate me. By relying on the kindness of strangers, I used the pleasures of my body to turn aside, for a moment, the admonishing glower of the community in my bedroom.
Such mediated encounters quickly became the core of my imaginative life in Emerson, enabling me to find in the midst of regulated disembodiment the creative possibilities of my own and others’ bodies. I began to meet men who desired other men, not in the urban Sodom but in the Paramus Park Mall, the suburb’s emblematic core. These encounters were remarkably comforting, opening up realms of imaginative adventure that made my adrenaline pump and kept my mind busy for days afterward. What mattered to me in these encounters, which rarely involved any talk, was not “knowing” others like me in the model provided by the suburb (establishing a conform ed “sameness” that allows mutual knowledge), but exactly their difference, which became an opportunity to invent, to pose, to perform. My identity, therefore, was not “discovered” within my “self” or across the river in the city, but in the mediated cultural forms that brought people together without making them one: the mall’s actual, rather than its virtual, function.

If I learned the lessons of embodiment in Emerson, I also learned this: if the promise of “freedom”—of transcendence that would free me into the disembodied abstraction that was my natural self—was a constant source of disappointment, the pleasures that came from what Lauren Berlant calls performing unfreedom—acting within and against, but not outside, the forms of cultural determination at hand—became the most satisfying and reliable source of agency I’ve found. Such revisions acknowledge our perpetual confinement within national rhetorics (“unfreedom”) while also demonstrating that those rhetorics may be re-articulated (“performed”) to draw attention to their failed promises and ulterior motives and to assert a public agency for those who re-articulate them. In advocating “unfreedom” as a powerful form of agency I do not want to underestimate the physical locations and deployments of power that sometimes make movement a necessity of survival. But Americans have too often believed that movement in itself constitutes agency, misrecognizing dislocation as transformation or freedom. My story is, however, not of a move from oppression to liberation, from suburb to city, from family to college, or from body to nation (or back again to subculture), but of mediation between symbolic orders (suburban, urban, national, sexual), that allows me to use one order to read and, to a certain degree, to resist the other. The suburbs are an historic articulation of the nation; they do not precede or “reflect” America. It is in places like Emerson that “fictive ethnicity” is formulated, taught, enforced, and perhaps most importantly, contested. I had to go home to begin this exploration of liberal community and its discontents, of resistance and alternative social formations, of ontological fictions and the preconditions of national belonging. My efforts to “transcend” Emerson seem to me to have demonstrated the strongest hold of its values upon me; maybe only when I
stayed put, when I felt most stuck in my bedroom in my ethnic family’s split-level in an all-American suburb, that I was able to become most “other” to myself, to imagine different narratives of what life could be, of where and how I could belong.

HOME SCHOOLING

The gesture of “staying put”—of performing unfreedom rather than engaging in the fiction of transcendence—turns out to be easier said than done. As I’m writing this, my mother telephones. “Are you cooking?” she asks, sensing the distraction in my voice. “No,” I reply curtly, “I’m writing.” She begins to apologize, says she’ll call back. I hesitate and then click on “save.” “No, it’s okay. I can come back to it.” She tells me about the antics of her grandchildren, sales at the local supermarket, the terminal illness of a cousin I’ve never met, the sauce she’s making for dinner. Not much response is called for: I giggle, cluck my tongue, express mild surprise. Eventually she runs out of news and it’s my turn, but the censor clicks on: I’ve had a tough day writing. I attended a lecture. I proposed a panel for a professional conference. None of this, I think, would mean a thing to her; I worry that she would think that my life sounds pretty boring, if not to say easy, not equal to the frustration I express. Not that my mother would give me any basis for these fears; she would respond the way she would to eating play-doh, missing a sale on boneless chicken, making marinara sauce: she would find a way to translate. It’s I who wonders how important my work is, why I’m doing it. So I say, “Nothing new here,” and leave it at that. What I’m really saying is: my life is so different from yours that you couldn’t possibly understand; I have no way to express myself to you. I assert her failure to transcend along with me (thereby claiming my own successful transcendence), my failure to find a way back.

So I still want to leave them behind, to use academic forms to turn my family and the other people of my childhood into two-dimensional figures of discipline and deconstruction. Even while disavowing the push towards national abstraction, I repeatedly position the details of my parents’ everyday lives (Play Doh, marinara sauce) against the “explanatory” abstractions of academic theory (“interpellation,” “discourse”). For better or worse, my sense that academia could teach me the national idiom—would transform a private body into a privileged abstraction—was for the most part right.

