

# THE ESSAY REVIEW

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## BODIES OF TEXT: ON THE LYRIC ESSAY



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## 1. THE WHITE SPACES

Suppose you want to write, in prose, about a slippery subject that refuses definition. Something like water, or the color blue. Like the word “lyric,” or the word “essay.”

Beginning, you balk at the question of form. One long block of prose seems to suggest a linear accretion of meaning, building to a thesis—but the more you poke at your subject, the more it seems to spread in all directions, to touch everything you’ve ever touched.

Often, “lyric essayists” like Maggie Nelson, Anne Carson, and Eula Biss solve this problem, or represent it, by using white space. Each paragraph (Nelson prefers “proposition”), like a stanza of poetry, becomes a little island of text, lapped by whiteness—set against blankness, and in relation to the others. Like music, lyric paragraphs make use of silence. They draw attention to their own density. In navigating them, the reader (perhaps confused, perhaps delighted) becomes a stakeholder in their meaning.

What do the white spaces signify? What does their silence say?

John D’Agata and Deborah Tall, editors of the literary journal *Seneca Review*, are generally credited with the institutionalization of the “lyric essay” as a genre. In the introduction to a 2007 issue specially dedicated to the term, they write: “The lyric essay does not expound. It may merely mention. As Helen Vendler says of the lyric poem, ‘It depends on gaps. . . . It is suggestive rather than exhaustive.’”

In emphasizing the gaps, we run the risk of casting the lyric as diminutive: it “suggests,” or “merely mentions.” Do such verbs imply an anorexic refusal to “expound?” Or can the lyric essay give rise to a different kind of amplitude?

In her book *Lyric Time*, Sharon Cameron refers to the voice of the lyric poet as inherently “choral,” since it takes place outside of linear (narrative) time and can thus synthesize multiple temporalities into a single utterance. The lyric essay, though it unfolds over a longer span of time, might be seen as accomplishing something similar: a Whitmanesque multitude refracted through a singular voice.

Plurality is one consequence of fragmentation. Perhaps the lyric essay is strengthened not by unidirectional “expounding” but by a lateral spread accompanying its movement through linear time, as its “propositions” multiply.

Recently, scholars in various fields have begun to critique linear models of meaning-making in favor of the sprawling “network” or “rhizome.” Caroline Levine writes in her book *Forms*, “networks might seem altogether formless, perhaps even the antithesis of form.” Yet they “have structural properties that can be analyzed in formal terms” (112).

The white spaces might be read as the necessary separations between nodes of a network, or as intervals between distinct voices that together form a chord. The essay’s plurality might become a kind of extended grasp: “As Henry James put it... ‘Really, universally, relations stop nowhere’” (Levine 130).

Or we might view the recent emergence of networks and rhizomes as evidence that there are more ways of conceiving of structures—more ways of reading—than we might have previously granted.

My aim is not to advocate for the lyric essay, or for a particular method of reading lyric essays—rather, I want to read the category “lyric essay” as a text, keeping in mind that the form’s greatest innovation may be an invitation into heightened awareness of our reading strategies: of individual texts, and of genre itself.

## 2. LYRIC DOORS

Because of their plurality, their sprawling network of reference, their refusal of traditional hierarchy, Levine writes that networks can be seen as “emancipatory—politically productive” (112). Productive of what, in this case? Emancipatory for whom?

Tall and D’Agata write, “Perhaps we’re drawn to the lyric now because it seems less possible (and rewarding) to approach the world through the front door, through the myth of objectivity.” They trust their contemporary readers to grant that objectivity is a myth—an assumption upon which earlier lyric theorists, defending the legitimacy of their field against the presumed objectivity of “science” and “reason,” could not necessarily count.

D’Agata and Tall do not define the word “lyric,” but by deducing its qualities from those they set it against, we can tell that they associate it with a) the unmythlike fact of subjectivity and b) some kind of back door. Or, well, at least not the front.

Maybe lyric slips through a side entrance; maybe it tunnels into the basement; maybe it parachutes onto the roof and slides down the chimney. Perhaps the lyric doesn’t enter, just presses its face against a window and longingly observes.

Even in the context of poetry, the meaning of “lyric” is elusive. In their introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader*, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins write, “A resistance to definition may be the best basis for definition of the lyric—and of poetry—we currently have” (2). Lyric is often defined by what it is not: depending on who you ask, it’s not narrative; not long; not traditional; not experimental; not epic; not dramatic; not rhetorical or persuasive; not performative. And yet, somehow, “lyric” has come to stand in for poetry in general, or prose at its most “poetic,” whatever that means.

