



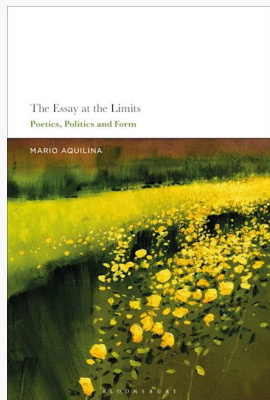
# ASSAY: A JOURNAL OF NONFICTION STUDIES

## The Assay Interview Project: Mario Aquilina February 7, 2022



**Mario Aquilina** is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Malta, where he teaches literature, literary theory and creative nonfiction. He is the author of *The Event of Style in Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), the editor of *The Essay at the Limits* (Bloomsbury, 2021), and the editor of *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), which he co-edited with Nicole B. Wallack and Bob Cowser Jr. Apart from his work on the essay – which has focused on the theory and history of the essay – Aquilina has also published widely on literary theory, style, Shakespeare, and electronic literature. Aquilina obtained his Ph.D in English Studies from the University of Durham (UK) in 2012.

**About *The Essay at the Limits: Poetics, Politics, and Form*:** In the hands of such writers as Rebecca Solnit, Claudia Rankine, David Shields, Zadie Smith and many others, the essay has re-emerged as a powerful literary form for tackling a fractious 21st-century culture. *The Essay at the Limits* brings together leading scholars to explore the theory, the poetics and the future of



the form. The book links the formal innovations and new voices that have emerged in the 21st-century essay to the history and theory of the essay. In so doing, it surveys the essay from its origins to its relation to contemporary cultural forms, from the novel to poetry, film to music, and from political articles to intimate lyrical expressions.

The book examines work by writers such as: Theodor W. Adorno, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Francis Bacon, James Baldwin, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Annie Dillard, Brian Dillon, Jean Genet, William Hazlitt, Samuel Johnson, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Ben Lerner, Audre Lorde, Oscar Wilde, Michel de Montaigne, Zadie Smith, Rebecca Solnit, Wallace Stevens, Eliot Weinberger and Virginia Woolf.

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**Karen Babine: Tell me about the genesis of this book. What was the impetus for it and who did you have in mind when you put together?**

**Mario Aquilina:** In early 2018 I started working on convening an international conference on the essay that was eventually held on the tiny island of Malta (Europe) in April 2019. In 2017, I had designed and started delivering an undergraduate unit on "The Art of the Essay" for students in the Department of English at the University of Malta, and the conference was a way to bring my research closer to my teaching. At that time, I had no personal connections with scholars of the essay. The subject was also underrepresented in my university, where the teaching of poetry, the novel and drama was prioritized over the teaching of the essay or other kinds of what we might call literary nonfiction.

In preparation for the conference, I published a Call for Papers open to everyone about "The Essay: Present Histories, Present Futures," and I started actively encouraging people to come over to Malta for it. I made a real effort to get in touch with as many essayists and scholars of the essay from around the world as I could. I joined specific Facebook groups, scoured Academia.edu, consulted Google Scholar etc., and I contacted as many people as possible, introducing myself and the conference.

The funding for the conference was negligible, and I was under strict instructions to break even. I wanted to keep the registration fee low so as to make the conference as accessible as possible to students and people from different countries. Still, we managed to convince more than 50 international writers and scholars to come over from China, Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, Dubai, Austria, Lithuania, Brazil, Romania, Croatia and Malta. One person who was incredibly helpful in all this and who I have to mention is the late Ned Stuckey-French. Not only did he immediately reply to emails when this unknown scholar from across the globe got in touch out of the blue, but he encouraged people to attend this conference and gave me invaluable advice on how to proceed. He himself was due to attend the

conference and help me in *The Essay at the Limits*, until I received an email from him informing me he couldn't make it to Malta. That he continued being in touch and supporting my work until few weeks before his passing away is something I am incredibly grateful for and fills me with admiration for a person I wish I could have met in person.

What became increasingly obvious as I started reading the proposals for papers and panels sent by these people who wanted to come to the conference (from widely-published essayists to PhD students) is that there are many somewhat diverging ways of thinking about the essay. The largely scholarly, historical and theoretical interest I had in the form was shared by many European scholars, but I knew I was focusing on somewhat different things to what interested, for example, people working in Writing Studies, in Rhetoric and Composition or teaching in MFA programs in the US.

