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Essay now: the contemporary essay in Australia and beyond

But, what *is* an essay? In his introduction to the 2014 volume of *The Best Australian Essays*, Robert Manne tackles the question of definition (intriguingly, one nearly every editor in the series has also foregrounded) and hopes, given this is his ‘second innings’, that it is a problem he now has a clearer view of:

I had thought of an essay as any brief piece of non-fiction prose. I no longer do [...] For me at least, an essay is a reasonably short piece of prose in which we hear a distinctive voice attempting to recollect or illuminate or explain one or another aspect of the world. It follows from this that no essay could be jointly authored. It also follows, that, with an essay, we trust that the distinctive voice we hear is truthful or authentic, even when perhaps it is not. (ix)

That Manne drops ‘non-fiction’ from his definition seems significant. As does his emphasis on a *distinctive voice*, authentic and truthful, *even when perhaps it is not*.

Jeff Porter says that ‘the trademark of the essay is its intimacy, the human voice addressing an imagined audience’ (2012: ix). The progenitor, he says, is Montaigne, who also felt that: ‘there is something that is fundamental about the essay to the play of the human mind’ (Porter 2012: x). Susie Eishenhuth and Willa McDonald also determine something human in the essay’s purpose: ‘to stir a common understanding, or at least invite deliberation on a common question. It reaches out in conversation across generations and cultures to touch others with its particular take on the world’ (2007: 129). Vivian Gornick personifies the essay as ‘a mind puzzling its way out of the shadows’ (2002: 36). Eula Biss, with her usual acumen, gets to the ‘root’ of the matter: ‘I suspect that genre, like gender, with which it shares a root, is mostly a collection of lies we have agreed to believe’ (2013: 196). Writing over a hundred years ago, Virginia Woolf, too, eschews psychology in favour of form, though the two are not necessarily discrete:

The peculiar form of an essay implies a peculiar substance; you can say in this shape what you cannot with equal fitness say in any other [...] Almost all essays begin with a capital I – ‘I think,’ ‘I feel’ – and when you have said that, it is clear that you are not writing history or philosophy or biography or anything but an essay, which may be brilliant or profound, which may deal with the immortality of the soul, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder, but is primarily an expression of personal opinion. (1905: 166)

Debates over definition and limits, conventions and transgressions are fertile territory for scholars in this issue, who range from problems of definition and form, to practices

of speculation, to posthuman and queer possibilities and beyond.

Our idea for this special issue of *TEXT* on the essay was an invitation for writers, scholars, and creative practitioners to think through the implications of the essay as an evolving contemporary genre in Australasia. That is, given the recent popularity of the essay in this country, we sought contributions that gauged and reflected on the genre as it had developed historically, or that traced its inflection in international contexts of relevance to Australasian stories and voices. Contributors responded enthusiastically to our emphasis on contemporaneity in relation to the essay; the focus in this issue is sharply on the present, or very recent past. This issue does not, then, except preemptively, contribute to a literary history of the essay in Australia (which anyway, may be a provocative desire, given recent skirmishes around John D'Agata's contribution to 'comprehensiveness' in his history of the American essay, see Deresiewicz). The contemporary state of the form is undeniably lively, scholarly attention to definition and theory is thriving, but the literary cultural roots of the essay within Australia arguably remain unearthed.

The essay is a diverse and fluid genre, and attention to issues of definition recur throughout this special issue, as elsewhere. Recent anthologies published here and overseas show what can only be called a characteristic engagement with theory, ontology, and evolution in relation to the essay as form. What an essay is or does is of perennial interest to writers and scholars in the genre, a concern that catalyses or evolves in new interpretations or sites for essayistic practice. So, Marcia Aldrich's wonderfully timely *Waveform* anthology claims the essay for women writers, and the essay as 'a shape-shifting thing. It can do many turns, take on any subject, and assume any structure demanded by the writer's aims and the requirements of the materials she wields' (2016: x). Geordie Williamson, the 2016 editor of the *Best Australian Essays* (his second time in the role) also positions the essay as something that more than anything is *deployed* by the author: 'the best essays here,' he says, 'trade in what might be called anticipatory grief, or calculated foreboding' (xiii). For Williamson, the essay is essentially connected to the elicitation of a certain kind of feeling, one further linked to a potential for activism. Williamson opens his introduction with a powerful personal anecdote; a memory of swimming with his young family on the Great Barrier Reef is juxtaposed to a terrible realisation:

three months later, that same stretch of reef was gone: killed by a bleaching event of an extremity without precedent in the Great Barrier Reef's 8000-year history. Thanks to human activity, the largest living structure on the planet had begun to die. (ix)

