

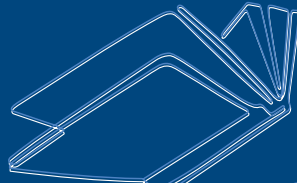
Essays Beyond Borders

EASTER SCHOOL - INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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Centro congressi Le Benedettine

Pizza S. Paolo a Ripa D'Arno 16 - PISA



UNIVERSITÀ
DI PISA



Book of Abstracts

WORKSHOPS

WORKSHOP 1

Emily Huurdeman

Fontys Academy of the Arts (NL)

Jo O'Brien

University of Applied Arts Vienna

Ana Cristina Pansera de Araujo

University of the Basque Country

Peter Thomas

Middlesex University

In contrast to the notion of the formal essay as a single-author, written output, we are developing essaying as a collective praxis that extends the essay to a multi-vocal and plural practice. In doing so we experiment with multi-modal and hybrid formats, including lecture performances in which we collage different media and ways of knowing together. Through our collective practice, we develop methods for essaying, which are shared and tested in educational workshops in the context of artistic research. We are currently developing and testing essayistic zine-making as an artistic research method. For this conference we propose an essayistic zine-making workshop: What happens when we build an essay-zine together? When we fold, cut, photocopy, staple, distribute, exchange, and annotate together? Through sharing together through fragments of different media: writing, talking; drawing, performing; photographing; copying. Through thinking together: through handling, assembling, collaging, placing, replacing. Our workshop uses essaying as a methodology of critical, dialogic, and public engagement. In the workshop, participants will be introduced to our approach, guided through the collective essay-zine making, and encouraged to share reflections in discussion. Following the session, our collective will make the production run of the zine, bind it, and have it ready for free release during the conference to prompt further discussion, extending beyond the session. The session will oscillate between reflection and production, asking:

- How do we produce the world through language, and how does language produce us?
- What happens when critical thinking is assembled rather than argued?
- Can the essay be something that moves between hands rather than stays in one voice?

WORKSHOP 2

Embodied Writing

Julia Alegre Mouslim

University of Malta

For me, writing is a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out. My feminism is grounded not on incorporeal abstraction but on corporeal realities. The material body is center, and central. The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* (2015). Through feminist writing on the body as a dwelling (Ahmed, 2007), as habitus (Appiah, 2019), and writing as a gesture of the material body (Anzaldúa, 2015), we will explore the potential of lived theory or 'theory in the flesh.' This kind of theory and writing gets close to home, close to the skin. It develops theory from the flesh and about the flesh, continuously connecting the political with the personal and the theory with the body.

- During this 90-minute workshop, we will discuss
- Common academic challenges to (embodied) writing
- The basic elements of lived theory and embodied writing
- One's own experience with embodied writing, in pairs
- And finally, engage with free writes based on prompts

Through this workshop, I want to share my love for a philosophical writing practice that engages with the body to understand and theorise lived experiences, situated knowledge, and political activism.

WORKSHOP 3

Now You Write the Planetary Essay

Bob Cowser Jr.

St. Lawrence University

Kendra Greene

St. Lawrence University

Robin Hemley

Long Island University

Patrick Madden

Brigham Young University

Irene Papoulis

Trinity College Hartford CT

Jenny Spinner

Saint Joseph's University

This workshop, led by Jenny Spinner and Bob Cowser, invites participants to engage the essay as writers. In keeping with the conference's theme, *The Essay Beyond Borders*, it foregrounds the essay's potential to bridge personal reflection and collective concerns, while also modeling its dialogic and exploratory nature. Following a brief introduction (8 minutes), the workshop will unfold in four generative sessions of 18 minutes each. In each round, participants will choose between two prompts connected to conference themes—such as the planetary turn, ecological crisis, and the essay as a form of civic or transnational engagement. The prompts, offered by eight U.S.-based writer-scholar-teachers of the essay (including Spinner and Cowser), will be introduced briefly (3 minutes per prompt), followed by sustained writing time (12 minutes). This cycle will repeat four times (72 minutes total).

The workshop will conclude with participants reading aloud a line or two from the writing they produced during the workshop (18 minutes total). Sharing is intended as a way of generating community across disciplinary and cultural borders. This workshop aims not only to encourage new writing but also to demonstrate a teaching method prevalent in U.S. writing classrooms. It is our hope that whether participants are newcomers or veterans of the form, they will leave with fragments to develop, prompts to reuse, and a sense of belonging to an international community of essay writers.

PANELS

PANEL 1

The Essay and the Ethics of Attention: A Diachronic Perspective

In philosophy, the phrase 'ethics of attention' describes how attention plays a role in orienting towards moral reflection and behaviour. According to philosopher Silvia Caprioglio Panizza, attention entails both joining with the other and what Irish Murdoch calls an 'unselfing'. In this context, attention is a mode of perception which "interrogates reality" (Caprioglio Panizza 2022, 15), thus creating a tension towards seeking some kind of knowledge or truth. Recently, literary studies have focused on the performance and representation of the ethics of attention and inattention in fictional narratives (Bennett 2018, Gante-

au 2022). Through the modulation of interruption, intensification of focus and openness, attention in fictional texts expresses an "ethical disposition" (Ganteau, 14). This panel aims to investigate, among other things, if and how such modes are expressed in essays, in a diachronic perspective. Interestingly, the attention economy is not an issue that pertains solely to the rise of the digital age and the scattering of readers' attention because of the overabundance of information available; it has concerned thinkers and writers since the existence of rhetoric (Lanham in Citton, 12). From a theoretical standpoint, certain features of attention, such as its tension towards seeking some kind of knowledge, its kaleidoscopic nature and its grounding us in reality while being both "imaginative" (Caprioglio Panizza, 2) and based on the experience of a specific object of attention, resonate with essayism as a mode.

Anna Maria Cimitile (University of Naples L'Orientale)

The paper will focus on questions related to writing and reading essays in early modern England. More specifically, it will look at the use of metaphors and other figures as devices widely employed in English early modern essay-writing — in practical essays as well as, for example, in essays that today we define as texts of literary theory/criticism (but also, possibly, in commonplacing, a writing practice that was for some aspects the 'draft' form of the essay). Was the idiosyncratic, rambling character usually associated with essays also present in more evidently purposeful or didactic texts? Whether essays were 'used', or read for pleasure, or for acquiring non-practical knowledge, literary devices were pivotal for arising the reader's attention, while they also testified to the literary dimension of the early modern essay. In this paper, they will be central for exploring the possible meanings of the phrase 'ethics of attention' when referred to early modern essays.

Paul Hamilton (Queen Mary University of London)

The essay has always struck me as a genre interestingly torn between being the epitome of an 'occasional' form of writing and being an alternative to systematic philosophy, a practice going back to Montaigne and Bacon – even recalling Plato in its imagined dialogue with the reader it is educating. If so, the kinds of attention the essay demands are going to be varied. Genre as well as subject-matter is relevant: essay can be written in many tones, each expressi-

ve of the kind of role or authority the writer wishes to adopt. The result is that the essay is comfortably synaesthetic or generically mixed. It can present itself as relaxed and anecdotal, urgent and polemical, or ironic and tricky, soliciting from the reader the effort to discern much emerging from few, or what Joseph Addison called ‘the Virtue of a full draught in a few drops’. This can lead to what Dr Johnson called ‘caprice’; or, it can in turn offer a non-systematic, serious sketch of typically Romantic ambitions of capturing the universal in the particular. William Hazlitt, for example, called his writing, mostly essays, ‘the thoughts of a metaphysician expressed by a painter’ (17. 311-12). You can’t paint the inner life immediately, but you can paint so as to make the viewer aware of how in debt to potentially infinite particulars we are when we access the self. Analogously, the essay’s personal anecdotalism pictures subjects made up of, but different from, specific examples. Both self-consciousness and essay demand an attention stretching across but never identified with their particular moments. At a moment in the history of philosophy when the subject was thought to ground everything else, this makes the essay unusually significant for philosophical inquiry. I will look at this significance and try to see how it differs from the traditionally subject-orientated account of a Romanticism which is actually often more ecologically aware than its critics.

