

Introduction

Essaying, from Past to Present

“Let me imagine,” wrote Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, “what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say” (46). Woolf’s fictional Judith Shakespeare might have been “as agog to see the world” as her brother, but she was expected to remain at home: “She was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil” (47). Woolf’s version of Judith’s story does not end well: she ran away to London, just as her brother had, but she could not be an actor or a playwright. Finding herself pregnant and without hope, she killed herself, a potential genius thwarted.¹ How long would it take for women writers not to be thwarted? In the centuries after the imaginary Judith Shakespeare’s death, real women writers emerged—Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, the Brontës, George Eliot, to name a few. When Woolf wrote *A Room of One’s Own* in 1929, books by women writers could have filled her shelves but, in her view, their work lacked incandescence.

We are now approaching the one-hundred-year anniversary of *A Room of One’s Own*, a significant anniversary for women writers because Woolf predicted in 1929 that, given the conditions of women’s lives, it would take “another hundred years’ time” for women to cultivate literary brilliance (94).² Woolf’s prediction was overly pessimistic, as many women writers achieved greatness well before 2029. Among them are essayists inspired by Woolf’s own legacy. In fact, a good number of women essayists in the United States found paths to publishing serious essays less than forty years after Woolf’s prediction. Indeed, the situation had already improved only nine years after Woolf’s warning about the hundred-year wait; in 1938 she published *Three Guineas*, in which she imagined an Outsiders’

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Society constituted by the daughters of educated men, women who would work anonymously, secretly, and “by their own methods for liberty, equality, and peace” (106). Woolf wanted to believe that women with all kinds of talents might bring an end to war, because they would bring the perspective of “a different sex, a different tradition, a different education, and the different values which result from those differences” (113). Although education was not available to most women in England in the 1920s and 1930s, some new voices and points of view emerged. Nevertheless, Woolf’s fictional Society of Outsiders was unable to halt the march toward the Second World War.

This book is about a different group of writers—literary daughters and granddaughters—who wrote innovative essays about vital issues in the mid-to-late twentieth-century United States. These essayists—Rachel Carson, Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, Joan Didion, and Patricia J. Williams—were different from most women of their era. They were united by their circumstances. They were college-educated and privileged; they were serious and ambitious writers; and they were powerful thinkers at a time when women were often not recognized as public intellectuals. They were also connected by their shared willingness to take risks and make bold claims in response to political, social, and cultural problems that included ecology, ethics, race, gender, and inequities. In addition, these essayists were skeptics who rejected simple explanations along with rhetoric promoted by industry, the government, and the law. They also experimented with the expansive possibilities of the essay form, which accommodated many subjects and genres, including narrative, journalism, research, and personal reflection.

Each of these writers was also marked by social difference. Carson had a long-term and private loving relationship with a woman, while Sontag less privately identified as bisexual and had extended bonds with famous women, including playwright Mariá Irene Fornés, choreographer Lucinda Childs, and photographer Annie Leibovitz.³ The other writers in this society emphasized their distinctive perspectives. Arendt was a World War II refugee and a political theorist. Didion was a western-based writer and a fifth-generation Californian who was fascinated by cultural change. Williams, the only member of this group still living, is a Black, Harvard-trained lawyer who writes about race, gender, and the law. Their work continues to matter because it shifted how Americans thought about central issues in the mid-to-late twentieth century. They wrote with ethical purpose in an unsettled world, and together they provided models for how to resist the received truths of one’s time. In short, they changed minds.

Each chapter in this book focuses on one writer and establishes her historical, social, and biographical context, while also juxtaposing famil-

iar essays and lesser-known projects. The works of these writers may be well-known, but their essays are not generally recognized as literary. Non-fiction has long been seen as a lesser category of literature, and because the essay is often focused on the local or the political, its relevance can seem fleeting. Critics, however, have not yet fully accounted for the importance the essay in the late twentieth century, especially essays by women.

