

Treptych

Contextualizing statement

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As a teacher, my work tends to fall into four categories: interdisciplinary environmental humanities, American and comparative literature, literary theory (especially ecocritical theory), and writing. These categories overlap, of course. At the University of Idaho, one of our major graduate-level programs in the English Department is the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) program in creative writing, for which I teach occasional workshops in nonfiction writing. When I offer such classes, my students work on a single long essay, which is ‘workshopped’ in stages throughout the semester, and on almost-weekly short essays, which we call ‘flash nonfiction.’ I ask my students to spend no longer than half an hour drafting their flash pieces.

For my nonfiction workshop in 2014, the overarching theme of the class was ‘The Body.’ The students wrote various essays with body-oriented themes. Who’s not interested in the body? The results of the workshop were impressive, with many students successfully finding journals and magazines to publish their flash pieces or their longer essays. My weekly prompts that semester were as follows: ‘The intelligence of our sensing bodies’; ‘Freak’; ‘Body in trouble’; ‘Pain’; ‘Thinking with a damaged brain’; ‘Flowering uniquely with the gains and losses of age’; ‘Hanging on ... as close to total exhaustion as it is possible to get without dying’; and ‘...another miraculous property... (contemplating something marvellous about the/your body).’ In addition to spending time in class discussing the students’ work (which was distributed prior to each class session), we also read book-length examples of body-oriented nonfiction, and the flash prompts were linked to each of these books, such as David Abram’s *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* and Eli Clare’s *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*.

I have written many full-length literary essays, but when I was teaching my workshop on body writing a few semesters ago I had done only one flash nonfiction project of my own, a set of twelve short essays on Indian culture, which I titled ‘Thali’ (named after the Indian meal consisting of numerous small dishes) and wrote during a series of flights when I was traveling home from Kolkata to Idaho in 2012. On a flight to visit my retired PhD advisor during a mid-semester break when I was teaching the body-writing workshop, I lowered my tray table and assigned myself three flash nonfiction essays. There’s something about flash nonfiction that’s well suited to the short bits of uninterrupted time one experiences on airplanes. I had written the three titles on a small piece of paper that I carried in my pocket—I often start my work with a title and then develop the manuscript from there. I drafted the essays by hand on pieces of blank printer paper, spending half an hour on each. One of the flight attendants stopped at my table when she saw me intently writing page after page. ‘What are you doing?’ she asked. ‘Writing,’ I said. ‘I’m a writer.’ ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I’d like to read what you’re writing.’ But then she got busy serving drinks to other passengers and never returned to see the finished essays. I’ve presented these pieces during various literary events, though—flash nonfiction works well for literary readings, as it tends to be easily graspable for listeners. When I write such essays, I try to tell a brief story or at least to have a clear, central idea, one that is captured in the title. Perhaps the brevity and relative simplicity of the flash genre makes it a good medium for communicating to general audiences—to readers and listeners who may not have the energy to pay attention to more intricate texts.

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