



Jennifer Dean

Sentiment, Not Sentimentality

I have a pet question I like to ask other female essayists. Well, it's really a question I want to ask every woman who writes essays, as opposed to personal essays, as opposed to memoirs, but I only got to ask it once in a phone interview with Elena Passarello. I saved the question for last because I felt sure she'd been asked it before, or had at least heard it before in a writer's workshop, and it went a little something like this:

Me: *In your collection of essays, Let Me Clear My Throat, you largely steer away from the personal "I," and, instead, focus your essaying and expansion of ideas through the 'eye' of observation. Do you ever get asked —by editors, workshop commenters, interviewers, etc —why there isn't more 'I', more of Elena, on the page and in the book? Did people in workshops ever suggest or outright demand that you insert yourself more in your essays?*

Elena had two answers. One for public scenarios, more craft centered, balanced, logical, and measured, and one that expressed pretty much the same sentiment, except with more deftly deployed swearing and a level of genuine feeling that accelerated the pace of her speech and dropped the pitch a tiny bit, her tone gravely with notes of outrage and frustration. She began her answer with an emphatic "Fuck *that*."

My question was certainly something of a baited trap. I already suspected, after years of studying poetry and nonfiction and in the off-hand, half-stifled frustration in comments of female colleagues and friends over beers, that there was something else *going on* in workshops or discussions of the writing of creative nonfiction, in the discussion of craft, of writing; there was a sense of something in the room,

invisible but palpable, like Virginia Woolf's *Angel in the House*, squatting on our backs. It's easier to dismiss suspicions like that as paranoia, as something located in the chemistry of the particular group, your workshop peers, the class dynamic, the audience of a Q&A session. Hence, my pet question to Elena Passarello.

The 'it' is the double bind of conflicting messages, specifically to women, who write nonfiction. It could be best summarized by a piece of advice, a proclamation of sorts, from Kristen Iverson who has often been quoted as saying that nonfiction should have "heart" and should aim for "sentiment but not sentimentality," and, in general, there's nothing wrong with that advice, per se. However, the proclamation that writing must have sentiment but refrain from sentimentality is one I find particularly frustrating, as it seems to be one that — on the face of it — is practical advice, yet these attempts to avoid the possibility of sentiment often lead to incredible, insane stunts of writing for nearly all authors, and may prove to create obstacles of a (nearly) too laborious type for many women writers. As a woman essayist, this is a trap, one of those wonderful double standards where we are damned if we do, and damned if we don't. It is a regrettable element of our culture of toxic masculinity that men are, in general, denied a full range of emotional expression to such an extent that even somewhat half-assed, stunted attempts at honest sentiment are met with effusive praise, like a dog that has pulled off a particularly challenging trick. Men who write about their feelings are brave for trying. Women who do the same are indulgent and lazy writers. In much the same way that white mediocrity hobbles the development of white artists while placing an extreme burden on artists of color, male (and white) mediocrity in literature is present here too.

Of course, some might say this is just the corner we are boxed into by the label of 'nonfiction,' the great danger of writing about the self, about human experience, in a bald-faced way. And this is certainly true enough, yet for a woman writing, there are any number of times and ways outside of writing that women are either silenced or have had their ideas and arguments dismissed because they are considered "too emotional." It puts an additional burden on a woman writer, in the act of writing and also in hearing

critiques of her writing. The genre of nonfiction is often marred by, sometimes justified by, claims of personal myopia, navel gazing, and an exceptional degree of narcissism, even for writers.

Because of the “I,” the undeniable conflation (in the minds of readers) of self-on-the-page and self in the world that forces creative nonfiction writers, as a group, to pursue broader means of achieving sentiment while avoiding sentimentality. We are sometimes denied the purity of straightforward scenes, characters, and plot because our own words and perspective are not quite reliable enough to carry the day for many readers. On the face of it, the desire, the goal, to overcome sentimentality, the unearned evocation of reader emotion, and our own basic subjectivity—however ultimately doomed the enterprise may be—in favor of something closer to honesty, to clarity and fairness of the kind that lends us the respect of the reader seems a pretty noble aspiration of craft. Some times, however, this feels like a particularly awful injustice.

This anxiety about too much sentiment, so much anxiety that we go to great lengths to avoid even the scent of it in our work is taxing, but it certainly does mean we will be pushed to make on a conscious level a *lot* of craft-heavy choices in our writing and with greater frequency. But even succeeding on the craft level at avoiding sentimentality does not free women from the burden of answering questions in interviews about subject matter as is the case for Elena Passarello, or the almost inevitable demand from workshop peers and editors for *revisions*, for *more* of the *personal*.

Cry of the Blind: “Where Are the Women-Essayists Working Today?”