Carson's career as a writer was made possible by the editorship of William Shawn, the *New Yorker's* editor, who recognized in *The Sea Around Us* a new kind of essay. Her writing was not personal. It was instead accessible, even lyrical, science writing that focused on the biology and ecology of the oceans. Between 1951 and 1962, Shawn arranged to publish three multiple-week extended essays in the *New Yorker* from *The Sea Around Us*, *The Edge of the Sea*, and *Silent Spring*. Part of Carson's success was due to her deep expertise and research. She trained as a zoologist and worked for the US Fish and Wildlife Service for sixteen years before she was able to dedicate her days to full-time writing. As a scientist in the 1950s and early 1960s, Carson hoped that her books about the sea would gently impress two central ideas upon her readers: that the environment should be conserved and, more radically, that humans should accept their marginal role in relation to the vast oceans. Her scientific anecdotes demonstrated to readers that life on earth relied on interconnected ecosystems in which lifeforms were interdependent. By the end of Carson's career, she made a radical leap into political writing. She recognized that humans could destroy the planet, in part because the chemical and nuclear industries were reckless. *Silent Spring* became a manifesto about the public need for regulating industries in order to preserve habitats and species.

Eight months after *Silent Spring* appeared in 1962, Arendt published a five-part series called *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, also in the pages of the *New Yorker*. Arendt asked a very different question: what, in a secular age, does the word *evil* mean? In Arendt's view, evil was not an innate character trait or a fall from grace; instead, she argued, it was made possible by the warped ambitions of autocrats and the political, historical, and technological contexts in which they operated. As Arendt studied Adolf Eichmann, she relentlessly tracked detail after detail and lie after lie. The rhetorical challenges she faced were extraordinary. Eichmann was an unambiguous liar, and the language of the trial was politically and ethically charged. To write about the accused, Arendt chose to defy literary categories, mixing history, philosophy, law, and rhetorical interpretation.⁴

Like Arendt, Sontag's career was intellectually eclectic. She wrote about art, literature, "camp" sensibility, politics, war, suffering, and illness. Although many readers think of her as an aesthete, she was equally an ethicist. In *On Photography* (1977), for example, Sontag argued that the ac-

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cumulation of public images was dulling our sensibilities and contributing to an ethical failure of attention. She expressed a desire to restrict the publication of photography in the 1970s. In *Illness as Metaphor*, she insisted that readers reject metaphors for illness. These arguments were intellectual provocations and the stated goals were simply impossible. While Sontag's aphorisms, overstatements, and inconsistencies might appear to be weaknesses, the reviewer A. O. Scott recalled Sontag's importance to him as a young writer because he "craved the drama of her ambivalence, the tenacity of her enthusiasm, the sting of her doubt." Readers were thrilled by the movement of her mind, which was always a performance on the page. She chose to ask questions that had no easy answers, such as, How should one regard the pain of suffering others?

Unlike Sontag, Didion was shaken by the cultural rupture of the 1960s. In her best-known essays from the 1960s and 1970s, such as *The White Album* (1978), she wrote about cultural change, but few readers at that time recognized her as a significant political essayist. Didion's early success relied on her crystalline sentences and an authorial persona that seemed both inviting and disengaged. She resisted "the insistent sentimentalization of experience," the popularity of stories built on "broad strokes," "the distortion and flattening of character, and . . . the reduction of events to narrative" (Didion, "New York: Sentimental Journeys"). After *The White Album*, Didion realized that she had relied too long on a set of received tales about who she was and where she was from, and eventually those realizations led her to spend decades dismantling myths about California's destiny and American society. Starting in 1988, she began writing rhetorical analysis of media and politics in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. For twenty years she wrote essays about language games and the related risks facing American democracy. As Nathan Heller maintained, starting in the 1960s, Americans no longer had a "shared language and a common ethic." This conclusion may be partly right, but which came first, the loss of language and the failure of ethics or the rise of neoliberal politics? Perhaps they fed each other.

