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The emancipatory personal essay?

Abstract:

The personal essay is an art form that serves as both an expression of highly individualised specificity and as a narrative form that substantiates the individual's access to universal subjectivity. In the personal essay, the author elevates individual specificity to the domain of universality as it is understood within the thought frameworks of liberal humanism. The personal essay is thus a 'liberal' art form that presupposes commonality, or universality, between human subjects. The personal essay has also been taken up as a 'consciousness raising' project to identify a 'collective consciousness' shared by author and reader alike, and in this iteration is an emancipatory political tool. In this iteration, does the expression of fractured and marginalised identities in the personal essay form undo the hegemonic thinking that produces those identities? In this paper I identify two personal essay styles, the 'subject position-oriented personal essay' and the 'dialectical personal essay', to enlarge upon the conflict inherent to the personal essay: that the friction between singular and universal subjectivities cannot be adequately accounted for by a liberal humanist art form, nor is this disjuncture always comprehended in the personal essay as it is currently practiced.

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> It's exhausting to learn how to become a subject, it's hard enough learning how to become a writer. (Levy 2013: 26)

The history of the personal essay is long and knotty, with distinct traditions in many languages and cultures. This paper is interested in the Anglo-western personal essay as it is currently understood across both print and online publication cultures. It is characterised by brevity (it is generally short-form, although not always), is narrated by a voice styled as the author's own, and it often shifts between autobiographical writing and philosophical, poetic, analytical and polemic/political modes. It situates the author-narrator as a witness to events from life – both individually and collectively understood – that demand further exploration. Moreover, the form is generally framed within a liberal-humanist thought framework. To enlarge on this, I will call on Geordie Williamson's Introduction in Black Inc.'s *The Best Australian Essays 2015*. Williamson describes characteristics of the contemporary essay thus:

> the essay can be agile, written with brevity and rhetorical force … But it is as the distinct utterance of a singular mind that it most counts. Wonky, idiosyncratic, fragmentary, paradoxical, drunk on words, the essay has something that the AI algorithms and content-wallahs and social media provocateurs of the web do not: character, style, oomph! – a uniquely human thumbprint that only other thinking people recognise and pen their carefully keylocked attentions for. (2015: xxi)

This description, locating the editor's mood of pleasurable chaos while curating work of great formal diversity into a single anthology, does not quite define formal qualities that are exclusive to the essay. The formal characteristics Williamson lists could equally be applied to any number of contemporary literary genres: *character, style, and oomph!* might describe a short story, say, and *idiosyncrasy, fragmentation, and paradox* could equally describe the qualities of a poem. But it is not precise generic description that Williamson offers the reader; rather, this passage illuminates the cultural position of the essay. It is 'the distinct utterance of a singular mind that counts,' he writes, 'a uniquely human thumbprint that only other thinking people recognise'. In other words, the essay is firstly composed by a singular mind, and as such it betrays individualistic conceits. Secondly, when it is successfully composed, the essay appeals to a collective of readers who are bound by mutual identification which, in Williamson's example, are 'only other thinking people'; a collective, yes, but one whose numbers are limited by shared cultural precepts. In the case of this anthology, the cultural precepts Williamson identifies are 'thinkingness' and 'humanness'.

Within this paradigm, the essay itself sits somewhere between the author (an individual) and the reader (who binds the author to a collective identification). I suggest that the essay, here, is an object mediating an exchange between the individual and the collective. Crucially, as a 'uniquely human thumbprint', this object of mediation belongs to the project of humanist self-actualisation within a liberal democratic context. In unteasing the paradoxes of modern life with the fragmentary and idiosyncratic tools available to the essayist, I go on to suggest that the essay is a site of ideological conflict. At once promising 'formal freedom' and the supposed freedoms of human specificity, the essay simultaneously bears the marks of collectively held ideology, and in some instances reproduces hegemonic thinking. When we consider the role of gender and

other marginalising factors for authors, publishers, readers, and teachers, this conflict has material consequences. In this paper, I identify two trends in the contemporary personal essay that expose this tension: the 'subject position-oriented personal essay', a performative style commonly published online, and the 'dialectical personal essay', which is perhaps better equipped to expose this ideological conflict.