I have frequently heard male peers—often in a tone of genuine distress over a lack of diversity in nonfiction—that many women tend to write in the same style, with a focus on memoir and the subjective ‘I,’ that they lack craft or some other objection. When presented with examples such as Elena Passarello, Lia Purpura, Leslie Jamison, Kerry Howley, and others like Eula Biss, Rebecca Solnit, Jennifer Percy, Roxane Gay, and Claudia Rankine these same people claim those women are outliers.

Yet they are not outliers in any sense of the term, but rather are but a few examples of women who have learned to navigate the obstacles of essaying while female through a combination of skill, hard work, and sheer nerve. The internal pressures to hone craft, to avoid the trap and label of sentimentality while striving to maintain ‘heart’ (such a curiously subjective and vague gauge for measuring craft or skill), are enough to slow down anyone’s pace and productivity, imagine that pressure doubled on the inside and then confirmed and codified by community wide behaviors. It is rare to find much writing of the style of Howley, Purpura, Slater, or Percy because there remains a pervasive kind of sexism in writing communities that either ignores the craft and idea work of women writers, minimizes their efforts as merely a part of the burden of writing well, or demands they edit it out or water down their craft choices for the sake of a more palatable finished product for readers; or when an author achieves some combination of the above, as is the case of Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist* and Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, the work as a whole is marked as ‘political’ or as ‘cultural critique’, somewhat coded terms that suggest the author’s work is not literary enough.

The invisible privilege of male whiteness and the double bind it creates for women and people of color appears in the language of workshops, discussions of aesthetic choices and subject matter. We are advised to seek after a universal appeal to our readers through the specific, the close details of our particular experiences. Yet, for a woman, or a person of color, there is danger in taking this advice too far; there is danger even in pushing back in writing or in critique.

In a workshop discussion of a peer’s essay on her attempts to control the narrative of her past trauma through exerting extreme control over her body through a variety of eating disorders, she was praised for her bravery in sharing her experience, but when the suggestion was raised that she move beyond the personal implications of her reflections and carry that thought one step further into a critique of culture the suggestion was deemed one that would make the essay “too political.” This was understood as code for ‘bad’, or at least for an essay that misses the mark of ‘the universal of human experience’ and

falls short of an ill-defined standard for literary nonfiction. My colleague was allowed to write about herself, so long as she did not go so far as connecting her experience — the personal — more overtly to anything of wider significance. That would be going too far. It would be too much.

In her essay, “Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain,” Leslie Jamison examines the aesthetic turns of writing while female about personal experiences of pain, the expression of sentiment, observing at length that female expressions of pain have been, in some ways, fetishized. “We may have turned the wounded woman into a kind of goddess, romanticized her illness and idealized her suffering, but” Jamison points out, “that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.” Jamison follows this observation with a question “how do we talk about these wounds without glamorizing them?” One answer is to cease with the false distinction of “literary” nonfiction versus “political,” stop praising writing that explores the personal without any connection to the wider world in which the personal takes place and to begin acknowledging the aesthetic choice to privilege apolitical writing that avoids such messy work for what it is: a privilege of white, male identity or an act of erasure.

Denying a writer even the option of contextualizing her personal experience as part of a larger system because it might remove her writing from the realm of “literary art” and into cultural critique, of criticism, of “the political” —as though the two are somehow and forever mutually exclusive —is a false distinction and an act of silencing. The very concept of “high” literature as apolitical, universal, and sheared of all the sullyng effects of cultural context is a product of one group of white, male, affluent writers trying desperately to distinguish themselves from the other white, male, somewhat affluent writers in an era when women were still busy trying to even be allowed to speak and write, and people of color were still fighting to be considered *people*.

The incredibly beautiful, deep and powerful writing of writers like Lia Purpura, Lauren Slater, Elena Passarello, and Leslie Jamison work to navigate or unravel this intense sense of a double-bind. Each of these women find ways —through craft choices and research —to smuggle sentiment into their writing

without running aground on the shoals of sentimentality. But how much work is too much? How much more work are women essayists expected to do, craft wise, in order to “earn” sentiment in our writing? And, having done that work, will it be acknowledged for what it is?