Jackson and Prins speculate, “Perhaps the lyric has become so difficult to define because we need it to be blurry around the edges...to include all kinds of verse and all kinds of ideas about what poetry is or should be” (1).

When critics do define lyric against something else, it’s often something perceived as normative, some sort of “front door.” In one of the most influential discussions of lyric poetry, “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” (1833), John Stuart Mill defined it against the performative rhetorical eloquence of political oratory: “Eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard” (71). In a sentence deleted from the essay yet printed and widely circulated later, Mill used an image of spatial marginalization to compare the poet to someone crying out in a solitary prison cell, overheard by the reader on the other side of the wall. This spatial metaphor, like D’Agata’s and Tall’s, explicitly eschews the front door—in fact, eschews entrance altogether. For Mill, the wall between the poet and the reader preserves the authenticity of the poet’s utterance. Uncorrupted by attention to rhetoric, which bends it to another’s perceived expectations, the poet’s expression remains pure.

But the poet knows he's writing for someone. Mill himself admits as much, acknowledging the inherently performative character of lyric: "It may be said that poetry which is printed on hot-pressed paper, and sold at a bookseller's shop, is a soliloquy in full dress and on the stage....The actor knows that there is an audience present; but if he acts as though he knew it, he acts ill." In other words, the poet's art consists of skillfully, publically, pretending to be alone.

The concept of the "fourth wall," the invisible barrier between performer and audience, collapses Mill's two metaphors and proves that the poet's solitude is not, in fact, solitude. It's a triangular relationship between reader, writer, and wall. In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson describes this triangulation as fundamentally erotic: "Where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them" (16). Lovers and readers fantasize about freedom, but require structure.

"Nonfiction" is perhaps the only genre to contain a negation in its very name. The category contains everything from journalism to memoir to biography to cookbooks. But it is quite clear about what it refuses. Why is this particular dividing line so bold?

John D'Agata, in a special anthology of *Seneca Review* essays called *We Might as Well Call It the Lyric Essay*, argues that Nonfiction developed in response to a perceived threat. He cites a 1903 article in which librarian William Doubleday complains of his patrons' increasing demand for fiction, seen as unserious frippery for passive (usually female) readers. Doubleday prefers "a special form of literature read by young men" who "recognize the sternness of the battle of life" and prepare themselves for it by "serious reading." In one of the first recorded uses of the term nonfiction, Doubleday uses the eroticized language of advertising to suggest its potential deployment against fiction's threatening advance: "Attractive works of non-fiction may be temptingly displayed in convenient showcases" (5).

Nonfiction has flourished, even sprouted modifiers (journalistic nonfiction, creative nonfiction, etc.) and MFA programs. Yet D'Agata complains that the term's largeness robs it of legitimacy: "Within the span of a single century, 'non-fiction' has overshadowed half a dozen other literary terms to become the bland de facto banner that flaps above everything from journalism to memoir, imposing the same aesthetic standards and expectations on everything that falls beneath its shadow." Why is this a problem? Presumably, because the umbrella term has been imposed from the outside, rather than chosen by its practitioners. More particularly, because "our adoption of 'non-fiction'...has segregated us from art."

Unlike Doubleday, who feared the threat of a genre he regarded as feminine and Other, D'Agata is troubled by a tradition he's writing within—on one side, by the pedantic, fact-fetishizing world of reportage, and on the other, by the fuzzy overshare of the memoir, with its Oprah's-Book-Club whiff, its trauma narratives hawked for redemption.

The term "lyric essay" brings poetry—the highest of the high literary arts—into the realm of nonfiction. The term ingeniously takes advantage of lyric's double valence: 1) it definitely means poetic and 2) nobody can agree on what else it might mean.

In adopting the term "lyric," the "lyric essay" subtly smuggles in the concept of the "Lyric I"—a term that connotes, among other things, the notion that a poem's speaker can transcend the boundaries of the poet's actual, historical self. The "Lyric I" has been a site of generative contention, but critics generally agree on one particular paradox: the "I" belongs, at least partially, to the poet; yet it would be the worst kind of misreading to accuse the poem of falsehood if it appeared to depart from the poet's biography. The "Lyric I" provides access to a space in which,

as Ben Lerner puts it in his novel *10:04*, “the distinction between fiction and nonfiction [doesn’t] obtain...the correspondence between text and world [is] less important than the intensities of the poem itself.”