Didion's suspicion of government intersected with Williams's distrust of elements of the law and its practices. Writing as the descendant of an enslaved Black woman and her white slaveholder, Williams began her career with a landmark essay, "On Being the Object of Property," in which she rejected the false language of neutrality and colorblindness in US law. She argued instead that "law was a constitutive element of race itself" (Crenshaw xxv); thus, her essays exposed injustices and made evident the tension between the narratives of Black people, especially Black women, on the one hand, and legal and social constructions, on the other. Williams's essays in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* attended to race, gender,

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inequity, and the law. Although Williams's essays were urgent and overdue, she had no illusions that she could perform a magical transformation through writing. She did, however, find ways to reach broader and broader audiences, not only in her books, but also in her long-running column for the *Nation*, "Diary of a Mad Law Professor."

I chose to write about this group of political essayists because I appreciated the ways in which they grappled with complexity and uncertainty. I admired their political sophistication, their innovation, and the enduring importance of their art. I chose not to focus on political writers who brought with them an established set of beliefs. Except for *Silent Spring*, I avoided manifestos, and I chose not to work primarily with memoir. In selecting only these five writers, I have left out so many other political essayists. If I had more time, I would have included the work of Renata Adler, Gloria Anzaldúa, Angela Davis, Elizabeth Drew, Frances FitzGerald, Betty Friedan, June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, Gloria Steinem, Alice Walker, and others too many to name.

Cultural Contexts

The five women essayists in *Changing Minds* have not been fully studied as essayists, especially as artful essayists. During the postwar period of the 1950s and 1960s, women and feminism lost ground. In 1920, 47 percent of college students were women, but in 1963, when one might have expected an increased number of women college students, the percentage slipped to 38 percent (Gordon 214; Menand). From the fifties into the early sixties, the age of first marriages also dropped; as a result, nearly half of newly wedded women were teenagers (Flippen). Most wage-earning women in the 1950s and 1960s held traditional service jobs. Few of them had positions of authority. Louis Menand observed that, in the early 1960s, "seventy-eight per cent of college faculty were men; ninety-five per cent of physicians were men; ninety-seven per cent of lawyers were men; and more than ninety-seven per cent of United States senators, members of Congress, and ambassadors were men." This context makes it ever more remarkable that Shawn, as the editor of the *New Yorker*, recognized the importance of publishing the work of Carson and Arendt in 1962 and 1963.

Although the circumstances for most women writers were not conducive for success in the 1960s, feminism did gain some ground. Notably, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan was published just as *Eichmann in Jerusalem* began to appear in the *New Yorker* in February 1963. Friedan is not discussed at length in *Changing Minds* because she was a journalist more than a literary essayist, but her project was transformative for second-wave feminism. In 1957, fifteen years after Friedan graduated from Smith Col-

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lege, she surveyed her former classmates and documented a malaise among well-educated, married “housewives” and mothers who felt constrained by their roles. As the century unfolded, women were back-sliding with regard to education and employment. Friedman’s book made a compelling case for reviving feminism. A weakness of her book, however, was that she posited an overly narrow view of women and their circumstances in the mid-twentieth century. She and other white and privileged women did not consider the experiences of disadvantaged women, including Black, Latina and other women of color, as well as queer, lesbian, and trans people.

Despite the limits of second-wave feminism and *The Feminine Mystique*, some unusual efforts were underway to improve conditions for American women. President Kennedy’s Equal Pay Act of 1963 aimed at abolishing the gender pay gap, a goal not yet achieved. President Johnson’s passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 extended new protections against discrimination based on sex, race, religion, and national origin. It may be, however, that positive changes in women’s lives were most affected in the 1960s by the invention and distribution of oral birth-control pills. Clinical trials for Enovid, popularly called “the Pill,” began in 1956, and by 1957 the FDA approved the drug to make menstrual periods regular. Since most women’s periods were irregular to one degree or another, women could get the drug from any cooperative physician (Asbell 170–71). By 1959, half a million women were taking the drug for what was officially a side effect: contraception. In 1960, the pill was approved as a contraceptive, and by 1964 one quarter of married American women were using the it (“Timeline”). In 1965, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Griswold v. Connecticut Supreme Court* that, due to constitutional rights to privacy, states could not ban contraception for married couples (Asbell 241). In 1972, the Supreme Court legalized birth control for unmarried people in the case of *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, expanding women’s ability to make choices about family planning (“Eisenstadt”). The legal availability of the contraception rapidly changed lives.

