

Giving the Twenty-First Century a Try: Canadian and Québécois Women Writers as Essayists

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This essay applies the exploration and discussion of twenty-first-century women's writing in Canada and Quebec to the essay genre itself.¹ A form of writing that traces its origins back to Michel de Montaigne's 1580 *Essais* and Sir Francis Bacon's 1597 *Essays*,² this genre's place in Canadian and Québécois literary history includes a long and impressive practice by women writers, but a practice that is not well known.³ The focus here is on essay writing by Canadian

¹ I use the word essay—*essai* in French—but other terms are in currency for this body of writing, such as “creative non-fiction.” In French, the word “*essai*” can apply to a quite a long, book-length text. In English, it more typically refers to shorter pieces and the term “creative non-fiction” or “literary non-fiction” is used for the longer, book-length essay in English. In her 2002 collection *Going Some Place: Creative non-fiction across Canada*, Lynne van Luven includes under the rubric creative non-fiction “poetic personal journals, meditations, memoirs, activist personal reportage, autobiography, personal essays on being an outsider, historical and literary travelogues, tributes to a particular person, celebrations of a distinctive place, and explorations of the past” (ii). In a discussion about the annual Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction, *National Post* contributor Merrily Weisbord describes literary non-fiction as “mixed genre” writing—biography, memoir, travel, adventure, sociology, sexology, anthropology—a mix that she admires for its colourful idiosyncrasy. Perspectives such as these suggest a very broad and varied contemporary understanding of non-fiction or essay writing practices. For some, they may seem too wide, but even a brief consideration of the history and development of the essay reveals that it is actually a much more flexible genre than its common association with the academic exercise would suggest.

² The essay has twin origins and adherents—one stemming from a personal and informal French tradition tracing back to Michel de Montaigne's 1580 *Essais*, the other from a more formal and empiricist English tradition, associated with Sir Francis Bacon's 1597 *Essay*. Montaigne introduced the genre in 1580 with the publication of a collection of writings, *Essais*, in which he “tried” (*essayait*) to express his thoughts and feelings on a variety of different subjects. As practised by Montaigne, the essay offered a more free-form presentation that allowed unconventional connections of facts and speculation and liberation from a linear format and argumentation. Meanwhile, short years later, England's Sir Francis Bacon introduced a very different kind of essay. Rather than the personal, Bacon focused on the observable and factual. His essays comprised empirical observations that described with ostensibly scientific accuracy the world around him. They offered advice and guidance to readers in a utilitarian, public and purposeful way. “Bacon's essays were meant to reach a public audience that would act on his word,” essay scholar Cristina Kirklighter observes; “[Their] didactic nature [...] moves away from the inconclusive skepticism that pervades Montaigne's form” (10). Where the French style of essay could be characterized as personal, intimate, informal or conversational, the English essay could be characterized as impersonal, objective, methodical, rational, and pedagogic. See Verduyn 2007, 2012.

³ One might well be surprised by the extent of essay writing by Canadian and Québécois women novelists and poets. The literary history of this country boasts a rich and lengthy tradition of their practice of the essay genre. Margaret Laurence, Adele Wiseman, Jane Rule, Margaret Atwood, Michele Lalonde, Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, Madeleine Gagnon, Dionne Brand, and Lee Maracle are just a few writers on a list that could go back as far as Pauline Johnson, Edith Eaton (aka Sui Sin Far), Emily Carr, Nellie McClung, and that includes women not only from

and Québécois women writers since 2000 and in particular by women writers more familiar to the literary world as poets and novelists than as essayists. The essay begins with a brief overview of aspects of essay writing by Canadian and Québécois women writers at the end of the twentieth century by way of a foundation for some comparative observations which will suggest both convergence and difference, both continuity and departure in essay writing by Canadian and Québécois women writers since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