Lellida Marinelli (University of Naples L’Orientale)

Building on Silvia Caprioglio Panizza’s account of attention as central to ethical practice, this paper, *Lingering Forms: Essayism and the Ethics of Attention*, examines how contemporary essays enact and theorize a form of slowness that resists the accelerated, bite-sized consumption characteristic of the digital age. Ironically, this same age has seen the rise of online platforms like Substack, which have begun to reclaim the essay’s slow, reflective power through the format of writerly newsletters. While acknowledging this phenomenon as part of the broader media landscape, the paper turns instead to print-based works such as Brian Dillon’s *Suppose a Sentence* (2020) and Zadie Smith’s “Generation Why?” (2018). These texts, among others, dwell on the granularity of language, offer a critique of contemporary media cultures through irony and friction, and model a possible ethical relation through the deliberate attentiveness of reading and writing.

PANEL 2

Essayism & Artistic Research: Four Cases

Jasper Delbecke (LUCA School of Arts/KU Leuven)

Jasper Delbecke will examine the convergence of the essay and artistic research through the notion of the “essay-exhibition”. Drawing on the work of contemporary artists Walid Raad and Ho Rui An, Delbecke will explore how the essay form offers a compelling framework for engaging with complex archives and curatorial practices. The essay-exhibition emerges as a hybrid genre that metabolises knowledge through aesthetic and performative means, challenging institutional norms and fostering critical, situated reflection. By tracing how these artists navigate uncertainty and reconfigure exhibitionary conventions, this paper situates the essay not only as a literary form but as a mode which resists closure and embraces the provisional, dialogic, and affective dimensions of research.

Isolde Vanhee (LUCA School of Arts)

Isolde Vanhee explores essayism as an artistic method through the artworks, exhibitions, and writings of Tacita Dean. Known for her contemplative 16mm films, drawings, and analogue photographs, Dean engages with themes of memory, time, and history. Combining subjective search and critical inquiry, her work frequently enters into visual and conceptual dialogue with other artists, invoking shared cultural memory through citation, homage, and resonance. In *The Wreck of Hope* (2022), a monumental blackboard drawing of a receding glacier, Dean stages the impossible task of capturing a disappearing world. This gesture unfolds a form of visual thinking grounded in material engagement, slow temporality, and embodied attention. The title and imagery recall Caspar David Friedrich’s 1823 painting of the same name, drawing a line between Romantic sublimity and contemporary ecological anxiety. This paper examines how essayistic strategies operate within Dean’s work, and how they contribute to broader understandings of essayism as a method of knowledge production within artistic research.

Tom Van Imschoot (LUCA School of Arts)

Tom Van Imschoot's contribution asks how essayism can bridge the gap between artistic research and higher education in the arts. To do so, he conceives of essays as exercises in receptivity. Starting from recent examples in visual, literary and performative arts (e.g. Patrick Van Caeckenbergh's exhibition *Ultimate Survival, 2025*, or Jan Martens' solo dance piece *Elisabeth gets her way, 2021*), he observes how the embeddiment of an essayistic mode in the arts goes hand in hand with opening sources and connecting artistic inquiry with other fields of research, often outside the arts. In its very construction, the artistic essay is an attempt at making these open(ed) sources resonate as a resource of fascination and therefore questioning (one's sensitivity, one's knowledge, one's attention...). In times of 'disordered attention', could this be a way to create a moment of joint attention, one wonders, where artistic productivity is momentarily suspended to sharpen and share a radical receptivity that drives it? If so, could the application of this method in art research be a way for art students to make sense of it?

Arne De Winde (LUCA School of Arts)

In his paper, Arne De Winde focuses on the forgotten and often marginal tradition of experimental television, and how it's being reactivated in the age of television's obsolescence. While the essay film has become a widely recognized genre and an established form within the artistic canon, its televisual counterpart—essay television—remains largely unacknowledged, if not outright dismissed. As film theorist Laura Mulvey aptly puts it, the concept of experimental television appears “almost oxymoronic”; television is commonly seen as a medium of the mainstream, both aesthetically (defined by the “smoothness of flow”) and ideologically (upholding the status quo). Yet, throughout television history runs a subtle, often forgotten thread of experimentation—works that interrogate and disrupt the medium's formal boundaries, exploit its specific qualities, and challenge viewers out of their domestic complacency. These gestures are essayistic in their radical tentativeness: precarious trials, often doomed to fail and quietly erased from televisual memory. This paper examines several such experiments, including the aptly titled *Essays '55* (WRCA-TV, 1955), and considers how television's decline—its reduction to an obsolete medium in the context of a hyperfast, globalised, and interactive 21st-century media land-

scape—has paradoxically re-opened it as a fertile ground for artistic inquiry. Precisely due to its relative slowness and extended temporal form, a medium once dismissed as flat and commercial may now offer surprising potential for essayistic reflection and artistic research.

PLENARY LECTURES

PLENARY 1

Thomas Karshan (University of East Anglia) For and Against the Essay

At best, the essay in schools and universities is a space for reflective, critical, and individual thought. At worst, it can become a machine for producing formulaic prose and compliant performance. Why does the same form attract such radically opposed judgments? This talk approaches that question historically. I trace the rise of the modern educational essay in the nineteenth century, examining the ambitions of reformers in Britain and the United States who saw it as a vehicle for judging and cultivating intellectual character. I then look further back to its precursor, the early modern “theme” (tema): a tightly structured rhetorical exercise rooted in classical oratory and the disciplined practice of inventio. By setting these forms alongside one another, I ask what the essay was meant to do — and what we now expect it to do — and consider where it should stand among other modes of writing and assessment today.

PLENARY 2

Kara Wittman (University of California Berkeley) The Extraplanetary Essay

In 1977, the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration launched two small spacecraft on a “grand tour” of the outer planets. Those Voyagers have now passed into interstellar space. Aboard each is an essay. Voyagers 1&2 carry a gold-plated phonographic record containing photographs, music, multilingual greetings, and an “evolutionary audio essay on ‘The Sounds of Earth.’” The spirit is Montaignean: to represent, in an “ill-fitted patchwork” of fragments, a self to a self and to an audience one will not meet and cannot really imagine. This, however, is a world-self; the unimaginable audience is

extraterrestrial. The extreme nature of the Voyager essay, I'll suggest, amplifies some of the questions animating this conference: how might an essay represent global and ecological interconnectedness? What self-representation is at once true, durable, and decipherable?

What can the essay form teach us about representing a diverse and imbricate world of values and identities; how does it require the "consciousness of non-identity" integral to the form? Tracing the history, composition, and ambitions of the "Golden Record" project, this talk considers how the extraplanetary essay stresses and reframes the relationship between world and planet, representation and criticality, audience, self, and space-time and, in so doing, helps us imagine the essay's potential in the planetary future.

INDIVIDUAL PAPERS

Aaron Aquilina (University of Malta)

From Apocalypse to Annihilation: Alphonso Lingis and the Planetary Essay

The writings of Alphonso Lingis (American philosopher, essayist, and translator) are itinerant: traversing continents, histories, and genres with a distinctly essayistic impulse. His work freely combines philosophical reflection, travel narrative, anthropological detail, and literary fiction, embodying a form that precedes and exceeds genre. In doing so, Lingis interrogates not only the boundaries of the essay but also of "the human" that constitutes his central subject. Lingis's essays continually return to the entanglement between life, death, and place. Through his encounters with the non-human—from jellyfish to Andean cacti, from mouth bacteria to overgrown ruins—he asserts that our existential condition is inseparable from planetary embeddedness. This paper draws from diverse essays and collections—though, mainly, *Abuses* (1994), *Dangerous Emotions* (2000), and *Irrevocable* (2018)—to chart how the essay becomes a form uniquely suited to exploring this planetary entanglement, and to examine three modes of spatial understanding: the globe, the world, and the planet. The "global" is characterised by overkill: a catastrophic, excessive force linking colonial conquest to contemporary technopolis. "World", on the other hand, foregrounds alterity and relationality, where one dies with and through others. But it is the "planetary" that Lingis most radically pursues—a decentring of the human through immersion in the rhythms and matter of the Earth. Planetary writing, in this sense, becomes a kind of dissolution: of postu-

re, selfhood, and categorical thinking. The links of this with the essayistic are very evident.

Lingis's planetary essay is also resolutely literary. Its sprawling narrations, shifting points of view, and mystical poetics—alongside the suggestiveness of photography—resist the iconography of globalism. The planetary is not only his subject but also his mode: it ungrounds, unmoors, and ultimately enacts the annihilation not just of the self, but of the "human" as genre.