*The Essay at the Limits* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021) and *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming) – a book I'm co-editing with Bob Cowser, Jr. and Nicole B. Wallack – were conceived early on in this process as a way of making the most of this opportunity of having so many brilliant minds and writers together discussing the essay from a multiplicity of perspectives. For *The Essay at the Limits*, my idea was to try to address what I thought was a somewhat marginalized aspect of the essay, that is, its theoretical foundations. The essay is a form of our time with important anthologies and collections being published and with so many great essayists – especially in the US – having influence in cultural spaces, and yet there has been little progress in the thinking of the essay from a theoretical perspective in the last two decades. The work of Claire de Obaldia, Reda Bensmaïa, G. D. Atkins, Graham Good and others is important, but not necessarily central to contemporary thinking of the essay.

Looking to bring people together to think about the philosophical and theoretical issues around the essay, I issued another call, this time specifically for the book. This call was circulated among people attending the conference to gauge their interest in writing about the essay from more or less theoretical perspectives. I invited the contributors to think about the essay as a form that tugs at limits – formal, conceptual, political etc. – and the chapters selected address these issues. Of course, there's a limit to what can be done with a strict word limit of 110,000 words, but the 15 contributors and I managed to discuss the relation between the essay and a wide range of topics like: phenomenology, the post-literary, the novel, music, film, poetry and the aphorism. We discussed the writing of essays by women, public intellectuals and digital artists as well as the essay as queer performativity. We looked at tone, the notion of the authorial self and also at issues of representation in the essay.

My aims in *The Essay at the Limits* were varied. I wanted to take essay theory forward, and in doing so the book addresses scholars and academics. But I also wanted a book that would be

useful to anyone either teaching writing or aspiring to become a better essayist. This is by no means a *how to become an essayist* book, but it does broach a wide range of conceptual issues about the form that, I believe, should be of interest to practitioners of the form. After all, the practice of the essay is not devoid of a context or multiple contexts – political, philosophical, formal – and the book explores many such contexts.

**Literary theory only rarely enters our nonfiction conversations here in the US. It feels like a fundamental difference between the American nonfiction writers' community and that of Europe. What do you see as the chief differences between how the genre is discussed in Europe (and elsewhere) and in the United States? I'm also wondering how you regard conversations about nonfiction happening elsewhere (I'm thinking about the NonfictioNow conference, recently held in New Zealand; Assay's special issue about global constructions of reality, and more).**

Yes, I think you're absolutely right to point out that there are differences in the way the essay is conceived in different parts of the world today, although as always there are exceptions. It helps to think of the essay as a "contested space." On the one hand, the essay – as a genre or anti-genre – is somewhat resistant to definition, and many different forms lay claim to it. Some focus on Montaigne and the personal essay that derives from his work, but there are other traditions of the essay that take the essay elsewhere – into more polemical spaces, for example. "What is an essay?" and "What does an essay do?" remain questions with open answers today.

On the other hand, if something like essay studies exists – and I think it does, given the infiltration of the form into institutional contexts – then, it is contested by very different claims of representation – by craft-oriented writers, by people working in writing studies, by literary scholars, by public intellectuals etc. Is the essay a leisurely form of "table-talk"? Is it a vehicle for political protest? Is it a pedagogic tool? Is it a "literary" form? Who owns the essay, so to speak?

One thing that should be said when talking about differences between the US and the rest of the world is that the centrality of the essay in contemporary US contexts is probably unmatched anywhere else and we'd probably have to go back to early 19th century or early 20th century England to find a comparable moment in the history of the essay's circulation. Whether we're speaking of the essay for freshman students at universities or its role in MFA programs or, moving away from pedagogical contexts, the essay's role in public discourse (magazines, newspapers, websites, journals, books etc), the essay has more cultural capital in the US than anywhere else in the world at the moment. It is very much a living form there, a vehicle for public debate and cultural change. This doesn't mean that the essay doesn't have importance elsewhere. Far from it, actually. Even if I were to take such a small context like Malta's, I note more essayistic writing making its way into more prestigious spaces more frequently. However,

the scholarly interest in the essay from European and British scholars tends to be historical or philosophical or theoretical and not so much practice- or pedagogy- oriented. I sense a greater interest in the history of the essay and its literary value, say, than its role in the contemporary classroom. European scholars are also more likely to be interested, say, in the use of the essay for philosophy and theory by people like Barthes, Derrida, Foucault and others than the form's potential for contemporary political protest.