For many Canadian and Québécois women writers, the essay has offered an ideal venue for combining new, innovative, experimental and “alternative” forms of writing with concerns of personal and political struggle for social, cultural, economic, and even psychological recognition and justice. The 1980s and 1990s were especially exciting for convergences and coalitions among women writers pursuing these goals in English Canada and Quebec. In collaborations such as the collections *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing* (1986) and *La théorie, un dimanche* (1988), or the bilingual cultural journal *Tessera*, Canadian and Québécois women writers—among them Nicole Brossard, Daphne Marlatt, Louky Bersianik, Gail Scott, France Théorêt, Betsy Warland, and Erin Mouré—explored and expressed understandings and experiences of identity and desire beyond the boundaries of heterosexuality and patriarchal reality. Language and literary form were central to these explorations and publications as were innovation and experimentation, resistance and protest. As illustrated by essay collections from writers such as P.K. Page, Aritha van Herk, and Bronwen Wallace, pens were filled, frozen tongues were thawed and unleashed, arguments were presented, and previously invisible work

English-speaking Canada and French-speaking Quebec, but also from the country’s various cultural and aboriginal communities. While my focus is the essay as practised by women writers of fiction, the list could readily extend to include Canadian and Québécois women who are primarily non-fiction writers, such as Myrna Kostash, Naomi Klein, Linda McQuaig, Irshad Manji, Lise Bissonnette, Lysiane Gagnon, Nathalie Petrowski. Quite simply, this is a hefty and important body of work. See Verduyn 2007, 2012.

Giving the Twenty-First Century a Try: Canadian and Québécois Women Writers as Essayists came into view.⁴ Like so many air-borne letters, women's essay writing took off. Published in 1985, Brossard's *La lettre aérienne* was at the heart of a decade of analysis of patriarchy by Canadian and Québécois women. Concerns about, and writing against, injustices deriving from sexism and racism expanded steadily throughout the 1990s as women writers in English Canada and Quebec read the writing on the wall and looked into the dark side of nation. Once opened, the door to a different experience of Canada, and in particular to a different experience of being a writer in Canada, led to some critical moments of consciousness and to well-warranted pressure on aspects of assumed coalition among women writers. Lee Maracle, for example, expressed the concern of many Aboriginal authors that non-Aboriginal writers were "speaking for" Aboriginal culture, and asked these writers to "move over" and make room for Aboriginal writers to speak for themselves. In an essay entitled "Who's Listening: artists, audience & language," Marlene NourBese Philip found much to criticize "in the articulation of Western liberal feminism: the movement has become racist and classist in its practices [she asserted], although there have been some tiny tremors and even some cracks along fault lines" (43). Into these cracks and fault lines, Canadian and Québécois women novelists and poets wrote essays, examining "issues spinning out of colonialism, imperialism, class and gender, not as discretely existing objective categories," as Himani Bannerji explained, "but as social and ideological moments of each other" (*Writing on the Wall* ix-x). In this, it was no accident, as Lola Lemire Tostevin observed, that the essay became such an important genre for women:

Through feminist awareness many women writers faced the realization that previously held assumptions—whether universal, social or cultural—were changing. We were being

⁴ The allusion here is to P.K. Page's *The Filled Pen*, Aritha van Herk's *Frozen Tongue* (1992) and *In Visible Ink: crypto-fictions* (1991), and Bronwen Wallace's *Arguments with the World* (1992). The sentences that follow allude to Nicole Brossard's *La lettre aérienne* (1985), Himani Bannerji's *The Writing on the Wall: Essays on Culture and Politics* (1993) and *Dark Side of Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism, and Gender* (2000), M. NourBese Philip's *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture* (1992), and Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (2001).

pulled into unexplored territory, our writing often translated from the unknown as we attempted to redefine the boundaries beyond cultural and gender differences. The exploration of unidentified territory through poems, short stories, and novels became central to our work, but there were so many new ideas being tossed about that many of us felt we needed another genre to help us clarify the nature of our inquiries, to help us formulate and record our individual and collective ideas. Writing a review or an essay, usually based on someone else's writing, reassured us that we were participating, at last, in the making of literature and the changes it reflected. To paraphrase Ruth-Ellen Boetcher Joeres and Elizabeth Mittman in their editors' introduction to *The Politics of the Essay*, the essay is an act of personal witness: at once an inscription of the self and a description of subject and object as they relate to one another. [...] Inscribing ourselves into a critical genre [the essay] affords us a vehicle through which we can explore the different facets of new territory while creating new levels of understanding. (*Subject to Criticism*, 9-10)