Mario Aquilina (University of Malta)

Derangements of Scale in the Essay

This paper examines how essayistic writing stages what Timothy Clark calls the "derangements of scale" associated with planetary thought. Planetary thinking requires movement across temporal and spatial magnitudes that exceed ordinary human perception, destabilising familiar anthropocentric frameworks. Rather than proposing a theory of the "planetary essay," the paper explores how essayistic writing performs these scalar shifts through moments that de-centre the human and reposition it within wider nonhuman systems.

Focusing on works by Virginia Woolf, Annie Dillard, and Samantha Harvey, I analyse episodes in which essayistic perception encounters planetary scales. Woolf's essays, including *The Sun and the Fish* and *Flying over London*, experiment with perspectival shifts that dissolve the stability of human-centred perception. Dillard's essays, such as *Total Eclipse*, confront the temporal and spatial disorientation produced by encounters with planetary phenomena. Samantha Harvey's *Orbital*, though a novel, functions as a sustained essayistic thought experiment in planetary perception.

Through these readings, the paper proposes a method for reading planetary derangements of scale in essayistic writing, tracing how essays move between human experience and wider nonhuman temporalities and perspectives.

Marine Aubry-Morici (University Roma Tre)

The Eco-Essay: A Personal and Planetary Genre for the Anthropocene

This paper examines the eco-essay as an emerging literary form of the Anthropocene, blending scientific content with personal narrative to foster a deeper engagement with ecological crises. Works such as Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Baptiste Morizot's *On the Animal Trail*, and Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* redefine the boundaries of the traditional essay by integrating elements of science writing, non-fiction reportage,

and spiritual traditions. This hybridity expands the genre's potential, combining empirical rigor with intimate, experiential storytelling.

Supported by my SOE-funded Marie Curie project at Roma Tre University (CLINOFI – Climate Change, Anthropocene and Ecology in Nonfiction Literature), I argue that the eco-essay addresses the limitations of conventional fiction (Ghosh, 2016) by adopting a fragmented, interdisciplinary, and deeply personal approach to the Anthropocene. It enriches scientific discourse with emotional resonance and ethical urgency, restoring depth and verticality to our relationship with the world. Through the analysis of these texts, I explore how the eco-essay invites readers to experience the Anthropocene not as distant observers, but as active participants in a shared, transformative dialogue.

Paul Bailey [HfG Karlsruhe (DE) / KASK & Conservatorium (BE)]

Meeting Grounds: Essay as Event

This paper - to be performed as an **active** essay - will offer a series of reflections on a body of research undertaken within the framework of my ongoing PhD research concerned with the visual essay as a critical instrument within, and through, contemporary practices of graphic design. The paper will focus on a programme of 'gatherings' (Solnit), entitled 'Meeting Grounds: Essay as Event' that investigate, and experiment with, the essay as a verb (essaying), an event (a gathering) and as a social form for collective reasoning (Montaigne). The gatherings, hosting practitioners across fields (graphic design, literature, fine art), took place across the UK and EU and were hosted by the Centre for Other Worlds x Delli, Lisbon, Portugal (with Francisco Laranjo, Luiza Prado, The Provisional School for Nothing), Kunsthal Ghent, Belgium (with Metahaven, Dayna Casey, Katja Mater), Camden Arts Centre, UK (with Brian Dillon, Ima- Abasi Okon, Kameelah Janan Rasheed, Alex Balgiu), and most recently within a seminar/exhibition format at the ZKM Pavillon, DE (with staff/students from HfG Karlsruhe). Drawing from a newly harvested lexicon of terms that the 'essay as event' conjures, we will pay attention to modes of essaying that are 'active, collective, conversational, counter, ecological, hypothetical, incomplete, inconvenient, improvised, non-fiction, material, mobile, relational, resistant, revised, temporal, wayward, on-going...'.

Kurt Borg (University of Malta)

Intimating the World between the Essay and Philosophy: The Politics of the Pandemic in Zadie Smith and Judith Butler

This paper examines how Zadie Smith's *Intimations* (2020) and Judith Butler's *What World is This?* (2022) utilise the COVID-19 pandemic experience as a springboard for a broader ethico-political reflection. Despite the differences in their genres – *Intimations* consists of six essays written during the lockdown, while *What World is This?* presents a series of philosophical reflections on a pandemic phenomenology – in this paper, I argue that the two works share a common sensibility, such that Smith's lockdown essays raise philosophical questions (on the nature of suffering, or the experience of time), while Butler's philosophical writing approaches the pandemic through essayistic gestures (meditative, genre-blending, affective). Both books, written in the midst of the pandemic, use that experience as a means of opening up their writing, unsettling the borders between the personal and the public, to engage with the political injustices that persisted and were exacerbated during the pandemic. An argument I pursue in this paper is that Smith's and Butler's pandemic writing carries an affective dimension that is crucial to how the texts present themselves. The texts function less as systematic ethico-political treatises with solid argumentation, but, instead, proceed through a softer manner, perhaps through intimations, inviting openings in the readers' experience and empathic connections with others while preserving ambivalence. Both texts, ultimately, highlight how lives are interdependent and intertwined with others, a condition that was especially foregrounded by the pandemic. In this way, both writers use the pandemic as an occasion for an essayistic and philosophical reflection on and within a damaged world. Using these two texts as exemplars, the paper reflects on the 'pandemic essay', or how the pandemic lent itself to essayism, and how 'post-critical' approaches (Felski, 2015, 2020; Sedgwick, 2003) can illuminate pandemic writing.

Stefano Bracci Testasecca (University Roma Tre)

The Essayist's Nook: The Role of Self-Presence in Essayistic Writing

If philosophical writing hinges upon concepts and theoretical models, essayistic writing holds a looser connection to objectivity, a relation which is always mediated by direct experience. The world is investigated in the here and now: as the writer puts their pen to paper to write "As I write", or falls in a reverie in-

stigated by a nearby object, not only do they perform ‘self-reflexivity’, a prominent trait of essayistic writing, but they also imbue the text with ‘self-presence’. The act of writing about the moment of writing, what Barthes in his self-portrait calls “writing of the second degree”, significantly influences the approach of the concepts and objects encountered in the text. A writing which is ‘present-unto-itself’ implies a unique relation to spatialization, which inevitably affects the epistemological capacity of the text. The implications of such an approach relate to both the ethics of attention and to the essay as an inquiry to the interconnectedness beyond the human. As Michel Beaujour writes in *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (1980), “Nothing is more archaic or transhistorical than those texts claiming to disclose ‘what I am now, while I’m writing this book’.” While the writing-nook, the author’s surroundings, has been a centerpiece of essayistic writing, from Montaigne up to Agamben’s *Self Portrait in the Studio* (2017), this paper will use as case studies authors such as Hazlitt (“On the Pleasure of Hating”; “The Letter-bell”) and Woolf (“The Death of the Moth”; “The Mark on the Wall”). This presence-unto-itself of writing, “through which the material presence of writing itself is foregrounded” (Beaujour), is moreover connected with phenomenology, as seen in the leading role of self-presence in the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. This paper will then expand on the relationship between the essay and phenomenology, already explored by authors such as Erin Plunkett.

Paolo Bugliani (University of Pisa)
The Animal Essay and Planetary Episteme

This paper examines the literary animal essay as a form that fosters a planetary sensibility: a shift toward decentered, post-anthropocentric ways of knowing and being. It argues that the animal essay not only foregrounds interspecies entanglement but also functions as a literary mediator of planetary awareness in the Anthropocene. By revealing the constitutive links between human and nonhuman life, these essays articulate a planetary ethos grounded in fragility, interdependence, and coexistence. Starting with texts from the essay tradition—Thoreau’s *Walden*, Woolf’s “The Death of the Moth,” and Nabokov’s writings on butterflies—the paper seeks to identify a recurring structure of interspecies encounter that unsettles anthropocentric subjectivity. Turning also to contemporary animal essays by Annie Dillard, Jonathan Franzen, Helen Macdonald, Philip Hoare, and Linda Hogan, the paper aims to highlight how their hybrid blending of memoir, natural history, and philosophical reflection extends

this reorientation, shaping a planetary grammar of vulnerability, sentience, and co-dependence. In this sense, the animal essay is not simply an essay about animals, but a literary form that stages encounters across species and scales. Moving between the microscopic and the planetary, it gives expression to a world no longer organized around the human. The paper ultimately proposes the animal essay as a vital form for narrating entangled lives and for imagining more ethical ways of inhabiting a damaged, shared planet.

