

Introduction

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In a photo essay called *America and the Americans* (1966), which pairs John Steinbeck's writing with striking images taken by forty American photographers, the reader encounters this description of the country's gestation:

America did not exist. Four centuries of work, of bloodshed, of loneliness and fear created this land. We built America and the process made us Americans – a new breed, rooted in all races, stained and tinted with all colors, a seeming ethnic anarchy. Then in a little, little time, we became more alike than we were different – a new society; not great, but fitted by our very faults for greatness. *E Pluribus Unum*.¹

The distinctiveness of this passage comes from its blunt rendering of America's chaotic, less than glorious inauguration, but it is also remarkable how stealthily Steinbeck draws parallels – maybe unconsciously – between the singular country he describes and the anomalous literary form in which he writes. Three of his words make this connection. The first is *process*. The essayist is a person who transcribes their thought processes, tracking the swerves and outgrowths of a brain in motion. Rather than presenting what has already been fully conceived, the essay shows its work and consists of its own unfolding. The second is *anarchy*. The essayist is sometimes an unruly writer, dispensing with more ordered types of writing and choosing instead a wilder, looser form of expression. Literary disobedience is its vocation. The third is *faults*. From its inception, the essay featured the essayist's flaws. We find, for example, in Montaigne's famous preface to his essays an accommodation – even a celebration – of the author's many defects and imperfections. The essayist is an imperfect human, and these imperfections make ideal fodder for the genre's ruminations. The United States, in its striving to

¹ John Steinbeck, *America and the Americans* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), 12–13.

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become a more perfect nation, tacitly admits that it has not yet achieved perfection.

What we the editors hope will be clear in this volume is that a natural compatibility exists between the essay form and the unusual experiment called the United States. A diversity of form and content, a certain insubordinate spirit, a striving for things to come: A country might never have been more suited to tell itself through a particular literary genre. Although the essay existed long before the United States became a country – the genre having been officially christened by Montaigne in 1580 upon the publication of his first edition of the *Essais*, but existing already in a nameless, prototypical form since antiquity – the affinity between the two is hard to deny. The essay thrives today in the United States and has given Americans an ever-renewing literary-scientific tool for studying the self. This self might be an individual or the member of a social group; it might turn its attentions outward or inward, preoccupied with life as it was, as it is, or as it might soon be. This volume attests to the richness of the American essay, assuming such a thing can be said confidently to exist; both the United States and the essay are elusive objects.

Telling the history of the American essay – and we use the shorthand “American” in place of the bulkier “US American” throughout the volume – is no small task. There are surely a few glaring omissions, but given that the volume spans roughly 310 years and over 3,000,000 square miles, this was hard to avoid. That said, the essayists and essays featured by our contributors do quite a good job of illustrating the depth and breadth of American essay writing, and the patterns that emerge offer a compelling portrait of a country trying to figure itself out. As every book on the essay points out, to try (*essayer*) is the essay’s main task. What exactly are the essayists profiled here trying to do? It varies from essay to essay. This edited volume offers a whole taxonomy of trying, an almanac of attempts.

Even the most schematic list of important American essays that have been anthologized, widely taught, or rewarded with prizes or critical acclaim demonstrates the vast range of styles and themes Americans have embraced in their writing. If one were to read one by one the following pieces, a general sense of the sprawling, polychromatic United States would begin to take shape: Judith Sargent Murray’s “On the Equality of the Sexes” (1790), William Apess’s “An Indian’s Looking-Glass for the White Man” (1833), Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” (1841), Henry David Thoreau’s “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For” (1854), Sui Sin Far’s “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (1890), Mark Twain’s “The Turning Point in My Life” (1910),