Presumably, D’Agata wants to defend a similar kind of freedom for the lyric essayist, allowing her to construct a persona marked by artful indeterminacy, unhampered by the shackles of fact-checking yet assumed to bear a close relationship to “reality” in all of its “sternness” (unlike fiction, which is a made-up story about fake people). Thus, ingeniously, the term “lyric essay” simultaneously disowns the low-art subgenres on both sides of the fiction-nonfiction border. In allowing for lyric indeterminacy, it repudiates both the dry fact-obsession of the journalist and the solipsistic navel-gaze of the memoirist; yet, by hewing closely to “reality,” it avoids being mistaken for a puffy airbrushed fantasy or a yarn devised for entertainment.

There is power in naming. Institutionalizing the term “lyric essay” achieves, among other things, a guaranteed career niche for D’Agata, a place for him in literary history, firmly within the camp of High Art.

More so even than *Seneca Review*, for which he shares the masthead with his former mentor Deborah Tall, D’Agata’s anthology *The Next American Essay* stakes his claim on the genre. *Next American Essay* is an unusual anthology. It offers 32 essays (including the “prologue” and “epilogue”), ordered chronologically, one for each year, from 1975 to 2003. Why begin in 1975? Because that was the year D’Agata was born.

This choice might seem appropriate for an anthology of lyric essays: like a lyric essay, the book is highly personal and poetically idiosyncratic. D’Agata’s introductions to each selection contain personal anecdotes, such as “I was an eight-week-old fetus when my mother first read to me” (she read nonfiction) and “In this year I am fired from my position as News editor of my fifth-grade class’s in-house newspaper... Mrs. Tuttle, who fires me, says I don’t know the difference between nonfiction and art. Mom says to take this as a compliment” (2, 167). Like a lyric essay, the anthology absorbs and transmutes the contents of its author’s life even as it discusses his ostensible subject. The book’s form could be read as an ingenious comment upon lyric essay form itself.

And yet there’s something suspiciously self-anointing about it. Though *Next American Essay* is widely regarded as the defining lyric essay anthology, the term doesn’t show up until page 435, introducing the final selection. The book’s structure thus stealthily posits a narrative with two intertwining threads: D’Agata’s life and the essay’s evolution. The climax of both happens simultaneously, with the naming of the lyric essay.

As he charts the essay’s forward progress into ever more lyrical territory, D’Agata also reaches backward, gesturing into the decades and centuries of literary history long before his birth, as if to show that the consummation of this boy-meets-genre romance was historically inevitable—fated, even. In his commentary, he gestures as far back as Cicero and Sei Shonagon. Plutarch and Plato, he suggests, were proto-lyric essayists.

Such transhistorical mapping of genre has its advantages, and may not be entirely self-serving. The term “lyric” itself has been used in a similar way; though many contemporary theorists reach as far back as Sappho for the origin of lyric poetry, Jackson and Prins point out that “the concept of lyric as the oldest form of poetic expression is actually a relatively recent notion; specifically, it is a post-Enlightenment idea” that became reified during the Romantic period (2). Reaching back into history for the presence of the lyric, critics run the risk of anachronistically imposing

Romantic constructions of the individual self onto earlier time periods. Yet Jonathan Culler has defended this broad, transhistorical use of the term by arguing that such generic classification can provide “the scope to activate possibilities occluded by narrower conceptions” (75); it helps critics relate temporally disparate works through tropic similarities, taking us “beyond the period-by-period agenda of our ordinary studies” (75).

And yet the ambiguous nature of D’Agata’s structural move—at best a lyrical gesture in and of itself, at worst simply careerist—seems at least worth acknowledging. In a widely read essay in *The Believer*, Ben Marcus heaped praise on the anthology: “D’Agata’s transitions alone, which show how alive an anthology can be, and would make any editor envious... could outfit a whole new generation of writers with the skills to launch an impressive and relevant movement of writing.” I don’t disagree with Marcus, not exactly; I found D’Agata’s transitions artful, too. But, especially if D’Agata is helping to “launch” a “movement,” it seems important to examine the story of that movement, and recognize other ways of centering it than with his birth.