Ivan Callus (University of Malta)
Essayistic Politics in the World: Between Wishfulness and Praxis

Is there any writing that can (still) change the world? Of course, some writing can do so and purports that it must: for instance, the text of Bills before Parliament or of peace treaties and international Conventions, though it is striking how quickly plus ça change cynicism settles. And literary scholars will always want to believe that poetry can legislate, that fiction can refigure the world, that there can be effectual political charge in an essay and certainly across the tradition of the *essai*. After all, does not everything in the theories around base-superstructure distinctions suggest that ideas and writing can be activist and revolutionary? Between and across theory and practice, this much is known and believed. Without such conviction it could not happen that a conference could be called on how it might be essayed that borders-retentive thought and discourse can be brought down for the sake of the world entire: in good planetary-level citizenship, no less. And yet. What if it were not so? Or, what if it were increasingly less so, in the world as we now find it? To be literal-minded and presentist: what writing recently changed the world? Was that writing essay-definable, was it essayistic? Or is it the case that transformative writing is now mostly cast (in all conceivable senses of this word) otherwise? What is the fate of the essay, what can the essay fate, in the forms and modes of a 21st-century essayism that sees beyond its wishfulness about itself and the world towards a praxis for the times as it finds them? This paper considers these questions and their implications. It does so in the context of references to recent examples of non-legislative texts that can be said to have been deeply consequential. How many of those texts are (not) essays and/or essayistic? This seems to be an important basis for thinking past the borderlines of what it is possible to say, at the present time and for the sake of the world, about the essay in theory and practice – especially if we want to better understand how, more than ever, the essay(istic) matters in and for the world.

Rosa Cetro (University of Pisa)

Guyllaine Le Guéanff (University of Pisa)

Learning to Write the French Essay: A Challenging Journey for Italian-speaking Students

The essay was born in France during 16th century with Michel de Montaigne. Nowadays, the essay – and generally the argumentative text – is the main type of text used not only in French universities, but also in French language qualification exams like DALF (Diplôme approfondi de Langue française). The mastery of the essay is therefore fundamental for all those who wish to undertake an Erasmus exchange in a French university or reach an advanced level in French. Due to its tightly codified structure, the French essay proves to be a particularly difficult textual typology for Italian-speaking learners of French. In this communication, we would like to provide feedback from a French course on academic purposes at the University of Pisa. Our research methodology is based on a corpus of written productions by students and on a questionnaire aimed at showing the difficulties and the strategies encountered by students.

Robert Cowser (St. Lawrence University)

Expanding Galaxies: Adorno, Negative Dialectics, and the Narrative Energy of Baldwin's Later Essays

Phillip Lopate, when introducing “Notes of a Native Son” in *THE ART OF THE PERSONAL ESSAY*, writes that the longer James Baldwin stayed abroad, “the more rhetoric he seemed to need to paper over his weakening grasp on daily American life... Bravely, maybe foolhardily, Baldwin challenged the notion of the well-made essay with expanding galaxies (No Name in the Street, The Devil Finds Work) that keep shooting off in different directions, collecting eloquence, digressions, and juicy subthemes even as they ultimately fail to cohere.” But in “James Baldwin: Nonfiction of a Native Son,” Sonya Huber warns against just the sort of cherry-picking anthology editors do, encouraging readers to push past what Lopate considers Baldwin’s more “well-made,” regularly-anthologized essays to look at the later, more challenging work.

My paper will look closely at several of Baldwin’s longer essays – “Notes of a Native Son” (1955), “Down at the Cross” (1963), and “To Be Baptized” (1972), considering their conclusions in particular. My thesis is that Baldwin’s earlier, mid-century essays employed a more classical Hegelian dialectical style, offering the satisfactions to which Lopate is accustomed. But as the century wore

on, in keeping with shifts in the zeitgeist and his frustration with global racial politics, Baldwin began to experiment with what Adorno would call “negative dialectics,” eschewing tidier satisfactions for more complicated ones. The later essays are indeed “expanding galaxies” which ask readers to live with greater uncertainty and discontent.

Luna Dieleman (University of Ghent)

Illness, Ethics, and the Essay Form

Before scholarly interest coalesced around what is now called the “illness essay,” essay theorist Carl Klaus had already noted the mid-1980s rise of writing about “malady” in personal essays (Klaus 2010). By then, essays addressing physical or psychological affliction, such as Nancy Mairs’s *Plaintext* (1986) and Anatole Broyard’s *Intoxicated by My Illness* (1992), had become increasingly visible in American literature. Klaus argues that these essays engaged such intimate material that they reshaped the relationship between essayist and reader, as well as the conventions that structure that exchange (Klaus 2010). He suggests that they invite a quasi-therapeutic relation, positioning readers as empathetic “fellow-sufferers,” “trusted friends,” or “therapists” (Klaus 2010). Later work on illness essays affirms this relational mode, linking it both to the experience of illness and to the essay’s defining emphasis of process over product (Dillon 2017). Ann Jurecic argues that writers use the essay’s interrogative form to affirm belonging - to families, communities, and crucially, to a collective of readers (Jurecic 2016), prompted by the “bodily doubt” that illness produces (Carel 2013). The essay’s ethical force would then lie precisely in its capacity to question established knowledge and propose alternative value frameworks (Russell 2023). Contemporary writers of illness essays complicate this ethical model further. Instead of positioning readers as willing partners in recognition or consolation, they often invite forms of friction or unease, thereby testing the relational possibilities of the essay genre. This study examines two contemporary texts - Anne Boyer’s *The Undying* (2019) and Johanna Hedva’s *How to Tell When We Will Die* (2024) - to assess whether they stage or defy “therapeutic” dynamics, and how their rhetorical and formal strategies assign value to the essayistic mode. I first turn to the paratexts to trace how each author imagines their readership, before analyzing how the texts articulate both ethical and aesthetic claims about the essay and the reader’s role within it.

Jack Dignam (University of Amsterdam)

Essayism: Heretical Tropes & Rosaleen McDonagh

In this paper, I develop the notion of essayism proposed by Mario Aquilina as a “stance or attitude” to the world, understood here specifically as a stance of mediated immediacy. This dialectical understanding is achieved with reference to Theodor Adorno and Anna Kornbluh. Building on the Adornian claim that the “essay’s innermost law is heresy”, I characterise this essayism as a transgressive poetics that actively engages in public discourse and civic engagement. I claim this is transgressive through drawing on Mark Fisher’s assertion that the most productive reading of “the personal is political” is that “the personal is impersonal,” arguing that essayism functions as criticism of impersonal, given conditions of real existing subjects. I directly connect these impersonal conditions with the notion of immediacy. Thus, I claim that mediated immediacy is deployed not for passive reflection, but to expose the cultural, structural, political conditions of subjectivity, transforming the personal into a site of heresy and thereby critique. The relevance of this today lies in the pervasive individual nature by which nearly everyone is addressed. Hereby, we have a means of making such individual addresses subversive while maintaining the particularity inherent to them. I demonstrate this transgressive poetics with reference to existing Irish essayists and existing cultural, structural, political conditions of subjectivity in Ireland.

Allen Durgin (Princeton University)

Did a Human Write This? Richard T. Ford’s “Save the Robots: Cyber Profiling and Your So-Called Life” and the Techno-Futurist Essay

The rise of disinformation and dogmatism. The invention of new information technologies. The discovery of new sciences and new worlds. The anxieties and anticipations that animated the essays of Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century have returned with a newfound urgency in the twenty-first. The essay is our most human, most vulnerable writing form. But while the Scientific Renaissance gave birth to the essay as a genre, the technogenesis of today seems to herald its imminent demise. In the wake of AI text generators, what does it mean to write? To be intelligent? To inhabit a human form? Twenty-five years ago, legal scholar Richard T. Ford published a prescient essay in a special volume of *Stanford Law Review*. His essay “Save the Robots: Cyber Profiling and Your So-Called Life” seems out of place among

the other articles collected in the special volume. First, Ford begins by telling his readers that he is speaking not as an expert but rather as a curious but concerned citizen. To make things even odder, he changes, without comment, fonts throughout the course of the essay as he debates the pros and cons of what he calls his cyber doppelgänger. One way to read the essay is as an early form of AI generated writing in which Ford performs a reverse imitation game: a human imitating a computer imitating a human. Since its publication in 2000, little has been written about Ford’s essay. My presentation will return to Ford to explore how the genre of the essay can serve as a necessary technology for navigating our brave, new world.

