

Resisting the Narrative, Lyric Essaying the Future

Although its forms have existed for centuries and gone by many names, the lyric essay is often described as an experimental “new” genre. Until recently, many of the most widely-anthologized, read, and taught lyric essays have represented a narrow range of perspectives. Editors and contributors to *The Lyric Essay as Resistance* anthology discuss their commitment to evolving the lyric essay conversation and engaging a range of voices that more accurately represent the expansive nature of the genre.

Event Category: Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator:

Zoë Bossiere serves as the managing editor of *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction* and is the co-editor of two anthologies: *The Best of Brevity* (Rose Metal Press, 2020) and *The Lyric Essay as Resistance: Truth from the Margins* (Wayne State UP, 2023). Find her online at zoebossiere.com

Welcome to Resisting the Narrative, Lyric Essaying the Future, and thank you for coming. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Opening moderator remarks and housekeeping announcements:

Thank you all for joining us today. My name is Zoë Bossiere, I’m a nonfiction writer, the managing editor of *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction* and, most recently, co-editor of an anthology called *The Lyric Essay as Resistance: Truth from the Margins*. I am very excited to be here today to talk about the lyric

essay with my co-editor Erica Trabold and three of our wonderful contributors: Jennifer S. Cheng, Jenny Bouilly, and Krys Malcolm Belc.

Once, the lyric essay did not have a name.

Rather, it was called by many names. More a quality than a category, the form lived for centuries in the private journals of Japanese court ladies, the melodic folktales told by marketplace troubadours, and the subversive prose poems penned by the European romantics.

The most well-known attempt to categorize the form came in 1997, when writers John D'Agata and Deborah Tall, co-editors of *Seneca Review*, noticed a “new” genre in the submission queue—not quite poetry, but neither quite narrative.

This form-between-forms seemed to ignore the conventions of prose writing in favor of embracing more liminal styles, moving by association rather than story, dancing around unspoken truths, devolving into a swirling series of digressions.

D'Agata and Tall's proposed term for this kind of writing, “the lyric essay,” stuck, and in the ensuing decade the word would be adopted by many essayists to describe the kind of writing they do.

Since its naming, the lyric essay has existed in an almost paradoxical space, at once celebrated for its unique characteristics while also relegated to the margins of creative nonfiction. Perhaps because of this contradiction, much of the conversation about the lyric essay—the definition of what it is and does, where it fits on the spectrum of nonfiction and poetry, whether it has a place in literary journals and in the creative writing classroom—remains unsettled.

The acceptance of the lyric form seems to depend largely on who is writing it, with the essays that tend to thrive in dominant-culture spaces like academia and publishing often written by writers who already occupy those spaces. This may be part of why, despite its expansive nature, many of the most widely-anthologized, widely-read, and widely-taught lyric essays represent a narrow range of perspectives: most often, those of the center.

The center is, by definition, a limited perspective, capable of viewing only itself.

In “Marginality as a Site of Resistance,” bell hooks positions the margins not as a state “one wishes to lose, to give up, or surrender as part of moving into the center, but rather as a site one stays on, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist.”

To write from the margins, then, is to write from the perspective of the whole—to see the world from both the margins and the center.

Because the lyric essay is fluid, able to occupy both marginal and center spaces, it is a form uniquely suited to telling stories on the writer's terms, without losing sight of where the writer comes from, and the audiences they are writing toward.

When we tell the stories of our lives—especially when those stories challenge assumptions about who we are—it is an act of resistance.

The Lyric Essay as Resistance: Truth from the Margins houses twenty lyric essays that embody resistance through content, style, design, and form, representing of a broad spectrum of experiences that illustrate how identities can intersect, conflict, and even resist one another. Together, they provide a dynamic example of the lyric essay's range of expression while showcasing some of the most visionary contemporary essayists writing in the form today.

To begin, I will formally introduce each of our panelists. Then, each panelist will read a short lyric essay. After that, we will transition to a series of discussion questions, and then we'll have a few minutes at the end of the panel for any audience questions. Let's get started!

Event Participants:

Erica Trabold is the author of *Five Plots*, selected by John D'Agata as the winner of the inaugural Deborah Tall Lyric Essay Book Prize, and co-editor of *The Lyric Essay as Resistance* anthology. She writes and teaches in central Virginia, where she is an Assistant Professor at Sweet Briar College.

Jennifer S. Cheng writes in poetic, essayistic, and visual-textu(r)al modes. She is the author of *MOON: LETTERS, MAPS, POEMS* (Publishers Weekly 2018 Best Book), *HOUSE A*, and *INVOCATION: AN ESSAY*. She has received fellowships from the NEA, the US Fulbright Program, Kundiman, Bread Loaf, MacDowell.

Jenny Bouilly is the author of *Betwixt-and-Between: Essays on the Writing Life*, *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, *The Body: An Essay*, and other books. She teaches at Columbia College Chicago and the Bennington Writing Seminars.

Krys Malcolm Belc is the author of the memoir *The Natural Mother of the Child: A Memoir of Nonbinary Parenthood* and the flash nonfiction chapbook *In Transit*. He lives in Philadelphia with his partner and their three young children.

Moderator Questions

- 1) Just now, each of our panelists read from a short essay which in some way resists the assumptions about the lyric essay form. (To panelists:) I'm wondering if each of you could tell us about the essay you chose to read and speak to the ways it embodies resistance? What is your personal experience with the lyric essay, and how did you arrive at this form?
- 2) In terms of diversity and representation, what properties of the lyric essay make it uniquely suited to inhabiting uncertainty and liminal space? How might the form offer space for writers to represent a wider range of personal experience in their work, maybe particularly for those writing from underrepresented or marginalized perspectives?
- 3) What opportunities do you see for the lyric essay as a tool for better representation and resistance in dominant-culture spaces? How might we as readers, writers, and teachers bring the power of the lyric essay into our classrooms and communities?
- 4) How do you envision the "future" of the lyric essay as a form? What are some examples of lyric essays you have read recently that you feel might embody the future of the form?