In the process of exploring possible reconfigurations of social relations and alternative political positions, Canadian and Québécois women's essay writing stretched and widened the cracks and fault lines that Philip and other women writers in Canada and Quebec described, creating broader spaces of communication and exchange. They also expanded the essay genre itself. "Canadian and Québécois women writers began to redefine the essay," Lola Lemire Tostevin observed; they began "to cross genres, interweave different levels of discourse. The essay was suddenly invaded by poems, personal anecdotes, autobiographical fragments. Abstract and master concepts were displaced" (10).

If this describes Canadian and Québécois women writers' "essaying" at the close of the twentieth century, what has transpired during the first dozen years of the new millennium? This essay suggests that there have been continuities and innovations. To begin, there have been many happy returns—or continuities—among twenty-first-century Canadian and Québécois women writers as essayists. This is particularly the case in Quebec. Essay writing remains an important part of Nicole Brossard's prolific productivity, for example, and writers now into their eighties, such as Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska and Antonine Maillet, have continued to bring out new collections of essays. So have Madeleine Gagnon, France Théoret, Suzanne Jacob, Monique

LaRue, Madeleine Monette, Louise Dupré, Louise Warren, Lise Gauvin, Lori Saint-Martin, and Régine Robin, who has been particularly prodigious in the essay domain since 2000. The same may be said of Margaret Atwood in English Canada. Not only has she been productive, she has been provocative and high profile.⁵ English Canadian readers have also enjoyed continued essay publication by writers such as Erin Mouré/Erín Moure, Betsy Warland, and Aritha van Herk, as well as by some new contributors to the genre, such as poet Alice Major, with her 2011 *Intersecting Sets: A Poet Looks at Science*. The discussion of difference in all its dimensions—gender, cultural background, sexual orientation—has continued, as has the concern to address difference in respectful and equitable ways. Issues in society and politics remain key concerns along with the act of writing and the work of language itself. At the same time, there has been discontinuity, notably in the extent of dialogue between women writing in English and in French that flourished in the early 1980s. Compared to the end of the twentieth century, essay production by Canadian and Québécois women writers in the first decade of the twenty-first century has not been as extensive—at least not in the form of print publication. Alternative forms, however, have emerged in which women writers are continuing to “have a say”—to “essay.” Of particular note is the internet blog, a development divergently more noticeable in English Canada than in Quebec.

Blogs are already among the more familiar forms of internet writing, a practice one media commentator recently described as “writer-centric” (Prickett 8). “On one side of the Internet,” Sarah Nicole Prickett has noted, “you have ‘content,’ farmed en masse by bot-like editors. On the other side you have ‘voices’”—and personality: “In an economy that’s the most saturated, the most precarious, and the least compensated it’s ever been, a writer’s ‘voice,’ or personality, or

⁵ Atwood’s book-essay on debt, *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth*, received high-profile media attention, including as the subject of a documentary film, *Manufactured Landscapes*, by Jennifer Baichwal.

[...] ‘personal brand,’ is more important than ever.” An example might serve to illustrate Prickett’s point. Consider the impact and importance of an internet site like Lemon Hound. Subtitled “more bark than bite since 2005,” Lemon Hound offers poetry, reviews, conversation, and commentary as well as “essays and fragments.” Launched as a single author blog by Sine Queyras in 2005, Lemon Hound now appears as a multiply authored blog. Here one finds the “voices” Prickett refers to, on a range of topics too broad and long to list. Together they are forging a new “literary un-tradition,” as Prickett terms this new trend in writing. In particular, one finds quality essay writing by Canadian (and non-Canadian) women (and men) among them many writers of fiction.

