On the Essay: A Gendered Evolution of Narrative Presence in the Personal Essay

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Dedications

To Professor Staples, for believing in this project; for never kicking me out of your office, be it the very first random summer Thursday or any day thereafter; for finding the word “essayistic;” for your guidance in syntax and in life; and for believing in me, as a student, a woman, and a writer. These pages are for you.

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An Introduction to the Essay

"*Vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out.*"

– Virginia Woolf, *The Modern Essay*

There is no familiar adjective form of the word “essay.” Fiction has the novel, written by novelists; poetry is created by poets who write poems in a poetic fashion; biography, biographer, biographic; journalism, journalist, journalistic; literature, literati, literary. Nearly every other genre has managed to work personal and occupational nouns, as well as genre ascribed adjectives into common parlance. Essay, essayist (“essayer” fell out of good graces in the 1800s), and, according to a very small, out of date entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: essayistic.

When we situate ourselves to read an essay, we often have something particular in mind. It is as concrete as it is intangible. It could be about lobsters, race, New York, a Toyota Camry, schizophrenia, loss, John Wayne. We don’t know if it will take us three minutes to read in a sterile waiting room, or a full, sweltering hour under the sun and adjacent to the ocean. We don’t know if it will stand alone on a translucent *New Yorker* page of web or paper – or be gathered together with others and bound with stitches and glue. When we sit at the table with the essay and spread it out before ourselves, we know not what it contains, but instead, what it affects. If we read what philosopher Theodor Adorno pens to be a “good” essay, we know that there will be moments of truth, either overwhelming in presence or subtly poignant. We also know that these moments will cause us to question truth, prod fact, and imagine woven fictions, and possibly *ourselves*, within the text.

We think we know what it means to write an essay. The word reveals itself initially, with equal parts reverence and horror, somewhere in adolescent English classes. The mechanics are fastidiously presented; the citations are exhausted; the content, almost always, revolves around F. Scott Fitzgerald or Jonathan Swift. Young people are introduced to the essay as a means of sorting out how they feel about the symbolism of green light, figuring out how to explain satire in words that sound impressive, and working under the pressure of a quantitative means of assessment. The

power is concentrated in the argument, not the self. The academic essay grounds itself in a formula of structure and argument. No matter how much there is to say about emerald light, there is never anything to say about the individual, the author. In fact, making personal statements, using "I," is the ultimate sin of the English class essay. The writer disappears from the writing.

Therein lies the plight of the modern essay: the academic essay is our ground zero definition of the term. Until we really, truly sit down with the essay, our consciousness maintains a base construction of the genre: one that is completely detached from authorial voice. The essay, in true practice, is wholly about voice: pure, manipulated, concealed, or overt. The essay is what happens when one goes out to write one's way out of a tangle of the self. It has the formidable power to channel voice in order to "focus and disrupt" (Mairs 4). The essay presents something to say about something, and by extension, something to say about his or herself, as the essayist.

There is, of course, a secondary plight to the modern essay, which E.B. White, in his foreword to *Essays* verbalizes and does so quite well:

> The essayist, unlike the novelist, the poet, and the playwright, must be content in his self-imposed role of *second class citizen*. A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other early triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play, and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence. (Atkins 21, emphasis added)

In short: no one takes the essay seriously. Most view it as a genre that lacks form and any kind of literary shape or merit: stream of consciousness on whim. If not frivolous and un-serious, it is viewed as wholly vain, pretentious, and arrogant. The concept and thought of writing about oneself is only an "amusement," and not a *real* pursuit (Atkins 13). However, in pursuing the essay as a topic of study, I substantiate my claim to do so by quoting Nancy Mairs on the dangers of the *real*

pursuits: “to speak of [essays] in the passive voice as though they were ordained by some anonymous agency, and to envision *‘real’* as a discrete state distinguishable (by the rigorous critical mind) from some other way of being infects otherwise fluid and flexible intelligences with a kind of cerebral tetanus that inhibits *jouissance* before the first lovely ripple of pleasure has fairly begun” (Mairs 3-4, emphasis added). I argue that freeing ourselves from “cerebral tetanus,” within the bounds of this project, looks like the following: exploring the essay as a serious form, as a conduit and complexifier of personal voice, and investigating the future that the genre posits.

To understand the modern situation of a concept, the natural, initial inclinations are to look to its origins. Like nearly every other facet of the essay, the origins are not known with certainty or singularity. In the first chapter of this project, I explore a span of the essay’s origins. I begin with Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), the known Father of the Essay. In the brief and limited critical study of the essay that exists, Montaigne is the essayist most often listed as the indisputable origin. Montaigne represents the digressional, informal, and – some might argue – vain iterations of the essay. Most importantly for the purposes of the essay’s endurance, however, Montaigne pioneered the use and voice of the “I.” Before the essay, a writer could write about the self only through the conceit of imagination, in fiction; or through the act and process of theorizing, in philosophy. In a time of personal stagnation, Montaigne worked his way through the process of writing his opus, *Essais* (1580), – in French, *essais* meaning, aptly, “attempts” – and carved out a space for himself. I situate the life and experience of Montaigne in his personal history, and the history of France at the time of *Essais’* creation. Using these histories to provide context, I will analyze the unique, essayistic style and voice of Montaigne on the whole, as well as thorough close readings of two of his pieces, in relation to both Montaigne and his audience. My analyses pay

particular credence to the structures of narrative and point of view, as I study the angle of the use and place of the self, the "I," in the essay.

Countless male essayists of note who came after Michel de Montaigne would be worth study and analysis of the continued development of the essay: John Dryden, John Donne, Sir William Cornwallis, William Hazlitt. However, in order to discern the origins of the essay form comprehensively, I turn to Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626). Bacon is more known for his political and philosophical contributions rather than *Essayes*, but his identities of statesman and philosopher catalyzed his project of the essay. In his ever-evolving and exhaustive collection, *Essayes*, Bacon creates the British class of the essay. While influenced by Montaigne in its content – wholly dedicated to the experience and opinions of Bacon – Bacon takes upon the project of a formal and distanced essay, which counsels its reader on a variety of topics. The credibility of Bacon in his essays rests wholly on the superiority of his genius and expertise, from which he offers a distanced version of himself. Unlike Montaigne, he uses the first person singular sparingly, if at all, but instead his tone from the mount provides an omniscient, almost divine sense of the "I." Bacon's identity can be seen via the values and practices he advocates for, as well as the third person characterizations of his examples. The duality of Montaigne and Bacon illustrates the two predominant approaches to the essayistic voice: overly personal and digressive, versus the distanced and formally omniscient.

While Theodor W. Adorno is not a writer of the essay, his theory, "Notes on the Essay," creates a ledge to stand upon between the two seminal constructions of the essay. On the topic of the essay's foundational hybridity, he notes: "At times, emancipation from the compulsion of identity gives the essay something that eludes official thought — a moment of something inextinguishable, of indelible color" (Adorno 17). Adorno's criticism of the essayistic form and

genre explores the multiplicitous dualities of the essay: from science and art, truth and lies, experience and experiments. A better understanding of the essay's dual origin, through the theory and criticism of Adorno, creates the vocal space for which female essayists will then work to claim as their own.

The charge of this project is not solely critical or exploratory, but in tandem, creative. One of few scholars on the essay, G. Douglas Atkins, astutely concluded: "I soon found myself writing about the essay, and as someone well reasoned, you can't write about essays in article form –" or in my case, academic form, "inevitably you wind up writing an essay" (3). And I did find myself writing an essay; in fact, I wrote many essays. I realized that so much of what goes on inside my head and internal monologue is one giant essay, and thus, I created a growing, amorphous Word document to chronicle these potential essays. I cannot say with certainty that any of them are of any literary merit. Instead, what you might find here are the remnants and pieces of myself, in a type of longform critical essay. Joan Didion, Marina Keegan, and Zadie Smith were chosen to make up the chapter and analysis of the female-formed essay, partly because they are incredible writers and women who represent a time capsule of experience, spanning years, backgrounds, and oceans. But also, they were chosen because their collective voices have been the ones who have most influenced my own. As you read the initial chapter on the male-constructed essay, my voice, the "I" of the author may be harder to discern. But, it is my hope that in the openness of the female-created essay, you will see pieces of myself there as well.

In surveying Joan Didion, Marina Keegan, and Zadie Smith as a portion of the body of female-founders of the essay, I found commonalities in the way each approached writing about herself – *narrative presence*. In contrast to the overtly direct and persistent use of the "I" in the male-formed essay, all three female essayists found essayistic pursuits rooted in ideas other than

their own identities. In crafting the essay, and their collections at large, each sought to seek out something greater in the world, be that psychology in practice, the rights of whales, or the death of libraries amidst political crisis, but consequently derived pieces of their identities from the greater things. Thus, I offer that the indirect approaches to narrative presence in the female essay creates greater communion and empathy with humanity, rather than the direct and overt use of the male-constructed “I” which narrowly focuses on the power and institutionalism of the self.

Chapter 1:

The Male-Constructed Essay, in Origin and Narrative

"*Now, I am constantly adorning myself, for I am constantly describing myself.*"

– Michel de Montaigne, "Of Practice"

I. Michel de Montaigne & *Essais*

It is a rare thing to have an indisputable origin; the identity of the first movers of the thought, method, and structure of various strains of intellect are often fought over for centuries. In the case of the essay, however, Michel de Montaigne has been established as the father of the essay and the founder of essayistic form. While his style is unique, so much of Montaigne's essays were formed in opposition to other thinkers and schools of thought. In this rebellion, Montaigne is able to not only think about himself and his experience; he conducts a study. He chronicles his experience in the world and thoughts upon the self, in a form that had not been approached before. In his aptly titled essay "On Experience," Montaigne announces: "I study myself more than any other subject; 'tis my metaphysic, my physic … In this universality, I suffer myself to be ignorantly and negligently led by the general law of the world" (III.XIII). He views the topography of his personhood as its own discipline, which in turn founded what it meant to intentionally write about one's self. While he may say that he is "negligently and ignorantly led" by the laws of the world, *Essais* demonstrates the Montaignian innovation of self-evidency. He participates in the rebellion of making one's own laws in the world, ipso facto, by the power of self-creation: "I shall know [the world's laws] well enough when I feel it; my learning cannot make it alter its course; it will not change itself for me" (III.XIII). The loose and abstract strokes painted by Montaigne in the seventeenth century would soon become the bones of the literary and personal essay.

The particular geographic and political environment of Montaigne's era give context to his construction of the self within times of turmoil. Montaigne sheds light on what is so much a trope of the essay: responding to external trauma via internal grappling and rumination. Montaigne's period of writing *Essais* spanned across some of the most violent and corrupt eras in French history. The wars of religion severed the civilians of France across the divide between Protestants

and the Huguenots. Montaigne, himself, existed at the epicenter of this conflict. In his official capacity as political liaison, he split his talents between his close friend, and soon to be crowned king, Henri de Navarre (later Henry IV), and a group of extremist Catholics referred to as the Holy League (Wimmer).

In this liminal space between religion and ideology, Montaigne turned inward. The period of the wars of religion and politically heavy back-and-forth between parties was a time of heightened activity for Montaigne. From 1557 to 1570, he was busy, entwined, and concerned with every detail of political information that ran through him; he puppeteered the court, in many ways. He retreated from the public sphere by the 1580s. It is in these times of "leisure" (Jay 23) for Montaigne that he writes *Essais*, seemingly from his ivory tower. In moments of either imagined stillness or true rest – exact orientation amidst the collection of *Essais* is ambiguous, as he cannot stay away from the public sphere except for brief periods in the 1580s – he portrays himself as entirely idle and inactive, drawing distinct opposition to his bodily movement of the civil war period. In this moment of perceived idleness, Montaigne allows his "attempts" to mirror the surrounding circumstances in which he found himself in his eras of political and social vitality, and their latent effect on his mental processes and thoughts. However, according to Montignian scholar Christopher Edelman, Montaigne "[did] not intend to designate the literary genre of the work so much as to refer to the spirit in which it is written and the nature of the project out of which it emerges" (Edelman). The designation of the form came after the publication of his attempts, as a by-product of canonization. In his creation of the spirit of the essay – and eventually, the essay as form and genre – Montaigne locates his own power *outside* of institutions; he establishes and builds scaffolding around the self as an institution.

Montaignian skepticism looks like not only uncertainty in the world around the man, but further, uncertainty in the outline and efficacy of the human person, himself. In this skepticism, Montaigne arrives upon the distinct inability of the human person to discern absolute truths. French scholar Paul Wimmer notes: “In the face of truth’s inaccessibility, Montaigne offers the suspension of judgment as a means of achieving stability and peace of mind.” The precise peace of mind which Montaigne sought was the comfortability and discoverability of the self. He used his own human body and thoughts as a microcosm from which to make universal observations about the human experience. He rejected the notion that any philosopher, scholar, or religious figure could know himself and his truths better than he: “I would rather be an authority on myself than on Cicero” (“On Experience”), or further, be larger or more commanding in the universal sphere. In relying wholly on himself and his own self-evaluation, he rebelled against Enlightenment ideals of scientific or deductive reasoning. He viewed the communication of human experience as a process of wrestling with thought and history: messy and abstract, not precise nor canonized; but completely originated upon the power and knowledge of the self.

Montaigne’s skepticism of objectivity is perhaps best exemplified in his understanding of the limits, if not weaknesses, of the human condition. He situated himself in an innovative construction of time and temporality. Montaigne straddled the line between the Renaissance and the Baroque, portraying the self as participating in eternity, while still existing vibrantly within the current moment (Edelman). In “Of Repentance,” he writes: “I do not portray being; I portray passing … I may presently change, not only by chance, but by intention.” In this, he presents himself and the human person as fragmented, but evolving, underscoring his irreverence toward Cicero’s human orthodoxy and perfection. He acknowledged the shortcomings of the senses – for in the senses, “lies the greatest foundation and proof of our ignorance” (“Apology”) – but more

gravely, he had a keen understanding of his own mortality. This self-awareness of eventual bodily expiration both created and supported his stance that the body, and by extension the mind, cannot be viewed as an object, but as "someone who inhabited it fully as a lived reality" (Jay 27).

