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## A Legacy of Whiteness: Reading and Teaching Eula Biss's *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*

“Biss writes essays,” Robert Polito writes in the Judge’s Afterword of *Notes from No Man’s Land: American Essays*, “the way Plutarch and Montaigne did—or if this sounds too classic for her passionate cool, also think James Baldwin, Anne Carson, Jenny Boully, and Luc Sante” (Polito 230). To Polito’s list, I’d add Maggie Nelson, Hilton Als, Wayne Koestenbaum, and Sarah Manguso, but I agree most strongly with his inclusion of James Baldwin in his list, as *Notes from No Man’s Land* is strongly reminiscent of *Notes of a Native Son*. Like Baldwin, Biss puts the subject of race at the core of her writing, and, like Baldwin, ties it strongly to geography. Baldwin gave us field notes from Harlem and the streets of Paris; Biss similarly divides her book geographically, into five sections labeled “Before,” “New York,” “California,” “The Midwest,” and “After.” More than just geographic distinctions, however, is Baldwin’s relaxed but sharp execution in his writing and its replication in Biss’s prose. Furthermore, Biss’s writing, however confident, is filled with its own anxiety—Biss, like Baldwin, comes off as uneasy about the subject of race, finding that no matter how well traveled or studied, it’s a complicated and multifaceted subject to report on.

“It isn’t easy to accept a slaveholder and an Indian killer as a grandfather,” she writes in the essay “Relations,” “and it isn’t easy to accept the legacy of whiteness as an identity”:

It is an identity that carries the burden of history without fostering a true understanding of the painfulness and the costs of complicity. That’s why so many of us try to pretend that to be white is merely to be raceless. Perhaps it would be more productive for us to establish some collective understanding that we are all—white

and black—damaged, reduced, and morally undermined by increasingly subtle systems of racial oppression and racial privilege. Or perhaps it would be better if we simply refused to be white. But I don't know what that means, really. (32-33)

Even though it might be difficult for her to accept what Biss calls “the legacy of whiteness,” *Notes from No Man's Land* seems to be an attempt at that acceptance. Biss has essayed her way through this legacy much in the same way we could say Baldwin essayed through the legacy of blackness—both of which are, when deeply regarded, pockets of thick air that are easier to breathe in at some points than at others.

### Reading Notes

*Notes from No Man's Land* belongs to the same club as Hilton Als's *White Girls*, Wayne Koestenbaum's *Humiliation*, Maggie Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty*, and Leslie Jamison's *The Empathy Exams*, a grouping of casual but informative writing, and that uses the self as a lens on a subject, treating the writing itself kind of like photography. There's a sort of personalized regard here, a disciplined and diligent look at a subject in focus without any negligence of the background. Rather than just a self-portrait, there's a nuanced look, a way of using the self as a filter for the world. “Operating at the edges of autobiography and history,” Polito writes, “her ‘American Essays’ are conspicuous for the sweep of American life they insinuate, from ‘the War on Telephone Poles,’ Mamie and Kenneth Clark’s doll studies, and Don Henley to Buxton, Iowa, the word ‘nice,’ and NAFTA” (229). There's plenty to see here, but Polito's word *insinuate* puts *Notes from No Man's Land* in its particular position. If it really does operate “on the edges of autobiography and history,” then why not just call it autobiography, alongside diaries like Virginia Woolf's or Anne Frank's, or books like Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* and Kate Zambreno's *Heroines*, which also operate along these edges? *Notes from No Man's Land's* insistence toward an intimate but informed examination of its subjects fits neatly within

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autobiography, but suggests classifying it in a way that's wholly new, because it succeeds at multiple things at once: the personal essay, reportage, and cultural criticism. The remaining question is whether an essay collection can be all three things simultaneously, or if we need another term—another subgenre of nonfiction—in order to comfortably talk about a book that does so much.

In contrast with a writer like Susan Sontag, well-known for her “impersonal” writing, or with a writer like Phillip Lopate, who often operates at the other end of the nonfiction spectrum, Biss seats herself in the middle, reminding readers at each turn that we aren't drawn into the book because of *her*, necessarily, but because of her subjects. Yet much of the book's success is owed to her very own lens—without Biss herself, without the very particular way she employs her eye, we'd miss seeing the things in this book as they are, and we'd miss a crucial perspective on a subject like race and its relationship to geography, had Biss stepped aside completely. This is a book that operates not only within a lineage of smart essays, but that inspires a forthcoming generation of the essay, raising the stakes for what essayists are called to do when they write about the worlds they inhabit.