While the internet as essay outlet is still developing, a number of notable sites or blogs have been serving fiction writers and readers alike for several years. Margaret Atwood’s is a case in point. An advocate of the internet and of technology in general as a support for literacy, Atwood has a formidable internet presence, with nearly 300,000 readers following her on the web. At the December 2011 “Next Media” conference in Toronto, Atwood argued that the internet and social media outlets like Twitter can serve as tools toward literacy. For Atwood literacy “isn’t the ability to read James Joyce. It’s the ability to read and write.” This is not to equate literacy with the essay, but the new form (blog or twitter), while noticeably shorter in expression, nevertheless still allows a writer to have her “say.” Even as she embraces technology, Atwood acknowledges its limits, and she has continued to bring out traditional print-form essays as well. Since 2000 alone, she has published six volumes of non-fiction. Works such as *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008), and *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011) have all received wide media attention. This is attention well deserved, Adair Brouwer has argued, noting that

Atwood writes with “x-ray vision” about nothing less than a “history of human obligation, economic and otherwise” (31). Joining Atwood in a twenty-first-century, twofold—both print and internet—approach to “essay-ing” is poet and novelist Dionne Brand. Brand’s blog “rabble” offers rousing critiques of Canadian politics, in particular the policies of the Conservative government, such as the recent cutbacks to public libraries, as well as blog-essays on the importance of religious freedom, democracy, and women’s rights, the problem of poverty, and the role of art and culture. Blogs by other novelists and poets as well, such as Lynn Coady, Karen Connelly, Hiromi Goto, and a growing list of others, offer further compelling examples of the twofold essay practice—print plus internet—in the twenty-first century.

With notable exceptions such as novelist Catherine Mavrikakis’s “e-carnet,” *L'éternité en accéléré*, six comparable examples are interestingly less prominent among Québécois women writers since 2000. More than internet blogging, the Montaigne style essay, often in the form of print volumes no less, continues to characterize Québécois women writers’ practice of the genre in the twenty-first century. More than one Québécois writer actively references Montaigne’s *essais*, as poet Louise Warren does in her essay-volume *Bleu de Delft*. “Nous avons parlé de Montaigne,” Warren writes, “de ses essais libres et de leur étonnante architecture formelle [...] Je n’ai rien à déclarer sur les murs, je n’ai rien d’autre à déclarer que ce livre de Montaigne dans la grande poche de mon manteau” (12). Toward the end of the volume, still reflecting on the essay genre and her use of it, Warren writes:

L’essai propose à la fois l’épreuve, la tentative et l’effort, l’exploration et la découverte, juste assez de flânerie pour être disponible, à l’écoute et curieux. Tant de possibilités puisque, dans chaque trait se vit un lent processus de transformation, une sorte de voyage initiatique, comme s’il y a un lieu dans l’écriture ou l’on peut errer, les mains dans les poches, ou creuser, raturer, chercher, recommencer, avoir droit d’une certaine manière à plus que son dictionnaire, à son atelier, et à soi-même comme forme, épreuve, matière. (105)

Comme essayiste, je rêve encore d'une pensée dont la vitesse serait en accord avec mon écriture. (109)

The subtitle of Warren's *Bleu de Delft—Archives de solitude*—evokes the personal, emotional contours of her *essai* and the key role of writing. “La solitude que je redoutais avant de commencer cet essai se compare à un épais brouillard qui à présent s'estompe” (55). This personal, poetic style characterizes Warren's follow-up essay-volume, *Attachements: observation d'une bibliothèque* (2010), in which the poet writes about the many books that have had meaning and significance for her, among them numerous essay-volumes by other writers, from Virginia Woolf to Marie Uguay and back to Montaigne: “Montaigne me communique sa liberté, son plaisir. Même son nom se traduit par l'image d'une marche en montagne, qui ne se fait pas au course, mais à mon rythme, accordée à ce que je vois, ressens, imagine” (170). “Apprendre à multiplier les essais,” Warren writes, “fait partie du travail de création” (34).