In 1970, college enrollment was 20 percent higher among women who gained access to contraceptives, and the pill was also the most significant factor in enabling women who were already in college to stay in college (Goldin and Katz 732). Surprisingly, the editors of the rather staid magazine the *Economist* named the pill—not air travel or computers or the atomic bomb—as the most important scientific invention of the twentieth century (“Liberator”). Although neither contraception nor abortion had any relation to Carson’s and Arendt’s projects, abortion affected Sontag’s life and Didion’s fiction. Sontag married Philip Rieff when she was eighteen years old and had an abortion during their first year of marriage, a procedure that was not legal at the time (Malcolm). (She gave birth to her

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only child, David Rieff, when she was nineteen.) Abortions occurred in two of Didion's novels, *River Run* (1963) and *Play It as It Lays* (1970), both preceding *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. In a *Paris Review* interview, Didion implied that she had no personal experience with abortion and described such events in her fiction as mere "narrative strategies" (Didion and Kuehl). Even so, the abortions in her books drew attention to the choices women made and the risks they took to make decisions about their own bodies. (As I was writing *Changing Minds*, *Roe v. Wade* was overturned.)⁵

It is notable, therefore, that all five writers had the good fortune to go to college and to stay in college. Their educations made it possible for them to cultivate ideas and to compose complex arguments from positions of expertise. Carson was trained as a biologist during college in the 1920s and earned a master's degree in zoology at Johns Hopkins in the early 1930s. Although she had hoped to earn a PhD, she left her program during the Depression to support her family. Arendt earned a doctorate in philosophy at the University at Heidelberg, where she studied with Martin Heidegger and later with Karl Jaspers. Sontag's college education began at Berkeley when she was sixteen years old, after which she attended the University of Chicago, graduating at the age of eighteen. She earned a master's degree in philosophy at Harvard and then went to study at Oxford and the Sorbonne, steeping herself in the world of ideas. Didion, who graduated from Berkeley, is the representative English major in this group. She began her career as a writer of personal essays, but her rhetorical training enabled her to become an astute political essayist. Williams's interest in race, gender, rhetoric, and the law was evident when she earned her Juris Doctor. She has since written about the history of slavery in the United States and the ways in which racism remains encoded in the justice system.

Given how challenging it was for these women to be taken seriously as writers, it may be surprising that all but one of them rejected the label *feminist*. Friedan's second-wave feminism focused on the ennui of homemakers, while Carson had an established career as a writer and editor at the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Carson remained the sole wage earner in a family that included her mother, two adult nieces, and their children. Due to her job and her later success as an independent writer, she may have appeared to be a feminist, but she did not openly accept the label. Arendt rejected the term outright. Her argument about the human condition drew a line between the social elements of life (which included gender) and the political sphere, which she believed extended beyond the social sphere. While the division seems limiting, in recent decades scholars have found tools for feminist theorizing in Arendt's discussions of plurality and narrative, in particular work by Seyla Benhabib in *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (2000) and Kate Bermingham in "Reading Arendt in the

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Era of #MeToo” (2020).⁶ Although Sontag declared in a 1985 interview that she was “born a feminist” (Sontag et al. 11), she undercut her claim when she admitted, “I was quite blind to what the problem was: I couldn’t understand why anyone would hesitate to do what they wanted to do just because they were told that women didn’t do such things” (11). Feminism may have seemed too simplistic to Sontag, but she said that it helped her to understand “the pressures on women” that she “was lucky enough to have escaped” (11).