Since there is, as Judith Kitchen writes, 'no established critical terminology by which we discuss the genre' (2011: 115), my use of the term personal essay needs to be unpacked. In using the term personal essay, I open it to include the lyric essay, the familiar essay, the periodical essay, and the poetic essay. The line between prose poetry and lyric essays is fine and slippery. To mark a distinction between them, Kitchen states that to be an 'essay', a work requires specific characteristics: 'an essay functions the way metaphor functions by *negotiating the terrain between contexts*, and it often does this consciously' (2011: 119, emphasis mine). Where the hermetic prose poem (or any other nonfiction form) may not, necessarily, establish the terrain between contexts, the personal essay definitively grounds itself in making these connections: 'the personal essayist seems almost from the outset to have sensed the need to connect the lived life with another, more universal issue, setting the specificities of the personal smack in the middle of idea or concept' (Ibid.). The personal essayist is working to build the connections between past and present, specific and universal. It is a site of mediation between contexts. However as it is a genre characterised by intimacy (Lopate 1995: xxiii), and one that has been used to contextualise the individuals' embodied experiences in social environments, the personal essay has been taken up at various points in history to make claims in regard to political subjectivity.

The personal essay is a site of negotiation between the individual and the collective, the specific and universal. It contains a grammar of slippage and fragmentation, and normalises this through genre. It lives in the family of life-writing, it is understood as an intimate form of discourse between author and reader, and it negotiates the terrain between concepts. As a subgenre of life-writing, the personal essay is at the present moment overtly associated with feminine and non-authoritative writing practices – such as memoir, epistles, and journals – yet, historically, the personal essay is more generally rooted in the masculine, hegemonic discourses of liberalism and democracy (Haefner 128). This paper asks whether or not the moment at which the personal essay is taken up as a radical, emancipatory literary practice by writers at the margins starting in the mid twentieth century, it interrupted the liberal democratic project of self-fashioning whence it originated.

In the twentieth century the personal essay provided an ideal literary form for the theoretical demands of progressive political movements, such as feminism, Black liberationist, anti-colonial, and LGBT social movements. It provided a format for people ontologically situated outside the limits of the western sovereign individual, those marked by the perceived collective limits of their race, class, gender or sexuality, to 'come to voice', and, thus, to stake a claim on the category of western subjectivity otherwise denied them. A common theory explaining the popularity of the personal essay amongst writers at the margins is that, as a political practice, it emerged out of 'consciousness raising' groups, and liberationist political practices more broadly.

In the late 1960s, American feminists began meeting in each other's homes to share stories from their lives with one another. These 'consciousness raising groups' did as their name suggests – they engendered a political identification between women *as a society* of individuals who suffered together under shared oppression. Participants' individual narratives, specific to their interior and domestic lives, took on a collective, social significance. Unlike many political 'minorities' (a problematic term to speak of populations that in fact constitute a global majority), the dominance of heterosexuality-in-practice meant that, for many women at the helm of second-wave feminism, to live a life at all was to live deeply entwined with the daily needs, duties, and intimacies of representatives of the oppressive class: men. 'Woman' as a category (particularly those from white, middle- and upper-classes), was therefore unlike many other marginalised identifications, because this class depended on – while being defined in their deference to – white men. Feminist consciousness raising groups provided the space otherwise lacking for collective identification and political planning across class, race, and sexuality boundaries.