To cite the personal dimension of Warren's *Bleu de Delft* is not to suggest an absence of social and political commentary or of an outward gaze in essay writing by Québécois *écrivaines* since 2000. Poet Madeleine Gagnon turns her attention to *Les femmes et la guerre* (2000) while short story writer Lise Gauvin enjoins readers to reflect on *Les littératures de langue française à l'heure de la mondialisation* (2010). “On constate encore aujourd'hui,” Gauvin writes in introducing the collection, “que [...] l'image de la francophonie reste d'abord liée au contexte de la colonisation, et plus particulièrement à l'Afrique” (15). “Comment les écrivains québécois se situent-ils dans le contexte de la francophonie?” she asks. “Quels types de liens peut-on établir entre les différentes aires francophones?” (30). Globalization and colonization are subjects of concern and violence is a recurring theme. Madeleine Monette, in *La violence au féminin*, is concerned with violence in the contemporary urban context, a combination that leads her to examine subjects like roller-blade and rap culture, street-kids, and urban alienation. The outward

gaze is present, but the personal reflection on writing and imagination remains strong—as reflected in the titles of recent collections by Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska: *Autofiction et dévoilement de soi: essai* (2007); *Imaginaire sans frontières: les lieux de l'écriture, l'écriture des lieux* (2010). More accurately, the personal and political blend in twenty-first-century *essais* by Québécois women writers, in a manner that extends from the 1980s and 1990s discussed earlier. Thus, in her 2002 *Écrire Comment Pourquoi* (2002), Suzanne Jacob links her deeply personal exploration of the how and why of writing with the political context of 9/11: “le onze septembre deux mille un, les tours jumelles du World Trade Centre de New York et le Pentagone de Washington ont été les cibles d'un attentat terroriste” (79), Jacob writes, as she probes the why and how of writing. Nicole Brossard's 2004 *Ecrire: l'horizon du fragment* is punctuated by the recurring phrase “Je suis là” in an iteration of witness both to the world and to the act of writing. Brossard has written for years and to the present about the role of writing—writing by women in particular—in a world run according to other human pursuits. In *Ecrire: l'horizon du fragment*, Brossard asks again: “Que peut la littérature?” “La question revient, entêtée, revient piocher dans l'ère de la mondialisation et de la société marchande, elle revient me hanter” (11). In the context of contemporary globalized and consumer society, Brossard's answer is an “essai” (a say) about the value and contribution of the imaginations, bodies, and desires of women and other marginalized groups. “The aesthetic and political challenges of [Brossard's] writing,” Susan Rudy notes, have given women “hope and the embodiment of alternatives” (Introduction, *Fluid Arguments*, 12).⁶

⁶ For Monique LaRue in *De fil en aiguille: essais* (2007) the essay is both a vehicle for reflecting on her work as a writer and a reader, and a venue for witnessing the world. As the book blurb states:

L'essai est l'occasion de méditer sur son travail de romancière, de réfléchir sur le monde, d'approfondir ses expériences de lectrice et ses découvertes de voyageuse, bref, de garder en éveil cette attention au monde et cette conscience critique qui, à ses yeux, sont indissociables de la pratique littéraire et en font tout le prix. (book back blurb)

The combination of personal reflection and witnessing the world can be seen in the titles of Régine Robin's extensive essay writing as well. To mention those published since 2000 only: *L'immense fatigue des pierres* (2001); *Berlin Chantiers: essai sur les passés fragiles* (2001); *La mémoire saturée* (2003); *Cybermigrances: traversées fugitives* (2004); *Mégapolis: les derniers pas du flâneur* (2009). Robin's essay writing warrants a study in itself, as indeed the editorial team of the 2007 essay collection, *Une oeuvre indisciplinaire: mémoire, texte et identité chez Régine Robin*, Caroline Désy, Véronique Fauvell, Viviana Fridman, and Pascale Maltais undertook to do. In their introduction, the editors explain that they wanted to "souligner l'immense contribution de Régine Robin dans des univers de recherche aussi multiples que diversifiés: entre le texte et la mémoire, la cyberspace et l'identité juive, entre l'analyse du discours, la sociocritique et le mémoriel, entre Montréal, Paris et Berlin. Les avenues empruntées par Régine Robin sont nombreuses et méritent toutes que l'on s'y plonge sans retenue" (xii). The focus on writing and language and the importance of the imaginary constitute thematic continuity across the collections of essays by many Québécois women writers published since 2000. How does this compare to post-2000 print essay collections by women writers in English Canada?