Like *Humiliation*, *The Art of Cruelty*, or *The Empathy Exams*, *Notes from No Man's Land* is doing something peculiar for today's cultural criticism. In addition to broadening the discourse, they provide readers with a kind of writing it wouldn't hurt to notice more often: a *personal* cultural criticism that lends itself to thoughtful and compelling conversation. What these books have in common is that we get to know their authors—not as much as in straightforward memoir, but in these books there is always a subject separate from the writer, however the writer is never *disconnected* from the subject. Again, as with photography, they point their cameras at what they want to shoot, and they shoot. Their style is still apparent, however, and we can still recognize their signatures. This kind of criticism is effective for the reader in that it helps to state the occasion for the writing, and it often creates a conversation everyone can join. There isn't a members-only cocktail party with this

writing but an open invitation, perhaps even a charity ball where everyone gathers for a common cause.

As far as cultural criticism at-large goes, we need more work that approaches culture from subjective vantage points, in addition to the strict scholarship already being done on various peoples and places. What purely academic writing doesn't often do is relate *experience*—that is not often its purpose, and it doesn't often tell us, like Biss does in “No Man's Land,” what it's like to be white in Rogers Park and digest the feelings of its inhabitants. It doesn't often show us the actual mindset of students in a place like Iowa City, as it does in “Is This Kansas.” And it doesn't often highlight history in a way like “Back to Buxton,” which is a sweet and embellished look at the makeup of an Iowan town that's nearly been forgotten. Rather than give us writing that's purely critical or philosophical, or writing that *only* gets filtered and dispersed through the lens of narrative, Biss's technique is to use the form of the literary essay as a vessel for both ruminative thought and personal reflection, using the intense analysis of academic writing and facts that could easily be delivered via sociological report. Her Didionesque “Goodbye to All That,” for instance, gives the reader a meditation on New York City topography, revisiting the three years in which she lived in the city. She writes that “I have to explain to you why I no longer live in New York, but first I have to explain to myself why I stayed so long” (61). This explanation to the self is Montaignian, Baldwinian, Didionian: an employment of self-reflexivity that helps an author get to the bottom of how or why something's happened for them. It's a way of thoughtfully writing the self into ruminative territory on a subject, and of working to undo what Lopate would classify as a “mental knot.” She's doing, essentially, the work we should all be doing as we essay, and in a way that, as academics, we're not typically asked to practice as we unpack our writing subjects.

## **Tradition**

The exact nonfiction tradition Biss is working in, as she executes a style so rare—so sharply observant, yet personal—takes from Baldwin or Montaigne, Cicero or Plutarch. Her style and instinct are essayistic, journalistic, and meditative all at once, giving us a text that shows off the potential versatility of nonfiction writing. With essays varying greatly from one another, like “Time and Distance Overcome” versus “Black News,” or “No Man’s Land” versus “All Apologies,” we see a collection of essays here that shows us how an essayist can oscillate, and it’s an oscillation that’s been executed with daring skill. Because the essay has long been known as a genre that works as well privately as it does as a public forum for thought, from Pascal’s *Pensées* to the *New York Times*’s “Modern Love” column, it’s easy to see why writing about race might effectively enter the essay’s traditional territory. Biss can treat the genre like a speakeasy, a space where small-talk gets tossed aside while we focus more intently on conversation that imprints itself on us more deeply.

“Social” nonfiction texts often employ academic or scholarly voices, but sometimes, as is the case with Biss, these texts employ casual voices for a more intimate execution, giving the texts a digestible shape for diverse audiences. Books like *Notes of a Native Son*, Hilton Als’s *White Girls*, Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist*, Koestenbaum’s *My 1980s & Other Essays*, and much of the writing of bell hooks aims for this kind of social writing, where we can bring the names of theorists and philosophers together with their -isms then give them to audiences stumbling into non-specialized bookstores. Like the books above, *Notes from No Man’s Land* straddles the line between the formally theoretical and the informally social, employing a relaxed authorial voice so that all readers, not just those with advanced degrees, are able to listen. We can look at her employment of voice in an essay like “Time and Distance Overcome,” which resides mostly in a distant third person for the essay’s first eight pages before switching suddenly to first-person reflection on the essay’s ninth and final page. The switch begins at the line “My grandfather was a lineman” (11), and from here we watch Biss stop thinking about Alexander Graham Bell and lynching, and start thinking about how to

connect an exposition on telephone poles to her own subjective look at them. We see how they looked one way to her as a child and changed when she grew into an adult. “Now,” she writes, “I tell my sister, these poles, these wires, do not look the same to me. Nothing is innocent, my sister reminds me. But nothing, I would like to think, remains unrepentant” (11). Does she want this switch to happen for us, too? Does she want us to feel our innocent views of telephone poles to slip away from us like they slipped away from her? Is the move from exposition to memory there just to urge us to witness our own changes?