There is power in naming, and not just for the namer: once the “lyric essay” existed as such, writers could write into the fledgling genre, expand its territory from within. As Eula Biss writes in her essay “It is What it Is,” published in *Seneca Review*’s 2007 issue, “Naming something is a way of giving it permission to exist” (55).

Of course, essayists were writing lyrically long before D’Agata and Tall and the *Seneca Review*; the anthology’s transhistorical focus proves as much. Furthermore, D’Agata never claims to have been the first person to utter the term—just to institutionalize it. The term caught on partly because it described something people were already doing, that had only lacked a unifying generic label. The fact that they continued to do so once that name existed, perhaps more visibly, should not be viewed as an argument that anyone needed the permission of D’Agata or of *Seneca Review* to create such work.

And yet, when a writer sits down to write something, she must consider form. Some writers ascribe an anthropomorphic agency to their own writing, investing it with a desire to take a particular shape; they claim to postpone thoughts of form until after the writing has stewed long enough in formal indeterminacy to “know what it wants to be,” or that they’ll begin writing in one form and another form will “take over.” Perhaps it’s possible to sit down and enter some blank formless state of receptivity and accept whatever the muse provides. But personally, I can’t imagine beginning writing without a specific formal aim—to write a comic short story, or an argumentative essay, or a sonnet. Things often change as I write, but beginning the process is difficult enough without being able to envision the shape I’m approximating, the container I’m trying to fill.

Once the term “lyric essay” became institutionalized by journals like *Seneca Review*, a writer could sit down and intend to write a lyric essay. Maybe she’d already been doing so, with or without the term in mind, but now she could write with more clarity about her aims and audience. She might know how to “market” her essay, and to whom.

This intentionality, crudely teleological and possibility-limiting as it might seem, can be experienced as a kind of freedom. Biss has described the form as “organic to the way I think” (57). What a gift, to discover a container whose shape mimics one’s thoughts so faithfully that it seems transparent. This isn’t in any way to argue against generic indeterminacy; I’m excited by works that break form. But it’s my feeling that formal codifications can be generative: the more rules there are, the more potential sites of identification exist—also, the more rules there are to break.

To address the term “marketing”: it seems silly to use the term in this context, when no one is making much money off lyric essays. But there’s a different kind of capital at stake here, the kind associated with “high art.” Not only “cultural capital,” but actual money in the form of fellowships, grants, and lucrative university jobs. To make space in the “high art” realm for a type of writing is to confer power on those who practice it.

So who are today’s lyric essayists? If indeed the lyric essay sidesteps the “front doors” of journalism, memoir and fiction in order to open a portal into a new literary space, then who is being invited? Who is crashing the party? Who is notably absent?

### 3. GENRE AND GENDER

For all her gratitude at what the term “lyric essay” has permitted her to discover and articulate, Biss remains suspicious: “I suspect that genre, like gender, with which it shares a root, is mostly a collection of lies we have agreed to believe” (56). Indeed, as many have noted, “genre” and “gender” both concern form and classification.

Like most taxonomic classifications, both genre and gender are somewhat arbitrary; they have hidden agendas. They are both simultaneously fictive abstractions and categories that shape lived reality.

The name “essay,” famously, comes from a verb that means “to weigh” or “to try,” highlighting the genre’s emphasis on process, its willingness to embrace indeterminacy. Citing these qualities, David Lazar argues that the essay is inherently a “queer” genre: “The genre category difficult to characterize by normative standards is queer. The genre category difficult or impossible to characterize, the essay, is also queer.... The desire of the essay is to transgress genre” (19-20). Lazar personifies the essay as a desiring subject in order to plead against carving it up into sub-genres; the term “lyric essay,” he argues, restricts the essay’s freedom by making it “genre normative” (20).

When writing about genre, there’s a tendency—almost a cliché—to disparage its limits, to gesture longingly towards an over-the-rainbow world beyond it. Ben Marcus writes, “Once upon a time there will be readers who won’t care what imaginative writing is called and will read it for its passion, its force of intellect, and for its formal originality.” But don’t we long for labels, too? What would a world without them look like? Could “formal originality” exist without definitions of form?