However, class, race, and sexual differences, as well as differences between individuals and their unique political desires, meant that consciousness raising group environments often fell into conflict. As women's autobiographical writing began to intersect with the discursive style of consciousness raising groups, many feminist writers began to write not only about the demoralising material conditions they lived through in public and private life, but also the failure of feminist social organisations to successfully account for and address their individual experiences and grievances. One memoirist of this period, Joreen Freeman, wrote about the social breakdowns of the earliest women's consciousness raising groups, describing the intense social atmosphere she experienced as rife with bullying, toxicity, and 'trashing'. 'Trashing', she writes, 'is a particularly vicious form of character assassination which amounts to psychological rape' (1976). The injury of this particular social failure was twofold, because the intentions of such organisations were to enable sisterhood and community; and it was, in fact, the sisterhood, the very insistence on a unified collective identification, which enabled and obscured from light the bullying. Feminist consciousness raising groups therefore provide a rich metaphor for the tension evident in an individual's conscious participation in communitarian political projects. The speaker at a consciousness raising meeting was simultaneously an individual narrating the singularity of their biographical experiences and a collectively-identified subject. The practice was coded as emancipatory, as is the literary offshoot of this political process: the contemporary personal essay as styled as an emancipating tool. The speaker-author's role in this complex is therefore calibrated as a first-person narrator invested in the political aims of the collective.

Extending this analysis to the project of writing the personal essay, the conflict inherent to consciousness raising groups mirrors the contradictions of the personal essay. It was not possible for the collective, so rigidly described, to comprehensively account for the singularity of each of its subjects, using a literary technology as embedded as the personal essay is in the normalising project of liberalism. However it is possible to suggest here that this very tension – between the individual and the need to collectively identify – gives rise to the destabilising power of the personal essay. Feminist practices

across artistic, social, and political realms did not, after all, end with the combustion of consciousness raising groups. In fact, the proliferation of autobiographical texts authored by women and members of other oppressed classes, who had come of age in this movement, almost certainly descended from practices learned in and nurtured by group consciousness, captured by the need to make 'public that which has been private' (Felski qtd. in Smith and Watson 1998: 83).

These tensions bring to light the problems of the autobiographical subject standing in as a representative subject – and in the case of the female writer, a subject delineated and defined by way of her alterity (Mason qtd. in Miller 2015). Lauren Berlant writes that within consciousness raising culture, feminist discourse, whether public or private, 'had, nonetheless, the status of a private meeting: the audience came to have the mass experience of intimate female identification central to feminist politics' (2008: 238). This mass identification ultimately fails to account for the singular subject. This is another tension to add to the personal essay's oeuvre: the intimacy it promises while being an object of public consumption.

However, writing oneself as a radical emancipatory practice comes under scrutiny when it appears to fit too easily into the individualist mould of subjectivity required by neoliberalism, that is, one which prioritises symbolic progress over substantive change. Within contemporary technologies, the personal essay is a highly accessible literary form encountered by readers of many backgrounds on a regular basis. Whether in the form of a periodical essay – a newspaper column, for example – or an online personal essay such as is published by most of the larger mastheads and independent online magazines – readers will encounter personal essays testifying to personal experiences and dilemmas that do not always offer material or political solution. Perhaps this is not the precise domain of the literature. Historical correlations between works of literature and substantive material change are rare, and so the insistence on the political viability of personal essays as meaningful political tools is at best shaky. Artful nonfiction, however, presents living, human testimony to the world's injustices. The simple act of bearing witness in public serves, for the reader, as a point of identification. 'Writing the wound' is an unlikely strategy for political upheaval, but for those at the margins, the existence and availability of first person nonfiction offers testimony to a shared experience that may otherwise have no precursor in cultural life. They become what Virginia Woolf names the 'precursor', the evidence of a shared existence for those otherwise denied useful terms of subjectivity. In *A Room of One's Own*, she writes that 'we think back through our mothers if we are women – but there is an absence where the history of our mothers' writing should be' (1929: 88). Filling in the gaps where Woolf could find no precursor is perhaps the most astounding political role any text can play. As bell hooks writes, 'Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless – our beings defined and interpreted by others' (1988: 12).