It was Didion, however, who made the most insistent argument against Friedan-style feminism. In an essay titled “The Women’s Movement” from her 1978 collection, *The White Album*, she dismissed “the popular view of the movement as some kind of collective inchoate yearning for ‘fulfillment,’ or ‘self-expression,’ a yearning absolutely devoid of ideas and capable of engendering only the most *pro forma* benevolent interest” (109–110). Didion was raised on libertarian principles, which is one reason why she rejected the women’s movement. For some time, she also eschewed sympathy for “have-nots,” “minorities,” and all “social ideal[s]” (110). Instead, she prided herself instead on belonging to a group of people, presumably writers, “who remain[ed] committed mainly to the exploration of moral distinctions and ambiguities” (113). Although Didion consistently valued criticism over activism, she eventually acknowledged and wrote about oppression due to class and race, if not gender.

In the book *Tough Enough: Arbus, Arendt, Didion, McCarthy, Sontag, Weil*, Deborah Nelson maintained that Arendt, Didion, and Sontag rejected feminism because they associated it with feminism’s “relationship to emotional expressivity, its foregrounding of psychic pain, its emphasis on collectivity, and its advocacy of utopian projects” (12). In a review of Nelson’s book in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Elaine Showalter argued that sentimentality has a history, but the absence of sentimentality does not have a history, at least not for women. “When women practise [sentimentality]” Showalter wrote, “they can be judged for personal failures of feeling, rather than philosophical rigour.” Nelson developed the point with her subjects, including Arendt, Didion, and Sontag, who were “perceived as psychologically cold rather than engaged in an ethical project with different assumptions” (73). These writers performed toughness, in part, because to do otherwise was to invite accusations of being unserious.

In a quite different review of Nelson’s *Tough Enough*, Lori Jo Marso observed that Nelson’s argument relies on an overly narrow conception of feminism. There are so many ways to express oneself as a feminist other than being “tough.” And, indeed, a full examination of the careers of Arendt, Sontag, and Didion reveals a wider and richer affective register. To describe these writers as emotionless is to be selective in one’s choice

of chapters and books. For example, Arendt's writing about being a refugee expresses a painful irony that she called "refugee style." In the 1990s, Sontag turned to writing fiction because, she said, she wanted to make her readers cry. Didion's early work in the sixties and seventies was steeped in anxiety, and later work, such as "New York: Sentimental Journeys," expressed outrage about how New York City's governing institutions, as well as the press, treated its most vulnerable inhabitants. The most committed feminist in this group is Williams. She did not hide the traumatic history of slavery or its place at the foundation of US history, nor did she seek to conceal the grief and wrath generated by racism, misogyny, and loss. She wrote repeatedly about her enslaved great-great-grandmother, who was purchased at age eleven and who gave birth to her first child at age thirteen. Another difference between Williams and the other writers is that she is at least sixteen years younger than they were. Born in 1951, Williams confidently wrote about the importance of feminisms and intersectionality in all her books, starting with *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*.⁷

The Essay and Its Twentieth-Century Forms

Although four of the five writers who will be discussed in *Changing Minds* had little interest in feminism, they all invested time in thinking about the capacious form of the essay. For those readers who are relative novices regarding the essay, it is worth recounting the genre's origin story. In sixteenth-century France, a nobleman named Michel de Montaigne began to write thoughtful, digressive, curious essays that posed the question "Que sais-je?"—or in English, "What do I know?" In his essay "Of Practice," he explained his inspiration to write after a near-fatal riding accident. One day in 1569 or 1570, he was riding on his estate and decided to ride onward without his companions. After Montaigne had traveled some distance, one of the riders behind him decided to show off his horse's speed and, coming around a turn, hit Montaigne and his steed with full force. The nobleman was thrown from his horse and lost consciousness. He recalled being carried back to his home thinking, "My life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order, it seemed to me, to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go" (269). After Montaigne survived the injury, he believed that this near-death experience changed his life. "This account of so trivial an event," he wrote, "would be rather pointless, were it not for the instruction that I have derived from it for myself; for in truth, in order to get used to the idea of death, I find there is nothing like coming close to it" (272).