Jamison’s Earned Sentiment

Earned Sentiment, a Recipe: one part research, two parts thinking on the page, two parts restraint and one part emotion (if you don’t have any first hand accounts, second hand is fine), divided by section breaks, the cooling distance of time, sieved through the matrix of critical analysis and reader awareness. In her essay collection, *The Empathy Exams*, Leslie Jamison’s “In Defense of Saccharin(e),” is a twenty page piece that includes extensive research in archives, visits to the Sweet N’ Low factory, and many quotes and reflections on the nature of sentiment verses sentimentality in literature from everyone from Oscar Wilde to philosopher Robert Solomon, *in addition to* reflections on her own craving for sweetness in everything from red wine to her relationship with a Very Serious Poet. At the core of her essay lies her own guilt over her craving for sweetness, for sentiment and feeling, and her anxiety over her art. Jamison does a lot of work to “earn” the sentiment she expresses in the essay. It is a masterwork of craft, in so far as tackling the subject of sentiment in writing, especially for a woman. This is master-class essay collection that excels on the level of form-play, on the page craft, research, meaningful and deep reflection, and even sentence-level attention throughout, and it is, to borrow a concept from Claire Vayne Watkins’ and her Tinhouse published essay “On Pandering,” written for men. Or, at least, written with an eye toward appealing to an audience all too long and deeply trained in appreciating an almost exclusively male perspective-driven aesthetic.

All the elements of research, the inclusion of other writers and thinkers, her descriptions of scenes from her past, balanced by her reflection and honest self-assessment offer readers a deeply felt look at sentiment without ever once straying into an excess of sentimentality. Jamison consults and quotes

numerous authors, writers, and thinkers in her essay: Oscar Wilde (113), Epictetus (114), James Wood (114), Axel Rose (114), Slash (114), Mark Jefferson (114), Michael Tanner (115), John Irving (115), Robert Solomon (115), Wallace Stevens (116), Donald Barthelme (121), and Kate Kinker (124), Buffy Sainte-Marie (127), Carly Simon's famous song, Warren Beatty's response (129), and even a New Yorker piece (121). Was that an accident or a matter of (sub)conscious design? Did she pick these quotes purely because of what they had to say or also partly because it was men that were saying it; thereby doubling down on the authority these quotes proffered on her to speak: the proof of heavy research and the thoughts and sentiments of men. The words of these writers, philosophers, musicians and artists work to speak *for* Jamison, and offer counter points that leave her free to delve into her own experiences with a desire for intense sweetness, something that readers quickly realize is a metaphor for sentimentality in language, in art, as Jamison tells us right from the beginning:

Saccharine is our sweetest word for fear: the fear of too much sentiment, too much taste.
When we hear *saccharin*, we think of cancer: too many cells congealing in the body.
When we hear *saccharine*, we think of language that has shamed us, netted our hearts in trite articulations: words repeated too many times for cheap effect, recycled ad nauseam.
Ad nauseam: we are glugged with sweet to the point of sickness. (111)

Jamison achieves an essay that captures the struggle of a desire for sentiment and a reflection on the fear of too much sentiment, of veering into sentimentality without falling into an excess of sentimentality, or worse, sliding into a pitch of argument that might come across as "a lady protesting too much," or a shrill defense of the indefensible. It's a masterwork of craft, even on the level of the section break, where she chooses to end sections and how she decides to begin others.

For example, in one of the rare sections of personal reflection on her own taste for sweet drinks and her deep-seated insecurity about the blurry tipping point into sentimentality, Jamison ends the section like this:

I remember demanding a Hurricane and feeling ashamed for wanting one. I remember talking about drinks rather than serial killers. I remember secretly dismissing phrases like “total evil” and “grand sweep of human events” and “total emotion,” because I felt they were too large and too vague to do much good. But I was also afraid of those phrases. I remember that too. (118)

And that’s it. That’s where she stops. The section that follows begins like this: “in a reconstructed laboratory somewhere in downtown Baltimore, two mannequins are having an argument.” (118-119) It is jarring for a reader, to be jerked from the reverie of Jamison’s reflection into a scene that, at first, makes no sense and happens in an entirely different location. But this is yet another example of how Jamison uses even the construction and arrangement of sections and scenes to avoid an excess of sentiment. Any more on the topic of her personal desires, fears, and insecurities would have been “too much” as one of my students put it during a discussion of Jamison’s essay.

The student who made this observation was older, nearly my own age, and very astute concerning craft and writing. The student, I should also mention, was a man, and for a half second after he uttered his pronouncement that anything more along the lines of personal sentiment from Jamison “would have been too much” I was lost for a moment in my own mind, wondering at the sense of gut-level anxiety and hurt the phrase conjured. I tried and failed to count how many times I had heard the critique of “too much” emotion, too much need, too much in general, aimed at me, as a woman, by men. How many times had I heard it said of other women? How many times I heard it said, with a tone of regret, by women I know? I saw my answer form as an image of sand on the beach, a multitude, too many grains to count.

Not “too much;” a dubious, but somehow necessary, stamp of approval.