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Hannah Arendt’s “We Refugees” (1943), Aldo Leopold’s “The Land Ethic” (1949), Richard Hofstadter’s “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964), Susan Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” (1964), William H. Gass’s “On Talking to Oneself” (1979), Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984), Nancy Mairs’s “On Being a Cripple” (1986), Richard Rodriguez’s “Hispanic” (2002), or collections like W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Joan Didion’s *Slouching towards Bethlehem* (1968), or Alexander Chee’s *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel: Essays* (2018). American writers have used the essay’s literary in-betweenness to explore other forms of the in-between. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) explores the ambivalence of border spaces, smudging the line between Texas and Mexico, colonizer and colonized, men and women, straight and gay. Fascinating formal experimentations, such as James Agee and Walker Evans’s photo-essay collaboration *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Orson Welles’s documentary essay film *Filming Othello* (1978), or Claudia Rankine’s multigenre instant classic *Citizen* (2014), show that the essay need not remain a purely textual object; it is capable of using whatever is at hand – music, images moving or still – to divulge its meaning. American essayists have treated every subject, in every style, through every medium.

There have been a few modest attempts to tell parts of the history of the American essay – these have informed our own work – but the scale of *The Cambridge History of the American Essay* is unprecedented. Ned Stuckey-French’s *The American Essay in the American Century* (2014) and Cheryl A. Wall’s *On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: The African American Essay* (2019) were important models for us. Anthologies by Philip Lopate, Jenny Spinner, Garrett Kaoru Hongo, and John D’Agata, as well as Robert Atwan’s *The Best American Essays* series, helped us craft a list of writers whose work has become part of the essayistic canon and introduced us to lesser-known writers who have brought important innovations to the form. Several *Cambridge Histories* were also indispensable as this project came together.² In the Recommendations for

² These include *The Cambridge Companion to the Essay* (eds. Kara Wittman and Evan Kindley), *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* (eds. Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr.), *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (ed. Sacvan Bercovitch), *The Cambridge History of American Women’s Literature* (ed. Dale M. Bauer), *The Cambridge History of Asian American Literature* (eds. Rajini Srikanth and Min Hyoung Song), *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature* (eds. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen), *The Cambridge History of Latina/o American Literature* (eds. John Moran González and Laura Lomas), and *The Cambridge History of Native American Literature* (ed. Melanie Benson Taylor).

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Further Reading section at the end of this book, readers will find an extensive list of monographs, edited volumes, articles, and anthologies, all of which offer important insights on the history and theory of the essay form.

Our definition of the essay is – like the genre – quite open ended. We’ve included short prose works that call themselves essays and others that do not bear this name but retain the essay’s qualities: brevity, attentiveness to a specific field of contemplation, a translucence that allows the writer’s subjectivity to shine through. In addition, readers will also find essayistic writing that borrows from other genres like sermons, memoirs, confessions, manifestos, speeches, meditations, dialogues, portraits, epistolary writing, and polemical texts. Composite forms such as the photo essay, the essay film, the essayistic novel, essayistic poetry, and other transmedial artifacts are also explored throughout. The essay is and always has been a hybrid entity. Our contributors have embraced the paradox of the essay: namely, that for such a small-scale type of writing, it hungrily absorbs into it all possible themes and neighboring literary forms. The essay’s simultaneous smallness and largeness are celebrated in the following pages.

How to organize the vast history of the American essay? Chronologically? By subgenre or theme? We’ve decided that the best approach was all of these combined; in other words, we decided not to decide. The volume follows a loose chronological flow, with chapters clustered into four eras: The Emergence of the American Essay (1710–1865), Voicing the American Experiment (1865–1945), Postwar Essays and Essayism (1945–2000), and Toward the Contemporary American Essay (2000–2020). These dates provide an architecture around which the contributors could freely build the histories of certain subgenres (the lyric essay, the nature essay, the travel essay), important figures (Cotton Mather, Margaret Fuller, James Baldwin), philosophical tendencies (Transcendentalism, Pragmatism), themes (the environment, music, law, art, science), or literary movements, critical schools, or aesthetic tendencies (the Harlem Renaissance, the Southern Agrarians and New Criticism, New Journalism, the New York Intellectuals). In some chapters, it was necessary for contributors to reach beyond the assigned time frame to offer earlier context or later updates to the developments they lay out in detail. Our ambitions were far greater than what was possible in the time allotted for the project, but we hope that scholars of the essay will be inspired by what we’ve tried to do here and continue the work we’ve begun, recognizing promising sites for expansion throughout these pages.