Biss’s vocal trajectory takes a turn throughout her work—her voice and tone in *The Balloonists* is slightly different, more personal and intimate, than in *Notes from No Man’s Land*, which is yet more intimate than her tone in her newest book, *On Immunity: An Inoculation*, a book that often gives us diluted language focused on sexism and medicine. We can compare the voice of *On Immunity* here:

While vaccination no longer leaves a mark in most cases, our fears that we will be permanently marked have remained. We fear that vaccination will invite autism or any one of the diseases of immune dysfunction that now plague industrialized countries—diabetes, asthma, and allergies. We fear that the hepatitis B vaccine will cause multiple sclerosis, or that the diphtheria-tetanus pertussis vaccine will cause sudden infant death. We fear that the combination of several vaccines at once will tax the immune system, and that the total number of vaccines will overwhelm it. We fear that the formaldehyde in some vaccines will cause cancer, or that the aluminum in others will poison our brains. (Biss 13)

There’s oft-repeated advice from writers like Phillip Lopate about the personal essayist’s execution of voice, and Biss picks and chooses from that advice, knowing when to lean in and speak softly—seductively, even—and when to take the megaphone. Because she can handle both, can easily juggle a loudspeaker (as in *On Immunity*) and a coffeehouse (as in *Notes from No Man’s Land*), she comes off

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in a way demanding of attention. Her tone in *Notes* is never actually abrasive toward her dear reader, which might be the most necessary ingredient for a book like this one. When writing on a subject simultaneously so intimate and public, perhaps the tone of the writing should be, as well. The megaphone and the coffeehouse should both be kept in mind, and we should be prepared to change our posture should it become necessary to shout at our friends.

A specific instance of this can be found in “No Man’s Land,” which keeps one eye on writing about Laura Ingalls Wilder’s life on the pioneer trail, while the other eye looks at Biss’s own life in the Chicago neighborhood of Rogers Park. In both places, white, female narrators learn to look at themselves in their colored surroundings, and perhaps because Biss’s subject is now more animate than that of a telephone pole she finds a greater need to animate herself. She animates herself through a voice much less distant here, and Biss reacts to “the mythology of danger” (153) in a great American city, whether these reactions mean forced reminders to trust the chill of Lake Michigan’s waters or not being afraid of black boys riding by on their bicycles.

The book’s overall voice straddles a casualness, through a vernacular designed for an open readership, which makes thinking about issues beyond just the writer’s life (here: race, class, geography) more accessible. This mixes with intelligence, which makes the listening part easy, and we come to know that as we listen we’ll locate something important to consider. For example, in Biss’s essay “Relations”: “Although the two can be confused, our urge to love our own, or those we have come to understand as our own, is, it seems, much more powerful than our urge to segregate ourselves” (22). In an essay so explicitly about race, this is a sharp yet comforting way rendering the moment, a little break from the heaviness of tone that we often attribute to the either subtle or explicit dialogue surrounding racism, and one that might also help us discover whether or not this idea serves as Biss’s inadvertent thesis. It might also, though, just be a way of “looking on the bright

side,” or an opportunity for Biss to take a step back from complicated discourse and understand that these concepts can enter gray area.

Biss’s readers know that there is different territory to enter if they want a conversation about race the way writers like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. or Frantz Fanon might cover it. And while a writer like Susan Sontag, who also operates in the social nonfiction realm, writes sentences like “Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half’s worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists” (Sontag 18), Biss will give us sentences like “As much as I believe racial categories to be fluid and ambiguous, I still know that there is nothing particularly ambiguous about my features, or my bearing, or my way of speaking” (29), and this leads us to note just how much Biss’s writing can feel like talking, thanks to her use of the first person. It can feel like a friend speaking in a soothing tone during vulnerable conversation over coffee, while still managing to carry the weight of the conversation’s subject(s). This craft strategy isn’t something to take lightly—part of what becomes so successful about nonfiction writing, and especially the essay, is its rhetoric, and Biss is a writer who seems to know just how to talk to us, how to tell us what we need to hear without ever being condescending about it.