What else are we to call a book that struggles so visibly to speak of emotion and pain without sounding “emotional”? If I were to try and pitch this book to my friend Dale, who orders beer by the pitcher, listens devoutly to death metal, works days in a machine shop and takes classes at night at our

University, and who reads voraciously and widely, I would begin by telling him that it's "about emotions, but it's not like that; not like chick lit or anything. She does investigative journalism and writes about working as a patient actor, interviews a bunch of people with Morgellon's Disease —this weird syndrome where people are convinced that they have stuff under their skin and pick at it all the time— and she goes on trips to Mexico, she talks about the Narco Wars, and getting punched in the face in Nicaragua, and this crazy Ultramarathon called the Barkley Marathons, and she interviews a guy in prison, and there's even an essay about *The Lost Boys*. You know, that documentary about the three metal kids in that Mississippi hick town who got railroaded for the murder of three little boys?"

I would leave out mentioning "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," her final essay because it is something the reader is meant to discover on their own. As one of my male students noted, "it's like the whole book is leading up to that" and as another frankly confessed, "if she'd *begun* the book with that essay, I don't think I would have read the rest, or cared as much about what she said [in "Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain.]"

In some ways, every element of the collection —from the intensive research, travel, interviews, form and content, to the order of the essays, and to say nothing of the manuscript editing that no one but editors see—everything is slanted toward seeking after an answer to the question "how do we talk about [women's] wounds without glamourizing them? Without corroborating an old mythos that turns female trauma into celestial constellations worthy of worship... and rubbernecks to peer at every lady breakdown?" (187)

In his essay "Crown and Shoulder" Steven Church writes of his grief over the death of his brother, and the unique way that pain has shaped his view of the world, and his writing, telling us

I've shouldered the load for so many years, I forget it's there sometimes. My brother died on the shoulder of an Indiana street, crushed his crown against a tree; and I should have known that all of this essaying would tumble back down to this root, to his death,

and that no matter how many digressive gymnastic leaps I made, how many fancy roadside attractions I built for you, no matter how cans of SPAM or other distractions I dropped before you like shiny baubles in the margins of this essay, I can't escape the inevitable pull of gravity from crown to shoulder.

For Church, it is the grief over the death of his brother, and for Jamison, the secret engine driving her and us throughout *The Empathy Exams*, the attempt to answer her question, to speak of the particular pain of her self, of woman, without veering into the muddy verge of sentimentality, or accusations of an excess of emotion. All the rest, the medical acting, the Morgellon's Disease, the trips to Mexico, to a West Virginia prison, are so many baubles along the path of her journey, seeking both answers *and* legitimizing her quest through rigorous and visible strain on the page. The collection, taken as a whole, is a writer flexing finely sculpted musculature acquired through hard work, and they come from a load she's shouldered for long enough to develop the muscles required to carry it well.

And yet, even Leslie Jamison's intense work and unusual level of success in achieving a much coveted and difficult accomplishment of rating high and staying present on The New York Times bestseller list for many weeks still didn't quite seem enough exclude her from dog-whistle sexism and near automatic second-billing status when she agreed to give a reading and talk at an event hosted by my Master of Fine Arts Program.

Kerry Howley & Lauren Slater: Necessity & Reader Expectations; or

The Mother and the Mother F#%\$ of Invention

The existence of barriers, whether real or artificially imposed, isn't always such a terrible thing, and in fact often leads to exceptionally innovating writing, even to the point of blurring genre boundaries and introducing new tools and techniques to the craft of creative nonfiction and essaying. The problem is never that the writer had boundaries. The problem is that many of those boundaries exists for large

swathes of writers and simultaneously don't exist for others. The problem is that those boundaries and barriers remain largely invisible or unacknowledged as part of the achievement.

A great example of both the double bind and stunning achievement in genre-bending essaying, and journalism is Kerry Howley's nonfiction novel *Thrown*. Kerry Howley deploys a fictional narrator, Kit, to help craft the tale of several American Mixed Martial Arts fighters' careers over several years into an essayistic exploration of aggression and our craving for violence as spectacle, the callousness with which we use others for our own ends. *Thrown* is a work of journalistic nonfiction, but its craft essays—in the sense of tying, exploring—the depths of a concept through craft choice and reader awareness. Her fictional narrator is at turns myopic, narcissistic, psychopathic and appallingly Machiavellian, but for Howley's book to work as something more than straight forward journalism, the fictional Kit and her profoundly flawed motives are necessary. Yet Howley was asked by several large publishers to re-write the entire work without her fictional narrator—to include more of herself as a person and character—as a condition of publication; Howley's steadfast refusal to re-write, and Sarabande's willingness to take chances with experimental writing are the only reasons Howley's *Thrown* exists, as is, today. Howley's *Thrown* is as well-wrought as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, and as compelling as Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (published by Simon & Schuster), and I would argue her trouble in finding a publisher lay not in the content or the craft choices but in the wider culture of readership and how the difficulties of readers separating Howley-the-author from Kit-the-narrator were pushed back on to Howley as an artist rather than onto a team of publicity specialists and the wider reading public.

