



Jennifer Lang

## When Worlds Collide: Writers Exploring Their Personal Narrative in Context

---

*We forget that we are history [. . .]. We are not used to associating our private lives with public events. Yet the histories of families cannot be separated from the histories of nations. To divide them is part of our denial.*  
—Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War*

Born and raised and schooled in America, I now live on the other side of the world, in Israel, a country many consider controversial. The reasons I live there are as complex as the country itself. I live here to stay married to a Frenchman I met outside the hills of Jerusalem over two decades ago and who refused to spend one more year in America. I live here because when our eldest son announced, in 2009, that he intended to enlist in the Israel Defense Forces after high school graduation in New York I couldn't imagine sending him off alone. In August 2011, we relocated from White Plains, where we had spent ten years raising our children, to Raanana, a peaceful city in the center of the country.

In most ways, my life is like that of my American peers: I work, fill my fridge, pay bills, carpool, make meals, do dishes. And yet, sometimes, it's nothing like theirs. When, during the summer of 2014, during the fifty-day Operation Protective Edge, my twenty-year-old firstborn was dressed in drab greens and a bullet proof vest with an Uzi over his shoulder while stationed at the border with Gaza for a week, I began to ask myself *how does where we live taint our everyday lives? How does the greater political or historical context in which we live affect our daily existence, even if we don't so choose, or aren't politically inclined?* I consider myself apolitical. I try not to read the news—to distance myself from ISIS as it inches its way closer to Israel's borders or from Iran's constant threat of nuclear arms—so that I can sleep at night and try to pretend I am safe and can keep my children safe.

But to a person in society, and especially a writer, that greater world, the political context surrounding us, creeps into my everyday existence, my daily conversations, and into the words on the page. Ayelet Tsabari writes in *The National Post*: “In Israel the political and personal are entwined. Politics seep into the domestic lives of people, even if they choose to ignore the news.” This intersection of the personal and the political seems inevitable as our ability to communicate instantaneously speeds up, as our access to information walks around with us in our hands, and as we travel abroad more now than ever before. We, as individuals with our own narratives, are bound to intersect with the socio-historical-political events around us in the greater world. And for those who write, we will confront the questions: *how do we tell our story in conjunction with or against the backdrop of the outside world, be it of peace agreements or civil war, drought or famine, kidnappings or killing fields?*

In *Why I Write*, George Orwell examines the four great motives for writing prose: egoism, art, history, and political purpose. In his words, historical impulse is the “desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity” (5). Political purpose is a “desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples’ idea of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude” (5). It was the Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 that tipped the scale for Orwell. From that time on, he knew his writing, whether directly or indirectly, would be against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism. Perhaps the last sentence of the essay resonates most deeply: “I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally” (10).

What Orwell calls historical impulse, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola refer to as *historical frame* in *Tell it Slant*: “To look at what it means to exist and be human—and who we are as species—we must look at history. That historical frame is one that may simply enrich your story... Leslie Brody sums her reasons

for writing her book *Red Star Sister*, a memoir of her anti-Vietnam War activism, when she simply said, “You have a responsibility to tell history because people forget history” (56).

Many writers have written essays about their personal narrative amidst and in relationship to the historical and political goings-on around them. Jo Ann Beard’s “The Fourth State of Matter” explores her connection with her colleagues who were tragically murdered in November 1991 by a post-graduate student in the Physics Department at the University of Iowa; Adrienne Rich’s “Split at the Root” delves into her upbringing as a Jewish feminist, daughter of interfaith parents, in the 1930’s and 40’s, south; and James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” looks at his roots as the eldest son of a bitter father, against the background of race riots in America and Negro soldiers shipping off to fight in World War Two.

None of these authors writes in a void. In *Tell it Slant*’s chapter called ‘Gathering the Threads of History,’ Miller and Paola write: “Unless you exist alone on an unchartered island—and are never discovered!—the elements of your life are reverberant with historical significance because you live in a communal group whose attitudes and choices are historically shaped” (59). The works of Beard, Rich, and Baldwin embody that awareness. They might have still written their stories regardless of the historical context, but then none of them would have resonated as deeply. As a result, each writer—Beard, Rich, and Baldwin—treats their multiple storylines differently, a frame of form to echo Paola and Miller’s historical frame. Beard braids the various themes equally as if weaving together threads of rope or strands of hair. Rich sets up her essay like an accordion, using her father, her mother, her marriage, and the political and historical contexts of the times as bellows moving toward and away from her divided self. Baldwin writes in large chunks and connects each one to the political situation and tension around him. When writing about the personal and the political, these writers’ various approaches show that any container or structure is possible.