### **Pedagogy & Race**

As a teacher, *Notes from No Man’s Land* was the first non-anthology that I used as a textbook. It may be odd when I teach this book, or offsetting in a way, however, because I’m a black male. More specifically I’m a black, American male, and therefore forced to think about race and nationality in certain ways, ways that I myself had only come to consider through reading writers like James Baldwin and Eula Biss. The fact that I belong to both this particular race and this particular nationality makes me inadvertently one of Biss’s subjects, as well as a part of a demographic that’s



always been tricky to discuss. But something about Biss's approach, something about her approach to the subject of race, specifically, asks both creative writing and composition students to stop, think, and realize. "I've never thought about this/that before" is a common reaction to Biss's essays. They gawk during in-class readings of "Time and Distance Overcome," and they yell in frustration at the decisions they watch the parents in "Relations" make.

Take "Time and Distance Overcome": not only does the general population never think of telephone poles as gallows, but for the newly minted student in the college classroom this idea is mind-blowing. Students enter the essay prepared to learn about the history of telephone poles, expectedly a boring subject, but find instead that they're additionally learning about a concealed history of American execution, and the ways "justice" was once carried out on black men in various American towns. They sometimes want me to weigh in on this justice, and when they ask me about whether I can still regard telephone poles in the same way as I used to I have to tell them that, just like Biss, the poles cannot remain the same for me.

"In 1898, in Lake Cormorant, Mississippi, a black man was hanged from a telephone pole," Biss announces near the middle of the essay:

And in Weir City, Kansas. And in Brookhaven, Mississippi. And in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where the hanged man was riddled with bullets. In Danville, Illinois, a black man's throat was slit, and his dead body was strung up on a telephone pole. Two black men were hanged from a telephone pole in Lewisburg, West Virginia. And two in Hempstead, Texas, where one man was dragged out of the courtroom by a mob, and another was dragged out of jail. (6-7)

The pervasiveness of these facts is a clear blow to the reader's gut, and it tells us there's something we've overlooked. Using an essay like this one is a provocative way to start a book of essays, and it gets students in the classroom thinking about what else we'll surprisingly learn throughout our

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reading experience. “Time and Distance Overcome” ends up showing students Biss’s vacillation between fact and interpretation, and how facts, when examined from unexpected positions, can give us new insights as writers as much as readers.

Similarly, in “Is This Kansas” Biss surprises again with the inclusion of facts but this time adds her observation. We begin to think differently about the events of our recent past, particularly Hurricane Katrina, as we shift in our seats a little not only out of discomfort but for a new point of view. She writes:

Racism, I would discover during my first semester teaching at Iowa, does not exist. At least not in Iowa. Not in the minds of the twenty-three tall, healthy, blond students to whom I was supposed to teach rhetoric. And not, at least not publicly, in the opinion of one student who did not look white but who promptly informed the class that she was adopted and considered herself white. (137)

A paragraph like this resonates with students. Or at least it was for my own students, who arrived in Chicago with gusto and *joie de vivre*, suddenly brought to think about whether they themselves were the students Biss was writing about. They’d say something in class like “I thought our society was past that, but I guess we’re not,” and they began to consider things like social position and privilege, coming into their own as students thinking critically and in new ways about a subject they might previously have swept under the rug, an important moment as we move forward, beyond the classroom.

Class discussions ranged from looking at “Goodbye to All That” in comparison to students’ own moves to Chicago from other places, to looking at “Is This Kansas” and “No Man’s Land” in ways that piqued student self-reflexivity. Students confessed that they perceived similarities between Biss’s own students in Iowa City and the partying students they observed or became on weekends,

and they began to note that they perceived passing strangers in the city differently simply because—though this may not have been her intention—Biss had asked them to.

### **Coda**

I often wonder whether, had it not been for this book, I would've ever fallen in love with the essay. This was the book that made me want to study the form, and because of it I've spent my career looking forward to the future of a genre. This is, after all, the success of a good essay. Good essays reload the world for us, giving us new ways of looking at old things. It's refreshing to come away from an essay saying "I hadn't thought of it that way before," the way eager students do, admitting that we're still receptive to the pleasant surprises in the world.

Though Biss's book is full of somber realization—really, the kind of realization any of us should have upon deep meditation on American history—it's also full of hope. There isn't just hope for a *genre* here, but hope for a future full of thoughtful readers and writers. Biss isn't the only one thinking about serious subjects, and this should provide us with the hope that there are people willing to talk about these subjects in meaningful ways. Willing to write about them. Willing to ask the questions we've been afraid to ask for so long. If we can hold onto this hope—if we can join the conversation at the cocktail party, even—we might find ourselves more capable than we realized.

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