This is not to say that, to some extent, these are not problems that men face in writing, either, but it is to say that there might be a problem with the way we discuss sentiment and writing in nonfiction, in our choice of language and some serious and ruthless evaluation of our perspectives and aesthetic preferences. If there is ever going to be a parity between male and female writers, to say nothing of the

skewed statistics that favor heteronormative and white writers, then more has to be done to examine the way we talk to writers in classes or workshops, and what, as editors and critics, we expect from authors.

Lauren Slater's use of metaphor on a Jurassic scale to avoid the trap of sentimentality and as a means of essaying in her book *Lying, A Metaphorical Memoir*, is another means of avoiding sentimentality to essay, yet the critical response to *Lying* is often squeamish, at best. In *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* Slater gives us an excellent summary of her book *in* the book, describing it as one that "takes up residence in that murky gap between [fiction and nonfiction] and, by its stubborn self-position there, forces us to consider important things." (161) The "what happens" of the book are a series of events chronicling her alleged onset of epilepsy and the subsequent struggle to overcome her illness through therapy and extensive surgery along with her experiences as a young adult.

Without her extensive use of metaphor and a willingness to play with the reader's expectations, what Slater might have had in her manuscript would have been not much more than an illness narrative, and one approaching maudlin, which critics would gleefully pillory as they had her earlier works. Yet, with her use of metaphor, her choice to deliberately deploy fictions and half-truths, *Lying* becomes not a memoir but a book length essay about the highly subjective nature of personal experience, the slippery nature of facts, and the self-myth creation process of writing about yourself under the umbrella of nonfiction.

Slater doesn't cloak her sentimentality in *Lying*, instead she confronts the nature of personal experience and the process of synthesizing experience through elaborate conceits in conjunction with her personal experiences and the overall effect on a reader is that, rather than allow us to dwell on the revelation of the personal and what could be extremely sentimental (such as her relationship with the atrocious Christopher at Breadloaf) she uses both to create the "murky gap" for readers, insisting that they consider bigger questions of identity.

Lauren Slater does this as well and in some amusingly unsubtle and subtle ways. The entire first chapter, in its form and content, are another clue. It's pretty significant that the front end of *Lying, A Metaphorical Memoir*, in the section of a book usually reserved for establishing the core ideas and setting of a memoir or essay, is entirely made up of two words: "I exaggerate." In a more subtle move, her essay-length book's introduction by Professor Hayward Krieger, a very convincing little blurb, turns out to be a fantastic invention of Slater's, and not merely the quote but the person as well. Her fictional blurbist alerts us to some of the core ideas when Slater-as-Krieger writes, "using, or suggesting the use of metaphor as a valid vehicle to convey autobiographical truths—thus her insistence that this book is indeed an autobiographical memoir—is a new and unsettling idea." Slater-as-Krieger goes on to say "this book requires courage, along with an open and flexible mind." No kidding.

Slater describes herself as a slippery person, and so it would make sense that, in order to explain some figurative truths about how she has experienced several key events that shaped her life (including her fling with Christopher) she had to tell some literal lies. There's a real temptation to write that off as an elaborate kind of self-defense mechanism: two lies and a truth (or two), a way to say a thing that needs to be said, but in such a way that it cannot be entirely dismissed out of hand, but can neither be taken too wholly as factual. There are elements of this memoir that, if literally true, might cause Slater a great deal of trouble in her personal and professional life, however, if that were all she was intending to do she could have just written a straightforward memoir instead of a metaphorical memoir; this combination of conceits and deeply personal experiences work as point and counter point to create a kind of wobbly balance throughout the book, one meant to force a reader to engage with the ideas she presents, make them *look* at, *think* about depictions of self and sentiment, rather than simply lose themselves in the pathos (or schadenfreude) of someone else's personal struggle.

Much like Howley's fictional narrator, Slater's deliberately (and obviously) deployed lies are meant to force a reader to take the larger view of her work; to see nonfiction journalism as (also) a kind of essay

on the savagery of spectacle; to see the memoir as (also) an essay on identity and the impulse to myth-making.

Yet such work does not wholly save Slater from taint of memoir, of accusations of excess of sentiment or navel gazing. “Sickness demands compassion, but even so, one can be forgiven for wanting to throttle the narrator of Lauren Slater’s [*Lying, a Metaphorical Memoir*],” begins Rebecca Mead’s review in *The New York Times*. Cathryn Alpert’s review in the *San Francisco Gate* also skewers the genre: “Slater’s latest illness memoir (after “Welcome to My Country” and “Prozac Diary”), a genre that has been dismissed by some as solipsistic, cheap and easy. *Such criticism might be valid here were it not* for Slater’s astute ability to transform her illness into a narrative so compellingly and intelligently written that it becomes hard to dismiss it on any terms, least of all her own.”