Once I chose academia, the road led to an increasing belief in the national myths of originality and heroic individualism, discovered in my chosen “field” rather than in the prairies of a manifest destiny. Yet those myths too often lead, as the American Adams and Eves of yore discovered, to crippling sensations of competition and isolation. At a recent MLA panel, someone read a story from
local paper in which a hotel clerk remarks that he doesn’t understand academics: we don’t spend a lot of time eating or sleeping with one another, he claimed; we just go back to our hotel rooms alone and cry. This remark elicited laughter from the audience, but also groans of recognition and defensive explanations: the horrors of the job market, betrayal played out on panels and in coffee shops throughout the conference. Such glosses fail, however, to recognize these phenomena as systemic components of the larger, isolating effects of academic culture and a good deal of criticism.

I saw this very clearly when I asked a colleague to read an early draft of this essay. “Why are your footnotes so nice?” he asked. “I know you. You’re pretty skeptical. But I’d never know that from your footnotes. Get rid of them. They’re too nice.” In many ways it was the feedback I hoped for, suggesting that my intellectual debts are not as overwhelming as I had claimed. Entertaining the possibility of changing my text, however, I realized that I had not experienced the footnotes as admissions of debt at all; indeed, they were a comfort, a source of pleasure. The footnotes formed a countertext to my argument itself, for even while leaving my family behind, even while using the essay to criticize the values of community, I was reconstructing those values in the footnotes.

The impulse to eliminate uncritical footnotes is one of the many conventions that tie academia to Americanization. Footnotes that acknowledge academic connection—rather than stressing critical distance—smack of collectivism, while “derivativeness” (the worse quality academic prose can possess) carries the whiff of Ellis Island. Deriving (coming from somewhere else) retards one’s emergence as the individualistic self that is the true American citizen. Since one is self-made, not defined by one’s relatives or competing ethnic loyalties, being in conversation with others, agreeing and witnessing rather than contesting and debating, is suspect, a hindrance towards Americanization no less than a sign of academic laziness. Despite my academic training, however, I did derive from some place—or rather, from some places, for the Americanizing suburb I called home was only one of many locations of my childhood: my ethnic family and my queer love of show tunes were also homes to me, and their influence—as well as their competitive jostlings—shape who I am, how I can belong in the world.

My great-grandmother, Barbara Ciardella, lived along the railroad tracks in a rowhouse with faded green awnings and a steep front stoop, much like those of her predominantly Italian-American neighbors. In the morning she would put on a pot of coffee that simmered all day, serving a steady procession of friends and family who came to sit at her table, talk to her occasionally in Italian (she spoke no English) and watch the soap operas or, in season, the Yankees. But most of all they gossiped. All visitors, male and female, young and old, passed around stories seemingly without point, punctuated with emotional highlights,
that everyone already knew. Over coffee and cookies, for hours at a time, among constantly changing players, they established lines of affiliation and familiarity.

This was the backdrop to a distinct early memory: I was having enormous difficulty learning math, and these guests of my great-grandmother’s paused in their gossip long enough to write out problems for me, wrestling with long division themselves so as to help me along. When I solved these problems successfully, they clapped and cheered, our glory collective and expressive. When I failed, my great-grandmother’s woeful moans, when the situation was translated to her in hushed tones, made me resolve to try harder next time, for their sake as well as my own. This was another kind of education, a competing model of belonging, although a harder one to recall.

In evoking memory’s capacity to articulate an instability within the presumed coherence of national identity and its abstractions, its models of belonging, and its academic rationalizations, I don’t want to naturalize memory or its subsequent expression in personal criticism as transparent “experience.” Rather, personal criticism can demonstrate the fictive nature of identity, memory, and collective belonging, without mitigating their power either to destabilize national fictions or to pose enabling alternatives. To return again to my great-grandmother’s kitchen: the Ciardellas were well aware of the fictive quality of the memories that served as the basis of their connections, at least as indicated by one piece of family lore. My great-grandmother had two sons who died, one soon after the other. My great-grandmother’s grief upon the death of the first son was so extreme that when her second son died, the family took up the task of writing her letters “from” the second son. I became haunted by this story of my aunts and uncles keeping their sibling alive through the years, textually. When my great-grandmother died, her children and grandchildren stopped coming together, and I lost this communal connection. I mourn that loss, and if this text can revive them a while, so be it.

