

BYU Department of English
Creative Master's Thesis Prospectus

Candidate: Elizabeth Brady

Working Title: Physicality

Essay Titles

“(W)hole”

“Reaction”

“Classification of a Self: An Essay on Identity in Alphabetical Order”

...and about five more

Prospectus

Thematic Concept

The ancient Greek aphorism “Know thyself” inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi echoes a prevalent—and timeless—human impulse. Often, we attempt to make sense of ourselves by metacognition: thinking about how we think. Or examining our inscape: our feelings and emotional schemata. Our intuition naturally leads us to turn inward in pursuit of self-discovery and understanding. And once we open that door, we come to realize that, as Phillip Lopate described, “the self [is] a new continent.” (*The Art of the Personal Essay* 44) A new continent—an endless expanse of ground to cover. A new continent—where information gathered about other continents can only go so far; there comes a point when understanding the new continent must come from a study of the continent itself, its climates, landmarks and physical attributes, abilities and limitations, perimeters and depths. And while digging deep below the surface to obtain a core sample of the new continent offers an internal understanding, the external information also offers valuable knowledge. I believe a close study of the outer body can reveal significant insights into this new continent of the self.

Ever since I was a kid I have loved learning. Every subject in school was my favorite subject: reading, geography, math, writing, science, art, music. When I think about elementary school, I equate learning with happiness in a broad, blanketing way. But seventh grade pre-algebra did me in, and freshman geometry and sophomore physics sealed the deal: I was simply not a mathematically-minded type of person—numbers, data, facts, and formulas fell through my mind like water through a sieve. So in college, I specialized in English and creative writing. I happily redefined my notions of how to find truth in the subjects I was learning. I traded in scientific formulas and mathematical principles with their multiple choice, only-one-right-answer tests for analytical papers that allowed me to come to my own understanding of a text. I could respond with emotion to my subjects and that was completely valid. I was content. But a surprising thing started happening my last year of college: the more personal essays I wrote, the more these scientific concepts started cropping up. I realized that as I sought to understand myself through essaying, I turned to concrete principles to examine the abstract continent of myself. I relied on things such as calculus and medical reports as means to strip down my life to the barest elements of experience. For instance, in my essay “Reaction,” I detailed the findings of a diagnostic colonoscopy/endoscopy and the biological effects of various medications as a means to explore potential similarities in my failed relationships. I found strength and security in these seemingly irrefutable truths. Perhaps I wanted the hard facts to carry an emotional element about myself I couldn’t quite confront without the shield of quantifiable evidence. In this way, scientific principles gave me access to internal components of myself I would

otherwise have left unexplored. By examining the physicality of my self as a new continent, I gained entrance to the core of the new continent.

I have wondered why interiority alone isn't enough for me in my exploration of myself. And maybe it's a matter of trust. Typically, when we think about who we really are, we turn inward and rely on character traits ("I'm a kind person." "I've got a temper."), or worldviews ("I am a Christian."), or our experiences ("I am a product of the '70s.") to define ourselves. For centuries, the Cartesian separation of mind and body has dominated western understanding of the self. And with that division, a hierarchical binary evolved, especially in the Christian world, prizing "mind over matter" and a belief of the soul as something inherently good and the body inherently corrupt, a physical limitation to be conquered. Ultimately, humans are simply masses of thoughts and emotions housed in a physical case. But instead of fully trusting my inscape as the only representation of the "real" me, and discarding any insight provided by the external self, I can't help but think that the mind and body together provide the richest understanding of a complete self.

I don't always believe my emotions, and my thoughts and experiences are colored by the fiction that is created when I rely on memory—for memory is a creation of an experience—a single version of objective truth. Jerome K. Jerome also expresses this pitfall of relying on memory: "That is just the way with Memory; nothing that she brings to us is complete. She is a willful child; all her toys are broken" ("On memory"). So, no, memory, emotions, and experiences aren't enough for me to trust. I must also rely on the physical truths of the world and my body in order to navigate toward self understanding.

In this project, I will examine aspects of my physical self in conjunction with how they inform the construction of my metaphysical self. I will rely on scientific principles, facts, data, the physical laws of this world—the irrefutable, the tangible, the fact-checkable. I will also rely on the input of historical and current philosophical approaches to the self and the body's role to shape how exactly I go about trusting these external sources—there are some limitations to assigning meaning to the physicality of ourselves, like the culturally-imposed implications of certain bodily characteristics. Ultimately, in this project I aim to bridge the gap between the physical and the metaphysical. Perhaps most simply put, I will attempt to explore myself from the outside in.