Part I: The Emergence of the American Essay (1710–1865) shows that many of the earliest American essays sought answers to spiritual, political,

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philosophical, and moral questions. Puritan writings of the early eighteenth century were pedagogical at their core, offering guidance on theological problems or delivering religious instruction. These writings had a special relationship with the sermon, a feature that endures in American writing even today. In early political writings like *The Federalist* (1787–88), one perceives the gravity of the task before the Founders: to codify a fresh, tyranny-resistant politics. The inherent paradox of this scene – namely, that slaveholders were championing liberty in their writings – would not be fully acknowledged until much later, particularly in essays by Black Americans whose ancestors had been enslaved by whites. Later, starting in the 1820s and '30s, the Transcendentalists crafted a spiritually inflected philosophy centered on the self-reliant individual. The pondering of questions on responsibility, service to one's community, and how one should live characterizes the compact, contemplative prose of Transcendentalism. In the years leading up to the Civil War, many American essays debating the ethics of slavery or the rights of women became a fixture of public writing. In the antebellum period, it was often white women who were first able to take up the pen to counter the assumption of a universal subject who could speak on behalf of everyone. The seeds of liberation were planted at this time, germinating too slowly for many of those who'd called for freedom in their writing to experience it themselves. And it was only later that Native Americans began to offer a fuller record via the essay form of the many ways their lives were convulsed by settler colonialism. The earliest American essays also attempted to capture the enormity and strangeness of the landscape, flora, and fauna of this new continent. This scientific and aesthetic attention to nature would initiate a rich tradition of nature writing in the decades to follow, expressed in various modes: the purely descriptive, the idealized, the elegiac. For the recent arrivals, this wild setting offered the possibility of a rupture with the past and with Europe. One perceives in American essays of the eighteenth and nineteenth century an anxiety about this break. Essayists of the time were clearly pulled between a respect and sense of indebtedness toward European tastes and traditions and a desire to produce something truly new and tailored to measure for a populace that had less and less in common with those on the old continent. For example, many American periodical essays of the eighteenth century followed conventions of their British equivalents – such as the use of a bachelor persona disguised behind an often humorous pseudonym – yet they also caricatured their European counterparts and sought to describe new social types that only existed in the United States. As a specifically American magazine industry burgeoned and the survival rate of its publications increased,

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a new poetics emerged along with a new critical language for talking about literature and the arts. Literary magazines of the nineteenth century published criticism of fiction and poetry, seeking mass audiences not only for the magazines themselves but to promote a growing body of writing by American novelists and poets. The history of American essayism has been one of increasing access, an opening up of channels of expression to more and more kinds of people whose destinies could barely be compared. As more people began to tell their lives through the essay, the genre took on new features, broached new subjects, and expanded the record of human experience.

Part 2: Voicing the American Experiment (1865–1945) follows the developments in the essay from the end of the Civil War to the end of World War II, a period of sweeping social and technological change. After emancipation, Black Americans could finally give a fuller account of their experiences, aspirations, and fears in an age in which, though liberated from slavery, they still faced cruelties and injustices at every turn. The language of social justice, whose roots can be found at the crux of Christianity and worker-centered politics, began to coalesce in this period. Over the subsequent decades, it morphed into a more expansive notion, embracing racial, gender, and environmental justice. Among the more significant groups to have turned to the essay as the primary means of expression were the Pragmatists, who, beginning in the late 1870s, sought to craft a down-to-earth philosophy tailored to Americans by articulating the practical ways that thought might affect the actual world. The concrete was privileged over the abstract, action over theory or empty conceptualizing. Some of the most canonical American essays emerged from the Pragmatist movement and illustrated once again the constant striving in American writing to become something separate from – albeit influenced by – Europe. Writers continued to refine and “update” certain kinds of essayistic writing for a growing American readership: travel writing, the genteel essay, the comic essay, criticism, journalistic writing. Advancements in transportation gave certain Americans access to new parts of the country and the world, which resulted in an explosion of travel essays during this time. Faraway places were brought home to people who didn’t have the privilege of traveling. These essays provide interesting documentary evidence but are also impressionistic and often marked by the preconceptions or prejudices of their authors. Taken as an ensemble, American travel essays of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prefigure the acceleration of globalization, which would explode as the new millennium loomed on the horizon. Genteel essays –