Fully participating in this bodily and somatic tradition, he found great solace in the ponderance of death: "Let us rid [death] of its strangeness, come to know it, get used to it. Let us have nothing on our minds as often as death" ("Of Practice"). Unlike other aspects of the human experience, however, Montaigne argues that death cannot be explored through true "experience" (neither literally nor cognitively). Even though Montaigne, himself, wrote these very pieces after the "thunderbolt" of a near death experience, via a horse-related accident (Bakewell 22). He advocated for the interaction with the concept and phenomenon of death through leaning into the "strangeness." A man's singular ability to consciously or unconsciously ponder death, as disconcerting and disheartening as it may be, is the only way to "approach" this experience of dying. "For dying, which is the greatest task we have to perform, practice cannot help us. A man can, by habit and experience, fortify himself against pain, shame, indigence, and such other accidents; but as for death, we can try it only once: we are all apprentices when we come to it" ("Of Practice"). *Essais* spans the breadth and depth of the human *experience*, from the mental and bodily reaction to *not know* – to be skeptical of everything from the fibers of society, to the fibers of the self – to the undeniability of fully knowing one's eventual ends – death, in all of its temporal certainty and experiential uncertainty. The feat which Montaigne "attempts" could not be accomplished, or even endeavored, through traditional forms; thus, he had to create his own. His ability to understand death, both conceptually and experientially, and then to *write* openly about it, gave him the power over death as a concept, akin to immortality. Montaigne, as narrator, no

longer identifies with the third person “man” who he writes to, but instead sets himself aside as extraordinary, exceptional, omnipotent “I”.

The fragmented, abstract collage of Montaigne’s interiority has become what scholars hold to be the foundations of the essayistic genre. His approach disavows the air-tight argumentative structure of Cicero, escapes the apologies of Aquinas, but moves toward a higher level of analytics than poetry like that of Seneca. Speaking to one of his more famous pieces, “Of Experience,” Montaigne “meanders digressively, combining anecdotes and apercus with arguments and quotations, reprising themes and coming at them from different angles. Its own temporality, rhythmically uneven and irreducible to a unified narrative, duplicates the unsystematic ruminations on time itself to be found in Montaigne’s work as a whole” (Jay 25). He does not accept a singular literary tradition, but instead draws upon the entire canon and then some to create his own. *Essais* as a whole text possesses no argumentative structure or logical progression. It is simply a collection of thoughts. It comprises 107 attempts at explaining, exploring, and explicating a variety of topics from themes of love and death, to experiences of sleep and smell. Even in those themes, which follow his titular structure of “Of ⸺ ,” he rarely sticks to his aforementioned focuses, but digresses widely to wherever and whatever he fancies. Literarily, he combines historical significance and recount with personal anecdotes and philosophical arguments, and often cheekily quotes the scholars and philosophers who he later eviscerates. Unlike the highbrow, elevated language of his predecessors, Montaigne was one of the first writers to experiment with writing in the vernacular. Colloquial language had the subliminal effect of reflection: narrowing the gap between the author and reader to the point of refracted similarity. According to Sarah Bakewell’s *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne*, he was the first writer to “create literature … using the plentiful material of his own life rather than either pure philosophy or pure invention. He was the most

human of writers, and the most sociable" (6). Montaigne not only championed the voice of the essay, he carved out its liminal space of existence: between philosophy and fiction.

In *Essais*, Montaigne participates in a smattering of rejections. In response to the civil unrest and seeming irreconcilability of human morality, he rejects ultimate truth and the dogmatization of human thought. Within the text of his essays, Montaigne spends considerable pages rejecting the dogmas and arguments of writers, thinkers, and philosophers that have come before him. Above all, he takes ultimate issue with Cicero. As household a name as Cicero was in the seventeenth century (and beyond in both directions), Montaigne is truly one of the first to work so adamantly in opposition to him and his methods, practicing ultimate and daringly enjoyable irreverence. The Ciceroan method emphasized mastery. He was a pinnacle of "humanistic orthodoxy" and perfection (Croll 178). Montaigne did everything in his power to escape these ancient and canonical constraints and lean into the Renaissance of de facto humanism. Thus, he, instead, participated in the "Libertine" exploration of the connections between prose and philosophy, exploring how unconventional forms may best describe the centrality and experience of the self. He deigned to fully exercise his curiosity, and curiosity is not so neatly bounded by language. Montaigne derived power from self-definition. He adhered to no previous traditions in form or genre, but instead used the power and institution of the self to propel him forward. Curiosity is inherently a mess of "attempts" at new shades of thought and flights of the imagination. *Attempts* indicated the figment of a process, rather than a stagnant thought. He held the bones of his interiority together through "tissues of metaphor," needing desperately to find a more apt way to describe what and how and why he *felt* and *thought*. He was a man writing for men and pioneered the use of the vernacular in ways that was not rejected outright. Thus, Montaigne created the essay. The uncertainty of a severed country at war over issues of ideology

presents itself in a leaning of skepticism, that comes to be a calling card of Montaigne and his style.

Montaigne's whole collection of *Essais* clocks in at just below one thousand pages. Explication of each and every essay would be a tedious task, and a repetitive one at that. In textually analyzing two of Montaigne's more prevalent essays, common approaches in style and inclinations of temperament can be drawn. Beginning with "Use Makes Perfect"[1] from Book II, Chapter VI, Montaigne takes on the task of explaining why the act of experience and, further, the *ends* of experiences must be actively pursued and "used". He folds language in upon itself, elucidating in prose how an imagined conversation with the collective – the reader and the author, couched in the "we" – on a complicated topic might sound: "'Tis not to be expected that argument and instruction, though we never so voluntarily surrender our belief to what is read to us, should be of force to lead us on so far as to action, if we do not, over and above, exercise and form the soul by experience to the course for which we design it; it will, otherwise, doubtless find itself at a loss when it comes to the pinch of the business" (*Essais*, II.VI). He inserts specificities and qualifiers, "over and above" and "otherwise," as well as separates the operative parts of the sentence far from each other, demanding that the reader remain vigilant.

Within "Use Makes Perfect," Montaigne uses personal anecdotes on injury and dying to best describe what he endeavors to communicate: the ends of experience, i.e. death. As with every other essay in the collection, Montaigne uses a collage of ancients and their quotations as jumping off points that attempt to guide an otherwise ambling piece. With regards to narrative presence, Montaigne is entirely direct with his use of the first person singular. In "Use Makes Perfect," he discusses the "discourses of one's self," and overly employs an inundation of the "I": "I am of

[1] Sometimes, "On Practice," with reference to G. Douglas Atkins and *Tracing the Essay*. 14

opinion that a man must be very cautious how he values himself, and equally conscientious to give a true report, be it better or worse, impartially. If I thought myself perfectly good and wise, I would rattle it out to some purpose." Montaigne does "rattle it out"; he gives his opinions in the first person, and then distances the third person "man" through the use of an advisory tone, specifically with "must be." Montaigne has previously established this distance, in addition to grounding the essay in his institution of the self. He later chides those "who look upon themselves as a third person only, a stranger." The first person, for Montaigne, is then not only the prudency of knowing oneself, but the power and ability to assert oneself. Montaigne is able to describe himself – "Now I am constantly adorning myself, for I am constantly describing myself," he writes in another essay "On Practice" (Atkins 31) – thus able to wield the power of the self in writing.

No better to act as a microcosm for the Montignian first person than "Of Experience" (III.XIII). At nearly twenty pages, "Of Experience" is not for the faint of heart, or the easily distracted. Despite that, it still remains one of Montaigne's most popular and oft cited pieces. The subject matter lends itself to a comprehensive understanding and nearly formed conclusion of his larger aims. The collage of metatexts and embedded ancient quotations exist in spades, and most vividly, Montaigne seems to collect these pieces of wisdom to meditate on them separately. Speaking to Montaigne's use of the vernacular, the essay is constructed in an exhausting stream of consciousness; internal struggle and malleability is evident. "Of Experience" and Montaigne's essays, generally, seem to be argumentative only in insolation. Each paragraph, usually in response to an allusion or quotation, offers an argument in and of itself, but the larger body of work consists of a handful of these mini-arguments in weak conversation with each other. In this, Montaigne seems to be more distanced from the suggestions and exhortations that he offers to his audience

and readership. The length and rambling nature of his essays seem less to focus upon a point or cause, and more for personal use of the author: from opinions on fish feasts to gout.

Montaigne's use of the casual, prescriptive "I" becomes more obvious within the workings of a longer essay, like "On Experience." Nearly every paragraph begins with statements in the first person singular, followed by suggestions on how the reader should fashion his life according to Montaigne's. There is no argument, and hardly a through-line in the content of Montaigne's opinions: "I do not remember that I ever had the itch;" "I hardly ever choose my dish at table;" "I have a special vocabulary of my own" (III.XIII). In its disorganization and digression, the focus is wholly on the untethered self, in relation to the "I" or in French, the narrative *je*. Jeff Porter argues, in *Understanding the Essay*, that the *je* opened up the freedom of the "non-institutional voice … [Montaigne] was convinced that the knowledge gained about the errant nature of human thought not only would have philosophical worth, but would also raise questions" (*xiv*). In surveying the person and works of Montaigne, I offer instead that he bears the creation of a *self-institutional* voice. His focus, description, and awareness of the self is one rooted in power, and signifies a shift in that power away from the institutions – political, religious, social, or otherwise – and into the self. The self, then, looms larger than institutions, and no other source or thinker of power can have any standing. By then placing himself on a pedestal of knowledge and incontrovertible self-power, Montaigne can use narrative presence, evident in the "I," to widely distance himself from his reader, allowing his essays, his "attempts," to be prescriptions of how to live.

II. Sir Francis Bacon & *Essayes*

Sir Francis Bacon mirrored Montaigne in biography and background, only a few countries away. Bacon was born into a wealthy family and, like Montaigne, had the luck and privilege of a childhood filled with thought. His familial and educational structure was centered around the

greatest thinkers of the time – from the literary to the philosophical to the political – and he consumed their works voraciously. Bacon was further catapulted into the world of politics by the grace of his upbringing. But, as with all good politicians, he found his start in the law. As a young lawyer trying to get his foot in the door of Buckingham, he surrounded himself with the favorites of the queen. Not all were in her perpetual favor, but Bacon slowly but assuredly made a case for himself in court. Like Montaigne, he was a man surrounded by the structures and institutions of power and existed solidly in the middle of the debates of religion, especially concerning the Catholics and reparations of Mary Queen of Scots. As Bacon's popularity waned, he began to second guess his career in politics for a pursuit of natural philosophy (Jay). Bacon was an incessant, and fearless, letter writer, but it was at this point of his life that he sought control. Thus, he began to seminalize his thoughts into *essayes*, a vocation which he continuously pursued over three decades.

Essayes was an experiment in thought and execution for the British ages. For nearly all of Bacon's life and career, the collection of writings existed in flux: constantly revised, deleted, and enlarged. At its inception in 1597, Bacon's essays made up a thin quarto. Only ten distinct pieces existed, but each were loose in structure and leaned heavily into fragmentation. By 1625, the collection resembled that of a tome: 58 developed essays contained within a quarto of over 300 pages (Kiernan *xvix*). Like the pagination and physical form, all aspects of Bacon's *Essayes* evolved over time. The content traced the arc of his political career as well as British public dialogue at the time. Further, his conceptions of the essayistic form and his own style were constantly under his own microscope for revisions of both trivial detail and consequential structural change.

Bacon rose in prevalence alongside Descartes, and each had their own strivations toward philosophical relevance, or at least a seat at the table in the erudite conversations of the time. Montaigne's sole field of study was the human mind, the constraints of his own experience, and his singular power was to derive meaning out of his own experience. While there were moments of hesitation for Montaigne, Bacon was able to answer the questions of the mind, soul, and thought more decisively. According to G. Douglas Atkins, in *Tracing the Essay*, Bacon "offers his version of the essay as … "'the *results* of inquiry, not the process of inquiry'" (43, emphasis added). Instead of *experience*, he offered up the framework and concept of *experiments*. Etymologically, both are rooted in a Latin grounding of "try" or "test" (*experiri)*, as well as *per*, which indicates a "risk."[2] New thinkers of the period wanted to overcome the effects of "untrustworthy raw sensation" and to test and measure experience instead (Jay 29). Bacon wanted to inch out of the insular constraints of the body and thought, and utilize the integration of science and technology in a way that spoke truth, and further presented controlled, concise knowledge of the external world.

In an age of Enlightenment and obsession with making things "new," Bacon sought to discover what could be determined with certainty about the world; he rejected musing and observation. Rather than opinion and the ephemera of *probable* encounters, which Montaigne muses over at great length, Bacon "desired scientific truth and absolute certainty based on designed, rather than random, encounters with the external world and rule governed explanations of those encounters" (Jay 30). The stochasticism of past thinkers annoyed Bacon. He viewed the haughty, aimless scholars of the past as "blind and silly," as they were looking inward but not truly *seeing* (Jay 31). Instead of letting thought and the future of philosophy run wildly, *experientia*

[2] Translation: https://www.etymonline.com/word/experiment

literata advocated for the concentration of the light of experience into laser-sharp precision (Pastorino 543). Bacon's theory created a way of meta-thought that was "ordered and arranged, not irregular and erratic, and from that deriving axioms, and from the axioms thus established deriving again new experiments" (Jay 31). Experience then became a mathematical model of control. Bacon wielded the power over his "experiments" to order and arrange as he saw fit. This model of the essay fits into an established form, which then begets a series of new models to yield new information. For Bacon, this created the foundations of his brand of inductive reasoning, in which the act of reasoning was perpetual – composed of continuous experiments and a community of experimenters.

In Bacon's other works, such as *Novum Organum*, he performed true scientific experiments, weighing gravities, gases, and vials. However, in *Essayes* he turns around the idea that the self can be observed and recorded in a similar way. Experimentation of the self for Bacon was the "weighing and evaluating of experience" rather than the weighing and evaluating of matter (Pastorino). In Bacon's true science experiments, he weighed matter as a "way to obtain indirect evidence on its schematicisms and microscopic properties" (Pastorino 553). After establishing distance from his experiences, usually in the form of time, Bacon is able to "weigh," or contrast, their elements. The bodies of experience are "separated" and "dissolved … by reason and true induction with experiments to reinforce them and by comparing them with other bodies reducing them to simple natures and their forms" (554). Bacon is able to partially separate himself from his experience, and observe "how things behave" and the situations in which those behaviors deviate from the norm (565). At the culmination of self experiment was the concept of *experientia literata* – experience becoming literature. According to Pastorino, "For Bacon, the composition of experimental accounts was an integral part of the experimental process: experimental activity

ended only when the experience was reported and written down" (543). The act of recording the results of the experiment through essay integral to the longevity and significance of experience.