Genre

In Montaigne's preface to his *Essays*, "To the Reader," he declares "[I] myself am the matter of my book." Personal essays are just that—writings about a person. Personal essayists seek to understand the self through a head-on examination of themselves. The self in action, the self in thought, the self in correlation to the world it inhabits. From the frivolous to the profound, the aim of a personal essay is to question the self in hopes of coming to a moment of discovery—what all these experiences come to, what it is to be a person in this world.

This quest of understanding our subject matter isn't merely an exercise in vanity. Montaigne explains, "Had my intention been to seek the world's favour, I should surely have adorned myself with borrowed beauties: I desire therein to be viewed as I appear in mine own, genuine, simple, and ordinary manner, without study and artifice: for it is myself I paint" ("To the Reader"). Personal essayists examine their subject matter—as thoroughly and honestly as possible. To me, this is the appeal of the personal essay. We try to order and process information rather than create it. Scott Russell Sanders agreed that the essayist doesn't try to hide anything, but of necessity for a complete understanding must be comfortable with a high level of exposure. He said, "Unlike novelists and play-wrights, who lurk behind the scenes while distracting our attention with the puppet show of imaginary characters—and unlike scholars and journalists, who quote the opinions of others and take cover behind the hedges of neutrality—the essayist has nowhere to hide" ("The Singular First

Person”). This bold, scrutinizing approach to ourselves as subject matter offers an authentic and complex view of a single life.

The personal essayist is interested in the self as a means to understand *beyond* the self—humanity as a whole. Bret Lott describes this purpose behind creative nonfiction: “the image that comes to mind is that of the Russian nesting dolls, one person inside another inside another. But instead of finding smaller selves inside the self, the opposite occurs . . . we find nested inside the smallest of selves a larger self, and a larger inside that, until we come to the whole of humanity within our own hearts” (“Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction” 198). Personal essays reveal the complexities, hypocrisies, victories of a person—reflective of the complexities, hypocrisies, and victories of the human family. By writing in the personal essay genre, I aim to take myself as my subject matter and thus gain access to the human experience.

Type of Work

I will craft personal essays comprised of various approaches to my body as myself. For instance, I will explore aspects of my body such as my hair length, my Crohn’s disease, my identity as a redhead, my sleeping positions. I will essay on massages I’ve received, and panic attacks I’ve experienced. But even with all this variety, the collection’s thematic scaffolding will create a sense of unity throughout. Each essay will be a discreet exploration of physicality while together they will build a full-bodied mosaic of a person.

These explorations will reflect the tradition of the lyric essay subgenre. As a hybrid of poetry, essay, memoir, and research, this form offers a lot of flexibility. My essays will reflect this merging in attention to the musicality of language as in poetry; exploration, meditation, and reflection as in traditional essays; an autobiographical stance as in memoir; and reliance upon outside materials as in researched essays. In the *Seneca Review*, editor Deborah Tall and lyric essay associate editor John D’Agata discuss attributes of the lyric essay, including the lyric essay’s “overt desire to engage with facts,” which reflects the emphasis on physicality in my project. They also explain that the lyric essay “often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosiacally”. This form is well-suited for my project as I portray meaning between the physical and metaphysical through metaphor and accumulation.

Benefit

The most immediate benefit of this collection is my own understanding of myself. As I write creative nonfiction, I make sense of the world and my place in it. This particular collection will enable me to see myself for the complexities I am comprised of—especially as I delve into the physical experiences and data of my body and how they inform my metaphysical self. This is vastly beneficial to me, as concrete truths of our bodies can become access points for metaphysical truths. As I undertake this collection, I will also seek out and research such scientific information as muscular anatomy for an essay on massage, psychological theories and patterns for an essay on anxiety, memory theory for an essay against memory and toward physicality, and much more—information about a wide range of subjects I otherwise would not have a natural exposure to. This is not only incredibly interesting and exciting to me, but will increase my general knowledge of how the world works and help constrict the gap in my English-heavy education.

The benefits of this project for me go beyond subject matter. I will also grow as a writer as I not only work to generate and craft the content of a large-scale, long-term, cohesive project, but also as I work through the process of revision. The opportunity to focus on producing and then refining a large body of work will cultivate in me a critical awareness of my writing—a more informed understanding of the choices available to writers, and the impact of the choices I am making in my writing. These tenets of quality writing will serve me well as I continue writing and seeking

publication after completion of my MFA, and possibly pursue a Ph.D. in order to teach creative writing at the college and graduate level.