In her book *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson shares an anecdote from her friend Christina Crosby, a professor of feminist theory, whose class “threw a kind of coup”: “they were tired of dismantling identities, tired of hearing that the most resistance one could muster in a Foucauldian universe was to work the trap one is inevitably in. So they staged a walkout and held class in a private setting, to which they invited Christina as a guest. When people arrived, Christina told me, a student handed everyone an index card and asked them to write ‘how they identified’ on it, then pin it to their lapel. Christina was mortified...she’d spent a lifetime complicating and deconstructing identity and teaching others to do the same, and now, as if in a tier of hell, she was being handed an index card and a Sharpie and being told to squeeze a Homeric epithet onto it” (59).

This anecdote comically illustrates how both our lust for classification and our rejection of it might spring from a similar source—an urge to accurately limn reality. As Nelson puts the dilemma: “On the one hand, the Aristotelian, perhaps evolutionary need to put everything into categories—predator, twilight, edible—on the other, the need to pay homage to the transitive, the flight, the great soup of being in which we actually live” (53). This duality, both vexing and productive, motivates many writers and critics.

Maybe this is why we're tempted to personify our own writing as desirous, to imagine it capable of willing transgression. Transgression is sexy. Think of overhearing, of eavesdropping; of scaling walls to reach the unseen beloved; of back-door entrances to speakeasies with complex passwords. But every transgression requires a boundary. Christina Crosby's story captures the confusion that can result when a category like "feminism" is transgressed from within: such transgressions, paradoxically, require the proliferation of walls. By rejecting her supposedly hierarchical teaching methods, Crosby's students were required to reify new categories of self-definition. Presumably, Lazar's distaste for the institutionalization of the "lyric essay" shares something with Crosby's distaste at being handed that Sharpie. If, as noted above, ever-more-subtle classifications might become generative sites of identification and/or resistance, Lazar and Crosby remind us that they can constrict and chafe as well. So what new wall might be reified by the "lyric essay" in order to name the transgression it seeks to perform? Who might be liberated, and who "mortified," by this taxonomic move?

One concept that's being transgressed is that of the "fact." In a review of D'Agata's book *The Lifespan of a Fact*, Lee Gutkind describes hearing one of his colleagues use "D'Agata" as a verb. "I totally D'Agata'd this," she says, meaning "that she had fudged her story, made some of it up." Gutkind is the protective father, if not actual originator, of the term "creative nonfiction," which of course rivals "lyric essay." Many writers and critics use the two terms interchangeably, or see lyric essay as the sub-genre, but the terms of the turf war between these two generic godfathers themselves are starkly clear: Creative Nonfiction, the journal Gutkind edits, fact-checks assiduously, while Gutkind imagines that D'Agata, on hearing his name used as a synonym for fictionalizing, "would be pleased."

*The Lifespan of a Fact* consists of the record of correspondence between D'Agata and Jim Fingal, his fact-checker at *The Believer* on a story about a teenager's suicide that had been rejected by Harper's due to factual inaccuracies. D'Agata is unapologetic about his strategy of altering facts for the sake of "art": "When Fingal proves that there are 31 strip clubs in Las Vegas and not 34 as D'Agata claimed, D'Agata says: "The rhythm of '34' was better in the sentence than the rhythm of '31,' so I changed it."

What is the difference between importing the artfully indeterminate "Lyric I" into the realm of nonfiction, as a way of granting power to subjectivity, and simply making shit up? Does such a distinction matter? D'Agata claims not to care, but I side with Gutkind in suspecting that there's a difference between "queering genre" and borrowing the authority of one genre, on bad credit, to bolster the profile of another.

Furthermore: does such a maverick stance towards "fact" betray a certain kind of presumption? One wonders how a writer might reliably distinguish between irrelevant facts—facts that can be smudged for the sake of art—and facts on which others' lives and legal futures might hinge. I'm not saying that the facts D'Agata changed fell into the latter category—but I'm not sure I would trust myself, or anyone else outside of the story, to know the difference. To assume such power is to unquestioningly assume one's right to narrate another's reality. Gutkind goes farther: "The market for lyric essays is limited at best. Perhaps this new book's lame idea, that art supersedes fact, is D'Agata's foray into self-promotion and image-building in the creative writing academy. That—and not the general public—seems to be his target audience."

So here is the High Art thing again. Not all "lyric essays" play fast and loose with the facts, and most of them don't pretend to be journalism anyway. But still: does the "back door" of lyric lead, perhaps, not to a shadowy speakeasy but to a rarefied academic cocktail party, one whose attendees can afford to scoff at the banality of "fact?"