Discovery about the self through experimentation displayed its results through the record of the essay. Each treatise communicated the method, the personality, and the conclusory notes of the experiment, with commentary from the experimenter. Self-experimentation, as proffered by Bacon, was crucial to humanity – namely because it extended the power of the self beyond the physical and cognitive reach of the human mind where it originated. Experimentation is inherently *repeatable*. Participating in the experiment, makes the "data" of experience "communicable, not merely intelligible" (Jay 34). The scientists of thought could repeat past experiments under new circumstances, thus making this approach, and the information gathered, transferable across time and space. In creating equality of experience, the democracy of experimentation moved beyond mere "shared" experience. It was no longer exclusively tied to a singular human person; it evoked "a more culturally mediated and corporeally situated notion of incommensurable experiences" (Jay 35). Bacon was able to record and weigh his experiences through formalized *experiment*, thus creating the prescriptive nature of the male-formed essay.

Like Montaigne, Bacon was interested in the power of immortality and used the essay as a venue to explore the different means by which that was feasible. Kindred with the concept of repeatability, the Baconian experiment model of experience allowed for a lifespan extending beyond that of the human person. The experience of self does not die with its origin body, instead the experience is immortal. The experiment which yielded such an experience can be repeated at any point in time and its results observed, measured, and comprehensively understood. With the immortality of thought and experience comes the idea that experience, itself, possesses no memory. In the "deliberate obliteration" of memory, Bacon underscores his previous maxim: if

the fabric of an experiment and experience relies on its fundamental repeatability, then there is no need for history, since exactness of results can be expected every time (Kiernan 38). Bacon builds up the self as infinitely in existence, and he establishes his power to participate in the constant definition and redefinition of self.

In his era of idea generation while constructing his theory of scientific humanism, Bacon thought not only of exactness in method – meaning, the *means* of experimentation – but also how the role and development of technology might come into play. In the scientific realm, two main advances in technology had been made in this era: the microscope and the telescope. Both of these instruments reinvented how scientists conducted experiments. The "range and acuity" of perspective gained from intense magnification possessed the ability to place both the infinitesimally small and the unimaginably big within the accessibility of the human person. Bacon saw technology, especially instrumental technology, as a means of replacing the fallibility of human senses, traditionally used in scientific experiments. As the champion of this key idea, his resulting essayistic tone possesses the distance and command of a God-like creator. The concepts of accuracy and innovation, embedded in technology, then, provided objective means to record and measure stimuli that moved away from reliance upon feeling and sensation. Bacon wanted the "data" of his essays to either be "revealed" by tangible instruments, or "constructed" by new scientific theories from which he could reference (Jay 39). The instruments for self-experimentation, rather than scientific experimentation, included the comparison of "bodies" and their actions, "induction," and the study of instances that deviate from expectation (Pastorino 544, 565). In this vein, Bacon formed the essay genre as the new "technology" of the time: a space to discuss the self through distanced experiment. In providing an objective approach which shirked most human feelings, he achieved a similitude of exact language and precise thought. He

"constructed" it out of defining moments in his lifetime – i.e. the "scrupulous examination and collection of facts regarding the properties and behaviors of physical phenomena" – rather than in the larger scientific discipline (Pastorino 565). Finally, his body of work *became* those defining moments and "scientific" points of reference for a new generation of essayists. Bacon partook in the conscious act of recording, aware that he was powerful enough to create a persisting, necessary piece of work.

The totality of Sir Francis Bacon's foundational body of essays is best understood in viewing *Essayes* as a process, constructed over time, rather than a stagnant collection of pieces. Montaigne did the same; working on edits to *Essais* until his death, he pursued the idea of perfecting the essay (Bakewell 303). Over thirty years, Bacon fastidiously analyzed and reconstructed his texts not only on a word level, but on a structural and conceptual level as well. The evolution, then, presents more evidence on Bacon's contribution to the essay, than any series of close readings of the final product ever could.

The inaugural ten essays were painfully stark. Historically, a young Bacon composes these fragments from the fringes of court, not having yet broken into the frenetic, yet ambitious British court. He writes what he calls "counsels," in which he makes candid advisory notices and analysis of human nature and political behavior. Kiernan concentrates Bacon's attempts under the genre of the "conduct-book" (*xvix*), not unlike the pontifical tone of Montaigne. Rhetorically similar to the stringencies of conduct, Bacon's early essays leaned heavily upon austerity and choppy language. He placed great focus on the strength of an individual sentence, but a singular essay in this period of Bacon's history was no more than a loose string of these strong sentences, crowded together

under a common topic (Kiernan *xxxi*).[3] Concern for "civil business" – a charmingly Machiavellian assertion of "what men do and not what they ought to do" – pervades his thought, and Bacon hoped to lead and essay by example. "Though the volume contains some observations relating to those in power, the primary emphasis is upon effective, prudential behaviour for the individual intent upon 'making it' – a kind of political vade-mecum" (Kiernan *xxi*). The reality of Bacon writing authoritatively and creating a handbook for "making it" was entirely ironic, as he was devastatingly far from "making it" himself. It is in this dissonance, however, that Bacon's attempt to prove his worth, either to the world or to his own insecurities, evinces within his essays; Bacon "made it" on his own terms, not allowing the magnitude of the self to be subsumed by any other subject. "Making it" in the realm of the essay reflects the kind of self institutionalism proffered by Montaigne. Both men fell from the scaffolds of traditional, institutional power, and then had to turn inward to derive power and certainty out of themselves. They provided the service of record keeping and prescription. The collection of Bacon's ten were not mere musings on the constructs of power and civility, but instead a manifesto of himself as an individual, writing not because he wanted to, but because he *needed* to in order to preserve his own sense of dignity.

Bacon followed the writerly trend and took a ten-year hiatus from his attempts at the essay. Upon his return, he began the formation of thirty-four new essays, as well as significant revisions to the original ten. As he finally rose in relevance politically, his essays still reflected advising upon civil business, but extended more generally and philosophically to focus upon the nature of government and rule. He further wrote on religion, aspects of the public life, and traditional moral values made into points of argument and experiment. His meditations became more detail ridden

[3] Theodor W. Adorno on fragmentation and the essay: "It thinks in fragments, just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over" (*Notes* 16).

and focused upon niche subjects, like gardening, the imperial overseas colonization project, and duelling controversy (Kiernan *xxv*). In writing on compartmentalized subjects, Bacon relied more heavily upon allusion and quotation, predominantly from the Bible and Machiavelli, meticulously weighing his own experience on these topics with external examples (Kiernan *xxxiii).* Formal structure was still rare within this mid-life iteration of his collection, but Bacon defined his own essays of this period as "dispersed Meditacions" (Kiernan *xxxiii*). His serial revisions made these into a living document, following the complexities and emotions of the intersection between individuals and power, as well as his derivative power over the self through experimentation.

In the years preceding 1621, Francis Bacon had hit his political and creative stride. He had proven himself as a counsellor, legal mind, and painter of thought. The political aspirations of Bacon came crashing down come 1621 when he was impeached for judicial bribery (Kiernan *xxvi*). He was not only removed from his position, but expelled from court entirely. In these moments of anguish and embarrassment, Bacon shifted away from essays formally and instead focused upon letter writing and unofficial "counsels" to rising favorites. Come 1625, however, Bacon had sent his final version of all fifty-eight *Essayes* to print. This version was the most public of any and boasted the highest degree of formality in structure to date; he even employed physical division through sections (Kiernan *xxxv*). Even though the essays within the 1625 collection were the most formal, there was still a great variance in form and structure. In reflecting upon Bacon's historiographical trace in conversation with the essayistic form, Kiernan noted: "[T]he essay form obviously allowed Bacon the opportunity to take up other interests than civil business or those treated in his philosophical or professional writings, including traditional topics for reflection like Fortune, Friendship, Death … all treated with a characteristically Baconian 'dry light' and with an

eye cocked to ‘true Use’” (*xxx*). In full acknowledgement of his ego, Bacon used the essay as both an outlet for his less popular thoughts, and a pedestal for his more political ones.

Fancying himself an expert in nearly everything (gardening, philosophy, sedition, matters of the heart), Bacon took no issue or anxiety in the fact that both he and his essays existed in a liminal space. Bacon’s methods were conceptually at odds with his style. He sought the clarity and precision of a scientific thought, through *experiment*, but communicated the results in a wholly colloquial fashion – “Such scrutiny has revealed Bacon to be neither a prosaic scientist nor a mere disciple taking his Senecan amble or Ciceronian constitutional, but an astute craftsman creating and refining through meticulous revision a powerfully individual prose” (Kiernan *xxxviii*). He was scientific most obviously in his thought processes and underlying argumentative structure. However, aspects of his style and form contributed supporting “evidence” towards his scientific lean. His essays were built off of memorable symmetries of parallel syntax. Each line was short and precise, like the pandering numbers in a report that prove a point. While the majority of Bacon’s essays were constructed in a traditional, rectangular prose form, an original edition of “Suspicions, Malice, Cunning, Etc.” from *Essayes* shows the evenly spatially arrangement of these lines on a page such that they resemble a column of records, each line further corroborating the point:

Suspicions, that the Minde, of it selfe, gathers, are but Buzzes;
But *Suspicions*, that are artificially nourished,
and put into Mens Heads,
by the Tales,
and Whisprings of others,
have Stings. (XXXI.27-30)

Precision can be seen in the unexpected choices of language, like “Buzzes” and “Stings.” Each of these draw connections to a visual of bees, which supports Bacon’s calling card of natural imagery and reference of scientific traditions. Suspicions, then, are both harmless background noise, but still harbor the ability to inflict pain. In this particular experiment, Bacon weighs suspicions of the self, up against external, artificial suspicions from others. Each short line leads the reader further into Bacon’s severity of thought, ending pointedly and precisely with “Stings.” Unlike Montaigne, Bacon does not participate in the traditional inundation of the first person singular. Instead, the “I” in Bacon’s essays is predominantly implied, contributing to his distanced, omniscient God-like tone. The self is preeminent, and the third person of the “Man” is at the mercy of Bacon’s meditations.

The so-called colloquialism of Bacon, however, lends a modern edge to his essays in a way that demands a listening ear even five centuries later. While his tone and diction are more formal than Montaigne, one approach he utilizes to appeal to the voice of the common man is “succinct aphoristic statement” (Kiernan *xli*). Often, these are referred to as colloquialisms, or societally accepted yet trite statements with a seed of truth. He extracts these statements from his own library of read texts, but in doing so, quotes from memory. Rarely does any aphorism reflect verbatim from its source. In doing so, Bacon makes these statements his own and is further able to engage in dialogue and debate with them. He uses colloquial phrasing of the time to integrate the self with his readership. The vividness of Bacon’s language additionally contributes to the unwieldy nature of his colloquial approach; he almost seems to be exhorting his readers, asking biting questions and beginning essays with dramatic opening sentences, in order to rile up his readership. In his exhortations, he decreases the distance between himself and his reader and asserts himself in a position of power over his audience, while giving very little away about his identity.

In combining what is both old and aged – language – with what is new and sharp – science – Bacon becomes emblematic of the English tradition of the essay; some scholars even say he founded it himself. The form and genre of the essay gave Bacon a common and defined space to place the thoughts of his meditations, letters, anecdotes, and rogue thoughts. He makes gentle acknowledgement to those who came before him in this genre, be that Montaigne, Seneca, or Cicero, but forages his own path into literary history by grounding his thought in stark, controlled observation rather than rumination (Kiernan *xlviii*). Bacon prioritizes direct comparison and reasoning, over the style of self-propelled digression and stream of consciousness. While some critics argue that Francis Bacon is not the founder of the purest English essay due to his overly formal structure, his position as "first" is evidenced in that handfuls of aspiring English essayists follow steadfastly in his tradition, mimicking his style as well his collection of titles. Even though Bacon deviates from the other father of the essay, Montaigne, in his tone and aloof avoidance of the "I," both men "reflect mind[s] that impose [their] will on the matter of language with the unequivocal confidence in the power to know" (Porter *xvi*). These two fathers of the essay approached the same ends through two different methods: experience versus experiments.

The cocktail of Bacon's approach to crafting the essay can be well understood and argued in "Of Boldnesse" and "Of Counsell." While Bacon is in no way formulaic in his approach, each piece within *Essayes* can be analyzed for elements that are undeniably Baconian. "Of Boldnesse" can be consumed in one bite; it is pithy, but densely packed with argument. The opening of the essay produces the sensation of being thrown into the middle of a conversation, asking: "*What was the Chiefe Part of an Oratour*? He answered, *Action;* what next? *Action;* what next again? *Action*" (XII, 37). The cry for "civil business" rings out initially, and soon transitions to applications on the level of the state. In under a page and a half, Bacon manages to call forth a smattering of

allusions, from “Mahomet” (Mohammed) to the Bible to chess strategy, all building towards the logical progression of his ultimate counsel. In the escalation up to his final assertion of the argument, he builds short sentences using tricolons, with parallel ends and beginnings upon each other, concluding in a topical and concise statement on “boldnesse”.

In “On Boldnesse,” Sir Francis Bacon avoids the “I” completely. He employs the third person characters of a “wise *Mans*”/”men,” “the Politique Body,” and “a *Bold Fellow,*” to breathe life into and illustrate his exhortations (37). As he writes by example and self experiment, Bacon asserts his own thought and action into these third person entities. In that way, the reader can excavate the identity of Bacon as a wise man, a member of the “Politique Body,” as well as a prudentially “Bold Fellow.” He, then, uses these identities to preach from the mount towards the direction of the direct and indirect “you,” which he uses as part of the vernacular to connect with and assert power over the reader. These same third person identities, or characters, act as variables within the larger experiment that can be weighed up against each other. In his closing counsel, Bacon states: “For in Counsell, it is good to see dangers; And in Execution, not to see them, except they be very great” (38). Syntactically, the reader interprets this as “For in Counsell, it is good [*for you*] to see dangers; And in Execution, [*for you*] not to see them…” The implied, indirect second person creates an even greater degree of distance between Bacon and the reader. Bacon is so far above the text that he exists only through the self-institutionalism of third person impersonation and talks down to his constituency.