The emphasis is mine though it almost seems insulting for my reader to point out the obvious: that, from the moment Slater deploys the “I” and engages with elements of her own personal history, she is pigeon-holed to memoir, and though Slater does a tremendous amount of work to use the genre of memoir and move her book into the space of the essay, critics refuse to wholly allow her that freedom of passage. She has committed the sin of essaying on the ‘self’, used the pronoun ‘I’ as a matter of subject, and cannot pass completely unscathed. The temptation to dismiss the critical response as a disdain for memoir is powerful, but it’s worth asking ourselves why it is that memoir is not deemed a suitable mode of essaying in the first place, or rather, why it isn’t seen as a suitable mode for essaying as a woman.

Lia Purpura & Elena Passarello: Swapping ‘I’s For Eyes

If the examples of essaying through the modes of journalism or memoir don’t seem compelling enough on their own, and the taint of the self in essaying is too perilous a venture, then what is left for a writer hoping to explore experience in writing? One answer involves what one might call an act of self-mutilation

on the page, the disembodiment of the ‘I’ into a pair of eyes the writer offers as windows for a reader, defusing the self into an amorphous presence behind each line of description.

Lia Purpura’s essay collection is an exercise in discovering empathy through curiosity and sustained, meditative observation. Each of the essays approaches the human condition through a series of questions that Purpura attempts to answer by looking intently at an object or person. Purpura essays on the questions of connection, seeking depth and wider associations in the minute details of every thing from the dime left in a body bag in a morgue to the filigreed patterns of frost on a window pane in winter. She succeeds in her mission through the combination of intense, graphic detail, almost intuitive connections, and an open and direct discussion with her imagined reader, asking them —again and again—to look, to “stay with [her].” (“Recurrences / Concurrences”, 26) Although it isn’t all that unusual to engage a reader through vivid and compelling description, and that a reader might be overwhelmed by subject matter she chooses to describe and with such detail, but what makes her own work so successful is that she also asks the reader to empathize with her as she looks and does so in such a direct way. She almost universally begins her essays with some kind of question, like the quote from David Ignatow in “Autopsy” asking, “To whom are we beautiful as we go?,” to the joke in “On Aesthetics,” “How does a guy with hooks for arms jerk off?”

On the level of the sentence, Purpura is striving for a kind of writing that defuses sentiment through description, a technique more often reserved for the abbreviated space of a poem. Her essays, though brief, are dense with imagery and well-worked turns of phrase that do the work of mining the mundane for the miraculous. It is no wonder that her essays are often tagged with the label of ‘lyrical’, a description that sometimes feels like a back-handed compliment to essayists who receive it. Calling what Purpura does in her collection ‘lyrical’ — a description most comfortably deployed in poetry and music— is ambiguous at best, because conflating the craft of poetry with the craft of essaying in such broad ways simultaneously dismisses the work of either genre and pushes the writing nearly into the realm of the

magical. There is nothing magical about Purpura's choices; what Purpura has done is remove herself as an individual and created instead a kind of narrator-voice that asks us to look with intention at her subject, much like the dulcet tones of documentary voice-over. As a craft move it is tricky in the space of nonfiction and when done well (as it is in *On Looking*) deserves praise, certainly, but it is also a move that requires a kind of sustained detachment on the part of the writer, a sort of psychological severing of the I from the eyes. It is no wonder, then, that what we often call 'lyrical' techniques don't often make it into the longer spaces of essay or memoir; that kind of work is exhausting.

And yet, more often than not, 'lyrical' is deployed as a kind of dubious critique. As though somehow the essayist has 'cheated' in using "poetic" techniques, but when 'sentiment, not sentimentality' is the order of battle, and when, as a women we are almost universally burdened with the suspicion of being "too emotional," (and this is a rhetorical question) what other roads lie open for achieving sentiment if not through a sustained act of self-denial on the page?

Of course, these are the more direct appeals to the reader, directly posing the questions she too seeks an answer for in her essays, but sometimes, the appeal to join her in her quest is less apparent, more implicit. In her second essay "On Aesthetics", Purpura begins with a statement/quote from Albert Einstein: "It is the theory which decides what we can observe." Purpura does not include the source material from whence come her quotes, and I think that's what allows for questions to form for the reader. Shorn of context, the quote stands on it's own as something else, a statement that begs a question: what is the theory? How does it work to compel us to decide what we will ignore, what we will examine?