The essay as an act of human thinking through, as a conversational gambit to impart important factual information, to create feeling that *moves* the reader towards a point of view or away from a stance, has never been needed more. For Williamson, as for so many of the contributors to this special issue, the essay is a crucial mode of thought and intervention. The essay demands response, whether poetic, political, or both. Theorising this drive as part of the peculiar and powerful force of the essay *form* is something that this special issue in particular contributes to.

Our call for this special issue deliberately cast a wide net. The essay is also a pedagogical mode, one that often seems far removed from its more literary relatives,

and we sought interventions in thinking through the essay as it is used in tertiary contexts as much as reflections on the mode as a distinctive creative practice.¹ What is an essay? Who writes essays, and how? What does the essay do in the Australian publishing context and why should we pay attention to this? What is problematic about the essay, and why? Contributors to this special issue, through their diverse investigations and scope undermine the singularity of any definition and perhaps nonetheless contribute to one: the essay is multiple, shifting, and both historically and culturally contingent. We think here of John Frow's description of genre as 'a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning' (2005: 10); we see that the essay as genre is unruly, essaying its own transgression as its narrator sifts and weighs, attempting to let 'discourse take the shape of experience' (Good 1998: 10).² In this issue, even the traditional constraint of length, Manne's 'reasonably short piece of prose' (2014: xi), is contested by several contributors who argue that both book-length works and single paragraphs may constitute essays in certain situations.

While the focus for this issue was broad, contributions have clustered to reveal a set of issues that are preoccupying writers and thinkers: formal innovation, contemporary essayists, the relationship of essay to autobiography, polemical uses of the essay, the scholar as essayist, and the future of the essay. In this special issue, the twin matters of poetics and politics are fundamentally interwoven. While one article (Hemley) directly addresses the perennial issue of 'truth' in the essay, most contributors explore ethical issues through the prism of literary form, a shift that has been noticeable in recent work on creative nonfiction (another blurry nonfiction genre term) (see, for example, Singer and Walker). The literary, perhaps not surprisingly, dominates. Our call for papers generated few submissions on scientific essays, formal expository essays, or the student essay as a pedagogical tool.

As with other *TEXT* issues, we have divided the works into two sections: scholarly articles about the essay, and creative essays. This, of course, has its own complexities: some of the scholarly works are also creative works (Rendle-Short, for example) and the creative essays often make an overt argument about form or content (Meads, for example). Nonetheless, we hold that the four creative works showcased here form a distinct group and demonstrate the technically innovative use of the essay which emerging scholars are making here in Australia.

The essay has a particular role and place in Australian political life; publications such as the long-running *Best Australian Essays*, as well as game-changer current affairs publications like *The Monthly* and *The Saturday Paper*, have significantly shaped the Australian essay scene, providing both a platform and a prestige for the essay in this country.

Sue Joseph's interview-based article 'The essay as polemical performance: "salted genitalia" and the "gender card"' presents both a fascinating snapshot of a giant of the Australian non-fiction essay-publishing scene, Morry Schwartz's highly successful Black Inc. publication *The Quarterly Essay*, and a rare insight into the creative process of the essay writer. Drawing on a long interview with the Australian musician, writer, and academic Anna Goldsworthy, Joseph explores Goldsworthy's approach to

composing ‘Unfinished business: sex, freedom and misogyny’ (2013) commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary volume in the now long-running series. Goldsworthy’s essay was a particularly timely exploration of gender and politics that Joseph uses to spotlight the role of the essay as a vigorous mode of public intellectual discourse. In reflecting Goldsworthy’s response to what she saw as an unexpected backlash to the essay (which played out in the ‘Correspondence’, another unique feature of the *QE* essay format), Joseph explores how the essay’s capacity as a mode for political *feeling* – a personal, subjective response – to be both interrogated and displayed is crucial to its success, as well as central in its particular provocations.