Perhaps D'Agata can be forgiven for conflating the creative writing academy with some kind of marginal space: it hardly holds the cachet of other, longer-standing, more traditionally prestigious academic departments. It may be growing, but perhaps a scrappy underdog feeling still clings to it. Many public debates have been held, for example, about whether MFA programs are inherently anti-intellectual. Even so, if the traditional academy is what the lyric essay seeks to transgress—well, I'm not sure this is a transgression that interests me.

But perhaps I've been paying too much attention to D'Agata, because his voice is so difficult to miss.

When I was an undergraduate, I sang in the Yale Women's Slavic Chorus, which was formed in 1969, the first year women were admitted to the university. Its origin story: when a group of women petitioned to join the long-established Russian Chorus, they were denied, but one of its members volunteered to teach them Bulgarian women's vocal music. Today, the Yale Women's Slavic Chorus is still going; their gatherings and concerts are still the weirdest, loudest, most joyous, most unapologetically female events I've ever attended. Sometimes the original male founder comes to these gatherings and hangs around. He tells anyone who asks that he founded the chorus, that he is responsible for its existence; if you smile appreciatively and appear willing to listen, he'll quip that he did so "to meet girls." But it's obvious, once the music starts—once the "girls" open their throats and start hollering—that none of it's really about him.

I'm not saying D'Agata is that guy. (For one thing, he's not standing on the sidelines; he's singing too.) But I suggest the analogy to frame the different kinds of ownership that might be at stake here.

In *Next American Essay*, D'Agata writes, "In Italy stanza means 'a room.' In Spain stanza means 'a shelter.' In France... stanza can be used to describe 'a stance'—a way of carrying oneself" (382). I like the little volta of this third definition. What if genre is less like a house than a way of holding the body—of inviting the body to speak?

Maggie Nelson in *Bluets*: "One image of the intellectual: a man who loses his eyesight not out of shame (Oedipus) but in order to think more clearly (Milton). I try to avoid generalities when it comes to the business of gender, but in all honesty I must admit that I simply cannot conceive of a version of female intelligence that would advocate such a thing. An 'abortion of the mind, this purity' (W.C. Williams)" (55).

Gender is a slippery, often-misleading signifier, but it's also a lived reality. Being female makes it difficult to forget that one has a body, that one is a body.

Susan Griffin echoes Nelson's critique of this brain-in-a-jar model in her essay "Red Shoes." "Without the body," she writes, "it is impossible to conceive of thought existing. Yet the central trope of our intellectual heritage is of a transcendent, disembodied mind" (306). Such a notion, she argues, is a fantasy of liberation that itself becomes a kind of cage: "The idea of an entirely autonomous mind has a subtext, and that is the desire for unlimited freedom from natural limitations.... And yet limitations are a necessary predisposition for any existence, including the existence of something we suppose to be abstract and cerebral, like the essay. And when the essay is built on the purposeful 'forgetting' of the body, these limitations paradoxically grow greater." (306)

Jenny Boully's essay "The Body," also included in *The Next American Essay*, consists exclusively of footnotes. Some of its pages are almost entirely blank. The essay's title refers not only to its own absent "body of text," but to the physical body of its lyric speaker. Thus, the essay

simultaneously relegates the female body to its margins and casts such marginalia as its central concern.

The last thing I want to do is suggest some kind of easy relationship between gender and literary form, to argue that women are predisposed to write in a certain way. And yet, for many, writing about gendered experience presents a paradox: how to represent the robustness of one's own lived experience while also representing the experience of obscurity, of erasure? How to explore the messy, fluid realities of the body without sacrificing so much linearity that one's work is labeled incoherent or unreadable? How to transcend the "diminutive," the traditionally "feminine," without devaluing it?

Susan Griffin again: "Is it possible to write in a form that is both immersed and distant, farseeing and swallowed? I am thinking now that this is what women have been attempting in the last decades. Not simply to enter the world of masculine discourse but to transform it with another kind of knowledge" (315).

The lyric essay, with its associative logic and its openness to viscosity as a tool of meaning-making, may in fact be more suitable than other forms for expressing embodied truths—especially those previously neglected, those experienced in the gaps between sanctioned "facts." It may offer unique tools for expressing the presence of absences. Perhaps this is why many notable female writers, especially those interested in writing about and through their female bodies, seem to excel at the lyric essay, to find the genre a congenial home: Maggie Nelson, Jenny Boully, Susan Griffin, Anne Carson, Eula Biss, Mary Ruefle, Brenda Miller—among many others.