In the end, my extended family proved more adaptable to my “difference” than I could have anticipated. When I finally did graduate from that elite New England college, my whole family made the trek to graduation. My father, crying, told me it was the proudest day of his life. When I was worried about coming out to my family, my brother invited over a gay member of his fraternity who told me how my brother had made a speech to the whole house saying that making the frat safe for gay men made it safer for all their differences; my grandmother, who upon the birth of each of her grandchildren crocheted an elaborate tablecloth to give as a wedding present, gave my partner and me my tablecloth when we bought our house. To be sure, these efforts inscribe me in the heteronormative discourses (marriage, home-ownership, homosocial bonding) that structure their lives; yet my family’s efforts to transform those discourses—their own performances of
unfreedom—have, in many ways, allowed me my life. Even in the course of their suburbanization, what my family retains, as memory, from competing models of social organization and belonging—a willingness to incorporate newcomers into the family; a raucous and at times indecorous sense of humor; a trust that our bonds can withstand a heated discussion; that open displays of affection, by men as well as by women, are healthy—has in many ways made me a poor academic (too hungry for community, too quick with tactless speech), but has also brought other forms, other styles, to this essay. My family stays in touch, mediates our lives, induces me to use the “save” function. If Americanness was only half achieved, other forms of belonging were only half deserted.

There’s the hope.

**PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS, PERSONAL CRITICISM**

The power of personal criticism to upset the nationalizing functions of academic discipline became strikingly clear to me when I began delivering early versions of this essay, provoking a mixture of anger and despair best summed up by one scholar: “If you’re right,” he exclaimed, “then everything I’ve always believed is wrong, and you might as well put me on a shelf like a can of Campbell’s soup.” This odd metaphor for “out-datedness” drew less on the shelf-life of minestrone than on the art of Andy Warhol, whose famous Campbell’s Soup silkscreens suggest not only the mass production of contemporary desire (“um-um good”), but, when Warhol used the same style in his multiple-panel portraits, of “personal” identity. With his images of riot police and electric chairs, Warhol extended his exploration of identity under Fordist capitalism to include the disciplines of the state as well.

Thinking about this scholar’s unlikely metaphor, I’ve come to believe that my essay troubled him not because it revealed anything startling, but because it was uncannily familiar, suggesting how the life narratives of academics, like Warhol’s silkscreens, are composed through the repetitious overlay of the national, the economic, and the personal. The dismayed scholar was resisting the recognition that he is, like me, invested in those very structures—capitalism, the state, other people’s identities—upon which academia supposedly grants a transcendent perspective. He is, in short, a can of Campbell’s Soup.

The academic desire to segregate “the personal” from “the professional”—to keep identity “private”—is part and parcel of broader cultural currents: If the public is taken in American civil discourse as a synonym for the national, then the private or personal become the nation’s other. From right-wing outrages against governmental regulation of “private” enterprise to liberal protests against state intervention in “personal” choices (sexuality, abortion, physician-assisted suicide), a wide and often contradictory range of “private” experiences
is presented as an enclave against the nationalized public. These distinctions especially occur in discourses of the body and its markings: race, gender, class, and sexuality. Insofar as the “personal” may be said to be over-located within the discourses of the body, that privatized body is dis-located from the national public. The Warhol allusion suggests that my interlocutor was especially troubled, however unconsciously, by the specter of that most private of marked citizens, the American queer (why Warhol and not, say, Lichtenstein?), claiming a structural relation to the national public and its academic institutions.

Academia would never be so vulgar as to adopt the terms of the popular press or of explicitly nationalist literature. Yet the obsession with drawing absolute and value-laden distinctions between public and private—and with marking those distinctions by setting limits on the body—has found an academic inflection in debates over personal criticism. The association of much (particularly Leftist) scholarship with the private (its “jargon”) and with the bodily discourses of race, sex, and gender (the “p.c.”) has occasioned a vigorous effort to create a public—and yes, even national—scholarly position, evidenced by the renewed call for “public intellectuals” (where have we been all along, if not in public?). In this effort to claim a public academic status, personal criticism has often been a scapegoat, irrationally distinguished from rigorous (read: abstract, disinterested) scholarship. The call for public intellectuals corresponds with the rise—and disavowal—of personal criticism, just as the creation of a national public correlates with the abjection of marked “private” bodies.