A lot of my editorial work in the essay in the last few years has been focused on building bridges between these different communities in essay studies. On the one hand, on a personal level, I'm interested in introducing my students – now, both undergraduate and postgraduate – into the contemporary contexts and practices of the essay. On the other hand, also through friendships and collaborations I have formed over the last three years, I've had the opportunity to introduce theoretical and conceptual ideas into the practice-focused environments that tend to dominate US discussions of the essay. I think that any practice has theoretical foundations, so to ignore theory in the name of practice is, in my opinion, superficial and short-sighted. Similarly, to ignore the contemporary potential of the essay and its pedagogical uses is also a mistake, particularly because what we mean by 'essay' is constantly in flux, and we can only be aware of that if we follow closely what's being done now.

One other fundamental difference in the discussions around the essay that I noticed is how different claims for representation are handled in different traditions. There is a very clear emphasis on prioritizing discussions about gender, race and identity more generally in US discussions of the form. This is missing in some other parts of the world, not necessarily in a way that excludes diversity but possibly in ways that do not actively prioritize representation by marginalized groups and inclusion as a topic for discussion. From a US perspective, one would read this as white male privilege – and this would be a very valid argument – but one has to be careful not to believe that the issues that are raging in a US context are necessarily transposable (without modification) to other contexts. Indeed, in other contexts, the exclusions might be others and the rest of the world faces similar but also different challenges to the US. Just to take a simple example, race and gender are fundamental, of course, but in academic contexts, funding – or lack of it – and the prestige of the institution in which one works also play a role in whether the work of particular writers or academics gets any exposure.

On a personal level, the current debates about publishing in the US were an eye-opener for me and they affected my editing style and considerations as I progressed from *The Essay at the Limits* to *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*. Not only did my academic focus shift slightly in my own chapters in these volume – from a formal/theoretical discussion of the essayistic mode in the former to a theoretical/political discussion of the relation between the self and other in the latter – but the selection of the chapters was more actively intended to address issues of representation in the second book.

*The Essay at the Limits* was open to everyone, and proposals were considered solely on merit and relevance to the topic of theory. This still led to contributors from different points on the gender spectrum and many contemporary issues were tackled (race, gender, class), but this was more a happy accident than a carefully orchestrated strategy. One reason for this is that *The Essay at the Limits* was put together by contributors who were attending the Malta conference, and thus the pool of chapters was limited to them and their interests.

In *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, the choice of topics was more intentionally tailored for breadth and scope. Of course, having to write a companion and having 250,000 words available instead of 110,000 as well as now having formed more personal and professional connections with a much wider network of essayists and scholars – also through the invaluable help of my co-editors – meant that we could aim for more comprehensiveness.

To address the final part of your question, I'm not familiar enough with the work being done in New Zealand, for example, to make any expert claims about it or any other parts of the world whose essays I haven't studied – though as I write this I'm looking forward to participating in the 2021 NonFictionNOW conference. Still, I suspect interest in the essay, wherever it might be, differs in terms of how much importance is given to literary history, the upholding or questioning of the essay context, contemporary political contexts, the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the form, claims for representation by marginalized groups, the essay's pedagogical uses.

**How do you see your background in literature influencing your work in nonfiction? One of your contributors, Ivan Callus, writes: “But it can be supposed that whatever the approach, the essay can continue to be thought of as the genre-principle, the capacity field for expression of attitude (the essay’s emergence with Montaigne and its consolidation in the eighteenth century—in other words, with modernity’s greater scope for individuality and property—is no historical accident)” (101).**