However, the apparent ease with which such cultural objects are commodified and symbolically represented in place of substantive change urges me to consider the limits of the personal essay. Adrienne Rich, reflecting on her early essay publications, writes:

> Soon thereafter, personal narrative was becoming valued as the true coin of feminist expression. At the same time, in every zone of public life, personal and private solutions

> were being marketed by a profit-driven corporate system, while collective action and even collective realities were mocked at best and at worst rendered historically sterile.
>
> By the late 1990s, in mainstream American public discourse, personal anecdote was replacing critical argument, true confessions were foregrounding the discussion of ideas. (2001)

This marketisation, which Rich reads as a betrayal of the political project of writing oneself into subjectivity, suggests a belief that the personal essay can operate as a monument of resistance against ideology, which can and should hold up against the neutralising effect of commodification. Instead, I see this consumption of a literary form that holds some radical potential as symptomatic of what the personal essay is: a site of mediation between the specific and universal, and freedom and facticity, in a global context subsumed by market realities. It strikes me as disingenuous to align every offshoot of the personal essay as though each is as marketable as the next. Obviously, there are substantial formal differences between the kinds of 'personal anecdote' and 'true confessions' Rich describes, and those essays that resist marketisation because their form does not align with what mass media desires – they are too long, or dense, or experimental, or serious, or violent for commercial proliferation, and they remain in the pages of radical journals, small presses, and underground zines, only rarely moving into the mass market. One example of such a challenging, dialectical personal essay I will draw upon is Hilton Als' piece 'Tristes Tropiques' from his 2014 collection *White Girls*.

At the commercial end of this publishing spectrum, there is something to what I will term 'subject position-oriented personal essays' that is particularly desired by mass media; this relates to the essay functioning as an overt point of relation between the author and a collective of readers (consumers) who share cultural precepts. The personal essay form at its most marketable is where it is taken at its lightest, because its subject (no matter its topic) *is* the relationship between an author and their context. By declaring this point of identification as both the subject and topic of a personal essay, this kind of essay works as both the literary object and the marketing program for the literary object. Such essays could be seen as demonstrations of Barthes' performative writing: 'the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered' (1977: 146-7). Subject position-oriented personal essays both presume the unity of pre-existing cultural forms (whether they be monolithic identities such as 'woman', relational identities such as 'brother', or modes of authority such as 'witness'), and present the reader with no other content beyond their utterance. Countless iterations of this 'subject position-oriented personal essay' are published online on a daily basis. To illustrate the trend I will call upon a 2015 essay published on the 'celebrity, sex, fashion for women' website *Jezebel*: 'On Falling In and Out of Love With My Dad', by Natasha Rose Chenier. The reason I cite this particular example is that it became the subject of a number of journalistic responses critiquing the limitations of – and the exploitative labour conditions underpinning – the proliferation of confessional personal essays written for the internet. 'On Falling In and Out of Love With My Dad' details that which its title exposits, in the form of a personal essay. As well as describing an autobiographical account of an abusive, incestuous relationship, the essay looks out beyond the individual; Chenier links her individual experience to the language of feminism, cognitive behavioural therapy, and child abuse. Chenier

describes her body's response to the abusive relationship, and ties it into a broader narrative of male domination: 'Within a patriarchal system, the idea of father-daughter incest is especially disturbing …' (2015). In this way, the essay conforms to a normative model of a personal essay (it uses a narrative of an individual to speak to a broader, collective issue); and in conforming to genre (of experience, identity, and of literary form) the essay conventionalises both the author's bionarrative and the readers' recognition of such a narrative. For example, Chenier writes: 'I imagine that, unless you have experienced genetic sexual attraction yourself, this is going to sound entirely unbelievable. But trust me: it is as real and intense as anything' (Ibid.). The essay is a site of mediation between an individual and a collective who share cultural precepts, or who, at the very least, can recognise a certain conventionality of form. Moreover, this particular personal essay and its editors were critiqued by other journalists for indulging readers' basest identifications: pity, revulsion, and contempt. While 'In Falling In and Out of Love With My Dad' is crafted elegantly to the high standards of American online journalism, it does not, in my estimation, go beyond the genre parameters it sets up for itself: its title and its content do the work of affirming a form of recognition (even if that recognition is repulsion) between the individual and collective. In this regard it is not a dialectical exercise in revealing or disrupting hegemonic thinking, but a reproduction of hegemonic genre. While the topic of the essay suggests some radical potential – incest is indeed a sexual taboo and surviving trauma is a style of individual resistance – this essay presumes the unity of pre-existing cultural forms rather than upending them to reveal original or novel insight. In summary, this particular essay, and the subgenre it belongs to, is not necessarily engaged with negotiating the 'terrain between contexts,' that is, the cultural terrain whereby objects accrue their ideological functions, nor making visible the covert workings of ideology, but with simply producing cultural objects for a ready-made collective of consumers.