It's the sort of implicit question that allows a reader to follow along as Purpura walks us through an otherwise bewildering array of imagery and experiences with more purpose than we might otherwise. Purpura tells us, again and again, through direct addresses, through anecdotal stories, that there is more at work in her writing, that —much like her, we are meant to be at times "dizzy" with disquieting facts. We are meant to look, and look intently, the way she herself looks at art "as if at a mirror, waiting for it to

reveal me more fully to myself.” (31) It’s a gentle kind of leading, ultimately, but it is still just the right balance of directly addressing the concerns of the reader without giving ground to them entirely, and provokes the kind of inquiry into empathy that Purpura is reaching for herself as she attempts, even in the first line of the first essay, to find the dead lovely as they go —“I shall begin with the chests of dead men, bound with ropes and diesel-slicked...their lashes white with river silt.” (1) And as Purpura describes them, they are lovely, even as we watch with Purpura as the dead man “turns to marble before us.” (3)

Of course, there are other ways to essay on humanity without involving the subjective, without dwelling in the ‘I’ as subject *and* pronoun. Elena Passarello’s *Let Me Clear My Throat* is an unabashed collection of essays that use the voice as a vehicle and theme for essaying on the primal and emotive spaces between the crafted lines and artifices we create for ourselves and others both on and off stage. In what, I’m sure, would come as a stunning surprise of descriptive choice to Passarello her craft —both on the micro and macro level—employs a great deal of “poetic” techniques, in that she uses the minute details of the specific to touch a chord in her readers, and even at the level of the line she is at all times employing the gritty and so necessary descriptive, the lithe and quick analogies and metaphors, often-times piling them one atop another to create momentum and a sense of rising action for a coming crescendo line (much like a “turn” in poetry) that has been for ages the bread and butter of poets and writers. Passarello is a master of the word, using each phrase and sentence to craft movement and emotion through each piece of her collection all while eschewing the heavy ‘I’ in favor of the ‘eye’, doing the work of separating the voice from the body, from the specific location of her self and making it available for the reader as a vehicle for exploration and emotive emphasis.

Over and over again, throughout her collection the voice and technique become the means of essaying on emotion and communication without ever falling into sentimental description or wallowing in the development of self on the page. From “Harpy”’s opening paragraph enumerating the history of her body as part “of the sound you hear when I sing, sigh, or say “hello”, or scream it” (63), to her

descriptions of Jennifer Holliday's "And I Am Telling You I Am Not Going," that "is the sound of a trained singer who knows that the only way to sing like a woman desperate enough to break any rule in the book is to break the major rules of singing, 'Tips' be damned." (151)

Much like Holliday's finale, the punch of Passarello's writing doesn't actually come from the obvious conclusive lines of that paragraph, but from the stupendous description that proceeds it, the descriptions of her singing, "stuffing six thousand cc's of air down into herself in an uncorked suck[...]" the sound of a hero resurfacing after three minutes under treacherous waters, or of a dagger entering the heart of a Jacobean avenger." (151) That is some ecstatic description and a string of analogies piled on in a way that lord knows someone in a workshop might ordinarily take issue with, except that here it is precisely what is required to illuminate the importance of the line about "breaking major rules of singing."

Not only does Passarello deploy the piling on of descriptive to sketch the outline of others' emotions in her book, she also conjures her own sentiments of isolation and snow-bound loneliness of Midwest winters through the music of birds, or rather their complete absence in winter time in "And Your Bird Can Sing." "Under the lead apron of this Iowa winter," she tells us, "I have no capacity to envision months of mornings that brought to my windows a dense and knotted mass of birdsong. A marathon winter is a trial of memory." (127)

It is a strategy that comes from a career in drama and an ear for sound, certainly, but it is one of those craft choices that could be called poetic, too. Passarello weaves dense and vivid description throughout her book as a means of sketching for her reader emotions like desperation, happiness, desire, and loneliness. It is one of the more subtle methods, but all the more powerful and technically skilled for that. Her work with sound and description succeed in doing the heavy-lifting of carrying the sentimental freight of her essays and eschews the I and favors the 'eye' and is spared a lazy conflation with memoir, yet, what saves Passarello in critiques of her work inevitably surfaces in interviews, in public spaces where

her identity as a woman writing becomes foregrounded, if her stump speech answer to my question is any indication.

What Passarello and Purpura do in their work is use many of the tools of poetry, of good writing on the level of the sentence, or, in the case of Slater, taking a conventional technique of writing and deploying it in a highly unconventional—but effective—way to essay. Yet, often when we speak of Purpura’s essays we call them lyrical, call them “poetic,” as though somehow a high level of attention to detail is purely the provenance of poetry, and using it in essaying is a kind of short cut, despite evidence to the contrary that the use of poetic techniques require a sustained attention to detail and phenomenal internalized craft-work on the part of the writer.