In defending personal criticism against these charges, however, I also urge its practitioners to avoid making “personal” synonymous, not only with “private,” but also with “individual.” Our stories are never private or only our own. As Michael Berube argues, “one’s understanding of one’s observations has been formed by the various historical forces that have formed the landscape that makes those observations possible” (1065). If personal criticism does not shed light on what Berube calls “intersubjective relationships,” but pauses on self-absorbed fascination with the particular, it misses the opportunity to challenge the self-determined autonomy of one’s “personal” story and to analyze the academy’s role in the workings of state interpellation. The theoretical promise of personal criticism lies in its potential demonstration of how the subject circulates between public and private spheres, abjection and entitlement, the state and the subject, subject positions and global economies. Such circulations undermine clear distinctions between the national public and the experiential private, and it is precisely that deconstructive circulation—articulated not from a transcendent and abstract position but from an experiential and implicated one—that comprises personal criticism’s potential to challenge, not only what Nancy K. Miller calls “the nationalism of the ‘I’” (xix), but nationalism itself.
NOTES

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1. I am thinking of such works as Getting Personal (Nancy K. Miller), French Lessons (Alice Kaplan), Crossing Ocean Parkway (Marianna Torgovnick), Alchemy of Race and Rights (Patricia Williams), Leaving Pipe Shop (Deborah McDowell), Alias Olympia (Eunice Lipton), Colored People (Henry Louis Gates, Jr.), A Life in School (Jane Tompkins), BorderLands (Gloria Anzaldua), My American History (Sarah Schulman), and Cures (Martin Duberman).

2. My thinking here owes much to Lauren Berlant’s argument that the nation’s “norms of privilege require a universalizing logic of disembodiment, while its local, corporeal practices are simultaneously informed by the legal privileges and—when considered personal, if not private—are protected by the law’s general proximity” (“Queen, “ 470).

3. Several commentators note the mall’s blurring of public and private spaces, especially as the mall replaces the traditional downtown shopping area. Lizabeth Cohen argues that the mall’s appropriation and commercialization of public space means that a “free commercial market attached to a relatively free public sphere (for whites) underwent a transformation to a more regulated commercial marketplace . . . and a more circumscribed public sphere of limited rights” (1099). In contrast to Cohen, who uses the regulated “private” space of the mall to naturalize the “freedoms” of public space outside the mall, I am arguing that the public sphere and the private sphere are coterminous and mutually structuring, not distinguishable “opposites.”

4. It seems nearly impossible for critics writing about suburbs not to nationalize them, as is evident in the subtitle to Kenneth Jackson’s classic study, Crabtree Frontier: the Suburbanization of America. Neil Harris similarly nationalizes malls when he claims, “In joining modern pleasure in large, unadorned surfaces to an older, baroque theatricality, the best of these buying machines remind us, once again, that the commercial spirit has nourished much of our most interesting American design” (288). Without
denying the commercial spirit behind the design of malls, I want to sug-

gest that the architectural designs of the malls generate, not simply reflect,

the national character and the “commercial spirit” that Harris sees as motivational—and hence prior—entities.

5. Emerson, incorporated in 1903, was originally named Etna, but its mail was being delivered to a town of the same name in New York; a name change was necessary, but firehats had already been ordered with an emblazoned “E,” and so the town changed its name in 1909 to Emerson. I am grateful to town historian Bill Wassman for the details of this story. The name change is perhaps fitting: Christopher Newfield argues that Emerson endorses “corporate liberalism,” a belief that the principle social pleasure is submission to an amorphous and unappealable power before which both personal action and collective democracy lose all effective agency. Given Newfield’s analysis, perhaps the naming of my hometown was not ironic at all.

6. I am building here on Etienne Balibar’s theory of “the nation-form.” Subjects, Balibar argues, are formed as part of a “fictive ethnicity,” a national collective, purportedly possessed of a common ancestral “nature,” that dis-
solves all competing localities and identifications. That idealized projection is productive, however, of a haunting dissatisfaction—a misrecognition—
characterizable as “desire.” Such a desire—for a belonging never quite achieved, a recognition never quite completed—is necessary to the state, insofar as it produces both voluntary labor and patriotic striving. My desire was not only overdetermined, then, it was doomed from the start, ironi-
cally in similar ways to how my parents’ had been. Although my access to disembodied logic as an academic seemed to resolve my embodied status as a queer, both “identities” functioned to foreclose my options for national belonging, and paralleled how my parents’ lack of education and desire for upward mobility disqualified them. As Lauren Berlant argues, “excesses to the norms of body and language” mark “American failures, citizens unfit to profit from their talents in a national symbolic and capitalist system” (“Infantile” 502). My parents’ newly bourgeois bodies, like my queer body, their undereducated language, like my overeducated language, placed us outside the national norm that fueled all our desires in the first place.