Roberta Ferrari (University of Pisa)

Writing the Planetary: Literary Essays in the Age of Climate Crisis

This paper examines the literary essay as a privileged form for articulating and disseminating environmental and climate change awareness within a planetary framework. It argues that the essay’s ethical and relational orientation makes it particularly suited to addressing the socio ecological challenges of the present. While the scientific grounding of climate discourse and its tendency toward ideological polarization might appear at odds with the essay’s indeterminate, exploratory nature, the paper contends that precisely these qualities enable the form to mediate between individual experience and planetary interconnectedness. Through readings of essays by Zadie Smith and Ian McEwan, the analysis identifies recurrent linguistic, rhetorical, and narrative strategies that render climate change both conceptually intelligible and affectively resonant. These include reflexive modes of inquiry, narrative analogies linking micro and macrocosmic scales, and a dialogic ethos fostering intimacy between writer and reader. The paper ultimately proposes the essay as a textual space capable of reimagining human Earth relations, contributing to a planetary consciousness attentive to interdependence, vulnerability, and shared ecological responsibility.

Maria Frendo (University of Malta)

The Essay as a Method of Inquiry

Since the time of Montaigne, the personal essay has had a varied critical response. While on the one hand it has been praised as an expression of subjectivity, on the other hand it has been derided precisely for the same reason, as well as for lacking formal structure and scholarly rigour. My paper aims to redress the

balance in favour of the former, in that it can be a structured thought process through which man can explore, analyse and present knowledge, transforming a vague question into a focused argument by guiding research, developing critical thinking as well as allowing writers to document the discovery process. More than providing answers to questions, this type of essays seeks to find the right questions to ask by pushing the boundaries of thought from the superficial to the complex, helping man understand how arguments work which would hopefully lead to deeper levels of inquiry into the nature of knowledge. By referring to essayists such as Blaise Pascal, Samuel Johnson, Charles Baudelaire, George Orwell, and G.K. Chesterton, and also specifically to Pope's Essay on Criticism (despite it being a poem, Pope calls it 'Essay'), together with references to the musical essay of Bach, Beethoven, and Mahler and Vella, this paper hopes to cast a different light on the genre of the essay. Rather than a befuddled, unruly piece of writing, the essay, which is largely a document more based on experience than definition, has the ability to tackle points of view that can lead to nuanced resolutions and syntheses, thereby aiding both writer and thinker in formulating methods of inquiry.

Giorgia Gherzi (University of Pisa)

The Essay as Ethical form in Anna Maria Ortese's *Le piccole persone*

This paper explores Anna Maria Ortese's distinctive use of the essay form, focusing on selected texts from *Le piccole persone* (*Il criminale prudente*, *Un attore vale più di un cavallo?*, *Il pitu*, *L'impero animale*, *Il cervo giustiziato*). In these writings, Ortese develops an essayistic mode in which argumentation intersects with lyrical and visionary discourse, transforming the essay into a space of mediation between autobiographical experience, moral reflection, and collective inquiry. The paper aims to analyse Ortese's rhetorical and discursive strategies. Her essays unfold as a dynamic movement from the particularity of everyday news to the broader horizon of moral and philosophical inquiry. Through a plural and inclusive voice – marked by the recurrent use of “we”, by references to shared experience, and by expressive, figurative language – Ortese constructs a form of dialogue that speaks directly to a non-specialist, “common” reader. At the same time, her prose is shaped by a pervasive rhetoric of indignation: a polemical energy that emerges in invective, adversative constructions, sharp oppositions (“we” versus “they”), and a strongly positioned “I”. These strategies create an ethical tension that is both participatory and conflictual, resisting sentimentality. The tragic, the pathetic, and the melanco-

lic are not ends in themselves but channels through which emotion becomes ethical awareness and civic responsibility. Finally, the paper considers the dynamics of gaze and perspective that blur the boundaries between human and animal, dislocating anthropocentric hierarchies and opening Ortese's essayistic writing to a planetary dimension. In this light, Ortese's essays can be read as a pedagogical practice of relational thinking and ecological imagination.

Marija Grech (University of Malta)

Into the Blue: The Blue Humanities as an Essayistic Endeavour

This paper brings together scholarship from the field of the Blue Humanities with conceptualisations and theorisations of the essay as a genre. It traces the various ways that these two distinct fields of research can be mapped onto one another, and it proceeds to read the two fields through one another in an attempt to conceptualise a form of planetary ‘essaying’ that is informed by the sea. The paper reads essayistic exploration as a movement of fluidity and drift, while also examining how the Blue Humanities fashions itself not simply as a discourse on the sea but a discourse of the sea – one that similarly seeks to embrace its own fluidity, grappling with questions of uncertainty, otherness, and a drift into the unknown. The talk thus makes the case for reading the Blue Humanities as an essayistic endeavour – as a form of planetary ‘essaying’ that attempts to grapple with, conceptualise, and form new ways of knowing and engaging with the earth as a planetary entity. Through the field of the Blue Humanities, it argues, the sea provides the space for a conceptual ‘untethering’, or a conceptual ‘drift’, that invites us to question the terrestrial assumptions that ground our relationship to the earth and find other ways of thinking about and interacting with our planetary environments.

Adrian Grima (University of Malta)

Sedimented Worlds: Language, the Personal Essay, and Planetary Disposition

The “planetary imaginary,” a framework connecting individual narratives to global socio-environmental forces, provides a productive lens for reading contemporary personal essays in Maltese. The essay's open, exploratory form and ethical first-person voice make it uniquely suited to planetary thinking. This perspective is particularly pertinent for small island literatures. In the aftermath of the 2020–21 global pandemic, essayists like Omar N'Shea and Kurt Borg consciously chose to write in Maltese, a smaller language situated at the mar-

gins of dominant literary economies. This linguistic decision functions not merely as a vehicle for a planetary outlook, but as a performative enactment of it. The pandemic highlighted the entanglement of global processes with local vulnerabilities, making the essay an ideal medium to bridge intimate memories with macro-concerns like local and global pressures on an increasingly fragile natural environment, and the opportunities and challenges when cultures meet in the Mediterranean. Omar N'Shea's five-part, book-length essay *Es Sidr* (2025) employs a "being-in-relation" narrative to explore physical and symbolic spaces through an earth-anchored ethics. His work traces a thematic progression from the biotic (migratory birds) and atmospheric (the ghibli wind) to the lithic (ancient geological formations of sand and mountains), in a context in which oil extraction features prominently. This trajectory underscores a planetary sensibility, marking a decisive shift from deep-time natural systems to the Anthropocene, where extractive human industries dominate and endanger the very ecosystems to which the essayist accords primacy.

Gail Hammill (American University in Dubai)

Sociopolitical Encounters and the Personal Essay: A Meta Narrative for the First Year Composition and Beyond

Recently I finished writing "A Period Piece," an essay about that day, at age fourteen, I learned how to use a tampon. An experience of ignorance, fear, and shame as well as triumph, discovery, and liberation, I wanted to write about it for many years but never did because I feared others would find it trivial or repulsive. Despite decades of identifying with feminist writers, I had failed somehow to see its political relevance. In *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate reflects, "There is something heroic in the essayist's gesture of striking out toward the unknown, not only without a map but without certainty there is anything worthy to be found." Indeed, overcoming doubt about the worthiness of a writing project does require courage; yet even private acts of courage, like writing about our memories, often depend initially on encouragement from others. My encouragement, in this case, began with encountering Sharon Olds' "Ode to the Tampon," and a surprising conversation with a close friend. Many well-known essayists, from Emerson to Adrienne Rich to Lopate have argued and demonstrated that the best personal essays engender sociopolitical awareness in both the writing and reading of them. Despite this, many composition instructors, even while assigning personal essays as readings, hesitate to assign them as writing assignments, out of concerns that include doubts about

their intellectual rigor arising in part out of license to "navel-gaze," certainly an antisocial activity. In this meta-personal essay, I chart the sociopolitical encounters that accompanied my writing of "A Period Piece," its prompts, process, and products, to argue that in the current age of social media addiction, reading apathy, and AI concerns, the personal essay, perhaps now more than ever, has powerful pedagogical potential in first-year composition and beyond.