---

In “The Fourth State of Matter,” Beard casts the widest net, even greater than the one Miller and Paola offer, encompassing both a historical frame as well as a scientific one. For Beard to write about what it means to be human—to love and to lose that love—she looks at who, what, when, where, why, and how her colleagues were killed, a story that she places within a larger context of the universe, using the title as a metaphor. By placing her small story within the greater expanse of the sun, moon, and stars, we understand how insignificant we are. Throughout the essay, Beard allots the central themes of her dying dog, her failing marriage, the unwelcome squirrels in her spare room, her colleagues in the physics department, and the day six of them were tragically murdered the same amount of space. The shooting is clearly the main event, the biggest loss of all, but the author controls the text and strikes a balance, not allowing it to dominate, as if to say the collie also counts as do the confused husband and messy marriage and the squirrels’ invasion. Their stories—and how they touch her—deserve to be told too. Life, death, and grief come at the reader continually throughout the text from all angles.

Eighteen years after the essay first appeared, Joshua Rothman, an editor at *The New Yorker* magazine, writes: “Beard doesn’t write about the shooting the way most reporters would. She tells the story in a ruminative, expansive, associative way, as if to show how all the threads of a person’s life can be drawn together and cut in a single moment.” That single moment serves as the trigger for Beard to write this essay, to ponder the loss of her marriage, imminent loss of her dog, and feeling of loss of control over her house. What seems initially as disjointed themes are, in fact, tightly woven, meticulously written themes, which, together, form a stunning whole.

In the third paragraph, Beard writes:

In the porch light the trees shiver, the squirrels turn over in their sleep. The Milky Way is a long smear on the sky, like something erased on a blackboard. Over the neighbor’s house, Mars flashes white, then red, then white again. Jupiter is hidden among the anonymous blinks and glitterings. It has a moon with sulfur-spewing volcanoes and a beautiful name:

---

Io. I learned it at work, from the group of men who surround me there. Space physicists, guys who spend days on end with their heads poked through the fabric of the sky, listening to the sounds of the universe. Guys whose own lives are ticking like alarm clocks getting ready to go off, although none of us are aware of it yet.

Beard's deft use of foreshadowing makes the reader realize every word, object, and image—squirrels, sky, blackboard, planets, physicists, sounds of the universe, ticking alarm clocks—will eventually connect to a disastrous chain of events and mean something more than the thing itself. As Sarah Wells points out in “The Memoir Inside the Essay Collection: Jo Ann Beard's *Boys of My Youth*,” Beard knows what's going to happen—that later in the essay, the author will erase the X's from her sketch on the chalkboard and after that, the shooter will erase the men, and still later, the author will erase the chalkboard after a colleague comes to visit Bob's office—but at the time of reading, the reader has no idea (Wells).

The family of squirrels offers another example of foreshadowing. Beard can't take the invaders making thumps and crashes and high-pitched squeals and invites her friend to help chase away the animals; pages and paragraphs later, as Beard tells of the shooting at the university, no one makes a sound. The seemingly comical scene of the ex-beauty queen coming to Beard's rescue and removing the rodents has nothing to do with the somber shooting scene, and yet it symbolizes and foreshadows the horrific and frantic events as Gang Lu chases down his victims one at a time later in the day.

Beard also employs the craft antidote to foreshadowing: hindsight. Both literary techniques are necessary to create the context, the historical frame. Using police records and factually accurate historical information gleaned from the news and other accounts of the shooting, she recounts how it happened and then inserts expressions like the smeared sky and ticking like alarm clocks ready to go off early on in the text to foreshadow those events. When Beard references the Milky Way, Jupiter, Mars and the moon, the reader does not yet understand Beard's extensive knowledge of the cosmos or the meaning of the ticking clock. We don't yet grasp that the bigger, larger, all-encompassing universe is, in fact, an integral part of

---

Beard's daily life surrounded by physicists who speak in far out, space-ese. Because of the shooting, her colleague Chris's explanation of the fourth state of matter takes on new meaning.

The editor, Rothman, writes: "I've returned to this essay many times over the years, and I'm always moved by the way it juxtaposes a tragedy on Earth with the larger world of the stars. Many of the people who died in the shooting were physicists; does the fact that they'd devoted their lives to understanding things much bigger than themselves—planets, stars, the universe—change the meaning of what happened, or help make sense of it?" By framing the story in light of the larger universe, using both foreshadowing and hindsight, the writer and, therefore, the reader, are reminded of one's own smallness and powerlessness.