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which had a distinctly European flair and offered commentary on contemporary manners and morals – waned and then largely vanished by the 1930s, perhaps because of their perceived mustiness and elitism. A looser, less conservative style would gain prominence and, one could argue, it has maintained its stronghold in American letters even up to today. This loosening up can be seen in American comic essays, which, since the nineteenth century, have sought out new targets of humor, especially in the realm of politics and social life. Through regional humor or humor based on other aspects of identity such as social class, gender, or race, American essayists often tested the limits of decorum and freedom of speech with their provocations. Among other forms, comic essays were and continue to be a site for critique of the traditions and behaviors of a given social milieu. In the years between the Civil War and the end of World War II, another form of critique gained more momentum in the United States, namely, literary criticism. In the 1920s and '30s, writers and critics who were part of the Harlem Renaissance critiqued racist and white supremacist ideologies embedded not just in the politics and social life of the time but in American arts and letters of the first quarter of the twentieth century, while beginning in the early 1940s, the New Critics (whose genealogy intertwines with that of the Fugitive Poets and the Southern Agrarians in sometimes complicated ways) attempted to develop an objective system of close reading that privileged a text's form rather than external factors such as its historical context or the life of its author. Modernity brought a new experimental frame of mind and a more sophisticated language for writing about art, music, and literature, which would prefigure the rise of critical theory and postmodernism later in the century. With a growing newspaper landscape and more venues for essayistic writing, the early twentieth century was a particularly rich period for the genre. The American readership at the turn of the century and moving toward and through the World Wars became more cosmopolitan, more interested in writing that was both thought-provoking and entertaining, and more hungry for a mix of hard news and subjective reflection.

Part 3: Postwar Essays and Essayism (1945–2000) shows how the era after World War II opened up new fields of exploration for the essay. While the essay form is generally associated with the ruminations of a single, contemplative individual, it is also a space for the mulling over of life collectively lived. The appeal for an expansion of civil rights became a central theme of many essays in those years. Black Americans simultaneously processed and protested against the horrors of Jim Crow and celebrated the richness and variety of artistic, musical, and literary innovations by a population that, just one to two