Robin Hemley (Long Island University)

Adapting to the End of the World: Reframing Environmental Degradation through Speculation in the Work of Nicole Walker

In this paper, I examine how Nicole Walker's forthcoming hybrid essay collection, *Shapeshifters of the Inland Seas*, uses speculative strategies to imagine planetary futures shaped by environmental collapse, adaptation, and ethical responsibility. Focusing primarily on her essays about Utah's Great Salt Lake, I argue that Walker practices a form of speculative nonfiction that reveals how human and nonhuman bodies are co-authored by environmental change. Walker links stories of virgin births the shrinking of the Great Salt Lake, the survival of brine shrimp, and the migration of birds with stories of Mormon settlement, industrial dumping, reproductive technologies, and bodily adaptation. Through this method, Walker treats speculation as a mode of ethical inquiry. She asks what it means to live in a world where lakes collapse into toxicity and survival itself becomes an act of imaginative labor. Drawing on traditions of the braided essay associated with writers such as Terry Tempest Williams, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Claudia Rankine, Walker extends the form toward planetary thinking. Her essays suggest that adaptation is itself a kind of narrative. To adapt is to rethink how stories are told about land, water, bodies, and agency. In Walker's work, the lake is a changing entity that forces humans to confront their own limits and complicities. I situate Walker within the speculative essay as a form that imagines futures already arriving. Walker situates environmental degradation as a field of ongoing transformation. Her essays model how writers can use hybrid and speculative techniques to help readers imagine what it might mean to live, ethically and imaginatively, at what often feels like the end of the world.

Emily Huurdeman (Fontys Academy of the Arts NL)

On Pitbulls, Essaying Contradictions and Frictions in Public Debate

Through topics that are seemingly mundane, and even taboo, I investigate and address broader themes in public debate. Though each one has a different focus, they are all (inter-)connected. The aim is to counter the binary of polarization through a non-binary and queer lens, using multi-vocality and poly-perspectives to investigate the complexity of a topic through frictions and paradoxes, not to conclude, idealize or simplify.

Through an object-oriented perspective, *On engines* focuses on feminism and gender roles, ecology and capitalism. Through an embodied perspective, *On Bruises* focuses on (informed) consent and sexuality, domestic abuse and femininity. Through a non-human animal perspective, *On Pitbulls* focuses on polarization in politics and society, xenophobia and discrimination.

For this conference I will perform a new version of *On Pitbulls*, in which I essay the topic through assumptions and biases in social class, polarisation in social media, and contradictions in politics, laws and scientific research. I will also show the process of essaying and method of investigation: From a (I) Topic to a (II) Performative archive and (III) Per-forming. The (III) Performative archive is a digital map with collected “knowledge fragments”, these knowledge fragments are collected from different “ways of knowing”, different perspectives, and different media. The step collecting is followed by clustering and creating a (temporary) constellation. The constellation is the base for the (III) Per-forming, in my case a lecture performance, but the process is intended for every artistic discipline, it can also be a base for essay writing.

Paul Keen (Carleton University)

Incorrigible Hazlitt

Few genres and eras have converged in what Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy describe as the “incorrigible plurality of the world” more dramatically than essay writing during the renewed political unrest of the post-Napoleonic years, and no essayist in the period was more incorrigible than William Hazlitt. As Greg Dart has argued, for many essay writers, a highly performative demonstration of the genre’s own creative processes often counted for more than a coherent message: “what it aspires to is not so much thought’s distillate but its process of fermentation – the manner in which ideas resonate and communicate with one another” (181). But, crucially, by the 1810s, this sense of “fermenta-

tion” applied to more than art. For Hazlitt, this sense of plurality was animated by a spirit of contradiction and dislocation that anticipated Ernest Bloch’s “ontology of the unfinished,” staging textual disruptions as a literary instantiation of what Marxist critics would come to theorize as the contradictions of industrial modernity. Hazlitt’s self-ironic digressions and displacements performed a dialectic of making and unmaking that anticipated Bloch’s “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” in ways that reflected the pressures of his post-revolutionary moment. However nostalgic Romantic essayists such as Hazlitt and his contemporaries may have been for the world of urbane sociability evoked by eighteenth-century periodicals such as the *Spectator*, the lyrical turn of their essays often replaced this social ethos with what Dart has called a “whirligig of association” that seized on familiar sights and sounds as triggers that launched essayistic journeys into intensely personal memories (and meditations on the power of memory) rather than the more public focus of eighteenth-century coffee houses. Situating Hazlitt’s essayistic version of Bloch’s ontology of the unfinished within a longer history of the essay genre foregrounds questions about the different kinds of cultural work that essays’ association with miscellaneous, self-ironic, and fragmentary forms of knowledge could be seen to be doing in very different eras.

Daniel Lago Monteiro (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro)

An Essayist in the Tropics: Machado de Assis and the English Essay Tradition

This paper aims at investigating the connections of Machado de Assis (1839-1908) with the English essayistic tradition as well as his own practice of the essay. For over forty years, Machado contributed to several periodicals, most of which were signed by distinct pen names. On the one hand, the use of pseudonyms aimed at giving unity to texts and creating an author-narrator distinction. On the other hand, a cross-reading of these different periodicals reveals that the narrator in one series often alludes to the narrator of another series and provides references to Machado’s own personal life. A striking example is the reference to the author’s date of birth: 21st of June, the beginning of winter in the southern hemisphere. Thus, in the periodical essay “A Semana” (18 February 1894), the narrator, as usual, addresses readers in a personal and humoristic tone: “I woke up not feeling well today [...]. I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: I wasn’t born for summer heat”. In fact, here, Machado reports readers to another one he had also published in “A Semana” (1 October 1893):

“I love cold weather; perhaps because I was born with it, on the very day our winter begins”. But that was not the first time Machado reminded his readers he was “a child of cold weather”. We find the same biographical note on earlier essays, published decades before. By the same token, Machado’s periodicals frequently refer to English essayists, to their merging of the figure of the newspaper journalist with the fictional idea of a character. Therefore, in this paper, I will investigate the hypothesis that when Machado blends author and literary persona, fact and fiction, and when he playfully reminds readers of being “a child of cold weather” in the tropics, he attaches himself, in his own way, to the essayistic tradition.

Thijs Lijster (University of Groningen)
Mediation and Immediacy in the Essay

In her recent book *Immediacy or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2023), Anna Kornbluh described ‘immediacy’ as a cultural style that prioritizes affect, presence, personal voice and embodiment over reflection, careful analysis and critique. She suggests that the personal essay, as well as a recent surge in ‘autotheory’, is a symptom of the latter, part of a continuum of social media posts, memoir, and other cultural forms that illustrate the ‘first-personalism’ of the current age. In dialogue with Kornbluh, as well as some of the authors that have informed her analysis such as Hegel (2018), Adorno (1973, 1984) and Jameson (1991, 2009), I want to further explore the relation between essayism and mediation. I will argue that Kornbluh’s conception of the essay is undialectical, equating the first-person perspective with immediacy (whilst associating the third-person narrator of the novel with mediation). While Kornbluh, following Hegel, prioritizes the perspective of universality or social totality, I will argue on the basis of a reading of Adorno’s ‘Essay as Form’ that essayistic writing and thinking indeed mediates between the particular and the universal, something that is overlooked in Kornbluh’s haphazard rejection of the essay’s ‘first-personalism’. I will also illustrate this by drawing on contemporary essayists such as Maggie Nelson (*On Freedom*) and Lieke Marsman (*Op een andere planeet kunnen ze me redden*), both of whom relate their own experiences to planetary crises.