Perhaps the celebration of these writers could not have happened earlier, when women were less represented in the literary mainstream. That same mainstream is also, conveniently, more receptive now to regarding embodied and fragmentary writing as art, as a valued form of intellection rather than an avoidance of it. Griffin's and Boully's presence in *The Next American Essay* indicates the acceptance of their writing by the creative writing establishment. Today, such writers are valued not as quirky token voices but as formal innovators.

The essays mentioned above do not necessarily represent the dizzyingly diverse genre as a whole, in either their form or their concerns; even if I could, I'm not really interested in proving that they are, or that the lyric essay is somehow a "female" genre—to do so would be to essentialize, and to run the risk of ghettoizing. (Besides: even the term "female" feels, these days, like an outmoded category in need of renovation.) But these examples serve to highlight the folly of separating "identity politics" from studies of "form," as many critics still insist on doing. Essays like Boully's show how formal innovation can arise, at least partially, out of the urgent need to explore the lived reality of a particular identity. It seems to me that any genre proving hospitable to such efforts should be welcomed.

Despite Lazar's objections, "queerness" might not be hampered by generic reification: the lyric essay potentially gives high-art sanction to all sorts of experiments. And not just those by women, or queer writers. If the lyric essay's associative structure, its deployment of visual tropes and of blank space, are tools particularly suited to exploring the bright mess of embodied experience, then the genre opens new possibilities for anyone with a body.

Paradoxically, it also seems well-suited for exploration of the disembodied, the fragmentary, the flashbulb immediacy and ephemerality of the Internet age. Sarah Menkedick skeptically writes in "Narrative of Fragments" that the lyric essay's form, which seems to both represent and invite

interruption of the reader's attention, "is as easy to consume as a Flickr slideshow, as successive sound bites on CNN, although in its language and content as a whole it intends to be difficult and tries for Barthesian jouissance." Maybe—but to me, this paradox seems less like hypocrisy than evidence of a messy, invigorating attempt to reckon with disruption. In this post-postmodern age, even writers who might have previously benefited from the illusion of a unified, separable self are forced to confront the reality of fragmentation, and find new ways to express it.

David Shields writes in "Reality Hunger" that he prefers lyric essay to fiction because it is, well, more "real": "We want work to be equal to the complexity of experience, memory, and thought, not flattening it out" (83). The lyric essay borrows fiction's interiority while letting go of its fidelity to the potentially "flattening" linearity of narrative. In doing so, it invites the reader into a crystalline structure of thought that—like a rhizome or network—might resemble chaos and formlessness at first, but upon closer look, might accurately represent the bright mess of a particular mind, inside a particular body, inside the vivid confusions of our shared world.

I suspect that most practitioners of the lyric essay, whatever they think of the term itself and its relation to identity politics, would resonate with Susan Griffin's rhetorical questions in "Red Shoes": "Bringing the public world of the essay and the inner world of fiction together, is something sacrificed? The high ground? Perspective? Distance? Or is it instead a posture of detachment that is renounced, a position of superiority? The position of one who is not immersed, who is unaffected, untouched? (This is, of course, the ultimate 'fiction.')" (314) At its best, the lyric essay accurately locates the writer in the "great soup of being" —the confusions of lived time, the jagged shape of thought, the betrayals and silences of the body.

#### 4. THE WHITE SPACES (RECONSIDERED)

I've typed the phrase "white spaces" so many times now that I can't help but focus on the word "white." Blank pages are usually white. But that doesn't mean they are innocent.

Claudia Rankine's recent book *Citizen* has been called a lyric essay. Though most reviews labeled it as poetry, its formal indeterminacy and plurality have invited a variety of classifications. Either way, the subtitle, "An American Lyric," seems to invite the reader to treat the book's speaker with the generative indeterminacy, the choral plurality, of a "Lyric I"; Rankine has said that this speaker, who explores the lived experience of Black subjectivity in America, conveys experiences that are her own as well as those of people she knows. The book mostly eschews the "I" itself in favor of a second-person "you"; this "you" could represent the speaker's plurality, or her dissociation from herself. Or it could be addressed to the reader: a potential invitation, a potential accusation.