Daniel Jukes, in ‘Walking, talking, looking: the Calibre Essay and remembering persuasively in Australia’, takes a different slant on the impact of another key forum for the essay, the *Australian Book Review* and its Calibre Prize. Dealing with a selection of essays from the Calibre’s prize-list, Jukes suggests that one of the key roles of the Calibre stable of essays may have been to revisit the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, offering partial mechanisms for reconciliation. Using the work of Ross Gibson, Jukes argues that the essay form may be located as ‘a way of mediating between white and black Australia’, through its conversational and flaneur-like qualities and its ability to harness Gibson’s ‘persuasive remembering’.

In ‘The essay in the Anthropocene: towards entangled nonfiction’, David Carlin offers a careful thinking through of the essay as creative writing methodology, a genre that can make things weird in powerful and political ways, embracing subjectivity and the personal. How do we write about a world where humans can no longer claim special ontological status over nonhumans? Arguing that it is now more than ever that the essay, with its messy marginal status and ‘multi-directional methods’ is truly needed, Carlin notes: ‘My impulse here is to set the stage for further connections between contemporary currents of innovation in the essay genre in creative writing and experiments in writing by humanists and social scientists arising from the urgency of posthuman ethics.’

Julienne van Loon, in ‘Embodied subjectivity and the project of the contemporary literary essay’, also explores the essay as posthuman. She starts out positing the essay as ‘a piece of writing that sets out, in the spirit of the word’s Latin and French origins, to test the quality of an idea, to weigh something up’ but from this relatively mild assertion, deploys the essay into a ‘post September 11’ world, arguing that, ‘a skilful literary essayist can imbue even the most abstract, philosophical or scientific of topics with a situated, embodied subjectivity’. Analysing essays by Gillian Mears, Damian Galgut and Marina Warner, van Loon claims that essays such as these are ‘doing important cultural work in a period of chaos, grief and political violence’.

What does the essayist say that the poet, short-story writer, or novelist says differently? Issues of genres and boundaries recur in this special issue and in ‘Provocatively calm: on David Malouf as essayist’, Patrick Allington notes that Malouf draws strict distinctions between genre in his work. Crucially, Malouf asserts that while both his nonfiction and fiction are ‘personal’, the nonfiction is from the outset ‘public’ rather than private. Malouf’s storytelling voice is vivid in every genre, but nonfiction occupies a distinctive space in his story telling oeuvre and Allington presents a close reading of

Malouf as essayist that probes and reveals what an essay can do as a mechanism of identity building or questioning. Malouf is a highly political writer because of his willingness to think and write about the place of Australia in the world, and form is a no less crucial a part of this.

The play between private and public is also explored by Ellena Savage in ‘The emancipatory personal essay?’. Tracing the connection between the use of the personal essay by marginalised groups, especially women, and the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 70s, Savage argues that the conflicts within such groups are mirrored in the personal essay form, as it attempts to express both a personal viewpoint and a universal political message. She posits two different approaches to the personal essay: the ‘subject position-oriented personal essay’, which aims for identification between author and reader, and ‘the dialectical personal essay’, which questions this supposed mutual recognition as ‘an act of resistance against hegemonic thinking’. This latter approach, Savage argues, is able to mediate between singular and universal subjectivities and make space for an emancipatory agenda.

A number of other papers focus on the potentiality of different types of essays, in particular lyric essays. Paul Hetherington and Rachel Robertson’s ‘Both broken and joined: subjectivity and the lyric essay’, references the *trencadis* mosaic work of Antonio Gaudí and Joseph Jujol, and argues that the lyric essay is especially well suited to the rendering of postmodern, fragmented experience. They demonstrate in lyric essays by Lucy Dougan, Gillian Mears, and Robertson how the form mimics the haphazard and associative processes of mind, memory and subjectivity, and the ‘elusive relationships of subjective impressions to the quotidian and the real’.

Michelle Dicoski’s ‘Wild associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson and the lyric essay’ makes an important claim that certain book-length works may be best understood as lyric essays, and that the narrators of such works present ‘not just a view of the world but a method for viewing the world’. She analyses the use of juxtaposition, association, and citation in these works, demonstrating that the characterisation in them is ‘found in the character of thought itself: in how it leans, and with whom, and how it leaps and connects, and how it makes its wild associations’.