“On Counsell” is slightly longer in pagination, and more central to Bacon’s larger project in constructing the architecture and art of counselling. He begins strongly: “The greatest Trust, betweene Man and Man, is the Trust of *Giving Counsell*. For in other Confidences, Men commit the parts of life; Their Landsd, their Goods, their Children, their Credit, some particular Affaire:

But to such, as they make their *Counsellors*, they commit the whole: … they are obliged to all Faith and integrity" (XX, 63). While a shocking statement to assert that political counselors are more important than family, children, and credit, Bacon's conversational approach makes the jump in thought seem easy, if not given. He once again removes any inclination of the first person, but rather presents the "results" of his self experiment (his own knowledge, tempered with the confounding experience of others) in the prescriptive third person, still using "Wise Men" and "Kings"/"Princes". His argument is further strengthened by explicit acknowledgement and refutation of counter arguments: "Let us now speake of the *Inconveniences* | of *Counsell*, and of the *Remedies*" (64). He chronicles every risk of political counsel, but pairs each with a "remedy," demonstrating his mastery of the subject.

Bacon further strengthens his counsel, through the use of the first person collective: "Let us now speak" (64). The reader can then identify as part of the "us," coming into closer relation to Bacon and his self identified institution of power and knowledge. Only in a small section following the body of the essay, entitled "*Principis est Virtus maxima nosse suos,*"[4] does Bacon invoke the first person singular. These exemplary uses of the "I," however, are used to address a very specific audience. "So it was done, in the Commision of *Union*, between *England* and *Scotland*; which was a Grave and Orderly Assembly. I commend set Daies for Petitions … I commend also *standing* Commissions" (67). It is only the policy based, practical counsels, which Bacon is willing to put his "I" behind, in hopes that he may again find good favor with the traditional structures of political power.

The *Essayes* of Sir Francis Bacon showed a secondary reality of what the genre of the essay could be. He finds harmony with Montaigne in the unorthodox idea that the self could be its own

[4] "It is the great merit of a prince to know his subjects," *Latin translation*, from EU Dictionary.

source of power: writing could originate from the truths of the self, rather than the imagination or the historied generations of previous, external thought. This was a new idea in the early modern period. However, Bacon diverged from Montaigne in that he portrayed a *product* or the self, rather than a process (Atkins 43). Neither approach is inherently the *right* one; in fact, the idea that both can exist, and do continue to *persist*, in harmony with the other creates the foundations of the malleable identity of the self and the essayistic form and, and paves the way for future essayists to navigate the space between the two conceits.

III. Theodor W. Adorno & "The Essay as Form"

In the spheres of thought and theory, Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) was in fine company and in finer competition. At heart, Adorno was a German theorist and philosopher, who spent his time split between Nazi Germany, New York City, Oxford, and California in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He was an early postmodernist at the outset, experimenting with the metaphysical and the enlightened alongside Hegel and Horkheimer, the second of which he worked with and under at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt. In his voyage into Critical Social theory, he attempts to apply the work of Karl Marx and G.W.F Hegel to the era of late capitalism. Further, Adorno applies the Marxist theory of hypercommercialization to the arts, paving the way for what will be a distinctly Adornian analysis, yoking together art and culture with science and theory. His focus then progressed into the idea of identity, and ultimately aesthetics, beginning with the study of music. This progression led to a life's work of critical theory spent analyzing the reality of "object" and its role, or un-role, in reifying identity: personal or societal. Adorno dogmatized the synthesis of the like with the unlike, the reality with the unreality, and the rational with the irrational (Cook).

Art exists as the object, as well as the means, of this synthesis in Adorno's philosophy. In the inherent indefinability of art, Adorno roots the foundation of his argumentation. Through examining the relationship between art and society, he defines "aesthetic identity" as "different … in one important respect: it is meant to assist the non-identical in its struggle against the repressive identification compulsion that rules the outside world" (Adorno, "Aesthetic Theory" 6). Thus, art invents its own dimension, one that posits a particular reality, although not necessarily a benevolent or attainable one. It redeems disparate spaces with each other, temporal, ideological, metaphysical. This dimension Adorno connects alongside the idea of imagination, with a slight negative discourse as he refers to it as "illusion" (Cook 68-9). The realm of illusion elicits a certain freedom, a similar freedom that a reader of fiction experiences in dissolving oneself into a story. The reader can define a sense of identity in artistic fiction and interpret it to fit said identity. In so much, the art itself battles against any semblance of "rational" oppression that would negate the possibility of such an idea. The power lies in the art, just as much as it lies in the individual.

Nearly four centuries after both Michel de Montaigne and Sir Francis Bacon, Theodor Adorno takes up the challenge to explain and philosophize the unexplainable artform: the essay. Adorno published the first volume of his tome *Noten zur Literatur*, or *Notes to Literature* in 1958. He experimented with the essayistic form in investigating a litany of literary subjects, from authors like Balzac and Dickens to concrete theory. He opens *Notes to Literature* with the metatextual and articulately layered essay, "The Essay as Form." In some ways, the essay seems to annoy Adorno; he's "discomfort[ed]" by it. Conversely, the form and telos of the essay is precisely the kind of subject matter on which Adorno yearns to ruminate. Through the lens of aestheticism and freedom of artform, Adorno establishes the defiant posture of the essay, noting, "In Germany the essay arouses resistance because it evokes intellectual freedom" (*Notes* 3). The essay as an obstinate

entity gains its personality by grace of its refusal to be bounded, and is the root of Adorno's duality of frustration and admiration with the form. At first, he attempts to control the form in determining whether its origins and methods lie in the scientific realm, or the artistic one. He questions the possibility of whether the essay has the *responsibility* to be scientific in morals – which is to say, existing in pursuit of the truth of the self, through the methods of observation – or artistic in aesthetic quality – which is to say, resisting truth as a concept, and rather, leaning into the illusion of subjectivity.

Adorno leans on the attractive divide between science and art, in describing the tenor of a "bad essay" and the lauds of assumedly the opposite. He offers: "The essay form, however, bears some responsibility for the fact that the bad essay tells stories about people instead of elucidating the matter at hand: the self. The separation of science and scholarship from art is irreversible" (Adorno 6). There is a distinct, and crucial, difference between the methodology of construction versus expression. Construction is innately scientific; it requires forethought, a blueprint, and "correct[ness] by scientific standards" (7). Expression, on the other hand, is singularly artistic. Expression lends itself to a somatic interpretation: as if the matter of the essay begged the author to take word-form. Adorno draws nuance in the essay's presuposed division between science and art; he asserts that the essay is not an act of science, but instead a piece of art that possesses an intimate "relationship to scientific procedure" (9). The "data" gathered for the content of an essay often takes the form of insights, rather than scientific observations. The essay, as an artistic form, possesses scientific power over the subject to provide these insights. Adorno's theorizations about the liminal space between science and art, mirror the two approaches to the essay offered by Michel de Montaigne – experiential and artistic – and Sir Francis Bacon – experimental and precise.

The difference between the two finds parity with the dichotomy between expression and construction. An insight demands the influence of the human object that sees, digests, and expresses, rather than a scientific tool which views, measures, and records. Adorno elucidates the depth of this theory within a meditation on Marcel Proust:

> The simplest reflection of the life of consciousness would teach us to what a slight extent insights, which are by no means arbitrary hunches, can be fully captured within the net of science. … The measure of [scientific] objectivity is not the verification of assertions through repeated testing but rather individual human experience, maintained through hope and disillusionment. Such experience throws its observations into relief through confirmation or refutation in the process of recollection. … [S]cientific scholarship fails to deliver on what it promises to the mind: to illuminate its works from the inside. (Adorno 8-9)

Viewing the essay as art allows for the "matter" of the essay to speak for itself, to "illuminate its works from the inside." Extending Adorno's metaphor, allowing the essay to be exclusively a work of science, limits its illumination to simply having the light of the self shone *upon* its objects, rather than having the light of the self originate from within the observed objects. Observation and construction show what already exists, in distinct terms of black and white, of cause and effect. It studies the essay as a stagnant object, immutable in many ways. Conversely, art interprets the essay as an instance of experience, rather than incident. Experience implies a string of complexity and matters which lean heavily upon subjectivity; incidence implies a report, a consequence, and a path forward.

The essay is not an act of history. The essay does not simply record, or further, record selectively and with an agenda in mind; it is not so immutable that it becomes an entity which is

referential across times and cultures and generations. It is an exercise in exploring the experience of the individual. This is a self-centered and privileged endeavor in many ways: the author, so concerned with the events and plights facing him, takes hours upon hours of leisure to write and reflect. For who? For himself, for the multitudes that will assuredly find it interesting, no matter what "it" might be. The study of the male self, as Montaigne noted, a study in "universality" ("Of Experience," III.XIII). Universality of the self is the full eclipse of that which is *not* the self, no object of observation can be larger or more imminent than the self.

To no surprise, Adorno takes up yet another dichotomy of the essay: the prescience of language. He views language as the conduit and method to concept. Language is the art and presentation of words and ideas towards a particular end. The end in question is often the evocation of self centered experience. The presentation of an essay is what distinguishes the genre from a record of events, or a diary entry: "In actuality, all concepts are already implicitly concretized through the language in which they stand. The essay starts with these meanings and being essentially language itself, takes them farther; it wants to help language in its relation to concepts, to take them in reflection as they have been named unreflectingly in language" (Adorno 12). The language of the essays, as analyzed here, is formed off of its narrative approaches. Montaigne and Bacon participate in direct, circumscribed language and reflection which begins and ends with the "I." The element of reflection and comparison is crucial to the essay, often achieved in the tying together of concepts and ideas with the language of experience.

The disciplinary definition of the essay demands thought and importance, embedded in the reality that adherence to discipline, or rebellion against it, determines the personality of a text as much as its confines. The act of reading and coming into the sphere of art, is distinctly different than that of science, than that of philosophy, and so on. On the surface level, it seems that Adorno's

chief mission is to pigeonhole the essay. Either: the essay is a work of science, its authors champion an exactness of language and an incisiveness of language that can only be scientific in origin. It is irreversibly true. *Or,* the essay, in its abstractivity and beauty, is a work of art, its authors are painters and sculptors, creating mutable structures out of words and the interconnectivity of experience. It is up to the viewer to determine its truth. In drawing these endlessly, irreconcilable parallels, however, Adorno invites his reader to question compartmentalism. In this act of questioning authority and theory, he offers forth the inherent/latent possibility that the essay is both, is neither, is a rebellion against the pure *concept* of disciplinary intellectual norms. Writing about the self, then, acts as that rebellion against intellectual norms; it can be both the embodiment of authority and a venue from which to theorize. Once again, the essay, as the edification of self study, finds the middle ground between the two.

Despite this rebellion, the essay is, in many ways, a quotidian act: pondering and recording the acts and experiences of the everyday individual. However, Adorno notes that the essay is "radical in its non-radicalism" (Adorno 9). At the intersection of every dichotomy in the canon, at this point of dissonance, Adorno chooses *not* to pin down which collection of these the essay *is* at its core. Instead, he notes: "Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its subject matter is always a conflict brought to a standstill" (Adorno 16). The explicit and implicit discontinuity of the essay informs the structure and organization of an essayist's thought; "the essay proceeds, so to speak, methodically unmethodically" (Adorno 13). The subject matter of the essay informs and creates the bounds and outlines of the essay. It is less dependent on the individual actions of the author or essayist, but instead so ingrained into the connections between the language, especially between the seemingly irreconcilable elements. Adorno employs an almost mythic and deliberately cosmic imagery in masking this assertion about the essayistic form: "In the essay discrete elements set off

against on another come together to form a readable context; the essay erects no scaffolding and no structure. But the elements crystallize as a configuration through their motion. The constellation is a force field, just as every intellectual structure is necessarily transformed into a force field under the essay's gaze" (Adorno 13). The essay is uncovered, then, not necessarily out of intention, but out of an inevitable *need* to enter into existence, by the grace of the interaction and immediacy of its elements. The gaze of the self sets the span of other elements into motion. Unlike Montaigne and Bacon who emphasize the power of self-control in writing and proliferating their essays, Adorno argues that within the dichotomous space of the essay, "The decaying individual is just the content of lived experiences which are touted as surrogates of concrete experience, but no longer have control over such experience itself" (Jay 347). In the art of essayification as interpreted by Adorno, the self possesses the power over its own self expression, but relinquishes the interpretation and utility of experience to the reader.

Chapter 2:

The Female Body of the Essay, of Evolution and Narrative

"*But since I am neither a camera eye nor much given to writing pieces which do not interest me, whatever I do write reflects, sometimes gratuitously, how I feel.*"

– Joan Didion, "A Preface" to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

I. Joan Didion

In 1976, Joan Didion's essay "Why I Write" was sandwiched in a centerfold page of the *New York Times*. The essay was surrounded by "The Scrapbook History of Profootball" and a full page advertisement for a catalogue of French cooking techniques. I wasn't there in 1976; I was not even close to being *alive* in 1976, but I'd like to imagine that was a strange place for such an inimitable piece of writing. Did America know they were waking up to something of this caliber on their kitchen table?

"Why I Write" is not one of Didion's more formidable works. It's not even one of her more famous essays. It stood and stands alone in the archives of the *New York Times*, not enclosed within one of her collections like, *The White Album* (1979) or *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968). In search of the life force behind why writers, particularly Didion, *write*, the answer is obvious in the pervasive, repetitive use of "I". Didion masterfully feels out the edges of her identity as a writer. She rejects any claim that she is supposedly a "good" writer. Unlike Montaigne and Bacon who speak with unrelenting and stubborn authority on everything, she identifies and experiments with what she is "bad" at: thinking intellectually, abstractly – *thinking*, in general. The act of thinking implies a certain kind of isolation with the self, a closeting away from the intellectual or creative influence of the outside world. Michel de Montaigne and Sir Francis Bacon were very good at thinking; they had more than enough time in isolation and penned everything that they thought. "In short, I tried to think. I failed," she admits (Didion). Instead of pondering philosophy, theory, and the salience of the large scale, Didion turns to the observable. She turns to experience and object:

> In short my attention was always on the periphery, on what I could see and taste and touch, on the butter, and the Greyhound bus. During those years I was traveling on what I knew

> to be a very shaky passport, forged papers: I knew that I was no legitimate resident in any world of ideas. I knew I couldn't think. All I knew then was what I couldn't do. All I knew then was what I wasn't, and it took me some years to discover what I was.
>
> Which was a writer. (Didion)

She rejects the so-called "world of ideas" that all "worthy" academics and thinkers so ascribe. I use quotation marks here colloquially and pointedly. What Didion experiments with here is precisely the heart of the modern, female essay that I will soon endeavor to define. She knows what she doesn't know; she doesn't pretend to know fully what she *does* know. But in both, she digs in. She works instead to observe how *she* sees the world, which in turn illuminates pieces of how and where she sees herself in the world.

