

EVENT TITLE: Strike a Chord: The Lyric Essay Forms of *A Harp in the Stars*

EVENT DESCRIPTION: This panel features craft talks by essayists whose work appears in the University of Nebraska Press anthology *A Harp in the Stars*, which Aimee Nezhukumatathil calls “a fascinating look into the bright heart of what the lyric essay can be.” Contributors will read brief excerpts of a segmented essay, a braided essay, a hermit crab essay in the form of a word search puzzle, and a hybrid lyric craft essay, then discuss practical strategies as well as theoretical concerns when writing in these forms.

EVENT CATEGORY: NONFICTION CRAFT & CRITICISM

EVENT ORGANIZER & MODERATOR: **Randon Billings Noble** is an essayist. She is the author of the essay collection *Be with Me Always* and the editor of *A Harp in the Stars: An Anthology of Lyric Essays*. She teaches in the MFA in Nonfiction Program at Goucher and the Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing at West Virginia Wesleyan.

EVENT PARTICIPANTS:

Angie Chuang is a nonfiction writer and an associate professor of journalism at University of Colorado Boulder. Her first book, *The Four Words for Home*, won an Independent Publishers Award. Her work has appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*, *Litro*, *The Asian American Literary Review*, *Vela*, and others.

Essayist and poet **Heidi Czerwiec** is the author of the lyric essay collection *Fluid States*, winner of Pleiades Press’ 2018 Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose, and the poetry collection *Conjoining*. She is an editor at *Assay*, and teaches in Minneapolis and with the MN Prison Writing Workshop.

Sayantani Dasgupta is the author, most recently, of the short story collection *Women Who Misbehave*. She is an Asst. Prof. of Creative Writing at the UNC Wilmington, and has also taught in India, Italy, and Mexico. She is also the author of *Fire Girl: Essays on India, America, & the In-Between*.

Laurie Easter is the author of *All the Leavings*. Her essays have been awarded fellowships by the Vermont Studio Center and Playa, listed as

notable in *Best American Essays*, and published in *The Rumpus*, *Chautauqua*, *Brevity*, *The Shell Game: Writers Play with Borrowed Forms*, among other publications.

OPENING MODERATOR REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Randon Billings Noble: Good afternoon, and welcome to “Strike a Chord: The Lyric Essay Forms of *A Harp in the Stars*.” Thank you all for being here.

This anthology came about when I proposed it to the University of Nebraska Press at NonfictionNOW a few years back. Before I even left the conference, I had already secured a few of the contributors, and I gathered the rest through a combination of solicitations and an open call, which yielded an embarrassment of riches. In curating this anthology, I wanted to try and put words to the form “lyric essay,” to try to define it, to make it at least a little more accessible and understandable—even as I kept running into contradictions in my own thinking.

Despite its resistance to categorization, there are broad forms of the lyric essay that are worth trying to define. In the anthology, I’ve divided them into four categories:

- Flash essays – 1,000 words or fewer, they are short, sharp, and clarifying;
- Segmented essays (also known as fragmented, paratactic, collage, and mosaic essays) – divided into segments that might be numbered or titled or simply separated with a space break that allows the reader to pause, think, consider, and digest each segment before moving on to the next;
- Braided essays – segmented essays whose sections have a repeating pattern – the way each strand of a braid returns to take its place in the center; each time a particular strand returns, its meaning is enriched by the other strands you’ve read through; and
- Hermit crab essays – this form, as Brenda Miller named them in *Tell It Slant*, borrows another form of writing as its structure the way a hermit crab borrows another’s shell.

Some of these forms overlap, and near the end of the book is another kind of overlap: craft essays that are also lyric essays. These all think overtly about lyric essays, even though they express that content in a variety of

lyric forms. The anthology concludes with a series of meditations by each author, a wide range of thinking about the lyric essay: how it can leap, search, wander, hint at, unravel, excavate, and create; how it can both replicate and explain trauma; how it comes from or leaves behind fiction and poetry; how it acts like a panther, an iceberg, an on-ramp, an artichoke; how it's defined and how it can never be defined; how it tries and how it delivers; how it sings and how it plays.

It is my hope that writers, readers, students, and teachers will both learn and take pleasure from the surprising, beautiful, wily, and diverse lyric essays in the anthology, and in the panel today.