More than "influencing" my work in nonfiction, I'd say that my background in literature and literary theory "determines" it. More than nonfiction – which is such a wide term in its application – I'd say that so far my work has been focused on the essay in particular. In literary studies, the essay has traditionally been seen as a secondary form in relation to the more serious genres of fiction, drama and poetry. Whenever the essay was discussed, it tended to be presented as an aspect of context for a more important literary canon. For example, how do Hazlitt's and Lamb's essays relate to the Romantic poetry movement in late 18th century and early 19th century England? Or how do Virginia Woolf's essays relate to her novels? Against this, I present the essay to my students of literature as a form with "aesthetic and literary" force and as worthy of detailed study for its own sake. In other words, I bring an aesthetic and formal

interest to the essay as well as a contextualization of the essay in historical contexts. This comes from my training in literature. From literary theory, I bring an awareness of the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the essay, its claims for self-expression and the way it thinks of its relation to the world "out there." I tend to question some of the narratives that the essay presents about itself, for example the idea that the essay is an expression of individual thought. What about language and our always being marked by the presence of the other, I ask?

But in the last few years, I've found that the influence also works the other way round and the debates in nonfiction or essay studies that are central in the US have infiltrated and markedly affected my thinking about, teaching of and writing about the essay. I've become more interested in the contemporary political contexts of the essay and the way the essay canon is shaped by traditions and institutions. So I've been reading differently and writing differently, asking my students to go for a wider range of topics and essayists in their research. Claudia Rankine, Eula Biss, Rebecca Solnit and Jia Tolentino, for example, are now on my syllabi along Montaigne, Woolf, Orwell, Lamb, Hazlitt and Seneca. We discuss the internet confessional essay, the American protest essay alongside John Keats's letters about Shakespeare, and so on and so forth.

**The book seems to locate the essay tradition in a distinctly masculine and lineage (Montaigne, Plutarch, etc.) and advocating for the "transgressive and future-oriented" (2) moving forward—what do you see as the future of nonfiction scholarship, who's writing it, what effect it's having on the creative side of the genre, and what do you envision as the evolution of the genre's theoretical conversations? What is the place of women in the nonfictional lineage? Of queer and nonbinary writers? Who are you reading that we should know about?**

This is a series of fascinating and complex questions all rolled into one. I'll do my best to address as many of them as I can.

First, the tradition. I think that for many reasons, literary history has tended to conceive of the essay as a form primarily written by men. Not just men, actually, but old men who find, in growing older, the wisdom and the time to reflect about the world and their life.

Now, of course, there are many qualifications to this statement. The first one is that as Jenny Spinner shows in her anthology *Of Women and the Essay*, this excludes a number of women essayists who deserve more recognition in the so-called essay canon but who might have been excluded for many reasons (think of what Woolf says about Shakespeare's sister, Judith, for instance). The second qualification is that if up until the end of the nineteenth century one might have found (for many reasons, most of which social and political) mostly men writing essays (with few important exceptions), since Virginia Woolf but especially in the last forty

years in the US, we have been blessed with, I'd argue, at least as many important women essayists as men. Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Rebecca Solnit, Eula Biss, Jamaica Kincaid, Leslie Jamison, Jia Tolentino, Zadie Smith, Cynthia Ozick, Elizabeth Hardwick, Jenny Diski, Alice Walker and so many more. For me, the contemporary essay is primarily the age of women essayists or, more precisely, non-white-male essayists.

Considering that *The Essay at the Limits* speaks about many of these non-white-male essayists in different ways, I'd qualify the claim that the book, as a whole, "locate[s] the essay tradition in a distinctly masculine and lineage." I'd say it recognizes this tradition while also calling it into question, repeatedly. In fact, not only women essayists but also the queer essay as well as essays by writers of marginalized groups are written about repeatedly in the book, with Aaron Aquilina, Allen C. Durgin, Jenny Spinner and Nicole B. Wallack, in particular, devoting whole chapters to these voices.

In *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, though, there's even more space for women and non-white-male essayists. The majority of writers whose contributions headline the book, for example – Claudia Rankine, Rebecca Solnit, Leslie Jamison, Jamaica Kincaid and Kaitlyn Greenidge, among others – are non-white-male voices.

