

## #AWP22 Event Outline

**Event Title:** Writing the Disturbed Essay: Memory and Identity

**Event Description:** While personal essay often serves as vessel for the exploration of memory and the construction of identity, the disturbed essay stirs up the sediment, allows for memory's paradoxes, and helps us reevaluate what we reach towards when we write. It allows us to refute dominant narratives about LGBTQIA+, PoC, and disabled lives. Those elements of the past that wake us, interfere with the coherent story of a self, and invade our privacy become the radical heart of a truer story.

**Event Category:** Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

**Event Organizer & Moderator: Katie Jean Shinkle:** Katie Jean Shinkle is the author of five books and seven chapbooks of poetry and prose, most recently *None of This is an Invitation* (coauthored with Jessica Alexander, Astrophil Press at University of South Dakota, forthcoming) and *Thick City* (Bull City Press, forthcoming). She was a 2021 Lambda Literary poetry fellow, and currently serves as co-poetry editor of *DIAGRAM* and creative nonfiction editor of *The Texas Review*. She teaches in the MFA in Creative Writing, Editing, and Publishing program at Sam Houston State University.

**Event Participants:**

**Lily Hoang**

**Monica Prince**

**SJ Sindu**

**Danielle Pafunda**

**Opening Remarks**

Welcome to the virtual space of AWP 2022 and the panel "Writing the Disturbed essay: Memory and Identity." My name is Katie Jean Shinkle, and thank you all for tuning in from wherever you are, whenever you do. We would like to begin our session with a virtual land acknowledgement. I am coming to you from East Texas and would like to acknowledge that I am on the traditional land of the Tonkawa people and I pay my respect to generations past and present. We also offer this virtual acknowledgement from Adrienne Wong, SpiderWebShow, Ontario: "[S]ince our activities are shared digitally to the internet, let's also take a moment to consider the legacy of colonization embedded within the technologies, structures, and ways of thinking we use every day. We are using equipment and

high speed internet not available in many indigenous communities. Even the technologies that are central to much of the art we [make] leaves significant carbon footprints, contributing to changing climates that disproportionately affect indigenous peoples worldwide. I invite you to join me in acknowledging all this as well as our shared responsibility: to make good of this time, and for each of us to consider our roles in reconciliation, decolonization, and allyship.”

I would like to now introduce the participants in the panel in the order in which they will present and read their biographies.

Lily Hoang: Lily Hoang is the author of six books, including *Underneath* (winner of the Red Hen Press Fiction Award), *A Bestiary* (PEN/USA Non-Fiction Award Finalist), and *Changing* (recipient of a PEN/Open Books Award). Her micro-tale collection *The Mute Kids* is forthcoming in 2022. She is the Director of the MFA in Writing at UC San Diego.

Monica Prince: Monica Prince teaches activist and performance writing at Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania. She is the author of *How to Exterminate the Black Woman: A Choreopoem*, *Instructions for Temporary Survival*, and *Letters from the Other Woman*. She is the managing editor of the SFWP *Quarterly*, and the co-author of the suffrage play, *Pageant of Agitating Women*, with Anna Andes. Her next choreopoem, *Roadmap*, is forthcoming from SFWP in 2023.

SJ Sindu: SJ Sindu is a Tamil diaspora author of two literary novels, two hybrid chapbooks, and two forthcoming graphic novels. Her first novel, *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, won the Publishing Triangle Edmund White Award and her second novel, *Blue-Skinned Gods*, was published in November 2021. A 2013 Lambda Literary Fellow, Sindu holds a PhD in English and Creative Writing from Florida State University. Sindu teaches at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Sindu’s newest work, a hybrid chapbook titled *Dominant Genes*, was published by Black Lawrence Press in February 2022.

Danielle Pafunda: Danielle Pafunda is the author of nine books of prose and poetry: including *SPITE* (The Operating System), *The Book of Scab* (Ricochet Editions), *Beshrew* (Dusie Press), and *The Dead Girls Speak in Unison* (Bloof Books). Her work has appeared in three editions of Best American Poetry, BAX: Best American Experimental Writing, the Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day, and a number of anthologies and journals. She teaches at Rochester Institute of Technology.

Katie Jean Shinkle: \*\*will read bio from above\*\*

We will begin with Lily Hoang.

## PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS, INITIAL THOUGHTS, OR READINGS

Lily Hoang

See full paper in supplemental materials

Monica Prince

- Brief reading of "Fight, Flee, Freeze"
- I chose to use second person in this essay to center the underlying disturbance of being betrayed by a Black man.
- I use overlap and continuity disruptions in essays to mirror my experiences as a Black polyamorous woman whose existence disturbs society. When it comes to other genres, in choreopoems disturbance appears by breaking the fourth wall and offering information from outside the dominant narrative on stage.

SJ Sindu

- Deleuze and Guattari – Minor Literature
  - Minor literature's use of language makes the major literature tremble.
  - What are the opportunities for disturbance present in minor literature?
- Language use
  - I'm an immigrant, bilingual writer who learned English in third grade.
  - My use of language is innately from the position (and identity) of outsider.
  - Language is simply a tool, not something that constrains my writing
    - I'm willing to break the language if I need to in order to get my point across.
      - Writing from a position and identity of outsider gives me the privilege of disturbing the language itself.
- Dominant stories of self
  - Our understandings of stories of the self in yearning, coming of age, coming out, family dynamics, and even history are shaped by dominant narratives, especially the myth of the American Dream.

- I seek in my writing to disturb those understandings, to upend the expectations of such stories of individual journeys, both physical and psychological.
- Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, while useful, has come under fire for cherry picking stories, misrepresenting non-Western stories to fit his thesis, and general lack of nuance when it comes to narratives from the Global South.
  - If we let go of the hero's narrative and this notion that all stories are essentially the same, what kind of disturbances are possible?
- (Un)reliability of memory
  - Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham critiques how traditionally narratives around embedded observers—those who are marginalized in the same ways as the communities about which they write—have claimed their bias as reason that these narratives are not as “objective” as ones collected and transcribed by outsiders.
    - But outsiders are also biased because they often carry with them a colonial perspective that erases and marginalizes the very people about whom they're purportedly writing.
  - Another critique of the embedded observer, especially in terms of the personal essay, has to do with the unreliability of memory—questions of objective Truth and how much we can “believe” the events related to us by the narrator of a personal essay.
    - Of course these questions are valid, but this supposed and intrinsic unreliability of memory can also be applied to the unreliability of original source documents, of history itself as it has been told. Is there any objectivity to be found at all?
  - The opportunities presented for disturbance by the essay form are tied to the slippage of memory between fact and the imagined space, and to the slippage of identity between past and present and future.
  - The disturbed essay is an essay written from a liminal position, one that is at once important because it is a position from which the whole forest is visible.

Danielle Pafunda

- the difference between writing memory and memoir,
- the limits conventional forms of memoir place on the memories we're narrating
- as well as the limits those forms place on the narrators we construct

- *the potential of the disturbed essay* (a form that splices conventional memoir forms with autofiction and speculative nonfiction)
  - o to narrate lived experiences that haven't resolved into coherent, articulable memories,
  - o to recognize those past selves who elude us, particularly those pre-trauma, or trauma-contemporary selves,
  - o and to craft narrators closer to our actual selves.

### Katie Jean Shinkle

- The disturbed essay is a haunted essay, haunted by time and memory
- In the attempt to figure out how writers handle time and memory in the disturbed essays, two approaches interest me
- 1.) Based in American historian David Gross's ideas about noncontemporaneity, defined as "that which is of another time and thus discordant with the present." Gross's three ways historical memory works—absolute noncontemporaneity, relative noncontemporaneity, and enduring noncontemporaneity—can be applied as narrative strategy to the disturbed essay
- 2.) Based on Lance Olsen's idea of "narratological amphibiousness," the disturbed essay occupies a space of hybridity in form and structure which allows for the exploration of the simultaneity of time and memory in a fluid way

### Moderator Questions

1.) from Katie Jean Shinkle: I'm thinking about the idea of disturbance as an interruption, and considering how marginalized identities are non-linear because our lives do not fit into any kind of prescribed, societal normativity, so by the very nature of us being in the world our lives are filled with breaks in continuity and stoppages. Can you all speak to how you explore this idea of disturbance as interruption in your own work/essays as it relates to identity (if you do)?

2.) from Lily Hoang: How does disturbance manifest differently based on genre, or does it?