Beard ends the essay the same way she began, returning to the dog's pain, to her pain, and to the stars and planets and sky. The writing slows down. It resembles the pace in the first section with longer, drawn out, descriptive, pensive prose. She writes: "In a few hours the world will resume itself, but for now we're in a pocket of silence. We're in the plasmopause, a place of equilibrium, where the forces of the Earth meet the forces of the sun. I imagine it as a place of silence, where the particles of dust stop spinning and hang motionless in deep space." It's as if we're standing in front of a painting and studying the writer's strokes. As the outer, greater world—of plasma and cosmos, politics and craziness—presses down on Beard. She hovers, still, motionless, vulnerable. Holding on. Hanging. Just like we, the reader, hold on and hang and listen.

Beard moves back and forth between two worlds: the concrete and quotidian—house, dogs, rodents, husband—and the cosmic. She drifts between here, now, life and out there, beyond, death. "Around my neck is the stone he bought me from Poland. I hold it out." She imagines she's talking to Chris again: "Like this? I ask." She imagines his response: "Exactly, he says." The same thing he had said nine pages earlier when he was alive and they were discussing her marital situation and her dog's illness at the office. After recounting the horrors at the university and returning home to the reality of her dying

dog, she floats away, to pretend she and Chris are together and he is a breathing, living being. Because when the outside world is too difficult to bear, sometimes the only way to find comfort is to escape in the mind.

---

Adrienne Rich's "Split at the Root" captures what many struggle with—the bifurcation of self, a separation of identities, wrapped up in and divided by place, family, roots, religion, politics, and other external forces. The essay, divided into fourteen sections, delves into many themes, including her identity, her father's identity, her mother's identity, her marriage, the politics of the south, the politics of racism, the politics of assimilation, and the politics of feminism. The *raison d'être* of the essay—her exploration of and musing on her split identity as part Jew, part gentile, Southern born, feminist, once-married, since divorced, now lesbian, mother—is allotted the most import. But each theme, regardless of how many paragraphs or pages it occupies, is grounded in Miller and Paola's historical frame—growing up with the backdrop of World War Two and the Holocaust, losing her father during the assassination of Martin Luther King, and divorcing during the rise of the women's liberation movement.

The tone Rich uses throughout the piece is distant and intellectualized, similar to the way she was raised. It's as if she is putting her identity, the weightiest theme, primarily her Jewish one, under a microscope and analyzing it, the way her physician father might have. Throughout the text, she quotes poets and writers and works of art. In the second section, she refers to her own poem, when she described herself as "Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew, Yankee nor Rebel" (640), which enables the reader to understand the weight of her lineage and her geographic dislocation. On the next page, she cites a poem by Karl Shapiro: "To hate the Negro and avoid the Jew / is the curriculum" (641) when referring to her father's student years. Then, while describing the Christian social world in which she grew up, she recalls her part as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, reiterating how her father made her rehearse her line emphatically "Therefore, Jew." Next, she cites Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, then James Baldwin, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Plaskow. Each reference to literature reveals her commitment to learning

---

and desire to explain things through text; each creates distance between her emotional self and the reader. By referencing such people and incorporating their arts and cultures and wisdoms, Rich's themes take on a new level of seriousness. She is not writing of her experience as if in a vacuum but weaving in with the voices of other significant thinkers, and in so doing, her own story is magnified in importance and dignity. Not only does her intellectualizing create distance but it also makes those sections heavier. It grounds them in a certain socio-economic setting, too; the writer is revealing her intellectual prowess. She is educated, knowledgeable, like her father.

Rich doesn't set out to write about her father's struggle with his identity as a Jew in a WASP southern world, as much as she intends to explore her own mixed breed identity, which requires first that she explore and thereby expose his in order to better understand hers and all her internal struggles. "Split at the Root" wends its way back and forth, introducing one theme, then another, like an accordion. At its core, where the essay continues to return after it strays for a paragraph or a page, is the author's split self. That issue of identity is her anchor from which she dives off into one theme and then another, from personal to political, in and out.

Rich's myriad identities as a white growing up in the racist south creep into her everyday life and behavior and outlook. Her identity is mirrored in the greater world around her, and vice versa. She defines herself in relation to them—the Negro, the Southerner, the Gentile.