I didn't use to categorize people according to gender and I didn't give this issue any weight when looking at potential contributors for *The Essay at the Limits*. I felt – and I still feel – it might be reductive to filter an evaluation of someone's work through their gender or race. Of course – through the reading I have done and the conversations I have had – I can see now, more than ever, why many would push in a different direction. It's related to what Claudia Rankine says about the white-male who tells her, in *Just US*, that he doesn't see colour. Jenny Spinner has written a great chapter on why we might wish to emphasize gender in our thinking of the essay in *The Edinburgh Companion* because to ignore gender – or race – is to ignore realities that have a tangible effect on what gets written. *The Edinburgh Companion* is very sensitive to this context and a look at the topics and the contributors shows a wide range of representation.

Having said that, I'm not too keen on the idea that we have to forget literary history, even if the version of literary history we have is by necessity incomplete. I am also not keen on forgetting the literary and aesthetic value of the essay in order to focus exclusively on the political. The essay can be political – it often is – but it can also be political in literary ways. Instead, I prefer to interrogate how that literary history was written, who was included and who excluded, preserving that which deserves to be preserved while also acknowledging that different times bring different expectations about what an essay is and should do and that, therefore, we should be open to change. And at the moment, not only do women have a place in the space of the essay, but, in my opinion, their place is central, now and in the future.



As to queer and non-binary writers, again, *The Essay at the Limits* has two chapters on the queer essay. *The Edinburgh Companion* has one on the transgender essay. First of all, the queer essay (both in the sense of the essay as a genre that defies normativity but also as a text written by queer people) is not new and this is becoming more obvious now. The provisionality of the genre and its ability to give a space to the marginalized, in my opinion, makes it particularly attractive to these issues. One of the strengths of the essay as a form is its malleability and openness to experimentation. If to essay is also to essay to be, then exploring identity (in its situated relations to others) is one of the main affordances of the genre (or anti-genre).

Which brings us to what I call the future-oriented nature of the essay. By this I mean that the essay, in being experimental and in being always on the lookout for a change of tone or swerve in thought, is characterized by a certain kind of expectation for the unexpected and the different. This makes it a somewhat paradoxical form in the sense that it is most clearly essayistic when it departs from the expected – which makes calling it a genre somewhat difficult.

However, if we were to look at the present of the essay, its current manifestations in various forms, we could maybe speculate about what we might see more of in the near future not only in the US but around the world. Firstly, I see a greater prevalence of the essay as a political tool. There is a long history of this in the American protest essay tradition that Cheryl Wall, Brian Norman and others have spoken about. This kind of essay is less popular in Anglo-European contexts, but the form – also because of its growing digital prevalence – is becoming more conducive to responding to immediate political and social issues like race, gender and climate change.

Secondly, the availability of digital platforms affects both the timeliness and circulation dynamics of the essay as well as the possibilities of formal experimentation with the combination of various modes (visual, filmic, aural, textual etc.). The essay has been an exclusively textual genre for centuries, but this is bound to change as we move further into the digital age. Thirdly, though I said above I think this is already happening, the essay today is far from a univocal space and, especially through the availability of digital platforms, but not just, it is a form that welcomes non-binary and non-white-male voices more than ever.

The theory of the essay can keep evolving by responding to these new realities. We need to question widely-held ideas such as the essay as simply amatorial, non-polemical, and as simply expressive of individuals. The essay can also be collaborative, the work of multiple individuals in a community. It can be engaged, polemical and willing to bring about change in the real world. And it is this kind of essay that I'm reading more, recently. I'm interested for example, in what the essay can do for our climate in a post-truth world. I am also interested in the

polyvocal essay that brings different voices together. I'm interested in the nature essay and also the essay that allows me to travel in the mind. So, in no particular order, the books on my closest shelves at the moment are by Brian Dillon, Claudia Rankine, Rebecca Solnit, W. G. Sebald, Robert Macfarlane, Susan Sontag, Olivia Laing and Roland Barthes.

**Thanks so much, Mario.**

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Karen Babine is Assay's editor and the award-winning author of *All the Wild Hungers: A Season of Cooking and Cancer* (Milkweed Editions, 2019) and *Water and What We Know: Following the Roots of a Northern Life* (University of Minnesota, 2015), both winners of the Minnesota Book Award for creative nonfiction. She is an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga

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### For Further Reading

Sam Cha  
*Unbearable Splendor:*  
Against "Hybrid" Genre; Against Genre  
Assay 5.2 (Spring 2019)

Esme Weijun Wang  
The Assay Interview Project  
January 1, 2019

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