Instead of digressing aimlessly once a sticking point is reached, Didion tries even harder to untangle the mind mess. Sometimes it seems like she makes the mess worse, tightening the knots and entwining the loops. In these moments, she assures the reader in second person: "You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and let them develop. You stay quiet. You don't talk to many people and you keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate the cat in the shimmer, the grammar in the picture." We may have never experienced that shimmer, but in Didion's second person assurances, it feels like something we want to keep reading about and eventually understand. The second person, as used by Didion, brings the reader near to the narrator, blurring the line between experiences.

It is difficult to pin down why the reader can feel comfort and seek understanding in Didion's prose. The words command themselves in a way that is so uniquely Joan; similar to the means by which Hemingway writes and everyone listens. In the *New York Review of Books*, John Leonard attempts to grapple with this intangible:

> I remain a partisan, in part because I've been trying for four decades to figure out why her sentences are better than mine or yours…something about cadence. They come at you, if not from ambush, then in gnomic haikus, icepick laser beams, or waves. Even the space on the page around these sentences is more interesting than could be expected, as if to square a sandbox for the Sphinx. (Leonard)

Joan Didion's undefinable genius augments the unplaceable power of the essay. Her words are artfully placed, both spatially, on the page and relationally, to the other words and marks of punctuation within the sentence, paragraph, piece. The self is artfully placed as well. The reader is enthralled because they are searching for something which is not wholly or directly there: evidence of Didion within her work. In searching for a way to analyze the intangible (a much harder thing than most of academia makes it out to seem), I found myself paying ultimate attention to the shape of Didion's essay, from word to sentence to section.

Shape, in this context, can take on many conceits, many shapes, if you will. There is firstly the spatial: how a sentence looks in juxtaposition to white space of the page, specifically where and how it embeds itself into the rectangle. Didion plays the variation of sentences like a symphony, but never plays into what we might expect. In "On Keeping a Notebook," she begins her closing with four words: "It all comes back" (108). Only to follow it with: "I was on Fire Island when I first made that sauerkraut, and it was raining, and we drank a lot of bourbon and ate the sauerkraut and went to bed at ten, and I listened to the rain and the Atlantic and felt safe." A moment of some of the smallest words in the English language is followed by a litany of polysyndeton and nested description.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live": she begins "The White Album" like this. She traces the movement of people, of murders, of herself, of the Sixties. She is explicit with her reader,

however, that these things come in flashes: “all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no ‘meaning’ beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting room...to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical” (186). These flashes cut into the form of the text; there are dense rectangles of italics, questions, answers, quoted needlepoints, chants, and packing lists. She is not always explicit in how she addresses these variances. Sometimes they are exemplary and intrinsic, other times they go unacknowledged. In either conceit, these instances of metatextuality complicate Didion’s voice and further blur the edges of an already blurry genre. In her particular “cutting” of these pictures, she moves toward and pursues electricity rather than ethics. She tries to find what shimmers, what has the potential energy. She does not try to pin down and corner *truth*. Within the form of the essay, Didion is more concerned with objects and events, assessing the self only through external detail.

“On Self Respect” was once a cover line on *Vogue*. Didion recalls writing the piece quickly and feverishly, as the author who was originally slated to write the cover piece, never did. The title was crafted in the image of the Montaignian essay: On + Universal Subject. Thus exists the expectation for an “I”-laden essay, with guidance, or condescension, from an ivory tower, far far away. Joan Didion does not provide. Instead, she enters into a contemporary space of writerly identity. Didion does not avoid the first person, but employs it sparingly. Her approach to the essay is pointedly *not* talk about herself, directly that is. The methodology, in “On Self Respect” and countless other examples which I have not the time, nor the pages to close read here, is as follows: to examine and observe something or someone that exists outside of the self. The self might come into contact with this thing, either grazing one edge or colliding completely. The woman essayist tends to then address herself briefly and sparingly, circling back to the external matter. An initial

analysis of this could read as insecurity: a distinct aversion to self-focus, a glaring avoidance of identity. However, I offer that the nuance of the approach actually conveys intimate intricacies of the self that cannot be gained sincerely in any other form. Humans are so much a product of our experiences; we are a function, whose variables and interacted effects originate from space, history, and others. Joan Didion pieces together parts of herself, without squarely telling who she is. Or who she thinks she is. She leans on historical and literary allusion and revels in external experience. She embeds quotes, inscriptions, and other examples of metatextualization. In both Montaigne and Bacon, the reader becomes so inundated with the first person that one wonders, how accurately can the self be its own critic? In Didion, out-of-body experiences collect to create a span from which it is up to the reader to judge what is fact, what is fiction, where they find the essayist, and where they find themselves.

She begins suddenly, with a seemingly unrelated first-person anecdote about Pi Beta Kappa, and her inability to accrue membership, but then reels back quickly and dives into the titular subject at hand: self-respect. “On Self Respect” reads like approachable philosophy. Didion makes claims, supported by anecdote and evidence. But instead of academic rhetorical distance, she offers the collective and employs the “we”:

> To live without self respect is to lie away some night, beyond the reach of warm milk, phenobarbital … counting up the sins of commission and omission, the trusts betrayed, the promises subtly broken … However long we postpone it, we eventually lie down alone in that notoriously uncomfortable bed, the one we make ourselves. Whether or not we sleep in it depends, of course, on whether or not we respect ourselves. (Didion 110)

The first sentence in this excerpt has no subject. As a reader, there is no certainty in who has lied, or could be lying, awake at night, but in this evasion, the reader can see herself, or himself

subsuming as the subject. Didion then makes a narrative transition, gathering into the collective "we". Didion shows the reader a piece of herself in first person plural, but even still reveals very little. There is a low degree of identity ownership in "we". The collectivity of the first person is sincere in its admission, yet controlled in its lack of individual assertion. The final shift in vantage Didion oscillates to is the "they": "person," or the "people." It is an ambiguously anonymous entity or group, who Didion uses to make examples of her chief claims. "People with self-respect have the courage of their mistakes. They know the price of things. … In brief, people with self respect exhibit a certain toughness, a kind of moral nerve; they display what was once called *character*" (Didion 111). Almost intangibly, the distance between the reader and "people" seems a little farther. Questions of connection include: Do I know these people? Have I met one of them? Is my butcher a part of the "people"? Am I? It is clear that Didion, herself, has had observational exposure to these people, but once again, less clear as to whether or not she identifies herself among them.

In the moments within "On Self Respect" where Didion senses the arc of the essay nearing the first person singular (the infamous, illusory "I"), she participates in artful deflection. A prime example of this falls in the closing section of the essay. Didion offers a rare glimpse of personal experience: "That kind of self-respect is a discipline, a habit of mind that can never be faked but can be developed, trained, coaxed forth. It was once suggested to be that, as an antidote to crying, I put my head in a paper bag" (112). Even lacking context, these lines, while matter of fact and straightforward, exhibit vulnerability of emotion and potential instability. However before revealing much more, Didion deflects this interiority, "As it happens, there is a sound physiological reason, something to do with oxygen, for doing exactly that, but the psychological effect alone is incalculable: it is difficult in the extreme to continue fancying oneself Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*

with one's head in a Food Fair bag" (112). We are no longer seeking meaning behind Didion's tears, but instead mentally working to synthesize Bronte with a self-help suggestion, still wondering what it has to do with self-respect. It is a crafty distraction, and one that she uses both with literature (Jordan Baker, Julian English, Rhett Baker) and with history (Narcissa Cornwall, Napoleon, Helen Keller). Unlike her male predecessors, Didion does not rely on allusion within the essay as a precedent to rebel against. Both Montaigne and Bacon use gratuitous quotation from the patriarchs of their disciplines: Seneca, Cicero, Socrates, and the like. Instead of using them as erudite evidence toward a larger external point, they reflect these thinkers, these "other selves," back onto their own bodies: to prove their own self-assertions in contrast to an Other. Quotation for the male essayist is often used to prove up against, rather than, like Didion, to contribute toward something greater and wider.

But what about self-respect? Similar to the circuitous means by which Didion talks (or doesn't talk) about herself, she revolves around the jagged edges of self-respect: mistakes, ownership, personal worth, self-image, and self actualization. She dives sharply and deeply in the final stanza. Self-respect is freedom from "alienation of self" forced upon us by external expectation. "Without it, one eventually discovers the final turn of the screw: one runs away to find oneself, and finds no one at home" (Didion 113). To lack self-respect is to completely lose oneself, without hope of rediscovery. There exists the guilt and anxiety of "play[ing] roles doomed to failure before they are begun, each defeat generating fresh despair at the urgency of divining and meeting the next demand made upon us [by others]" (113). Lacking self-respect is inescapable and renews rapidly; "fresh despair" is readily available. In a metatextual lens, Didion's careful use of "I" is a means to avoid self alienation. Should the self-centric essaysist look around in the text of an essay and see nothing

but “I,” the world would look quite lonely. Redolent of the Montaignian and Baconian style of the essay, the correlation of persistent first person singular, in defiance of the other, exhibits this alienation, or as Didion would say, “to be locked within oneself” (112). In her approach to the form and genre of the essay, Didion finds and communicates pieces of herself, but chooses a focal point elsewhere. The self of Didion in the essay shimmers as a blur on the edge.

II. Zadie Smith

The self of Zadie Smith exists a bit more in hard relief. I remember picking up *Feel Free* when I was at the height of my essay-collection-collecting fervor. I read anyone who was anyone, and a couple people who were nobodies. I read Sedaris, Crosley, more Didion than I can recall with clarity, Orwell, Foster Wallace (over and over), Saunders. I remember reading a *New York Times* book review of another one of Smith’s works, likely *Swing Time*. Critics talked about her writing in a way that I remember being revolutionary and exuberant. I was limitedly interested in her fiction, but bought at least two of her books to sit in a stack with everything I should have, and still should, read. I remember very little else about Zadie, but as I approached *Feel Free* for the second time, I remembered vividly her details. She wrote about the death of libraries, death in general, the plight of Mark Zuckerberg, Jay-Z, Justin Bieber, Brexit, and toilets. I felt and still feel at home in her intricacies, her weird obsessions, in the same way that I do with Didion’s prose about prose and Keegan’s love letter to her Camry.

In the company of two American women essayists, Zadie Smith is the lone Brit. A native of North London, the cultural and infrastructural intricacies of the city background her voice and narrative. London lends a keen awareness of ever-moving people and things, a variety of voices, and the variance of multiplicitous personal identities. Smith’s family life informs much of her work, from her identity as a mixed race woman – part English, part Jamaican – to her identity as

a mother, to her marriage to a well-established poet. As a writer, she is concerned about empathy, and connection. In addition, the idea of people, their landscapes, and their motivations interest her in both fiction and nonfiction. Her writing does not require or demand extraordinary circumstance, but instead illuminates the extraordinary in the overlooked. She identifies, and is identified, first and foremost as a novelist, and her novels are as quietly brilliant as they are critically lauded. She is a short story writer, a dancer, a student, a professor at New York University. She is also an essayist.

In so many of her forewords, her interviews, her pieces in various magazines, Smith takes up differing exigencies of writing fiction versus writing essays. She makes a key, and heretofore unmentioned, distinction: the British essay or the American essay? The difference, here, being disparate approaches to narrative presence and point of view. British essays, to Smith, are like homework. From her Cambridge memories as an English major, longform, literary essays were the sole outlet of writing prompts assigned to her. In her words, essays of her youth were "contained, productive, capable of getting finished, and a way to feel like [she] had a job" (Shakespeare and Company). As she developed the essay as part and parcel of her repertoire, her first task was to unlearn the voice of the British essayist: objective, all knowing, "the tone from the mount." We know this now as the popularized voice of the male essayist. This was an initial point of vulnerability for Smith: to declare oneself *not* to be an expert, on something or anything. Both moving to America and reading Alice Walker uncovered the second essayistic vulnerability: the formal, unabashed use of the first person.

Smith's collection of essays is by no means an exhaustive anthology of her nonfiction work. It is, instead, the collection I own, love, and what critics have lauded as "exquisitely

pleasurable" and "notable".[5] Virginia Woolf once stated about the essay that, "like all living things, its present is more important than its past" (Woolf). In the year 2020, or really any year after 2016, *Feel Free* reads like an artifact of a bygone time. The pieces within collect Smith's writing from the years 2010 to 2017, which for the United Kingdom and the United States – and Zadie Smith hangs her hat on both – was a period of seismic change. In a 2018 interview at Shakespeare and Company with her husband and poet, Nick Laird, Smith reflects on the matter by which she holds and handles the subjects within her collection. She confesses, "It's really hard to read essays about a film about a 24-hour clock, or Justin Bieber," to which she laughs, "and feel that there's any need for them…[*Feel Free*] is like a museum of things I felt that I had time to be interested in" (Shakespeare and Company Podcast). The dissection of her own process, reception, and the aging of *Feel Free* is likened to that of a luxury. A reader can lean back to Montaigne and Bacon and see the embedded luxury of their work, as well, but unlike Smith, it is a luxury that aged poorly. Reading *Feel Free* in 2020, it feels particularly immediate. Smith turns over her museum of things, and the reader can feel a few things, the first of which is longing. There is a nostalgia for the time-capsuled years of Obama and Cameron, and then a sense of tragic comedy (or is it comic tragedy?) as her essays remind us what we might have been thinking about, pondering upon, in 2012. Before all of *this* happened.

Falling in line with tradition, *Feel Free* is divided into content-bounded sections. She frames her pieces within boundaries: political essays as an citizen "In the World," album and film critiques from "In the Audience," standing as an art observer "In the Gallery," as a reader "On the Bookshelf," and finally, as a philosopher and/or herself in "Feel Free" (Table of Contents, *i*). The

[5] Fom *NYT Book Review*, and chosen as a *NYT Book of the Year*. Publications other than the NYT have had complimentary things to say, but these two paired well.

smattering of topics and approaches evokes the familiar satisfaction of a treasury of miscellany, often found within books of essays and, even, similar to the approach of her male precursors.[6]

Smith is methodical, yet slightly whimsical in the way she unpacks her own voice, both as a fictionist and an essayist. Once again in the foreword of *Feel Free*, she establishes the three points on which writing balances: language, the world, and the self. She is adamant, and consistently so, that language can never be owned and, further, that she as the writer is never truly, purely present in the language[7]. Instead she writes not because she has "as the internet would have it, *so many feels*" but in tireless search of the right balance between these three entities of the universe. Her style, as self-identified, Smith believes to be an "amalgamation of other voices, with a tiny bit of [her] own sensibility" (Shakespeare and Co.).