Once again, there is continuum as well as discontinuity. Both Betsy Warland's *Breathing the Page: Reading the Act of Writing* (2010) and Erín Moure's *My Beloved Wager: Essays from a Writing Practice* (2009) readily recall Louise Warren's statement that essay writing "fait partie du travail de création." For her part, Mouré writes, "'essay' is not pronouncement but the fraught terrain of a practice, an *essai* or *try* articulated from inside the work of poetry. Essaying is part of the work of poetry, part of my practice of writing and reading it" (11). At the same time Mouré makes it clear that *My Beloved Wager* "stems from the propulsion to speak out" (11) and is a

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practice “influenced by feminism [...] by sexuality [...] by all that can’t be ignored” (11). “Writing is always and forever a social practice,” Mouré declares (49). “The varying discourses in a society either shore it up or challenge it. And discourse isn’t something we walk away from when we set down our pen” (49). Mouré’s essays are “in keeping with a Montaignian definition,” Marjorie Perloff asserts, praising Mouré’s essays for their “aesthetic and cultural role at this juncture of history.”⁷ A similar cross-fertilization of disciplinary fields describes Alice Major’s 2011 *Intersecting Sets: A Poet Looks at Science*. Why write a book of essays about poetry and science, Major asks, quipping that to do so “will surely attract fewer fans than a garage band with rap lyrics accompanied by accordion-players in lederhosen” (ix). Why a poet or novelist writes a book of essays, she suggests in reply, is because “interesting things happen at edges—at boundaries, membranes, seacoasts and the circumference of a convergence circle in the complex number plane”(x). Interesting things indeed do happen at edges, on the margins, where the essay genre has so often been located. Edges and margins are a clear focus in Aritha van Herk’s essay introduction to *In this Place: Calgary 2004-2011* (2011) and in the images that photographer George Webber contributes to the book.

As these examples suggest, convergences between Canadian and Québécois women writers’ essay work can be seen in the combination of personal commentary on topics of social, political, national and global relevance with experimental use of the essay genre. They can be seen as well in the continuum of these explorations and practices from the last two decades of the twentieth century into the first decade of the twenty-first century, even as the latter brings about new forms in the use of the internet and the blog-essay. Despite these points of convergence, there are differences or distances as well, notably in what one critical community reads and knows of the other. This has a great deal to do with language barriers and limited resources for

⁷ This comment appears on the back cover of Mouré’s book and as such has no page reference.

translation. It has for consequence that a writer-essayist such as Régine Robin is simply not as well known or read in English-speaking Canada as her work warrants. Similarly, the intellectual contributions of such writers in English Canada as Aritha van Herk or Nourbese Philip could be better known inside Quebec. Happily, there are exceptions, such as *Fluid Arguments* (2005), essays by Nicole Brossard, thanks to the collective effort of a translation and editorial team of Anne-Marie Wheeler, Susan Rudy, Alice Parker, Susanne de Lotbiniere-Harwood, Patricia Claxton, Marlene Wildeman, and Nicole Brossard herself.

This essay has suggested that the Montaignian-style combination of the personal and the critical in Canadian and Québécois women writers' essay writing, but also the innovative, experimental use of the genre, constitute not only points of convergence in their otherwise differing French-English language practice of the form but that it results in unique, insightful and critical perspectives on a wide spectrum of issues in the world today. As essayists, Canadian and Québécois women writers have tackled a breath-taking range of topics, from cultural politics to social transformation, from economic inequality to environmental damage, from the rewards of reading to the role of writing. The essay affords Canadian and Québécois women novelists and poets a different venue for comment and expression, a space of innovation and resistance against traditional views, resistance that extends to the very form their essays take. Canadian and Québécois women essayists are highly innovative and experimental in their writing. They cross borders between genres, between private and public, between the personal and the political; they incorporate memoir and photographs, poetry and philosophy, and dare to step off the straight-and-narrow of the traditional essay form. Indeed, a striking point of convergence between Canadian and Québécois women's essay writing is their innovative approach to the genre. The examples cited in this essay have hopefully served to put Canadian and Québécois women

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writers' essay publication in a new light as an important body of writing with a surprisingly long and vigorous history, a provocative and innovative present, and—all signs indicate—a critical future.

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