7. Rocky may not have been, as I imagined, my private fantasy after all, either sexually or socially. I was startled, watching Saturday Night Fever recently, to see the same Rocky poster on the bedroom wall of John Travolta’s character, himself a notable Italian American hero who leaves his ethnic Brooklyn family for his new life with a name-dropping social climber in Manhattan. The use of the poster in that film indicates that others have seen its symbolic value for Italian-American boys with social ambitions. The same scene, in which John Travolta parades around in a pair of tight black briefs, extends
the homoerotic potential of the poster through Travolta—whose sexuality, the subject of endless speculation, has formed its own open secret—to the male viewer, indicating that the sensational effects caused by Stallone’s body enjoyed a wider circulation than I imagined.

8. I have focused on queerness as the suburban “other,” but the most suppressed suburban category of difference is race. One of the central misconceptions of the suburbs is that by moving farther from the city, citizens become more white, and hence more American. At the heart of white flight is white fright: a fear that one’s privileges, stolen from others and enjoyed compulsively (activities projected onto the urban black or Hispanic criminal and drug addict), will continue to be haunted by the suburb’s projected “others.” Kenneth Jackson reports that African Americans comprised only 8.7% of the 54.1% of the suburban population of New York’s metropolitan area in 1980. Lizabeth Cohen notes that between 1950 and 1960, the population of the ten largest U.S. cities shrank, with three whites moving out for every two non-whites who moved in. Arguing that the suburbs subtly reversed the gains of the Civil Rights movement, Cohen concludes that “suburbanization must be seen as a new form of racial segregation in the face of a huge wave of African American migration from the South to the North during the 1950s (1059). When I called the borough clerk of Emerson to find out how many African Americans live in Emerson now, she informed me that the township does not keep numbers on “such things,” a statement that testifies to the white hegemony of my hometown.

The irony of suburban racism is that it reproduces the snobbish exclusion that first forced the Protestant elite out of the cities to escape exactly the immigrant populations who now project the same stereotypes upon African American and Hispanic city dwellers that were initially projected onto them. This irony was brought home to me on a recent visit to my parents. Driving home from the airport, my father noted that the roads were dangerous because of black ice. My mother, mishearing, assured him that there wouldn’t be many black guys on the roads of those suburbs. My mother’s mishearing arose from my father’s strong Italian-American accent (the rendering of “c” as “g,” the extension of sibilant “s” into “z”). The very linguistic traits that marked them as “racial” to me translated, for my mother, into an assertion of their white privilege in relation to the “black guys” who could never, as they had, escape the city for the suburb.

9. Lauren Berlant notes a shift in national education from monumental to technological culture; “global media formations,” she argues, “are the real citizen-heroes” (“Infantile,” 504), not the founding fathers enshrined in Washington D.C. Although I along with my ninth grade class made the national pilgrimage to the Capitol Berlant writes of, I can’t remember a thing about it.
10. Michael Moon discusses his identification, as a fat “protogay” boy in rural Oklahoma, with the excessively embodied opera divas, “radiating authority and pleasure,” he saw pictured in Look magazine (“Divinity,” 215). Both weight and sexuality, as types of “excessive” embodiment, incite ridicule, and hence are violations of the abstract body at the core of American citizenship.

11. Building on Benedict Anderson, I am claiming a form of memory here that acknowledges the national pressures to forget (one’s family past, one’s bodily sensations) requisite to the forming of imagined national communities, but also works against that pressure by forming national media into subcultural countermemory.

12. Berlant writes that Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, and Anita Hill “represent their deployment of publicity as an act made under duress, an act thus representing and performing unfreedom in America.” Such performances “represent their previous rhetorical failures to secure sexual jurisdiction over their bodies, challenging America to take up politically what the strongest individualities could not achieve” (“Queen,” 458).