Patrick Madden (Brigham Young University)
Why Everyone Should Teach Brian Doyle’s Essays

I’ve been studying and preaching the essay for a long time, thirty years in an

official capacity, but maybe my whole life if I change the parameters a little bit. I’m conversant with, even enthusiastic about, the headier theory side of the genre, and I’ve joyously immersed myself in its history. So I’ve encountered a lot of responses to essaying, and for my money, no essayist works better pedagogically than seven-time Best American Essayist Brian Doyle (1953-2017), who as both a writer and a person was utterly jubilant, exuberant, exultant, at both the wild world and its translation into writing. All essayists have individual voices, but few can inspire students to find a voice like Brian Doyle can, modeling for them how to discard the stodgy rules they’ve internalized about what’s permitted in writing and simply converse with ideas and with others, as Montaigne did. Doyle’s prose exemplifies the kind of dialogic thought that weighs ideas, makes unexpected associations, navigates tensions, all toward a radical expansion of the mind. Because his prose is so unpretentious, so conversational, so welcoming, it inspires students to learn to write in like manner. And to love what they’re doing. I have seen so many eyes light up when reading and discussing Doyle’s essays, and I’m confident that in sharing his work with the *Essays Beyond Border* crowd, I can share the magic.

I’d like to call my presentation “Why Everyone Should Teach Brian Doyle’s Essays.” I’ll provide handouts and a PowerPointed guide to some of Brian’s best essays, modeling a critical approach to using his work in the classroom. Mostly, I’m eager to infect other teachers with the pure joy of essaying that Brian embodied.

Nóra Máthé (Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania)
The Ethics of Uncertainty: Tentative Voices and Political Writing in Zadie Smith’s *Intimations*

This paper examines Zadie Smith’s *Intimations* (2020) as a case study in how the contemporary essay navigates the fraught space between private reflection and public discourse. Written during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Smith’s six essays combine her personal observations with cultural critique. Her style resists both the superficiality of digital commentary and the rigidity of ideological positioning, and it remains deeply personal. Although Smith expresses her political opinions, she does not want to stand on a soapbox. Against the backdrop of a digital culture saturated with instant opinions and headstrong “hot takes,” *Intimations* demonstrates how tentativeness, uncertainty, and personal specificity can themselves become civic virtues. Smith’s resistance to big declarations in itself is a form of resistance against digital

acceleration. Her virtues lie in the willingness to listen, acknowledge, and ponder. Her essays hold the private and the public in tension, showing how even hesitant, partial reflections can create space for ethical and political thinking. I argue that *Intimations* exemplifies how the essay can intervene in public discourse by refusing authority rather than asserting it. Smith's writing enacts an "ethics of uncertainty" that resists the simplifications of digital media, affirming the essay as a form where self-questioning, attentiveness, and humility are themselves political acts.

Ivan Enrique Parra (University of Michigan)

The Imagined Essay: Possibility and the Pedagogy of Form in Gabriel García Márquez

Essay criticism has traditionally centered on the nonfictional and predominantly European lineage of the genre. This critical genealogy has left little room to consider how essayistic thinking might operate within fictional forms or emerge from other epistemic geographies, such as the Caribbean. In particular, and mainly studied through the lenses of identity, politics, history, or magical realism, one of the Caribbean's most important and essayistic books—*One Hundred Years of Solitude*—has rarely been examined for the non-dogmatic habits of thought it performs and elicits in its readers. This paper begins from that gap to ask a pedagogical question: How can *One Hundred Years of Solitude* be used to teach students to develop essayistic habits of thought? Extending this inquiry, it also considers a broader theoretical question with methodological implications: If the essay has long been the privileged site of reflective thinking, what do we gain pedagogically by turning to essayistic fiction to cultivate those same habits of inquiry? To address these questions, I propose the concept of flashes of essayism, page-level operations in which narrative form enacts thought processes. Through close readings of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I examine how such flashes manifest through multiperspectivism, hypothetical narration, and self-reflections that transform storytelling into an enactment of essayistic inquiry within the virtual simulations the novel constructs. These narrative simulations serve as testing grounds for non-dogmatic thinking, inviting readers and students to rehearse speculation, revision, and reflection without the demand for resolution. In the classroom, this process can be activated pedagogically through close reading practices that foreground the formal mechanisms of essayistic thought within the fictional world. Reading the novel in this way enables students to inhabit provisionality and to experience non-dogmatic thinking as an unfolding process that shapes how they engage with uncertain-

ty and complexity in social and civic life. In this sense, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* demonstrates that fictional works—no less than the essay—can enact essayistic inquiry through its formal qualities and function as a pedagogical tool for cultivating the essay's habits of mind in its readers.

Kristin Rozzell-Murray (American University in Dubai)

Guest Essays from *The New York Times*: Genre Expectations

In 2021, The New York Times retired the header "Op-Ed" (opposite the editorial page) for its opinion pieces and replaced it with the header "Guest Essays." According to the inaugural "Guest Essay," this change was mainly driven by a shift in how readers consume content, primarily online rather than in print: "There is no geographical 'Op-Ed,' just as there is no geographical 'Ed' for Op-Ed to be opposite of. It is a relic of an older age and an older print newspaper design" (Kingsbury). While the name change marks the undeniable move from print to digital media, this paper argues that more profound significance lies in the choice of the words guest and essay. The term essay, in particular, carries a rich literary tradition and connotations distinct from other forms of writing in and out of the classroom. Essays encourage reflection, exploration, and openness; they are a thoughtful stroll through a landscape of ideas, handed off like a baton to readers. The essay says, "Keep going." By examining selected New York Times guest essays, this paper will explore the implications of the name change and how the essay, as a genre, contrasts sharply with the reactive, rapid-fire nature of social media discourse. Drawing on thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Phillip Lopate, and Scott Russell Sanders, this paper considers how and why, as Ann Patchett explains, "Essays never die." Her trust in the enduring, dialogic nature of essays points to what the editors of the New York Times may have implicitly recognized: that the header Guest Essay invites contemplation and conversation in both the writers and the readers. Readers can frolic in a Guest Essay as they might in fiction, but the ideas, while voice-specific, are alive, listening, and awaiting the next writer.

Leiv Sem (Nord University)

The Relational Dimension of the Essay

Literature is, among many other things, a social event. It is the articulation and transmission of ideas from one mind to another. The writing and the reading of the essay is therefore also a social contract, and at the heart of the essay is the complex issue of the relational dimension. This relational dimension of the

essay is manifold: It encompasses a relationship between the writer and the text, between the reader and writer, between reader and text, and – perhaps more than in any other genre – the writer’s relationship, and commitment to, the process of writing itself. This relationality is one key factor that gives the essay a unique potential for reaching insights and excavating ideas hidden in the ores of the mind and language, and a matchless basis for communicating and making an impact on another mind. In a sense, then, the essay is the most literary of genres, quintessentially embodying and carrying literature as expression of ideas, and as a genuinely human activity. As such, the stakes are particularly high in the genre of the essay. At the same time, this relational dimension makes the essay more relevant than ever before.

The proposed paper will discuss the relational dimension of the essay. To focus the discussion, the proposed paper will take as its vantage point a strategically chosen set of examples of essays centered on walking in physical landscapes. These accounts of encounters with the manifest world illuminate the potential of the writer and the text to develop relationships with a place, with temporality and a literary tradition.

Jenny Spinner (Saint Joseph’s University)

The Essay in a Shared Fragmented Literary Culture

A sixteenth-century reader who encountered Aristotle, Plato, Seneca or Lucretius in one of Montaigne’s or Bacon’s essays would not have needed a footnote or a Latin dictionary. Well into the mid-twentieth century, essayists wove into their work allusions and common references that were part of a shared literary culture that shaped both public and personal discourse. In some ways, the fabric of the essay was defined by those weavings, and it depended upon readers’ understanding of them. (Readers and writers who did not have access to a classical education were left out.) Today, however, American essayists write in a fragmented literary and cultural landscape where few texts, if any, are truly common ground. Phillip Lopate, in a 1984 essay, “The Essay Lives - In Disguise,” bemoans this loss of “high culture,” even as he acknowledges that it “exclud[ed] a great deal of humanity.” Without these old threads in essays, he finds that “personal discourse has become more barren.” He writes, “Not only is popular culture not strong enough to cleanse the air of narcissism, but the writer’s invocation of its latest bandwagon successes, be it ‘Indiana Jones’ or Cabbage Patch dolls, comes off as a pandering to the audience.” This paper challenges that criticism. By analyzing recent essays in *The Best American*

Essays series, it seeks to understand how a more inclusive range of essayists has successfully adapted the genre in that fragmented literary landscape. Ultimately, it questions whether a shared literary culture—once a defining trait of the essay—is truly necessary for meaningful personal discourse.