After the accident, Montaigne decided to examine all aspects of life through self-questioning and skepticism. To accommodate his medita-

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tions, he sought a form of writing that was flexible enough to allow for mental meandering and the exploration of uncertainty. He called his writings *essais*, meaning attempts, a name that suggests their speculative quality and the provisional nature of human knowledge. He developed a practice of self-study that was enacted through reading, contemplation, and writing. He described his project as “a thorny undertaking, and more so than it seems, to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind, to penetrate the opaque depths of its innermost folds, to pick out and immobilize the innumerable flutterings that agitate it” (273). In 1755, Samuel Johnson’s definition of the essay aligned with Montaigne’s: “a loose sallie of the mind; an irregular undigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition.”

Montaigne’s project has remained relevant, but as time passes and cultures change, there are inevitable shifts in the essay’s form and content. In the mid-twentieth century, Aldous Huxley tried to tame the essay, arguing that it is “a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference.” “There is,” he wrote in the preface to his *Collected Essays*, “the pole of the personal and the autobiographical, there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal” (88). “The most richly satisfying essays,” he continues, “are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist . . . from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience” (88; 90). His assumptions about human universals, however, became rather tarnished by mid-century. In the early twenty-first century, when John D’Agata promoted the “hybrid” qualities of the “lyric essay,” he understood that the essay had two intersecting elements.

The lyric essay inherits from the principal strands of nonfiction the makings of its own hybrid version of the form. It takes the subjectivity of the personal essay and the objectivity of the public essay, and conflates them into a literary form that relies on both art and fact, on imagination and observation, rumination and argumentation, human faith and human perception. What the lyric essay inherits from the public essay is a fact-hungry pursuit of solutions to problems, while from the personal essay what it takes is a wide-eyed dallying in the heat of predicaments. The result of this ironic parentage is that lyric essays seek answers, yet seldom seem to find them. (436)

D’Agata’s description of the lyric essay modernizes the Montaignian project, while maintaining the essay’s flexibility of conception, style, and form. It is also the case, however, that D’Agata has regularly and famously

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conflated fact and art, placing his own essays in a new category that he calls “not-non-fiction.”

Although there are not many scholarly books about the essay in the twentieth century, one place to begin is Ned Stuckey-French’s book *The American Essay in the American Century*, which examines writing from the 1880s until, roughly, 1940. Stuckey-French began with an account of the decline of the genteel essay, with its nineteenth-century, upper-class conventions. Later he traced the rise of popular essayists in the early twentieth century who published in newspaper columns and magazines for a growing reading public. Such writing was supported by advertising and, as a result, it tended toward the “middle class and middlebrow” (5). Later in the century, rhetoric and composition specialist Lynn Z. Bloom saw essays as belonging to “a teaching—rather than a historical, critical, or national—canon.” As a result, “some readers may not have revisited [essays] since they read them in their freshman composition class” (quoted in Stuckey-French 9). On the whole, readers remained poorly trained readers of essays. Another valuable book is Carl H. Klaus’s *Essayists on the Essay*, a collection of notable works that celebrate form. He announced that “above all else essayists conceive of the essay as a place of intellectual refuge, a domain sacred to the freedom of the mind itself” (xxi), which sadly sounds a bit too much like advertising copy. In Susan Sontag’s entry in Klaus’s collection, she further aggrandized the genre by playing essayists against academic philosophers: “To say that a philosopher is an essayist is, from the traditional point of view of philosophy, a demotion. The culture administered by universities has always regarded the essay with suspicion, as a kind of writing that is too subjective, too accessible, merely belle-lettristic” (Sontag “Introduction” 149). She championed the essayist as a welcome interloper who “introduces digressiveness, exaggeration, mischief” (149).