Our language was more polite, distinguishing us from the 'rednecks,' or the lynch mob mentality. So charged with negative meaning was even the word 'Negro' that as children we were taught never to use it in front of Black people. We were taught that any mention of skin color in the presence of colored people was treacherous forbidden ground. In a parallel way, the word 'Jew' was not used by polite gentiles... 'Ideals' and 'manners' included not hurting someone's feelings by calling her or him a Negro or a Jew—naming the hated identity. (642)



---

The way Rich moves constantly from one theme to the next, often within the same paragraph, imitates the complexity of her life, the way she thinks. The historical context and politics—of the south, of her Jewish-gentile parentage, of the feminist movement, of the Second World War during her childhood and then world in upheaval and change during her late teens, of her father's denial of and self-abhorrence of his religious roots—serve as a constant reminder to the reader about all the forces and frames that forge our identities. And yet, it's impossible to compartmentalize our lives and selves at any given time. Our thoughts and actions are reflections of and reactions to the historical, cultural, socio-economic factors—and the opposing forces within each of them—in which we live. Miller and Paola write:

We're all at once son or daughter, lover, sister, brother, neighbor... We're also pieces of history. We have created digital culture, with all the implications of lives lived in virtual games, social network postings, and tweets. We are also the people who have lived through economic downturns and Mideast wars... To look at what it means to exist and be human—and who we are as a species—we must look at history. (56)

For Rich to figure out her identity, she has to muse on that of her parents. For her to understand her complex roots, she has to ponder theirs, where and when they grew up and the historical frame of the time. The layering of one theme on another, from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph, her inability to separate them clearly at times, reflects the complexity she grapples with in her self-discovery process. As Rich seeks to understand her multiple selves, she opens up even more possible identities and surely asks herself more, unexpected questions along the way. The deeper Rich digs, the more the compartments she has made for her identity collapse.

This essay appears as if it were written out of a place of reckoning, the author trying to grapple with her past and myriad, split identities as Jew, gentile, wife, mother, lesbian, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, middle-class, feminist, ex-Southerner. Rich is writing to confront and contend with her divided selves, to contemplate her roots, to wrestle with her identity issues, which, she has been struggling with for years:

---

“Why, I asked myself sometime last year, does this question of Jewish identity float so impalpably, so ungraspably, around me, a cloud I can’t quite see the outlines of, which feels to me without definition? And yet I’ve been on the track of this longer than I think” (640).

One of the most overtly politicized themes is the anti-Semitism coursing through Rich’s veins, thanks to her father’s anti-Semitism and perhaps his parents before him: “And there is of course the third thing: I have to face the sources and the flickering presence of my own ambivalence as a Jew; the daily, mundane anti-Semitism of my entire life” (640). Self-hating Jews exist, making it difficult to control or eradicate anti-Semitic slurs and acts completely. Almost every one of Rich’s identity issues make her stand out. As a Southern, lesbian, Jewish, feminist, she is in a minority among a Christian, white, male majority. All the forces in her historical frame challenge her identity, forcing her to look at herself in the mirror, examine them, and put them on the page within the given framework.

---

James Baldwin writes about race similar to the way Rich writes about religion. A core part of their identities stamps them as second class, outsiders, inferior, which means as soon as they write about themselves in attempt to understand their feelings of inferiority, they must look through a wide angle lens. What was happening in the greater world around them during their lives that affected and molded them? In “Notes of a Native Son,” first published in 1955 in *Harper’s Magazine* and later in Lopate’s anthology, Baldwin begins with the facts surrounding his father’s death and quickly introduces the historical backdrop at that time, providing an outline of everything that will follow. Throughout the essay’s three sections—the father’s roots; the last visit with his father; the father’s funeral—he weaves in the topic of racism, namely the mounting tension between blacks and whites, the anger of the blacks for risking their lives to serve in the war, the riots first in Detroit then in Harlem, and how it relates to each of the personal themes. Two major themes run through this essay: relations between father and son on one level and relations between blacks and whites on another. The writer’s focus on each theme functions like a moving camera, scanning

---

from familial to national tragedy, from the personal to the universal. They don't compete as much as they coexist. The politics of racism are enmeshed, setting the backdrop or the context against which Baldwin and his father's stories are told.

Baldwin considers his father's bitterness ugly and threatening, until he leaves home and lives in New Jersey, the year leading up to his father's death. He realizes no matter where he goes—bars, bowling alleys, diners, places to live—people refuse to see or serve him until, one day, he reaches a breaking point, when he explodes in rage, and almost gets himself killed had it not been for a friend who misdirects the police on his tail. "I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart" (594). In that moment, Baldwin understands that he has become more like his father than he ever wants to be, and the reader understands the weight of that burden he carries. Baldwin's essay cannot escape the historical frame. On July 29, 1943, the day his father died, his sister is born. Five days later, a few hours after his father's burial, race riots erupt in Harlem, a month after Detroit. On that same day, Baldwin attempts to celebrate his own birthday.