As I seek publication in such journals as *The Seneca Review*, *River Teeth*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Normal School* and others, I will benefit immensely from staying informed in the current trends of the genre through wide reading while gaining knowledge on the quality of publishable writing and the submission process. Publication will increase my exposure and realm of influence to readers, which, as they experience my explorations of self as explorations of humanity, will influence their understanding in kind. Readers of my essays will become open to the possibility of another means of understanding themselves and those around them: the marriage of external data with the internal schemata we generally rely on. The more avenues available to understand the continent of the self, the more fully we can satisfy the credo “Know thyself.”

Timeline

- October 2013: File prospectus
- March 2014: Complete first rough draft
- April/May 2014: Revise
- June 2014: Defend

Annotated Bibliography

I. Creative Sources

Borich, Barrie Jean. *Body Geographic*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2013. Print.

Borich’s memoir explores the self in relation to external surroundings. This will serve as a model for how scientific-based information like geography can inform our identities. I am interested in examining how exactly she goes about drawing parallels between these geographic elements and her inner self.

Cappello, Mary. *Awkward: A Detour*. New York: Bellevue LP, 2007. Print.

Capello explores a single concept, awkwardness, from a variety of approaches. She implicates her identity in the journey, and these two aspects of the book will benefit me as I also approach a single concept (self) through multiple approaches (elements of the body).

D’Aoust, Renée. *Body of a Dancer*. Wilkes-Barre: Etruscan P, 2011. Print.

D’Aoust is interested in the body as a testament to the life of dance it has endured. This narrative will provide insight into the stories our physical bodies can tell about our experiences, and how to communicate those concepts effectively.

Franzen, Jonathan. “My Father’s Brain.” *How to Be Alone: Essays*. New York: Picador, 2002. Print.

Franzen’s narrative recounts his father’s experience with Alzheimer’s disease, and the implications on his brain, as confirmed by an autopsy report. This essay also discusses memory as creations, rather than objective, wholly reliable fact. This will be a good model in how to incorporate material such as medical reports into my essays.

Grealy, Lucy. *Autobiography of a Face*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1995. Print.

Grealy's narrative traces her experiences with childhood cancer and a resultant surgical removal of half her jaw. Grealy's account will serve as a model in methods of describing physical attributes and experiences as well as reflections on the value and identity she and others ascribed to her because of this physical attribute.

Jerome, Jerome K.. "On memory." 1886. *Quotidiana*. Ed. Patrick Madden. 31 Dec 2008. Web. 01 Oct 2013.

This classical essay explores the concept of memory and remembrance. Jerome expresses distrust in memory as experiences can never be repeated and we remember experiences in fragmented ways—especially recalling the golden moments. This notion supports my assertion of memory as faulty and therefore unsuited for a complete understanding of the self.

Lopate, Phillip, ed. *The Art of the Personal Essay*. New York: Anchor, 1995. Print.

This anthology is the cornerstone of the personal essay. Lopate's collection traces the essay from its origins to modernity. With its table of contents divided by topic and form, this anthology will provide useful models of both of physical subject matter and options in methodology.

Lopate, Phillip. *Portrait of My Body*. New York: Anchor, 1996. Print.

In this essay collection, Lopate explores the self through two main lenses: as a skeptic and as an egotist. He explores the limits of his self through these lenses. I will examine these essays as models of looking inward to define the self, but especially at his title essay, in which he details a physical exam, as a model for approaching the self from the outside in.

Mairs, Nancy. *Ordinary Time: Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal*. Boston: Beacon P, 1995. Print.

Mairs's memoir recounts many aspects of her life, but I will be most interested in her approaches to sicknesses in her family and herself as well as her discussions on the body.

Miller, Brenda. *Seasons of the Body: Essays*. Louisville: Sarabande, 2002. Print.

Miller's collection also focuses on the body as its central subject. I am interested to see how she goes about this, what approaches she takes, and how these essays combine into a cohesive collection.

Montaigne, Michel de. Selected Essays. *Quotidiana*. Ed. Patrick Madden. Web.

Montaigne's essays serve as foundational examples in the classical essay. His methods of approaching the self through physical means in various essays will inform my project.

Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. Seattle: Wave, 2009. Print.

Nelson approaches her central subject, suffering and depression, by mediating on the color blue. I will be interested in seeing how exactly she makes this concept and its approach new each time she meditates on the same color. This will also inform my ideas of how to convey the shaping of the inner self by way of things outside ourselves.

Patchett, Ann. *Truth and Beauty*. New York: HarperCollins, 2004. Print.

Patchett and Lucy Grealy were best friends, and this book focuses on both of their personal stories—especially the shared moments. Patchett herself underwent facial surgeries. I am interested to see the differences in Grealy's and Patchett's approaches to facial attributes informing identity.