For the generations of contemporary female essayists which I have surveyed here, I have observed a very different kind of vulnerability. The outlines of their identities are known and defined in a way that initially looks like confidence, but shifts then, to looking like limitations. In writing about the self, a young woman looks at the boundaries of her identity and feels the need to justify why these are the bounds, question those bounds, and ultimately feel like they have not a single qualification to write in the way that they do. She feels like she must seek strongly fashioned objectivity, rooted in experience, rather than subjectivity, rooted in the self. In the foreword to *Feel Free*, Smith explains:

> It's true that for years now I have been thinking aloud – and often wondering if I've made myself ludicrous in one way or another. I think the anxiety comes from knowing I have no

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[6] Smith's are sometimes referred to as "the three B's": Brexit, Bieber, and bathrooms (Shakespeare and Company podcast, 2018).

[7] From one of two epigraphs that frame *Feel Free*: "The eyes are not windows. There are nerve impulses, but no one reads them, counts them, translates them, and ruminates about them. Haunt for as long as you want, there's nobody home. The world is contained within you, and *you're not there*." (Daniel Kehlmann, emphasis added)

> real qualifications to write the way as I do. Not a philosopher or sociologist, not a real professor or literature or film, not a political scientist, professional music critic or trained journalist … Essays about one person's affective experience have, by their very own nature, not a leg to stand on. All they have is their freedom. (ii)

It should be noted that within *Feel Free* Smith puts on each of those occupational hats. She untangles philosophy, studies strangers and non-strangers, analyzes literature and film, questions politics, and writes with brutal, brilliant critique. Smith is not alone in this. Joan Didion, of all people, of all women, questions herself.

Studying the essay demands a lot of time. There's a lot of reading, yes. But such is the study of anything. Studying the essay requires you to spend a lot of time in confined spaces. Small rooms with desks, between compressible stacks of physical books, scrolling through cataloged monotony of electronic ones, and pages and pages of HTML fraught searches of articles, blogs, podcasts, and interviews. All hoping to find something. Several, non-reputable sources point to a reality that Zadie Smith, at one point in time and at one intersection in this universe, wrote a piece for *The Guardian* called "The Rise of the Essay," a gold-plated finding. *The Guardian's* website, however, seems to deny that it exists, or ever existed. But the transcript of said Schrödinger's article can be found on "youmighthavetofindityourself.com" nested beneath a picture of Joan Didion. A discovery that looks a whole lot like irony, but also perhaps just comic happenstance. The piece unpacks much of the research completed within this project, and tacks on a bit more, but ultimately, Smith offers Thoughts on the Subject:

> There is a certain kind of writer – quite often male but by no means exclusively so – who has a fundamental hunger for purity, and for perfection, and this type will always hold the

> essay form in high esteem. Because essays hold out the possibility of something like perfection.

She then goes on to say that all essays rest on this form of perfectionism. And this is where, shockingly, I depart from Smith. I think that is quite counter to the idea of the essay. Or, actually, the contemporary female essay as experienced here. I do not think Joan Didion's essays are perfect. I think they are controlled in their mess. Didion talks like she is admitting and crafting these stories and things over a drink. Matter of fact and evenly candenced. But even still, she questions herself. And it is the questioning of oneself that works entirely counter to perfection. Perfection is rigid. Rigidity is the complete crystallization of the self. It is the rejection of other thinkers – the Ciceros, the Senecas, the Renaissance men – like what can be seen in the works of Montaigne and Bacon.

In lacking that rigidity, the female essayist is hard to pin down, spatially. Didion and Keegan move about and write throughout two dimensions: the first and the third person. Granted, each woman creates deviations of these perspectives, speaking individually and collectively, intimately and distantly. But at the heart of analyzing the work: there are two. Even in the duality of narrative, the reader experiences significant hesitation: does Joan consider herself part of the *we* that possesses self respect? Would Marina *actually* waste no qualms saving a whale?

Zadie Smith is a writer who is intentional about her approach to narrative and, more specifically, her use of the "I." From the epigraph opening her collection,[8] to the foreword, to interviews, to even an entire essay dedicated to "The I Who is Not Me," narrative perspective is an element that interests her, if not anxiously concerns her. With point of view, comes presence: the spatial location of the writer within the text. But, Zadie argues, time and again, that the writer is not present in the text, but instead "writers create their secondary selves, they use them to slip

[8] Ref. fn. 7.

from every bind and definition" (347). There is a condensed danger in writing perspective, in the moment where reality comes into contact with supposed fiction. In the essay, that is even more stark. The essay only flirts with fiction, through characterization and story-building; the rest of it is crafted truth and storied reality. Smith laments perfection in writing perspective, and quotes Yeats as being formative in her younger attempts: "The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life or of the work" ("The Choice"; Smith 347). A perfect life would mean that one's work in writing is distanced enough to never brush the edge of reality. It would never knock anything over. Whereas perfection of the work would embed so much reality in its existence, that the freedom of the *real people* within would be compromised. Smith circumvents this aged riddle by leaning into imperfection: "In my life, the flesh-and-blood 'I' and the I-who-is-not-me stumble equally, neither ever coming close to perfection" (347). She leans, further, into the blur and "the miasma of non-memory," which she explains that she, herself, lacks specific memory of facts and dates to the point where she feels she cannot write non-fiction truthfully, but instead only tells vivid pieces of the past (353). Smith's art, whether fiction or essay, represents the intricacies and malleability of form and perspective. The reader can never be sure that Joan Didion was not writing, reporting, observing people she knew, but Didion, as a human being, was present at the time of creation, and thus imbues herself in the work. The writer may not be wholly *literally* present in the work. I'm sure there are entire branches of philosophy and psychology that cover extrication of self. But the work, certainly the essay, is an extension of the truths of the writer, as experienced through the lens of something else: the concept of self respect, whales, the death of libraries.

"Northwest London Blues" is Zadie Smith's opener to *Feel Free*. As someone who has never written an essay collection, nay had anything published (yet feels that approaching a project

about both of those experiences is a space from which she can say something substantial), I wonder how much concrete thought and importance is vested in that very first piece. Does it set the tone? Does it unsettle? Is it bookended by the last piece? I can't say I have any conclusive answers to any of those questions; we would have to ask Zadie, although I'm not sure she would tell us either. However, "Northwest London Blues" is about libraries, tragedy of the commons, partisanship, politics, capitalism, the State, and, by extension, the self. Smith balances the methodologies of academic formalism with playfulness. Redolent of familiar MLA form, she includes origin dates in parentheses, yet plays with meta-experience of writing directly to the reader:

> From this vantage point we could look ahead to the turrets, or left to the Victorian police station (1865), or right to the half-ghostly facade of the Spotted Dog (1893) … Which is not to say that we are overly nostalgic about architecture (look at the library!) but we find it pleasant to remember that we have as much a right to local history as anyone, even if many of us arrived here only recently and from every corner of the globe. (4-5)

The tone is nearly that of a tour guide – "(look a library!)" – but equally reverent and irreverent, miraculously. The explicit awareness of "Northwest London Blues" sets it, and the rest of Zadie's collection, apart narratively, formally, and temporally.

Through point of view, Smith accomplishes the art of traversing. "Northwest London Blues" travels throughout time. Smith recounts the experience of attending the market with her daughter and mother, remembers her childhood there, places herself in the time of *writing* the essay, and even speculates on the future implications of the matter at hand. She whips throughout various spaces, from the market at Willesden Green, to New York University, to an overarching, a-spatial place where she discusses intersections of the state and politics. Smith travels in magnification; she focuses keenly on detail, embedded countless lists of countless small things,

but also zooms out widely to observe the level of collective humanity. Her essayistic style fervently switches between microscopic observation, to personal experience, to broad thought and interpolation. Most powerfully, however, Zadie Smith creates an essay crafted out of narrative switching as well.

In some narrative respects, Smith falls in line with Keegan and Didion. The reader encounters the familiar "I" and "we," and, of course, the "people." Smith is more liberal with her use of the "I", but as readers and critics, the distance between each of these perspectives, relative to the other, the reader, and the essayist, has already been established. How comforting! Except, of course, Smith expands her iteration of the essayistic form into the third dimension: the "you." She eases the reader into this experience, embedded in a scene-setting list describing the Willesden French Market and surrounding details: "It sells water pistols. It sells French breads and pastries for not much more than *you'd* pay for the baked goods in Greggs down Kilburn High Road. It sells cheese, but of the decently priced and easily recognizable kind.." (3). At the first point of contact, the presence of the second person is easily skimmed over. It almost seems like a narrative mistake. Smith, then, wastes no time assuring her reader that this you-dimension is no mistake: "When you're standing in the market you're not going to work, you're not going to school, you're not waiting for a bus … You're just a little bit off it, hanging out, in an open-air urban area, which is what these urban high streets have specifically evolved to stop people from doing" (4). The "you" inundates the reader to the point of accepting implication, whether or not he or she has travelled to, or heard of, Willesden Green. It is a crafty use of the "you"; the reader is not only interested (because *you're in it*, of course), but implicated, responsible, and freely active.

The manner by which Smith transitions between perspectives speaks power to her purpose and complexity to her art. Narrative variation is the channel by which Smith's other forms of

traversing happen. The first person is present at the time of creation. She utilizes both the first person personal ("I," "me," "my") and the first personal collective ("we," "our") to speak for herself and for humankind, through the guise of memory (which she has already told us is limited and untrustworthy), experience, and observation. The "I" and the we in Smith's essay participate in self-limitation, chiefly by their own self awareness. Smith, as the essayist in the act and process of writing, does not pretend to know everything about her subjects: "I do not claim to know what happens in villages," "And so I recognize myself to be an intensely naive person," and "I bore myself telling these stories" (4, 8, 9). The "I" feels very human in this essay, to the point where it becomes, almost undeniably, the writerly identity of Zadie Smith. It vacillates between objective confidence, and personal doubt; it is witty, cerebral, and slightly absurd. It could be no one else, except we know that, according to Smith, the writer is never truly present in the work. In this "I," the reader comes into contact with the ultimate example of "I-who-is-not-me." In this slipperiness of writerly identity, Smith, then, crafts some solidarity with the we, as evidenced in the above quote on architecture; she identifies with the intimacy of collective local knowledge, but also with the immigrant conceit as well. The people and Smith's version – the "everybody" – still exist and are still very much the *other*: an often lamentable version of the collective.

However, it is the three-dimensional space of the *you* that provides the venue for transition and linkage, throughout time, place, and narrative presence. With the "you," Smith converses directly with the reader: "Necessarily backward in time, though I didn't – couldn't – bore my daughter with my memories: she is still young and below nostalgia's reach. Instead I will bore *you*" (5, emphasis added). Here, the you is directed singularly outward from the work; it both provides a concrete audience, while allowing the narrative to move from one undefined time period to another. But, the inherent multidimensionalism of the "you" vests it with the narrative ability

to take on many roles. In another instance, Smith uses the "you" to develop narrative empathy with the reader, "Hopefully you have a Helen in a bookshop near you and so understand what I'm talking about" (6). But in a conflicting way, the "you" also seems to embody critical opposition: an entity that needs convincing, which she brings in story, anecdote, and analysis to do so. In some ways, Smith even seems to locate herself in the "you," bringing the "you" into the *us*: "Well-run libraries are filled with people because what a good library offers cannot be easily found elsewhere: an indoor public space in which you do not have to buy anything in order to stay" (11). The "you" within the personal essay possesses the ultimate power of the transitive property: it translates across time, space, barriers of thought, and barriers of self.

The singularity of Zadie Smith's essayistic style rests upon a single fact: she doesn't stop moving. Her narrative never rests on a single frame, or a single version of herself. Libraries, as are the subject of "Northwest London Blues," are viewed as a whipping multiplicity of personal connection, capitalistic drain, political unrest, and human necessity. Libraries exist everywhere, in Willesden Green and in New York City, and they *have* existed for centuries, as Smith's educative, parenthetical chronology shows us. Her work and process reflect the optical phenomenon which she asserts to be at the heart of the library problem: "mirroring" (8). For libraries, this is the idea that one's own problems, or the problems of one's town or country, are never truly singular. Populist, capitalist nationalists are not just in Italy and not just in America: "We get that money is tight, we understand that there is a hierarchy of needs, and that the French Market or a Mark Twain plaque are not hospital beds or classroom size." Inherent dissonances reflect and refract throughout the world and human nature at large. But that does not make them any less salient – "we're humans, not robots"– or any less a part of our identity. Thus, the self for Zadie Smith does not participate in Didionian deflection, nor is it viewed through the lens something larger. Instead, here the self

is lost in a miasma of a million different selves, reflecting and refracting through the permutations of time, place, scope, and narrative presence. The reader can never discern the true essayistic "I" with certainty, but observes a life-span of "I"'s at varying levels of closeness. The mirror, even, turns back upon the self: finding the "I" reflecting right back upon *you*.

III. Marina Keegan

Today, Marina Keegan would be 31 years old. There are certain dangers in idolizing and speculating about the dead, especially the young dead. However, whether or not she would have been a consultant at McKinsey or on her way to becoming the next Joan Didion, I would find it hard to believe that Marina Keegan would *not* be a writer. Instead of the ever-shifting outline of her physical presence in the world, we are left with a tightly packed opus. Compressed into 145 pages is a litany of fiction and non-fiction. She is not an essayist by formal trade or association, but she certainly could have been. Her collection includes pieces of fiction and embedded snippets of poetry, but the essays seep her voice into the world.

There are slight imperfections in her work. She takes moments to reconsider and doesn't edit them out, or carve them down. It's Montaignian, in a way. But, humbler. In all the ways that we find ourselves shaking our fist at the Frenchman for being lengthy, insufferable, and verbose, we beg and plead the universe for more of Keegan's words.