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generations earlier, had been virtually excluded from American arts and letters. Various waves of feminism swept in and then away in the essayistic writing of the time, in which women debated what the priorities of the movement should be despite its fragmentation by race, class, region, and generation, among other tribalizing factors. Indeed, in more general political writing of this era, the Left and Right churned out critiques of the other side and generated writings presenting their own plan for how the country could be made better. In comparing these political visions, one has the impression that those on either side of the partisan divide are truly living in two separate worlds, each studying a different set of civic objects and using these as evidence to support their claims. The tensions between two other categories were being confronted through the essay form: the indigenous and the foreign. Paradoxically, both native peoples and many immigrants faced discrimination based on their imagined deviation from ever-changing norms whose contours were not easily discernible. Time and again, Indigenous writers have turned to the essay form to articulate the brutalities of life since the Europeans' arrival, to vindicate their rights, to celebrate the richness and diversity of their traditions, and to eulogize nature. During the postwar period, Jews and others fleeing the horrors of World War in Europe came to the United States, bringing their stories of refuge seeking, loss, trauma, adaptation, and hope that their descendants might thrive in this new place. As cultures blended and novel ways of thinking became necessary for addressing the realities of postwar America, essayistic writing absorbed new methodologies and put a fresh twist on older themes of philosophical inquiry: media's role in shaping reality, the role of identity in a stratified society, the instabilities of written and spoken language, the problematic nature of binary thinking. Moving past modernism toward the post-modern period beginning in the late 1960s and peaking in the '90s, the prose of ideas underwent drastic upheaval as theory and philosophy began to meld in elaborate ways. Beginning already in the 1930s but thriving particularly strongly in the '60s, '70s, and '80s, a group of mainly Jewish writers and critics known as the New York Intellectuals mixed politics, criticism, and creative expression in their incisive, left-wing, anti-Stalinist essays. Around the same time, the first whispers of poststructuralism (and all neighboring forms of a burgeoning critical theory) were heard on American campuses and in writing by Europhile public intellectuals. Poststructuralism's new vocabularies and critical techniques were coproductions between Europe (especially France and Germany) and the United States, which both traded ideas across the Atlantic, receiving them sometimes with enthusiasm, sometimes with skepticism. This seems to have permanently altered the

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style and method of essays written by American scholars and public intellectuals. The line between scholarship and personal essay began to blur, as did the line between poetry and prose (see the lyric prose and essayistic poetry of the period), literature and journalism (see the long-form pieces by New Journalists of the 1960s and '70s), and literature and philosophy (see the thriving literary magazine scene of the late twentieth century, which featured these side by side or increasingly superimposed, or academic writing of the 1980s and '90s, which reads at times like hermetic poetry). Interdisciplinary writing thrived alongside more specialized essays on themes like law or the sciences, which alternated between a highly specialized idiom addressed to other experts and a more accessible, public-friendly prose meant to persuade or instruct readers on complex issues of these fields. In this period, various forms of authority were challenged through the essay. Targets included everything from patriarchy and empire to scientific objectivity and literary canons. This hybrid, anarchic form seemed the perfect medium through which to express the confusion, rage, disenchantment, paranoia, and melancholy that characterized the turn of the new millennium.

Part 4: *Toward the Contemporary American Essay (2000–2020)* acknowledges already in its short time frame the acceleration of essayistic production in the twenty-first century. This section spans only twenty years – the other sections cover far vaster temporal terrain – but is nonetheless densely packed for many reasons: the changed media landscape, the new writing channels for more people (especially people whose stories had not yet been told), and a certain hunger in the reading public for more essays all the time, perhaps because of the ways they conjugate the personal and the political in compact, digestible bites. In this period, more and more American writers have tried to make sense of the essay, theorizing it and testing out what happens when it is combined with photography, poetry, cinema, or other media. Its sphere has become more particularist; a major objective of contemporary essayists is to flesh out the record of human experience, interrogating how identity acts as an existential filter. As evinced by this section's chapters, the body's limitations, its color, gender, shape, desires, and effect on others is a central preoccupation of contemporary American essayism. More than in any period in history, essayists of the twenty-first century have used their writing to delve into their identities. As a land of immigration, the United States was bound to use the essay as a tool for studying cultural difference, belonging, exclusion, homesickness, and the whole range of feelings produced by the immigrant experience. Alienation is perhaps one of the most pervasive

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themes in contemporary American essays. This feeling might be produced by rapid technological change, social discord, changing cultural norms, or humanity's self-excision from nature. Indeed, a mournful tone infuses much American writing on the natural world. The naming of the Anthropocene has given essayists the opportunity to reflect on the extractive logic of modernity and its injuries to the planet. They recognize in their writing that since the Earth is the necessary precondition for all human action and thought, its demise will mean the end of all reflection, all literature, all meaning-making; in short, the end of the essayist's vocation.