And now, it is my pleasure to introduce authors in order they'll be presenting: Angie Chuang, Heidi Czerwiec, Sayantani Dasgupta, and Laurie Easter. Copies of their excerpted readings are available, though we will need to collect them at the end of the panel for copyright purposes. The authors will be reading brief excerpts of a braided essay, a hybrid lyric craft essay, a segmented essay, and a hermit crab essay in the form of a word search puzzle, then discuss practical strategies as well as theoretical concerns when writing in these forms. During each presentation, an image of the essay and/or form will be projected overhead.

PARTICIPANT INITIAL REMARKS:

Angie Chuang:

I plan to read an excerpt from my braided essay, "Scars, Silence, and Dian Fossey," in the anthology. This essay was literally a mash-up of two completely different freestanding essays I had proclaimed failures. One was a travel essay about gorilla tracking in Volcanoes National Park that had been rejected by multiple anthologies, likely because it was the most-expected travel essay from anyone visiting Rwanda. The other was an essay-length medical memoir focused on a scar I had acquired in the process of being treated for a borderline cancerous ovarian tumor at age 33. The braiding felt to this former professional journalist from an admittedly staid nonfiction writing background like a dangerous act. How dare I write about genocide in Rwanda in the same essay as explaining a scar in an intimate part of my body to my hookups? Somewhere in this—what felt like insanity—I arrived at Dian Fossey as a woman who bridged the privileged westerner struggling with loneliness versus purpose, with the idea of emotional and physical scars of many kinds. Her favorite gorilla, Digit,

being named for a scar on his finger, became the literal connective tissue for this third and final braid in the essay. I revised and rethought and nearly gave up on this piece for years in its new form, and it wasn't until Randon accepted it into the anthology that I dared believe it actually worked. To me, braided essays are a kind of magic—the synchronicity of wildly disparate strands that somehow click into place after much fussing and reconfiguring, retwisting, untangling, retangling. And that “click” is really the reader (or the editor), the recipient of what may have started as a mess of unruly ideas.

Heidi Czerwiec:

I will read an excerpt from my hybrid craft essay on the lyric essay, that is itself in the form of a lyric essay, “Success in Circuit: Lyric Essay as Labyrinth,” while a split-screen image of the essay and an image of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth is projected. In writing this piece, I was trying to convey my argument about how a lyric essay may use turns and move laterally through associative moves, an idea I was working through in multiple conversations with Karen Babine. It occurred to me to try to embody that argument in the form of a lyric essay making those same lateral, associative moves, a shape I associated with a labyrinth. To mimic the labyrinth's turns and folds back on itself as it circles its center, I incorporated resonant phrases and images that repeat, associative moves so that the piece progressed laterally, white space and references to negative space and *via negativa* for the labyrinth's path, before eventually leading us to the last word, “center.” My hope was to make a critical argument for how the lyric essay can progress in ways other than chronological/linear, in a format that demonstrated the argument even as it made it, and that was beautiful to boot.

Sayantani Dasgupta:

I will read an excerpt from my segmented essay, “The Boys of New Delhi: An Essay in Four Hurts,” while the essay's pages are projected. I had written the four sections of the piece as four stand-alone flash essays. But for the longest time, they didn't feel done. No matter how much I tinkered, not one seemed ready for publication. Ultimately, it made sense to club them together, to convey how one's vulnerability, and the people who prey on it, can change throughout one's life but never really disappear. I also wanted the sections to end abruptly to echo how such conversations continue to live on in one's mind. They are fragments, with no memory of what happened the day before or after, existing merely in the singular moment of their creation. Hence the decision to neither summarize nor

make sense of them via one neat concluding paragraph but end the essay on a sharp break.

Laurie Easter:

I will be reading an excerpt of my hermit crab essay “Searching for Gwen” that is in the form of a word search puzzle. Images will be projected on a screen as I read, beginning with the image of the word search puzzle and list of words to be searched. As I progress reading the essay, each word corresponding to the appropriate narrative section will then appear as circled in the puzzle to illustrate the tactile experience of solving the puzzle throughout the narrative. I will then discuss how I came to utilize this form for this particular essay, which is about the disappearance of a friend several years ago who remains missing and is still being searched for to this day. I plan to discuss how to go about finding and incorporating such alternative forms for essays when a standard narrative arc is not sufficient and will do so in the form of “How To” instructions that will be itself a hermit crab lyric essay. Elements of these instructions will consider the role of intuition, play, and accessing the subconscious when writing hermit crab essays. Images of the how-to instructions will be projected on the screen.

Q&A SESSION

TBD by the audience.