Many associate whiteness with blankness, innocence. But Rankine's book reminds us that whiteness is more like willful ignorance, disavowed knowledge. It's a highly complex set of codes and privileges, disguised as normative neutrality. To equate whiteness with blankness is a refusal of knowledge—or of acknowledgment. *Citizen's* spare blocks of prose on blinding-white paper serve to underline this notion: to force the reader to confront whiteness as part of the text, to confront whatever she projects onto it in response to its difficult (and notably black) "propositions."

One notable absence in *The Next American Essay: writers of color*. D'Agata cops to the anthology's demographics in his introduction: "There are 19 men in here, 13 women. Twenty-nine 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" (1). I guess he figures he'll get points for honesty.

But, as Nelson writes in *The Argonauts*, "The notion of privilege as something to which one could 'easily cop,' as in 'cop once and be done with,' is ridiculous. Privilege saturates; privilege structures" (97).

For an anthology of 32 writers to contain only one African-American, and only five writers of color in total, is striking—particularly striking when the words "Next" and "American" are in its title. In the "Next America," the one on the verge of being, Americans of color will outnumber their white compatriots. (We Might as Well Call it the Lyric Essay isn't much better: just 3 writers of color out of 15 total—demographics presumably representative of *Seneca Review* as a whole.) So are writers of color particularly under-represented in this fledgling genre? Or in John D'Agata's mind? Or do these numbers reflect the larger inequities of the publishing world, of society?

If I had to guess, I'd blame the exclusion not only on D'Agata's personal blind spots but on a persistent yet misguided notion in the Academy that "high art" and "identity politics" are inherently contradictory. Either way, there are many wonderful writers of color who might be called "lyric essayists." Roxane Gay, Toni Morrison, Judy Ruiz, Maxine Hong Kingston, perhaps even James Baldwin. And more—certainly, many that remain unknown to me. It would be unfair to disown my own complicity in this; writers of color have rightly taken white writers like me to task for not looking harder, past the gatekeepers' darlings. But if such writers remain outside of the anthologies and publications considered to be genre-normative—to define the standards by which the lyric essay is recognized and marketed—that says something. For one thing, it says that we need some new anthologies. If the lyric essay does in fact open up new and exciting possibilities for embodied writing within the realm of High Art, it should not, in its excitement at finally being invited, neglect to look around and see who is still absent.

Still, I would like to insist on seeing the lyric essay's blank spaces as sites of possibility for everyone—if only because, in insisting, we might make it so.

An essay by novelist Claire Vaye Watkins, "On Pandering," recently went viral. Watkins decries the way in which her own internalized misogyny shaped her first book, while calling herself out on her frequent blindness to her own white privilege: "Myself, I have been writing to impress old white men." Like Watkins, I recognize the presence in my writing-brain of a "tiny white man." And yet as a female writer I've been invigorated by identifying patriarchal structures so as to depart from them—to conceive of myself as writing into some other place yet to be mapped. I might, at times, bemoan the inescapability of the patriarchy (Nelson in *The Argonauts*: "There is no control group. I don't even want to talk about 'female sexuality' until there is a control group. And there never will be." (66)) But maybe there's value in having a structure against which to rebel. We might fantasize some pure organic form—some control-group form—but new forms have always ruptured older ones in order to bring themselves into existence.

It would be impossible, especially for me, to compare gender and race; among other offenses, doing so would deny the existence of intersectionality. But perhaps racist and sexist structures can resemble each other both in the erasures they inflict and the ways in which their charged, dubiously defended borders might invite a kind of generative violation. Destruction can be a powerful kind of creation. Watkins ends her essay with a battle cry: "Let us, each of us, write things that are uncategorizable, rather than something that panders to and condones and codifies those categories. Let us burn this motherfucking system to the ground and build something better."

Yes, let's—even if the old structures won't disappear entirely; we'll always be reacting against them, to some degree. Still, we can salvage that obsolete front door and make a window out of it. Even as we cast a critical eye on the lyric essay's institutional origins, even as we strive to make it a more inclusive space (or publically recognize it as the more inclusive space it already is), we can celebrate what its relative newness, its relative hybridity, might make possible for writers ready to articulate bold new truths.

No, there will never be a control group. But what there can be: a breakage, a re-shuffling. The result of breakage: a proliferation of edge, of space.

A new arrangement of truths, a different kind of meaning.

## Notes

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