Baldwin's scenes help to show how the politics of the time affect his father's world view and view of himself as well as how he himself feels about being black in the 1940s. Both the longer scene about Baldwin's relationship with the white teacher from school and then later, the white friend and the incident with the white waitress as well as the scene snippets (the conversation on the way to church with his father and Baldwin's search for black clothes for the funeral) illustrate this:

The day of my father's funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday. As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent, and hatred were all around us. It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father's end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas. And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all

---

about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son. (587)

In the second section, the action moves slowly, like in a game of chess, which is very much a waiting game, when one player calculates his next move as well as his opponent's. Each player waiting. Just like in the text where the police in Harlem wait. His father waits on his deathbed. His mother is waiting to give birth. Baldwin, while visiting his father in hospital, is keenly aware of the players around him as he looks at his father for what will be his last time:

I had told my mother that I did not want to see him because I hated him. But this was not true. It was only that I *had* hated him and I wanted to hold on to this hatred. I did not want to look on him as a ruin: it was not a ruin I had hated. I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain. (597)

At the end of the second paragraph, he hints that it is in fact burying his father that makes him think and question and eventually write: "When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own" (587). But the historical events in the greater world at that time are also plausible triggers. Black soldiers were being sent to fight in the Second World War, but when they came home, their country's racist attitude toward them hadn't changed. Even in New Jersey, Baldwin encountered waitresses and storekeepers who "didn't serve Negroes." The tension around him was building daily, and an explosion seemed inevitable.

When Baldwin spends the summer of 1951 in a small Swiss village, he meets people who had never seen a black man before, an encounter that leads him to write "Stranger in the Village." This essay explores the relationship between race relations in America versus in Europe, where they are not bogged down by and wedded to a history of slavery. Baldwin understands the inseparability between history and identity when he writes, "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."

As Vivian Gornick writes in *The Situation and the Story*:

On the barricades for radical feminism, it had seemed natural to me from the minute I sat down at the typewriter to use myself—that is, to use my own response to a circumstance or an event—as a means of making some larger sense of things. At the time, of course, that was a shared instinct. Many other writers felt similarly compelled. The personal had become political, and the headlines metaphoric. We all felt implicated. We all felt that immediate experience signified. Wherever a writer looked, there was a narrative line to be drawn from the political tale being told on a march, at a party, during a chance encounter.

(136)

Like Gornick, Baldwin, Beard, and Rich use themselves to write about the historical-political-literary-socio-economic-scientific worlds around them. Their singular, personal stories become magnified and unforgettable against the greater, complex contexts in which they are written. They become Aristotle's whole, greater than the sum of its parts.

As Miller and Paola write, the elements of our lives are reverberant with historical significance because we live in a communal group whose attitudes and choices are historically shaped. The only way to avoid or escape this cause-and-effect is to become a hermit on a remote mountaintop or bury one's old identity and invent a new one. Or, as many essayists and memoirists repeatedly do, reflect on the relationship between identity and history, self and greater world, personal and universal, and write within that framework.

## Works Cited

- Baldwin, James. "Notes of a Native Son." *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. Phillip Lopate. New York: Anchor Books, 1995: 587-604. Print.
- Beard, Jo Ann. "The Fourth State of Matter." *The New Yorker*. June 24, 1996 issue. Web.
- Bradley, William. "On Personal Essays and Political Discourse." *The Missouri Review*. August 23, 2005. Web.
- Klaus, Carl H. *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2010. Print.
- Miller, Brenda and Suzanne Paola. *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*. New York: McGraw Hill. 2012. Print.
- Nguyen, B. Minh., and Porter Shreve. "Vivian Gornick from 'The Situation and the Story.'" *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: I & Eye*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005: 136-139. Print.
- Orwell, George. *Why I Write*. London: Penguin. 2004 (originally published in 1946). Print.
- Packer, George. "The Unconsoled: A writer's tragedy, and a nation's." *The New Yorker*. September 27, 2010. Web.
- Perl, Sondra, and Mimi Schwartz. *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin College Division, 2006. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Split at the Root." *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*. Phillip Lopate. New York: Anchor Books, 1995: 640-655. Print.
- Rothman, Joshua. "Letter from the Archive: Jo Ann Beard." *The New Yorker*. January 10, 2014. Web.
- Tsabari, Ayelet. "Ayelet Tsabari: How to lose friends and alienate readers." *The National Post*. March 21, 2013. Web.
- Wells, Sarah. "The Memoir Inside the Essay Collection: Jo Ann Beard's Boys of My Youth." *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 2.1. Fall 2015. Web.