Undeniably, Marina Keegan is the reason I find myself spending a year and change trying to nail down the adjective form of the word "essay." I remember the first time I bought her book. It was the same first time that I saw her book. I was sixteen and shopping at an independent bookstore in Austin, Texas. The book had just come out. The edition I have is a hard cover, first edition, and sports no badges of "bestseller" that the mass market paperbacks now do. It's because

I bought it within (what I'm now assuming to be) a week of its release. Because I liked the cover. Ironic, isn't it?

I had never read an essay collection. My literary diet consisted of young adult novels I liked because they were simple and compact; classic favorites of the canon and my mother (which is to say almost exclusively Edith Wharton); and week-old issues of the *Economist*. Generally healthy, with a small sugar problem. *Opposite of Loneliness* was different. It was one of the first things I read that made me a little bit uncomfortable. I vividly remember reading one of her short stories called "Sclerotherapy," detailing the inner monologue of a woman going through varicose vein removal. I couldn't understand why someone would *write* something like that, or why someone would want to read it, or why I couldn't stop thinking about it. Naturally, I devoured the book. It read quickly: flitting fiction vignettes, followed by non-fiction "essays," with scraps of poetry in between.

I wish I would have kept track of every time I've re-read the book. I return to it in moments of suspension, doubt, in grappling with the world, in losing myself. I find pieces of myself in its pages. I've lent it out to people who I trusted with its physical bones; sent pictures of its pages to close friends, to ex-boyfriends. There's a yellow sticky note marking page 9; I didn't put it there. The dust jacket is remarkably un-torn.

In analyzing Keegan's form and approach to the genre of the essay, the reader, and critics, seem to question how she can sound both refreshingly young, and not young at all. In many ways both formal and informal, academia and elitism has made it the charge of young intellectuals to sound like PhD-toting, forty year olds. The jargon, the structure, the distance from our subject – we are told – will get us far in life. Especially as women, we are told to play our age close to our chest, to use words like "efficacy" and not use words like "stuff." It always seems like men can

get away with more colloquial attempts at diction; they can use vulgarities and "stuff," and call themselves disciples of David Foster Wallace or David Sedaris. Keegan pushes back against this idea. She participates in the rebellious lean of the essay and is entirely honest about all twenty-two years of her existence. She talks about – "borrowed skirts and bottled drinks" – with the same gravitas that she talks about the brain-drain of the consulting industry and the mortality of whales. She writes the essay that is self aware of its youth and the largeness of being young, while still understanding that in relativity, we are very, very small. In the final piece of her collection, "Song for the Special," she imagines a world at peace and a generation who thinks they are innately "special": "Until one day, vaguely, quietly, the sun would flicker out and they'd realize that none of us are [special]. Or that all of us are. … Hello, I'll say to outer space, this is my card" (208).

One way to consider the essay is to calculate the size of the author in the work, how much space the writerly voice is taking up. For Montaigne, Bacon, and even contemporary male essayists like Wallace, the flood of the first person overwhelms the white space.[9] This phenomenon contributes to the effect of the direct, unrelenting first person singular style of the essay. Joan Didion crafted her essays through perspective ambiguity and personal deflection. Like Didion, Marina Keegan's attempts revolve around topics *outside* of the self, but unlike Didion, Keegan does not play her cards of the "I" as close to the chest. She imbues her essays with the version of herself that she finds, only after looking out at humanity. She sees herself as part of something bigger. Keegan is,[10] as most twenty-two year old's are, trying to find herself. She searches for her place in the world; she tries to pin her dogmas down in one concrete philosophy. She tries to find

[9] *Manspreading*: the act or practice by a man of sitting with the legs spread wide apart (as in a public seating area) in a way that intrudes on the space of others. (Merriam Webster)
[10] Ref. self.

her voice and her identity in her work. She tackles the intersections of nearly every person, place, or thing in order to do so.

The Opposite of Loneliness investigates the fibers between people, what constitutes loneliness, what creates meaning, where our place is in the middle of these things. Loneliness forces space between people; it makes the person in question feel quite small. In "I Kill for Money," Keegan writes the daily regimen of an exterminator to be emblematic of this smallness; in the title essay, she shares that her experiences at Yale are the complete opposite. Within the space of the page, the reader hesitates on whether or not to observe Keegan, herself, as an exhibition of this kind of loneliness, or Didion's "alienation of self." She is objectively present in her brutal and brilliant commentary, but subjectively, she is narrating as an other. In the act of story crafting and observation, she does distance herself from her subject. This is obvious even, and especially, when she tackles topics which overwhelm her in size: a Toyota Camry ("Stability in Motion"), the consulting industry ("Even Artichokes Have Doubts"), and whales. In inches and impact, these objects, entities, and animals are larger than her; they are larger than the reader and the audience. In tackling these through the form of the essay, Keegan speaks unflinchingly to the inquiry of her youth, but also to the question that hides yet persists even in adulthood: in the midst of everyday tragedy and uncommon beauty, where do I fit in?

"Why We Care About Whales" originated in *The Yale Daily News* in 2009. It asks a series of incessant, uncomfortable, and rhetorical questions about death, cruelty, and the state of humanity/inhumanity. Keegan poses these questions, not as a diary of her pondering, but instead, as a listing of facts. Beyond the title which employs the first person collective from the very frame, the facts presented are couched by the statement, "When the moon gets bored, it kills whales" (151). She begins, "Blue whales and fin whales and humpback, sperm, and orca whales: centrifugal

forces don't discriminate" (Keegan 151). In tone, Keegan balances the informed, no-nonsense jargon of a marine biology textbook, interrupted by her signature beautiful, yet cutting, lines: "Beached whales become frantic, captives to their hyperventilation. Most die from dehydration. The salty air shrinks their oily pores, capturing their moisture. Deprived of the buoyancy water provides, whales can literally crush themselves to death" (152). "Beached whales become frantic" and "Most die from dehydration" are facts; tragic facts, but removed enough in their word choice that sympathy is minimal. These are the kinds of phrases that invoke the "circle of life" arguments. Keegan's choice of "captives to their hyperventilation" vests a very different kind of emotionality, implying a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. "Whales can literally crush themselves to death," is a natural tragedy in and of itself, but if whales are now "captives" there is both a captor, and someone who must be responsible enough to free these animals. In these first few pages, Keegan has not yet made herself present, or the liberator of the whales, but instead as a distanced observer, adamant to keep much of herself out of the narrative. However, Keegan's phrasing nonetheless indicates a level of empathy that signals the development of co-identification in the coming pages.

Marina Keegan does not deflect personal story and anecdote. She shares rather openly, but like Didion, does so in piecemeal. The first evidence of the first person singular comes in tandem with the death of a whale, corroborating her fact with experience: "Finally, their jaws open slightly – not all the way, but just enough that the characteristic illusion of a perpetual smile disappears. This means it's over. I know this because I watched twenty-three whale mouths unhinged. As twenty-three pairs of whale eyes glazed over" (Keegan 152). Keegan's first person investment, however, is not individual. She did not spearhead an uprising against the death of the Cape Cod whales, nor single handedly save twenty-three whale lives. Her narrative is instead a diary of

observations of a collective effort: something she happened upon in her beach backyard and joined into, something larger than her.

Whales die in multitudes, but they die alone. So do humans, Keegan pulls no punches to tell us that. From the first few paragraphs, the reader might assume that the essay harbors an agenda of education – a six page pamphlet for the "Save the Whales" campaign, written by a college sophomore. But instead, Keegan is taking a wider look at the entire mammalian landscape, and asking the question: why do humans so willingly sacrifice their time and convenience to aid a dying whale, but hesitate, and often desist, in helping a dying fellow human? Like Didion, she then brings forth the amorphism of "the people. "People are strange about animals," she says, but really, people are strange about *other people*. She shares and recounts the frustrating irony of the army of concerned citizens saving the whales, are the same ones feasting on cod cheeks caught down the beach in Wellfleet Harbor (153). She then states, "I worry sometimes that humans are afraid of helping humans. There's less risk associated with animals, less fear of failure, fear of getting too involved" (153). Keegan's theorizations about and observations of the problem are communicated in the first person singular ("In theory I can say," 154), but the wide reaching span of practical attempts and experiment are part of the collective. The dissonance is less about morality or mortality, but instead, about critical distance.

Keegan lays out the facts of her argument: we care about whales because we can identify a certain distance from them; they're not one of us; they're far too large. Stranded, lonely humans "don't roll in with the tide – they hide in the corners and the concrete houses and the plains of exotic countries we've never heard of, dying of diseases we can't pronounce" (154). Keegan explores and notes the fear, hesitation, and isolation that coats the diminished empathy humans have for other humans. Impoverished "stranded humans" are viewed as noncritical, while beached

whales are viewed as palpably urgent (154). Keegan continues to offer facts and observations in the first person singular, lamenting the incongruities of weighing theory against practice. As she wrestles with the divide between human kindness and sincere a-human connection, her first-person lines embedded in the essay become choppy, and no longer formally theoretical. Keegan questions herself, her theory, and helplessly grasps for that rational sense of community, even with the whales. She looks out at humanity and the sea of observations and feels, it seems, a bit lonely, on a beach, surrounded by a graveyard of dying whales. In the closing paragraph, she employs the "I" as strictly an arbiter of experience. She does not avoid or attempt to hide her identity, but instead offers the ultimate vulnerability of uncertain self, wholly through her own experience. "Perhaps I should have been comforting one of them … spending my time and my money and my life saving those who walked on two legs and spoke without echoes. … Before I could find an answer, the whale's jaw unclenched, opening slightly around the edges" (Keegan 156). In finally seeing *herself* in the expanse, in finding her identity in the collective, she may not find answers to life's tangled questions, but she does find community and developing clarity.

The essay comes to an abrupt end there, on the precipice of adventure rather than the closed book of experience. The author sees herself in humanity and immediately questions everything. In her approach to the essay, Keegan explores the idea that we should be spending our time on earth doing something different than what we are, spending our time becoming someone *different than who we are*. "Perhaps I should have been comforting one of them," she says, speaking to the homeless or the impoverished humans who live on a different continent, rather than the whales (156). In a later essay, Keegan disentangles her relationship with gluten, and wonders how different her life and her relationship with her mother would be if she was more fastidious in managing her allergy. What would happen if we were kinder to the rodent and pest exterminator?

Should I be reconsidering my participation in the “death of the mind” consulting industry (196)? Should we be thinking about eschatology and packing our possessions into a spacecraft — “what a gift we have been given to be born in an atmosphere with oxygen and carbon dioxide and millions of years and phenotypes cheering us on with recycles of energy” – (170)? Keegan’s essays arrive at the most vulnerable of ends: finding pieces of oneself in the throes of the world, yet realizing that these fractals of the self only pose *more* questions. In all the times that I’ve come to *Opposite of Loneliness* – exhausted, invigorated, grieving, or exalting – I close its covers feeling markedly less certain, but oxymoronically: more free. Now, as I exist at the same age and brink of life Keegan was when her work became posthumous, her fears and hopes are also mine: “I feel like we can do something really cool to this world. And I fear – at twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five – we might forget” (200).

Chapter 3:

Coda: On Conclusory Notes and Feminist Ideology

"*But a writer seemed another and altogether elusive order of being: I didn't know how to become her.*"

– Nancy Mairs, "Prelude" to *Voice Lessons*

I. The Male-Formed Essay and Individualism

The essay is “a toy for men with hands busied with other pursuits” (Thompson 139). This particular portrayal of the seventeenth century (male-formed) essay strips the form of any consequence or tangible sense of mattering: the essay as a toy, a meaningless distraction from “reality”. But it is precisely the collectively-held underbelly of thought that has diminished the essay’s street cred over generations. The co-patriarchs of the essay, Montaigne and Bacon, were by no means considered failures of their craft. Michel de Montaigne, “Père de l'Essais,” was lauded for his exemplary work and the enjoyment and improvement it brought to his reader. He pioneered the idea that writing of the self could bleed beyond fiction, record-keeping, and letter-writing. He posited a future in which exposition, experimentation, and experience, centered upon personal identity, were worthy pursuits of the written word. Sir Francis Bacon, exempt from his brief and intermittent cameo as an essayist, exists in history as not only a philosopher, but a statesman, engraved in history. The word “essay” is not even mentioned until three-quarters of the way down his Wikipedia page. Instead, he championed scientific methodology and empiricism, as well as existed a crucial epicenter of court power in the monarchy. Both men would have led fine, exceptional lives without the essay; but, somehow, the collectivism of both of their contributions led to the creation of the genre and form of the essay as we knew it.

A hand-span of points comprise the collectivism of the male-formed, seventeenth century essay. The foundations of this form simmer on top of Thompson’s idea of idleness. Across centuries, the men of the essay have had an excess of *time*. Essays arose organically for Montaigne and Bacon, in moments of their life in which they had time to idle, to lean into leisure, to reflect upon themselves and the scaffolds of power that surrounded them. Each experienced public falls from grace and points of political and professional stagnation. These events caused them to

question the big picture, the meaning of life, and exhaustedly through the essay: the constructs of power and the individual's ability to create power out of himself. In these moments of quiet, the male essayist focuses on nothing but himself, or more specifically, how the objects of the world relate back to him. They were "men of experience," pursuing an entirely selfish act.

Montaigne and Bacon, as well as their male successors to come, approach the essay directly. They speak overtly and are keenly aware of their mental and physical states. They are beyond able to address these large scale issues and the reflection of themselves, their bodies, and their lives onto them. These male founders, these patriarchs, if you will, appear to be very sure of themselves. They nearly take their identities for granted. The narrator never questions *himself*, but rather questions the philosophies and life experiences that impose upon the lifestyle and body of the narrator. *Who is Cicero to say, posthumously, that my way of thinking about my own death is implicitly incorrect? Why should I, disgraced Sir Francis Bacon, be listening to the minds of the Renaissance, when I am pioneering my own movement?* Within their works, there exists the usual human vulnerabilities: we are all going to die. I am going to die. But worry not, I've written the comprehensive tome on how to die well, and well, I won't spoil it, but you should first imagine yourself as a corpse.