These are the broad strokes of the history of the American essay, but which overarching patterns can be discerned in this chronology? How has its form and content changed? The essay has naturally responded to the novelties brought by time. With each new technology (television, the atom bomb, the Internet), social or political movement (hippy culture, compassionate conservatism, Black Lives Matter), generational cohort (Boomers, Gen X, Millennials), or significant event (the Vietnam War, 9/11, the coronavirus pandemic), there are essays that respond to it, giving it substance and duration simply by reflecting on it. In this sense, the essay has often been a form of *Zeitgeist* literature, tracking American history as it happens, portraying the country's mood with only a slight delay.

Certain cultural novelties have altered the essay's course. One general shift that has greatly impacted the essay form is a certain vulgarization of the language. The bulk of early American essays were written by white men who, through the privilege of a long and involved humanities education, produced writing with a rich vocabulary (informed by etymological knowledge or proficiency in several languages), a sometimes elaborate syntax, and a reliance on a set of fixed rhetorical maneuvers to persuade or divert readers. There is great variety in any group of essays published at a given time, but in comparing the average essay from the nineteenth century to the average contemporary essay, one will immediately note a tendency now toward the colloquial, the straightforward, the accessible, the personal, a writing based as much on feeling as on thought and representing a broader range of experiences. In many cases, the form has become a mere mode of transportation for the content (often social or political in nature), not something tended to with slower attention. These changes reflect the new priorities of the contemporary education system, which puts less emphasis on the formation of well-rounded, well-read citizens and more emphasis on the creation of workers in increasingly technocratic fields.

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Furthermore, there is no longer the assumption of a universal subject; the particular is emphasized instead. This was to be expected in a place of such extraordinary diversity. When people of many backgrounds encounter each other in one space, the universal begins to seem, in the best case, an impossible utopian dream, and, in the worst case, a nightmare of cultural hegemony. In the particularizing context of the contemporary United States, the “we” pronoun no longer holds up, at least not as a marker of ubiquity. It signals instead one’s belonging to a smaller community, sometimes pitted against those who aren’t part of it. The “we” of the essay now cannot even attempt to include everyone. In other words, the essay has segmented itself according to cohorts, or, perhaps more cynically put, to markets.

The essay’s commodification, which increased greatly in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, has been one of the most substantial changes to the form. Once a literary form acquiesces to the logic of markets, it will begin to yearn for mass appeal and be reduced to a success-seeking formula. It will seek out an audience to whom it can administer a satisfying dopamine boost, readying readers for the next essay put online or the next collection published in paperback. Essayists always sought to appeal to readers, but it was only relatively recently that the essay or essay collection became a product *first* and a work of literature second. Dysfunction, polemics, sex, grievance, sickness, injustice, addiction, environmental catastrophe: This is the stuff of modern mediatized life, and, yes, the sustenance of essay-as-commodity. More ruminative, slow, unspectacular prose whose urgency is not immediately apparent seems like a luxury in a world ablaze.

In the pages that follow, a much more nuanced account of the history of the essay in the United States is delivered scene by scene, with important figures making appearances across chapters and unexpected cross-pollination being shown between various traditions and movements. It is our hope that scholars of the essay will discover the work of essayists unknown to them and will pursue new avenues of research related to the essay’s history. Another hope of equal importance is that essayists, too, will be inspired by our contributors’ findings and will use them as stimuli for new pieces that might be folded into a future history of the American essay. Contemporary prose writers might see promise in blending the aesthetics of past movements to create something new, in absorbing the rhythms or lexicons of excellent writers past, or filtering their old themes – human nature, the meaning of life – through a twenty-first-century subjectivity. This book is for those who are drawn to the essay, a site of possibility, conviction, and beauty, for any of its countless fascinations. The essay is a place where people may be

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themselves. In it, they show what their mind is made of, pouring out its contents on pages meant to receive them. It is fortunate that such a vessel exists and that its contents are freely available to us, offering an alternative history of the United States told through one of its most robust literary traditions.