Maggie Nelson’s work is also examined in Francesca Rendle-Short’s ‘Essay (queer). The. Essay. Queer. And. All. That’ alongside an ‘essayesque dismemoir’ by Peta Murray and a performance essay by Noëlle Janaczewska. Rendle-Short playfully explores the essay as queer; tracing the interplay of genre and gender, verbing nouns (‘the essay as verb’), and the queering (‘impermanence, indeterminacy’) of the essay form. The essay itself is performative of all ‘that’. She describes her work as ‘a consideration of etymologies, form, unconventions, and desire’ that crosses the ‘so-called borders between scholarly and creative’.

Also interrogating borders is Robin Hemley’s ‘The imagined parakeet: invention and fact irrelevance in the speculative essay’. Distinguishing between the lyric essay and the ‘speculative essay’, Hemley argues for the latter as a mode that ‘exist(s), or should exist in a crack between genres that remains unclassifiable’. From the posturing provocations of John D’Agata through to the lyrical experimentations of Woolf, Hemley moves to Annie Dillard and then Jo Ann Beard in tracing acts of deliberate

invention within the essay. For Hemley, asserting that lyricism is not confined to the 'lyric essay' is an important stake in reclaiming fluidity, expansiveness and 'speculation' as the essay's primary mode and affect. He stakes the essay in liminal territory and the speculative essay is his way of naming this fluid investigation.

While Sean Sturm's academic essay in 'From Aristotle to crime scene: a forensics of the academic essay' may initially appear a world away from Hemley's speculative essay, in fact, his paper makes a sophisticated argument that the academic essay is fundamentally an 'exercise in performativity' and the venturing of new ideas. Exploring the academic essay as a public or forensic site, Sturm journeys via Aristotle's species of rhetoric and modes of persuasion to show how the academic essay has its roots in the teaching of rhetoric. Using Bourdieu and Weizman, he takes the academic essay as object, or 'field', the university as forum and asks, 'What more can the academic essay tell us about the "crime" of academic writing?' Comparing the 'point-first essay' (which he claims is monological) with the 'point-last essay' Sturm notes that the latter is 'dialogical and aims to interact with its reader through the medium of form'. The point-last academic essay is essaying in the way Montaigne suggested, perhaps more risky but, Sturm suggests, a performance which can genuinely animate ideas and create change in the academy.

The four creative essays featured in this special issue demonstrate that new and emerging writers are, indeed, transforming the academy and the creative work occurring therein. Marie O'Rourke's 'Aqua profunda' is a collage of memories, focusing around a complex father and daughter relationship. Using association, metaphor and space, O'Rourke's work suggests the power of the lyric essay as a form of memoir.

'Not a memoir: an essay' by Lucinda Strahan also plays in the spaces between memoir and personal essay with a story about stories and about mental illness. Using interruption and allusion, and the tension between time and space (or narrative and portrait), Strahan creates a hybrid essay, contributing to what she describes as 'spatial autobiography'.

Threasa Meads' 'We might as well call it a boat' (a title that references D'Agata's phrase about the lyric essay) creates a lyric essay as heterotopia. The essay maps itself as a Foucauldian heterotopic site, breaking with conventional linear structures, and demonstrating how the lyric essay can represent pain and trauma.

We end this special issue with Peta Murray's 'Please supply own title _____', the most experimental essay in the collection and one which demonstrates most obviously the essay's resistance to, and transgression of, genre. The reader is asked to be co-creator (or perhaps co-performer) of this work, actively participating in the essay's rejection of closure and coherence. It is a high energy and fitting close for a special issue that seeks to elucidate this most anti-genre of genres.

A special issue of essays about essays is, of course, wonderfully recursive (as is this editorial). However, beyond all the definitional dilemmas, the generic debates, and the questions of politics and poetics, lies the fact that essays give pleasure. Returning to Virginia Woolf, whose essays have influenced so many contemporary writers and scholars, we are reminded that:

Of all forms of literature...the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words. The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. (1925: 211)

We hope that the articles and essays in this special issue will give readers pleasure as well as advance our understanding of this dynamic and fascinating form.

Endnotes

1. Interestingly, we only had one submission about the academic or scholarly essay.
2. We probably do not need, here, to recount that the word essay in English comes from the French verb *essayer*, meaning to attempt or try, and the Latin *exagium* with its notions of weighing or sifting.

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