Other thematic and stylistic elements of the male-formed essay include fragmentation and digression of thought, structure, and language; a defiant and irreverent tone, working against something, or some previous conception of the self; use of the vernacular; and and direct, constant presence of the "I." In Montaigne, the "I" is overwhelmingly present and repetitive to describe experience, while in Bacon's counsels, it is omnipresent in recounting the results of his own self-experimentation. In both of these male founders' constructions of the essay, the first person was held at a distance from the audience, for the reason of providing actionable advice and persuasions

on *how to live*. Nancy Mairs quotes Virginia Woolf in defining this aspect of the masculine essay: "'the creature, Dictator, as we call him in Germany,' Father we call him at home, 'who believes that he has the right, whether given by God, nature, sex or race is immaterial to dictate other human beings where they shall live, what they shall do'" (Mairs 71-72). The male essayist is asserting this "where" and "what" of living, by virtue of their own lived experience. By prescribing their ways of life on the reader of past or present, they see their experiences and identities as canonical and *essential*.

Nancy Mairs is the author of a part critical, part creative feminist work called *Voice Lessons*, within which she investigates the critical and experiential spaces between the male and female, the masculine and feminine voice within the essay. Mairs also develops and builds upon the idea of the phallic "I" and the metaphor of literary paternity. The "I" originated in the male, specifically with Montaigne, and thus is a tool, whose access and use is colonized by the male essayist. I establish this "I" previously as a facet of the male-constructed essay, under the guise of the direct, unrelenting use of first person singular. Mairs defines literary paternity in the evidence that "a literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power made manifest, made flesh" (82). Michel de Montaigne and Sir Francis Bacon use the form and genre of the essay to create a physical record and monument to their lives and experiences, but as I argue earlier, to institutionalize, to manifest the power of the self. She identifies that this is an act of literary paternity, one that has crowded out women writers from essayistic pursuits for generations. Through the structures of power in patriarchal, Western culture, "The text's author is a father, … an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim" (Mairs 82). Thus, Montaigne and Bacon, as the co-fathers, co-

founders, and co-patriarchs of the essay, have laid claim to the form, which could not be penetrated by women. The phallic "I," as a male creation, confines the Other, the woman: "In the grammar of the phallus – the I, I, I – she can't utter the female experience" (Mairs 83). That is, until the rise of the contemporary woman essayist.

The contemporary essay written by a woman does many of these same things. In becoming a scholar of the essay, we can observe how the style and form is informed by what has come before. Occasional fragmentation, iterations of the vernacular, undefinable forms, and exploration are all stylistic and formal textual qualities that can be seen in Didion's thought, Keegan's youth, and Smith's academic idiosyncrasies. But the two eras of the essay diverge in the approach to finding and situating the self in the essay.

II. The Female-Generative Essay

In her "Prelude: Loving the Other," Nancy Mairs discusses her evolving identity as a woman writer and her initial brushes with the "I," as well as the "you," which we see in Zadie Smith's writing most notably. It is not unlike the aversion to the first person from entry level classes in literature, as previously discussed. As a teacher, herself, Mairs fell into the pedagogical avoidance of teaching the "I," but soon she realized that in holding the self "ten thousand light years away in the name of objectivity" is no way to teach and raise good writers, and further, no way to write for herself. For the woman writer, the self consciousness around the "I" is rooted in a desire to be objective; something which male essayists never find themselves preoccupied with, due to their intrinsic access to the phallic "I." Once the writer frees herself from the oppressive expectation of objectivity, she is free to express her "I" and confront the difference "my body is not your body" (Mairs 10). For Mairs, the second person was even more difficult to admit into her writing and teaching. As seen in the essays of Zadie Smith, the "you" draws the reader the closest

to the author that she will ever be: “to adopt the second person in my own writing would draw some innocent other into similarly suspect relations” (Mairs 11). It is as much an act of gender-oriented confidence, as it is an act of vulnerability.

In asserting the dissonances in the “I” between the masculine and feminine essay, Mairs reinforces a previous, but perhaps blindly accepted truth: the gendered forms of the essay are not the same. As I assert from the outset in this project, they are quite different. Relating to the “I” directly, Mair offers bluntly: “My ‘I’ seems simply not to be the male-constructed ‘I’: It is more fluid, diffuse, multiplex (giddy, duplicitous, and inconstant, I think men have called it)” (88). From the female perspective, one approach to the essay is not particularly better than the other, but from the male conceit, one is certainly more trivial than the other.

In resistance to triviality, one concept and charge of the contemporary-woman-essayist that I deeply admire, emulate, and am puzzled by is the seeming absurdity of it all. The great patriarchs approached topics of great public interest. They approach the generalities of death, life, love, and beauty, and did so in ways that were comprehensive (a nice word for lengthy), elaborate (a nice word for verbose), and previously unseen. It was unlikely to approach these aged subjects in the way that they did: conversationally. In many ways, this is what made the creation and emulation of the essay form innovative. However, Didion, Keegan, and Smith write in ways that approach these same ideas, but do so with a tint of absurdity. Keegan ponders her own mortality, but also the heightened morality of whales. Didion explores beauty by explicating her own plainness. Smith introduces Buber’s complex philosophies of self, but places him in direct, violent conversation with Bieber. And she, too, acknowledges, in case we missed it: “Bieber and Buber are alternative spellings of the same German surname. Who am I to ignore these hints from the universe?” (Smith 383). In reading Montaigne one finds oneself wondering, “How can someone speak so intently

and awarely about one's own death?" Whereas in Smith, I found myself seeking real, contemplative meaning in a pop song, that was once the inspiration for an elementary cheerleading routine. The value of absurdity is not just in its intelligent considerations, but also in the transparency of the author not taking herself too seriously.

The female approach to the "I" is grounded in the realization that the subjectivity of the first person is only made stronger by other voices, not jeopardized by their response. Montaigne and Bacon shirk the idea that any voices but their own can enter into their essays. Both, then, participate in essayistic rejection of external quotes and ideas, or anything that eclipses the presence and power of the male self in the essay. However, Virigina Woolf's idea of the feminine essay, was creating a space for women to find community in narrative and to move away from "individual, eccentric lives," like those offered by the male essayist. Nancy Mairs supports the idea of collectivity, especially in the process of the construction of the female voice, "in relation to some of the (m)others whose writer aroused me and nurtured and chastised me, each one drawing me on, teaching me to love her, to love myself in her, to love myself, to love: To write. .. certain voices (of both men and women) trained me and continue to modulate and refine my own [voice]" (7).

I think often of the voices that have shaped my writing. Three of them have an entire chapter of this project devoted to their life and work. But even still, I love David Foster Wallace. There was a period in my life where I read him voraciously. I was once handed a borrowed copy of *Consider the Lobster* on a date, in and around Columbia University. I still maintain that he's entirely clever. I won't say brilliant, because I think arrogance is the antithesis to brilliance. To date, I've never given the book back. But, it was not until I read Joan Didion, Marina Keegan, and Zadie Smith that I realized that the cleverness that I liked, which is to say the slight *irreverence*,

in the tone of the essay could arise from acknowledgement of *not* knowing everything, rather than the male-defined facade of being all-knowing.

The fluidity, and further the existence, of the female-constructed essay is not one that surfaced easily. The voice of the male essayist, extant since the 1500s, consists of the "'language to be a male construct whose operation depends on women's silence and absence' … a woman's capacity for uttering what is distinctive about her life is especially blunted. Her mutedness tends to become muteness" (Mairs 73, 81). In an essayistic rebellion against the repression of the female voice, the female essay gives birth to the feminine idea of *openness* – of creating a void, rather than filling it. The female-generative essay is "flawed not when it is ambiguous or even contradictory, but only when it leaves you no room for stories of your own" (Mairs 74). Didion, Keegan, and Smith all went out into the world in search of other voices, in search of the stories of the Other. They did not write the essay to boast upon their own lives, or by means to educate or prescribe a certain way of life. The female-generative essay is one that seeks "'the pools, the depths, the dark places …' until it smashes against the rock of, 'something about the body, about the passions'" (Mairs 77). Like the deflection of Didion, Keegan's distanced then personal analysis of humanity, and Smith's swirling switching of narrative perspective: the woman essayist does not dive in search of herself, but fluidly finds pieces of herself in the pools on which she writes.

III. The Non-Essential Essay

The impetus of this project was, in many ways, my love of the essay. I collect essay collections like they're going out of style, buying them at airport bookstores, compulsively online and late at night, really at any opportunity. I like their compactness. I like their strangeness. I like that I learn a little piece about *something* when I read them.

But, as a wise woman and professor once told me, the best writing arises when you get a little angry about something. As I began my research for this project, that bit of anger started as a speck of annoyance: the discovery that no one seems to be writing about, or further, *researching* the essay. This was fine; there were a few shining examples of people that cared: Atkins, Lopate, Klaus. Unfortunate that they were all men, but we could easily progress forward from here. The anger, however, arose from a general feeling, summarized in a single quote, from G. Douglas Atkins, a self proclaimed disciple of the essay and author of *Tracing the Essay*. He closes his final chapter: "The essay cannot save the world, despite the glory with which I seem to have enshrouded it." In the tone and inflection of any good liberal arts student: I would like to push back.

Zadie Smith, herself, offers that there might not be any "need" for these essays. I, again, want to resist that idea. Because there *is* a need. There's as much a need for the absurd and weird essay, which yokes together pop icons with philosophers, as there is need for exhortations about the importance of libraries in the midst of political turmoil. Neither of these topics, both of which are surveyed within *Feel Free*, are non-essential. They are curious and intelligent and funny. They are neither non-essential nor mundane. The essay is an unbounded space from which the writer and the writer is a little more free just by participating in the work: it is the opposite of the mundane. In her foreword, written upon publication in 2017, Smith includes a note about her anachronisms: "I realize my somewhat ambivalent view of human selves is wholly out of fashion" (*iii*). She once again argues that we all have better things to do, larger battles to fight than the ploy of narrative voice and the ponderance of a corpse. Even still, "You can't fight fire with air. But equally you can't fight for a freedom you've forgotten how to identify. To the reader still curious about freedom I offer in these essays – to be used, changed, dismantled, destroyed, or ignored as necessary!" (*iii*). Her comic lilt here lightens what I believe to be a crucial point, about reading *Feel Free* and the

temporal-spatial placement of the essay as a genre. When the essay is composed humbly, personally, and unaware of its future significance, it remains as a piece of dynamic freedom. It allows us to move forward by digging up what we do not remember.

The unassuming power behind the essay is what makes modern attempts so crucial. Overt forms, obvious attempts lend themselves to criticism and censorship. These are the violences that are often silenced by the oppressor, or inaccessible to the oppressed: the novel, the news article, the historical account. The edges of the essayistic form are blurred. Despite its "second class citizenship," a piece can be grounded in science, as much as personal testimony; it can be formal or informal. Even Adorno, in writing on the essay, acknowledges its power of hybridity: "In its relationship to scientific procedure and its philosophical grounding as method, the essay, in accordance with its idea, draws the fullest conclusions from the critique of system" (9). In its innate slipperiness, the essay frees up the individual and frees up the concept. In a way, no one pays attention to the essay. Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* will be more popular than *Feel Free* ever will be. Joan Didion won those awards for journalism and memoir. Essay writing is a side-gig at best. But the fringe existence of the form vests it with the power to say something that more obvious forms cannot, and to say it with creative ownership at that.

The female form of the essay posits a future in which the essay could change the world. Harnessing the power of the periphery is what the women of the modern essay do so well. Women essayists do not write with the supposition that the world will care what they have to say; they are artists of self exploration, not statesmen of self institutionalism. They, then, are inclined to push the genre into a territory that will make their work "matter" in humble sincerity and intangible power, as Adorno notes: "radical in its un-radicalism" (9). These women essayists seek reconciliation and generation of self, rather than assertion of self. Beyond finding pieces of herself

in humanity or in her writing, the female construction of the essay allows the female writer to have that freedom available to her. Mairs, herself, says that the female form of the essay allows her to use shared language to create a text for "the space it provides for me to live within it." That space is *freedom*. The feminine essay is built of words that relate to each other, in community, rather than those that exist in opposition: collective, rather than prescriptive. It rejects the rigidity and egoism of the self that is offered by the male-constructed, phallic "I." Helene Cixous describes a feminine textual body as one in which "a feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over" (Mairs 85). It is collective, it is amorphous, and there is action in its imperfections.

In his own attempts at reconciling the genre and form of the essay, before female involvement, Adorno offers that conflicting approaches to writing about oneself creates a workable space, rather than the destruction of possibility. The essay can be anything; the self can be communicated through so many different mediums, formal and informal: emails,[11] grocery lists,[12] notes to friends[13]. While these are not formal essays, the space of the essayistic voice, as theorized

[11] Ref. Smith on the email: "When it comes to life-writing, the real, honest, diaristic, warts-and-all kind, the only thing I have to show for myself – before St. Peter and whomever else – is my *Yahoo!* Email account" ("Life Writing" 353). And my own: "As now I'm having to truly, intimately, and frustratingly come to terms with the harrowing reality that there is no adjective form of the word 'essay'... Essiac is a type of herbal tea, said to kill cancer, *apparently*" (Outlook Outbox).

[12] Ref. Didion's packing lists: "TO CARRY: *mohair throw / typewriter / 2 legal pads and pens / files / house key*" ("The White Album" 203). And my own, "horror of disorder / On braising a chicken / social cool boy capital for good / anchovies? / embrace your inner obsessive gene" (iPhone Notes).

[13] Ref. Keegan's handwritten notes: "Hearing a famous writer tell me that the industry is dying and that we should probably do something else was sad. Perhaps I just expected him to be more encouraging of those hoping to *stop* the death of literature" (*xi*). And my own, "To whoever finds this upside down bowl, there is a bug underneath. I think he is still alive. I could not bring myself to kill him. I had to go to a meeting, please forgive me! With love and undying admiration, LKS" (Post-It note with Sharpie).

by Adorno and realized by Didion, Smith, and Keegan, provokes the idea that writing about yourself, even indirectly, is meaningful communication of your presence in the world.

Arrogantly omniscient and restrictively omnipotent self-writing – the self that knows everything about anything, and knows the self with complete certainty – drops us precisely in the stubborn stagnation of egoism that we find ourselves and our society in today. The female-generative essay, instead, offers a form of actionable altruism for the world. The charge is to go out into the world, into *your* world, not trying to find yourself or define yourself to the point of prescription, but instead trying to learn something about something or someone else. Only in this pursuit, which is formalized through the act of essayification, can the "I", the "you" come into contact with humanity. Only then, can we see ourselves in the Other. This is the particular kind of dogma that *can* change the world. This is the way the world begins, not with a bang but with the "stuttering adventure of the essay" (Mairs 87).

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Layne K. Smith