The technical term often becomes a gendered slur, as though hard, unmusical sentences and plodding, dense monographs are more (masculine and) appropriate vehicles for carrying the weight of ideas and emotions. There is an unspoken assumption in essaying that we are expected to sacrifice some measure of craft and emotional resonance in favor of “facts;” too much craft work becomes frivolous flourishes, the evidence of flimsy ideas. Our collective suspicion of beauty and emotion as a representation of gender has become so much a driving force that it bleeds over onto writers of both genders. Even a male writer, such as John D’Agata, attempting to essay using poetic techniques of sound, juxtaposition, and playing with form is looked on with heavy suspicion because he used such tools ‘too much;’ his use of what we loosely term as “poetic license” in service of the larger ideas is viewed as a kind of betrayal by large swathes of the nonfiction community.

Purpura does not quite escape, as her essays are often pegged as ‘lyrical,’ full stop.

Passarello’s work with sound and her craft choice to favor the ‘eye’ as opposed to the ‘I’ largely escapes such dog-whistle sexism in criticism of her work, but not the writer herself, if Passarello’s response to my interview question was any indication.

There's Too Much of "Too Much" Going On Here

So what then *is* enough to save women essayists—or any woman writer—from the double-bind of 'too much' and 'not enough'? It isn't our choices as writers—leave out the 'I' or build a veritable bulwark of research, pay attention to each word, every parsing turn of phrase, section break, and hone each and every piece, from the level of content and form and metaphor and description down to the placement of each comma—no, that kind of work is not on its own enough. Nor is going head-on at the problem, as do writers like Roxane Gay and Claudia Rankine, in their stunning collections *Bad Feminist* and *Citizen*, respectively.

Gay's collection of essays, *Bad Feminist*, combines a stunning level of seamless commentary and essaying on privilege, gender and race with lock-step craft work that bolster and amplify her ideas throughout each essay and across the book, yet seems to be relegated to undergraduate courses, if it is taught at all. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* is a masterwork of blended forms and genres, a powerful combination of techniques and content, yet it is commonly acknowledged that *Citizen* is written for white people, the distillation of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, a still earlier work that has yet to receive deep and renewed attention in the writing community of teachers and scholars despite the attention of *Citizen*.

In a graduate seminar I attended on creative nonfiction form and theory, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* was part of the reading list and discussion, but I and my normally attentive and active classmates found discussion stymied early, the typically smooth discussions of craft choices largely divorced from the significance of the content was not possible, and we were left with few routes of discussion open.

Confronted with nonfiction outside the niche of memoir, we no longer had a comfortable way to address the work in front of us because our entire education as writers of nonfiction is built on faulty notions of ourselves as writers in context. In that moment, during that class, what is both invisible but undeniably present was outlined in our silence, our uncertainty as to how to proceed because so much of

our education as creative nonfiction writers has been built upon the premise of a universal experience, a notion that is as false as it is political.

This somewhat unchallenged notion of ‘high art’ and purity of aesthetics in the classroom and workshop creates an unequal threshold for what qualifies as “good” writing and what a writer must do in order to achieve it; moreover, continuing to teach such a valuation system is to use a system that induces a double-bind for women and compounds that bind for writers of color; by default we indoctrinate readers, writers, editors, and students to marginalize, minimize and exclude any writer or work that in some way refuses to ‘play by the rules’ of what is an ultimately an invisible standard of white, male normativity. This is not news. Junot Diaz has been talking about this, literally, for years. (“MFA vs. POC”, *The New Yorker*)

If it needs to be said, then I’ll say it: this essay isn’t all about or only about how (white) women can get past the gatekeepers of taste and craft while essaying, it’s about the problem of an invisible and uneven set of obstacles; it is about sexist and racist standards that low-ball men and simultaneously create a higher threshold for women, and an even still higher one for women of color in the writing community, one that is pervasive and systemic and not limited only by gender. Nor is the problem one that is exclusive to creative nonfiction or the essay.

In his introduction to the 2008 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*, Salman Rushdie made the alarming observation that while reading the offerings for his time as guest editor of the series “there were perhaps too many tales of a small everyday world, a small town or a rural landscape, in which something terrible suddenly happens” and drew the reluctant conclusion that such a homogeny was the result of “what I had expected and perhaps feared: a wide-spread, humorless, bloodless competence.” (xiv-xv) Beyond this, Rushdie had little to say on the subject, but to suppose that these invisible and uncritically accepted standards of literary art play a part in the bloodless competence across the literary community is worth examining.

But the problem won't be, can't be, rectified simply through band-aid methods like quotas, nor will it be resolved by essays and think pieces by women and people of color on how to navigate those invisible standards. As Roxane Gay is quoted as saying at the Decatur Book Festival in 2015, "the work of fixing racism is not something we, as people of color, have to do. We aren't the problem. We're good." (Gay, as quoted in Mari)

The work of fixing these systemic inequalities has to happen through the same techniques essayists and all writers deploy in our writing: relentless, critical and rigorous self-examination, revision of thoughts, concepts and practices. We have to "kill our darlings," both on *and* off the page.

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