Jenny Spinner provided real innovation in her recent collection of work by women, *Of Women and the Essay: An Anthology from 1655 to 2000*. The scope of the book is so vast that there are limits to what can be included, but Spinner notably emphasizes Woolf’s powerful political pieces, including *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*. Her most important contribution, however, is her openness to inclusion, starting in the early twentieth century with the Dakota essayist Zitkala-Ša, a Native political activist who wrote essays for the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s*. Spinner also includes work by Zora Neal Hurston, Alice Walker, Sara Suleri, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Jamaica Kincaid, and Kyoko Mori, who stand in for hundreds of other women who were and are writing at the margins.

Brian Norman’s *The American Protest Essay and National Belonging* is one of just a few academic studies that pay serious attention to the po-

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litical essay. Norman's special interest was the protest essay, a mix of the traditional European personal essay and American oratory based in social movements. He was most interested in giving voice to "the experiences of those lacking full social status in the public arena by directly addressing a divided audience, documenting with journalistic fervor representative instances of injustice, and citing state promises of full social participation for all" (1). He examined, therefore, the twentieth-century work of James Baldwin, W. E. B. Du Bois, Emma Goldman, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, and Richard Wright. The essays dealt with race and civil rights, anarchism, feminism, gender, and sexuality, while demonstrating how protest can be expressed in the literary and rhetorical arts. Norman had a dual focus: dissent was central, and so was hope for mutuality, community, and a meaningful form of democracy.

At times, however, Norman's view of the ideal protest essay—which seeks an inclusive and equitable citizenship—becomes a bit narrow and prescriptive. For example, in Norman's view, Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" was not a successful protest essay because Thoreau chose to withdraw from politics and the nation, and therefore was not engaged in community building. In contrast, Norman valued James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, calling it one of the most successful examples of protest writing. At the close of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin writes, "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*" (Baldwin, 346–47). But Baldwin's essay is more complicated than Norman's argument allows it to be. For early readers, the essay's ending was a call for action, but the history of the essay's reception revealed tensions. Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote in his own essay, "The Fire Last Time: What James Baldwin Can and Can't Teach America," that, by the late 1960s, a generation of Black activists wanted to be "everything Baldwin was not. . . . Baldwin-bashing was almost a rite of initiation." For a time, therefore, his essays were "useless to the ideologues of liberation and anathema to so many black nationalists." And yet, writing in 1992, Gates celebrated a "new generation of readers . . . [that came] to value just those qualities of ambivalence and equivocality." Readers rediscovered Baldwin's complexity.

The most important recent book about the essay is Cheryl Wall's final book, *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The Art of the African American Essay*. Wall began her book with a reference to Toni Morrison's *What Moves at the*

Margin, noting that Morrison's phrase "captures exactly the status of the essay in literary studies in general and African American literary studies in particular" (1). Wall positioned the essay, which is often "occasional and provisional," "alongside literature's major genres" (1). Her goal, like that of critics such as Klaus, Stuckey-French, and Norman, was to reassess the essay as a literary genre. Wall called attention to a rich and deep history of African American essays that "dr[e]w on traditions of nineteenth-century oratory and extend the autobiographical impulse of the slave narrative," thereby shaping "the essay to advance the struggle for freedom above all" (Wall 5). While part of Wall's project was to explore the "political potency" of the essay and "its legacy of the pulpit and the podium," she also defined her project as offering "a protocol for reading" the African American essay.