Purpura, Lia. *On Looking: Essays*. Louisville: Sarabande, 2006. Print.

Purpura's essay collection is concentrated on the aesthetics and ethics of seeing. This physical aspect of a body will be insightful for my project, especially her essay "Autopsy Report" that details a body after death.

II. Theoretical Sources

Addison, Joseph. "On the essay form." 1711. *Quotidiana*. Ed. Patrick Madden. 18 Jan. 2007. 8 Oct. 2013.

Addison's piece discusses the constraints and affordances of the essay form—the necessity of brevity and the effect of the short form on the reader. Addison's comments will shape my skill set as I participate in the genre.

Atkins, Kim. *Self and Subjectivity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. *Wiley Online Library Online Books*. 8 Oct. 2013.

Atkins' book compiles commentary on the development of the concepts of self and subjectivity in philosophy and feminism. The book includes discussions of identity, self-consciousness, and more, but I'll be especially interested in the chapters on analytic philosophy—materialism and bodily continuity.

Christiansen, Naomi Lund. "Learning to Create: A Collection of Personal Essays." MA thesis. Brigham Young U, 2004. Print.

Christiansen's creative MA thesis explores the experiences of a female body—using a literary theory and feminism and other body critics as a foundation. This thesis includes essays I will refer to for samples, and the theoretical discussion of the female body will inform my own research in the subject area.

Crabbe, James C. *From Soul to Self*. London: Routledge, 1999. Print.

Crabbe explores the soul/self relationship through lenses of philosophy, theology, and physiological sciences. This resource will give me a more nuanced grasp of the history of the soul/self relationship.

Dillard, Annie. "Coming of Age in Pittsburgh: To Fashion a Text." *The Wilson Quarterly* 12.1 (1988): 164-172. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 March 2013.

Dillard's essay describes the necessity of deciding what to keep and what to cut in memoir; our experience and memory hold more than we can recount. She cautions against memoir as a preservation of memories—the writing of them will replace them. Not only does this piece inform how I go about essaying in general, but will also be useful in my argument against memory.

Feinberg, Todd E. and Julian Paul Keenan. *The Lost Self: Pathologies of the Brain and Identity*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. *Academic Complete*. 8 Oct. 2013.

This book approaches the neurobiological basis of the self—exploring how the brain creates who we are. Also included are studies and commentary on when the brain doesn't function correctly and the resultant transformations in the self.

Klaus, Carl H., and Ned Stuckey-French. *Essayists on the Essay: Four Centuries of Commentary*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2012. Print.

This anthology collects essayists' critical commentary on the essay's purpose, practice, and form, spanning the history of the essay. This will benefit my understanding of the essay genre and my place within it.

Klaus, Carl H. *The Made-up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010. Print.

Klaus confronts the problematic nature of the persona in essaying, examining the line between the person behind the essay and a rehearsed character portrayed on the page. This will inform my general knowledge on the essay form, but also address the fiction/nonfiction line I am also interested in.

Lopate, Phillip. Introduction. *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Ed. Phillip Lopate. New York: Anchor-Random, 1997. xxiii-liv. Print.

In Lopate's introduction to his anthology, he not only traces the history of the personal essay, but offers a catalogue of the many faces of the personal essay, including his interpretations on the form. This indispensable guide will help me familiarize myself with the tradition of the genre and my place in it as I participate through this project.

Lopate, Phillip. *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*. New York, Free P, 2013. Print.

Lopate's latest book on craft discusses many relevant topics to my project, like persona and turning myself into a character, imagination, the question of nonfiction as fiction, and research.

Lott, Bret. "Toward a Definition of Creative Nonfiction." *Fourth Genre* 2:1 (2000): 192-200. *Project Muse Standard Collection*. Web. 13 March 2013.

Lott explains that in creative nonfiction, we are seeking understanding of experiences, order amidst chaos. Often, the essayist seeks meaning in the ordinary—and these are the subjects of my project.

Monson, Ander. "Essay as Hack." <http://otherelectricities.com/swarm/essayashack.html>.

Monson equates essaying to hacking computer systems: the point is to get inside seemingly impenetrable barriers and understand the inner workings of the system. Monson speaks on thinking about the self as the method to hack the self, but I'm also interested in focusing on those "barriers" of the self—the physical body.

Moore, Dinty W. *Crafting the Personal Essay: A Guide for Writing and Publishing Creative Nonfiction*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 2010. Print.

Moore's guide to personal essay craft offers insight and examples on a variety of forms and topics in traditional personal essays, including the personal essay, memoir essay, contemplative essay, lyric, spiritual, gastronomical, and more—forms and themes I will undertake in my project.