A complicating factor for my critique of subject position-oriented essays is its radical genealogy – the roots of this form are to be found in early discourses of liberalism, women's intimate life writing practices, and consciousness raising groups – and, as such, this genre contains within it a history of subversion. Yet, in normalising the processes of discursive marginalisation and collective identification, this essay form reproduces hegemonic thinking. This is not to say that the personal essay, nor the marginalised social identifications that often drive them, have extinguished their potential to upend and expose hegemonic thinking. In fact some of the most singular and sophisticated personal essays of our time make visible these coercive forces governing our bodies.

One such essay, 'Tristes Tropiques' by Hilton Als, is an elegant example of a dialectical personal essay. A one-hundred-page essay on the topic of a 30-year long queer friendship between Als, a gay man, and a heterosexual man he names 'SL' (shorthand for Sir or Lady), 'Tristes Tropiques', like much of Als' nonfiction, upends conventional categories of identification. To read genre in this essay, I use Lauren Berlant's description of the field:

> A genre is an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons

> transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme. (2008: 4)

In expanding normative subject position identifications, like gender and race, to incorporate cultural artefacts such as films, books, fictional characters, and artworks, Als disrupts the normalising process of genre. Als writes:

> By the time we met we were anxious to share our black American maleness with another person who knew how flat and not descriptive those words were since they did not include how it had more than its share of Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker in it, women who had passed their 'white girlhood' together. (2014: 13)

There is no presumed universality in either the narrator's nor SL's cultural identifications, nor is there a presumption that a collective of readers will easily recognise or anticipate the pleasures available to them in the two men's cultural identifications as presented in the text. These spectral identifications inform the shape and style of the essay, which fragments time and frequently shifts its voice between critical, poetic, speculative, and confessional modes. Upending predictable categories, Als questions their hegemonic formation: 'America is nothing if not about categories', he writes (14). That 'Tristes Tropiques' disturbs sexual, race, gender, and writing genres, means that it is formally unassimilable into the dominant publishing culture of personal writing; and it is no surprise that it was published by an independent publishing house (McSweeney's).

In summary, the two distinct approaches to the contemporary personal essay I am naming are as follows: the 'subject position-oriented personal essay', which enlarges upon a normative identification between author and audience for a program of mutual political recognition; and the dialectical personal essay, in which an author upends the tools of mutual recognition as an act of resistance against hegemonic thinking in text and in life. The program of emancipatory life writing often found in personal essay practices needs to address this discord. Narrativity in and of itself can provide a therapeutic outcome for authors and readers from the point of identification they share – this is the idea of life writing as the transcription of lived events. However the need for intimacy in the personal essay is often conflated with the need for confession, which could be seen as a normative kind of identification – as though a confessional narrative is not mediated and transformed through the process of writing. The autobiographical nature of personal essays indeed lends the form to personal revelation and to situating the author as a relational subject which, in turn, often leads to a conflation of the personal narrative with the confession of trauma. Yasmin Nair critiques the over-inflation of the trauma narrative within liberatory political discourses which I understand to be symptomatic of the 'autobiographical imperative' – the insistence that marginalised subjects are only permitted to speak through the discourse of autobiography if they are to speak at all (Namaste 2000: 273).[1] It is trauma narratives that are often seen to substantiate political claims made by radical social movements. Nair writes that confessing trauma as a purely affective discourse 'insists that everyone identify as a trauma victim in order to be considered, really, nowadays, a legitimate subject'. She states:

> There's this weird kind of culture of confession …: this constant imperative to confess, and this imperative to reveal oneself as the wounded subject, that I find very disturbing. Because I think it pretends to be a systemic analysis, because what it's pretending to do is to say 'Look, this matters because so many of us who work on this matter are in fact also traumatized.' That's the rationale. But I want to say: is that the only way to understand trauma in neoliberalism? Is it possible that only those who have experienced it are allowed to talk about it? There's a kind of demand for authenticity in all of this that I find particularly vexing. (Qtd. in Kinnucan 2014)

Nair points to the habit of particular border activists in North America using confession as a political strategy: 'They all quote Audre Lorde, they all have the same goddamned Audre Lorde quotation that they use over and over again' (Ibid.). While she doesn't reveal which quotation it is, a google search yields this one: 'I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood' (1984: 40). Nair's critique is a useful intervention for this paper. While she doesn't address the personal essay form specifically, her critique could be levelled at any number of contemporary essays (perhaps many which I would characterise as subject position-oriented personal essays) for their performativity and their conflation of confession or self-revelation with a critique of hegemonic thinking. Self-revelation as a technology of criticism, artful interruption, or political resistance can only be effective if it makes visible the terrain on which it occurs.

In another measured critique of personal writing framed as feminist praxis, which, like Nair's statement, is critical of the practice of self-revelation's easy subsistence with hegemonic thinking and neoliberal capitalism, Grosz says:

> The proliferation of memoirs, of autobiography, the overwhelming emphasis of the personal, the anecdotal, and the narrational, while important for long periods of feminism's existence, have now shown us the limit of feminist theory, to the extent that feminist theory focuses on questions of the subject or identity, it leaves questions of the rest of existence outside of, beyond, or bigger than the subject unasked. Feminism abdicates the right to speak about the real, and about the world; about matter, and about nature, and in exchange, cages itself into the realm of the 'I'. *Who am I? Who recognises me? Who can I become?* Ironically, a realm that is increasingly defined by the right to consumption; the right to own, rather than the right to do. (2007)

The limits Grosz imposes on feminist theory are, I suggest, rhetorical. Writing autobiographically, or understanding the material body as the site of textual production, does not prohibit a feminist examination of biology, ethics, economics, matter, or sport. To take umbrage with this statement, I suggest the 'real world' fields that Grosz says are beyond the scope of (current) feminist theory in fact require feminist interventions that might substantially undermine the notional western subject and the discursive violence it requires. In other words, women's endocrinological marginalisation from realms of the 'real' – fields like medicine or economics – may in fact have something to say about the discourses that govern those realms. The critique that Grosz contributes

to this paper, however, is that a certain 'consciousness raising' or 'coming-to-consciousness' text has now been exhaustively produced and subsumed by mass media, and as this type of narrative now functionally subsists within hegemonic thinking, the terms from which a subject might 'write oneself' into emancipation have changed. While I contest Grosz's implication that autobiographical writing ought to be abandoned, I take from it a caution to practitioners of the personal essay: figuring the 'self' alone in text is no longer a substantial claim. To substantiate the radical political or artistic possibilities of the personal essay, the essay needs to demonstrate a dynamic or novel understanding of the cultural precepts it negotiates: the materiality of the terrain between contexts.

Endnotes

1. Vivian Namaste specifically writes that 'autobiography is the only discourse in which *transsexuals* are permitted to speak' (2000: 273, emphasis mine) in the notes to the introduction of her 2000 academic study of transsexuals' erasure *Invisible Lives*. She also writes that she contests the position that 'knowledge can only be founded on experience' (Ibid.) and on this basis refuses to write autobiographically. I have expanded this notion of the autobiographical imperative to include women and others who are frequently – if only ever – called upon to speak in public to account for autobiographical specificities.

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