Wall's discussion of Black oratory was followed by an account of the aesthetic debates of the Harlem Renaissance, after which she narrowed her focus to a small group of writers: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and, in a joint chapter, June Jordan and Alice Walker. In the Jordan and Walker chapter, Wall described their project as a racial and gendered "opportunity to seize the possibilities of a freer, more hopeful future, as well as coming to terms with the painful, oppressive past" (176). Jordan, who published regularly in the *Progressive*, was attuned to links between local and global politics. "My life," she wrote, "seems to be an increasing revelation of the intimate face of universal struggle" (Jordan, quoted in Wall 180). Walker, who often published in *Ms.* magazine, wrote instead about finding "our mother's gardens," a metaphor for recovering "literary foremothers." Among them was Zora Neale Hurston, whose writing and reputation was rediscovered through Walker's efforts (Walker, quoted in Wall 180). Wall admired the open-endedness of their essays and the "tentative quality [that] allow[ed] them to think through the contentious issues that define[d] their lives and times" (216). They wrote passionately, personally, and politically about the intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and economic inequality before the term *intersectionality* was recognized.

As Wall brought her book to a close, she called attention to defining moments that marked the importance of the African American essay in the early years of the twentieth century and its transformation at the century's end. Du Bois opened the century with the 1903 publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, a commentary on Reconstruction. Eighty-eight years later, Patricia J. Williams's first book, *Alchemy of Race and Rights* (1991), addressed the limits and failures of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). These works by Du Bois and Williams were significant on their own, but they also mattered because, from the beginning of the twentieth century to its end, the Black essay continued to represent both "limitless possibility and devastating disappointment" (23).

Essaying, from Past to Present

More studies of the essay will emerge due to current interest in the contemporary essay, but there will always be disagreements about genre. Jackson Arn complained in “Dot Dot Dot Dot Dot: Against the Contemporary American Essay” that essays are now outselling fiction and winning spots in the ubiquitous “best books” lists that appear every December. He exaggerated, for effect, that books like Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Ben Lerner’s *10:04* “have actually *become* mainstream fiction.” While John D’Agata teased readers about the flexibility of facts, David Shields took matters further in his 2010 manifesto, *Reality Hunger*, in which he mixed fact and fiction in a verbal collage that included passages, unidentified and unattributed, from hundreds of other writers’ work. His book was clever, but his manifesto called for writing that looked like the kind of writing Shields liked to write—a manifesto in a mirror. Unsurprisingly, Arn found this all too precious: “The genre is often spoken of as though it’s too elusive for any single mind to grasp, like a Zen koan or the *Lost* finale.” Fortunately the essay is always evolving. Brian Dillon, the author of *Essayism*, continued to see the genre as “unbounded and mobile, a form with ambitions to be unformed” (Dillon quoted in Arn). In the words of Mary Cappello, the essay remains an exciting “‘non-genre,’ mutating too fast for diagnosis” (Cappello quoted in Arn).

Maggie Nelson brought the essay back down to earth in a 2013 roundtable discussion that included Eula Biss, Sarah Manguso and Allie Rowbottom. “Writers crossing genres” Nelson said, “—either within pieces or over the course of a career—is about the least new thing under the sun.” Rather than debating elements of the form, Nelson preferred to “focus on imparting a sense of maximum permission and agency to go wherever it feels hottest to go.” She had an intense and ongoing desire to see and say, to document, to observe, to research, to bear witness, to articulate elements of the so-called real. But she also returned to her “own recurring preoccupations,” herself and her problems. In the same roundtable, Eula Biss maintained that “genre is a continuous—rather than compartmentalized—space, and I write across it as my subject demands and my abilities allow.” Biss continued, “Even when I’m writing something that draws fairly unambiguously on the essay tradition, I tend to write across sub-genres of nonfiction.” Thus, “memoir can function as journalism or . . . personal meditation can function as cultural criticism.” What was most striking in these comments from Nelson and Biss was that inquiry came first. Their work was shaped less by genre categories than by their engagement with the world, the self, and others. Therefore, instead of defining the essay as a category of writing, it seems appropriate to return to Montaigne’s sense of the word *essay* as a verb: to essay is to try, to practice, and to be motivated by curiosity, exploration, and discovery.