Eleonora Tarabella (University of Rome “Tor Vergata”)

‘An Ecstasy of Joy’: Interconnectedness Beyond the Human in Virginia Woolf’s *Butterflies and Moths: Insects in September*

Butterflies and Moths: Insects in September embodies the pivotal function Woolf considers essential in an essay: “it should give pleasure”. Hybridizing autobiography, short story and entomological study, Woolf’s text explores “an ecstasy of joy” reached beyond the human, and experienced by insects living their lives to the fullest. Overcoming the limits of anthropocentric perspectives, the human narrator feels holistically interconnected with a nonhuman world that seems to go on after the Anthropocene and possible human extinction, as Peter Adkins would suggest. From an ecofeminist point of view, *Butterflies and Moths* breaks the dualism of subject/object that limits our worldview in Western culture, and reminds us that nonhuman beings exist whether we notice them or not. Challenging conventions, the author focuses on small creatures: they possess ontological value that dominant discourses have always tried to suppress. As an essay can be “about God and Spinoza, or about turtles and Cheapside”, Woolf’s text leads the reader “outside the garden”, towards memories of the Stephen children going out bug hunting. But, “ironically enough, it is when one’s hunting days are over that the greatest chances come our way”. As Christina Alt underlines, nonhuman life goes beyond taxonomic classifications and post-Victorian children’s hobbies. A moth can in fact appear on the wall of your own house when you least expect it. The essay, then, elicits in readers a sense of praise and wonder towards what exceeds the human world. If non-humans are able to occupy domestic places, Woolf’s text suggests political practices based on a multiplicity of relationships connecting all living beings, and reminds us that it is useless, for humans, to struggle for an illusory position of prominence over the other-than-human world; no matter how big the butterfly net is, or how much treacle has been spread on trunks.

Christl Verduyn (Mount Allison University)

Beyond Borders: Canadian Women Writers as Essayists

In *Her Own Thinker: Canadian Women Writers as Essayists* (2023), I explored the thinking, ideas, and perspectives that Canadian women writers of fiction have chosen to express with the essay genre rather than in fiction form.

I argued that as essayists Canadian women novelists and poets have made significant contributions to intellectual, cultural, social, political, and ethical thinking in Canada and beyond. Perceptive and prescient observers of the world, they have addressed global and national issues and concerns, many of which only decades later drew sustained public attention, from environmental crisis and human rights to colonial histories and racism. In the hands of Canadian women writers, moreover, the essay genre has taken uniquely creative multifaceted forms of writing, including and beyond those identified in the Conference Call for Papers, from the planetary essay to the essay shaping public discourse, addressing the digital and Age of AI, or teaching critical thinking.

Despite the innovative nature and substantive breadth and depth of Canadian women writers' essay writing, however, this substantial body of writing has not received the critical attention it warrants. Continuing the project to address this oversight, I propose a paper about essay collections that have appeared since *Her Own Thinker*.

With the 20-minute paper time frame in mind, following a brief description of the new collections, I will focus on one in particular - poet Jan Zwicky's *Once upon a Time in the West: Essays on the Politics of Thought and Imagination* (2023), a powerful example of the planetary essay and its pedagogical potential. In essays that take critical thinking about ecological ethics and interconnectedness beyond the human to new heights and realms of theory and practice, Zwicky challenges dominant Western thinking and its blindnesses and consequences.

Janja Vollmaier Lubej (University of Ljubljana)

Contemporary Slovenian Female Essayists: The Essay as a Space for Critical Thinking

This paper presents selected essays by contemporary Slovenian female essayists from 1993 to the present. It focuses on the role of the essay in public discourse and on the essay as a space for critical thinking - both of which are especially important in today's reality of half-truths. A thematic and stylistic

analysis of the selected texts will be presented and discussed.

This is followed by an overview of the work of selected authors - Silvija Borovnik, Renata Salecl, Helena Koder, Katja Perat, Manca G. Renko, and others - which highlights their essayistic thinking as well as thematic and stylistic similarities and differences. These authors, through their diverse topics (literature, society, translation, intercultural contacts, pop culture, myths, etc.), raise many important issues that deserve attention in everyday discourse.

The aim of this paper is to present the essays of contemporary Slovenian female authors and their reflections on contemporary society, which they often view with a critical lens. Their insights into literature, poetry, the Slovenian language, culture in general, and society - supported by expert arguments and personal experience - engage with both established ideas and fresh perspectives. I would like to present their essayistic thought, which is articulate and interpretative, within the broader context of the significance of the essay in Slovenian literature and culture.

Nicole Wallack (Columbia University)

Essayism in a Time of Unraveling: Radical Humility and Planetary Entanglement

If the planetary turn asks us to think beyond the abstractions of globalization, it also requires us to confront what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak names our "collective responsibility to an unknowable otherness" (Spivak 73). In the face of climate precarity, extractive epistemologies, and ongoing colonial violence, discourses of mastery—whether scientific, political, or rhetorical—do not account for the ethical complexity of interdependence. This paper argues that essayism offers a planetary method for dwelling inside crisis, not as solution or stance but as radically humble inquiry.

Drawing on John Duffy's account of radical humility as a rhetorical virtue grounded in the ethics of relation and accountability (236), I argue that essays resist the illusion of detached authority. Like Karen Barad's concept of entanglement, essayism recognizes that "individuals do not pre-exist their interactions" (ix); knowing emerges through relation. Essayists such as Brian Doyle and Robin Wall Kimmerer write from ecological entanglement rather than about it, treating attention as an ethical act. Cathy Park Hong and Rebecca Solnit confront racial and political injustice not through totalizing claims but through structurally and rhetorically situated reflection. In each case, essayism enacts a relational ethic that makes visible the conditions of thought itself.

Such writing is also inherently pedagogical: essays practicing radical humility do not simply communicate ideas but invite readers into disciplined habits of reflection, testing, and ethical response. Essays model methods for how to think with others, human and not, rather than over them. Recent work in mobilities studies helps illuminate how these writers' essayism arises from movement through relational networks. As Horner et al. argue, mobility is not exceptional but "the norm" of meaning-making (6); essayism is similarly mobile, crossing borders of genre, scale, and epistemic frame while remaining accountable to context. Returning to Montaigne and Bacon, I trace a history of principled uncertainty that culminates in a contemporary planetary essayism—one that acknowledges complicity, negotiates incomplete knowledge, and practices ethical courage. In a time of planetary crisis, radical humility does not imply retreat but responsibility. Essayism offers readers not only arguments but methods for practicing an ethic of entanglement on an imperiled planet.

Aija Laura Zivitere (Independent Scholar)

How the Essay Film Thinks the Political: On Ai Weiwei's Human Flow Films and the Discourses of Planetary

Laura Rascaroli mentions in her monograph *How the Essay Film Thinks* (2017) that the essay film has distinctive political concerns and that there are political essay films; however, she does not elaborate how the essay film thinks politically or what the features of political essay films are. Her book also seems to continue the flawed but widespread practice in film studies that uses the word 'political' as a synonym for the word 'ideological', that translates and understands the Adornoian *Ideologiekritik* as 'the critique of ideology'. Building on David Bromwich (2020) observations on political essays written in English over the last three centuries and on his finding 'the responsibilities of the citizen' and the difficulty of thinking among seven issues that 'have been discussed most searchingly', this paper puts at the centre of attention 'the practical connection with life that can foster thinking.' Echoing Bromwich's question this paper asks: What, then, is a political essay film? and How the essay film thinks the political?, given that an 'absorbing concern' of several of the political essay writers was 'the difficulty of thinking.'

This paper makes a clear distinction between notions of the political and the ideological, and it uses Michael Freeden's research on thinking politically and thinking about politics (2013) and Leor Zmigrod's research on thinking ideologically (2022, 2024). The issues of thinking politically, the political and the ideo-

logical, political ideologies, and art and politics are paramount when exploring art and films by Ai Weiwei in general and his three human flow films — *Human Flow* (2017), *The Rest* (2019), and *Rohingya* (2021) — in particular. While Ai envisages these films as stories from the global refugee crisis, this paper looks 'beyond a global horizon' into the figure of meridian and discourses of planetary (Auer 2013, 2021)



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