Philippson, Peter. *The Emergent Self: An Existential-Gestalt Approach*. London: Karnac, 2009. *Academic Complete*. Web. 8 Oct. 2013.

Philippson also traces the self from a philosophical lens, focusing especially on psychotherapy theories. This will help me gain an understanding of how the self comes to view ourselves as individuals and what that looks like from a clinical psychology perspective.

Sanders, Scott Russell. "The Singular First Person." *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*. Ed. Alexander J. Butrym. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989. 31-42. Print.

Sanders's piece examines the concept of writing from our personal experiences and perspectives. He lauds the essay as the "closest thing we have, on paper, to a record of the individual mind at work and at play" (32). This supports my project, as I will be working through my understanding of my self on paper.

Shields, David. *Reality Hunger*. New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.

Shields argues that contemporary culture hungers for nonfiction since our world is becoming increasingly unrealistic. Due to this hunger, nonfiction writers should be exploring and offering new forms in nonfiction to mirror the contemporary experience. This will inform my understanding of the current conversations in the genre, and I hope my new perspective on the physical and metaphysical will be a step toward these new approaches Shields calls for.

Smith, Alexander. From "On the Writing of Essays." *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time*. Ed. Klaus, Carl H., and Ned Stuckey-French. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2012. 25-28. Print.

Smith's essay describes the effect of essaying on the essayist—or maybe what it takes to be an essayist. Either way, he lauds essaying as a way of life. This source serves as a sort of blueprint to living that essayistic life that will enrich my own essays.

Reading List

I. English 667R: Creative Nonfiction Workshop, Winter 2013 (Madden)

Bakewell, Sarah. *How to Live, Or, a Life of Montaigne: One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*. New York: Other, 2010. Print.

Brooks, David, and Robert Atwan. *The Best American Essays 2012*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. Print.

Leach, Amy. *Things That Are*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2012. Print.

McGlynn, David. *A Door in the Ocean: A Memoir*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012. Print.

Spiegelman, Willard. *Seven Pleasures: Essays on Ordinary Happiness*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009. Print.

Sanders, Scott Russell. "The Singular First Person." *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*. Ed. Alexander J. Butrym. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1989. 31-42. Print.

II. English 617: Creative Writing Theory, Winter 2013 (Larsen)

Klaus, Carl H., and Ned Stuckey-French. *Essayists on the Essay: Four Centuries of Commentary*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2012. Print.

III. English 669R: Poetry Workshop, Fall 2013 (Johnson)

Arnold, Craig. *Made Flesh*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2008. Print.

Beachy-Quick, Dan. *This Nest, Swift Passerine: A Poem*. North Adams: Tupelo, 2009. Print.

Ford, Katie. *Colosseum: Poems*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2008. Print.

Koch, Kenneth. *New Addresses*. New York: Knopf, 2000. Print.

Kooser, Ted. *Delights and Shadows*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2004. Print.

Manning, Maurice. *Bucolics*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2007. Print.

Plath, Sylvia. *Colossus and Other Poems*. New York: Vintage International, 1998. Print.

Perillo, Lucia. *On the Spectrum of Possible Deaths*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, 2012. Print.

Revell, Donald. *The Bitter Withy*. Farmington: Alice James, 2009. Print.

Ryan, Kay. *Say Uncle*. New York: Grove, 2009. Print.

Young, Dean. *Embryoyo*. San Francisco: Believer, 2007. Print.

IV. English 667R: Creative Nonfiction Workshop, Fall 2013 (Madden)

- Atwan, Robert and Cheryl Strayed, eds. *The Best American Essays 2013*. Boston: Mariner, 2013. Print.
- Bonomo, Joe. *This Must Be Where My Obsession with Infinity Began*. Memphis: Orphan, 2013. Print.
- Doyle, Brian. *Leaping: Revelations and Epiphanies*. Chicago: Loyola, 2013. Print.
- Hemley, Robin. *Do-Over! In Which a Forty-Eight-Year-Old Father of Three Returns to Kindergarten, Summer Camp, the Prom, and Other Embarrassments*. New York: Little, Brown, 2009. Print.
- Klaus, Carl and Ned Stuckey-French. *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2012. Print.
- Lopate, Phillip. *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*. New York: Free P, 2013. Print.
- Swanson, Matthew and Robbi Behr. *Understanding Traffic: An Expert Account*. Chestertown: Idiots', 2007. Print.

V. English 667R: Creative Nonfiction Workshop, Winter 2014 (Franklin)