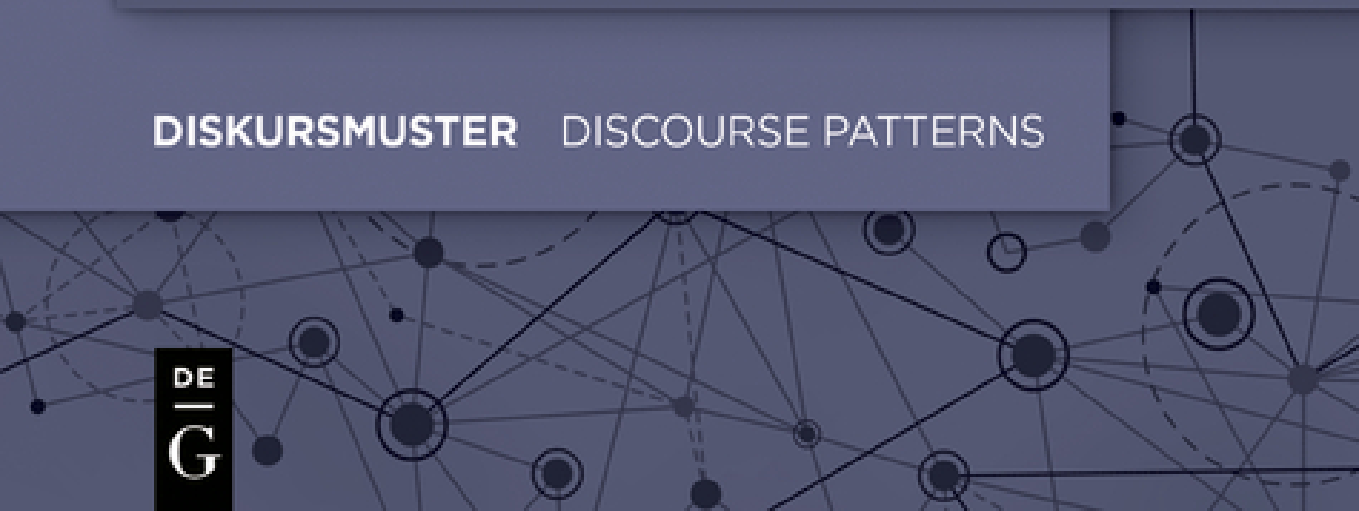
DE GRUYTER

INSPECTING THE INTERVIEW

A COMPANION

Edited by Carsten Junker

DISKURSMUSTER DISCOURSE PATTERNS



Inspecting the Interview

Diskursmuster
Discourse Patterns

Edited by
Beatrix Busse and Ingo H. Warnke

Volume 35

Inspecting the Interview

A Companion

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Mario Aquilina, Nicole B. Wallack, Bob Cowser Jr

Essayistic Interviews: The Interview as Collaborative Essayism

Abstract: Through a reflective discussion of what the authors call "essayistic interviews" published in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* (2022), this chapter proposes and develops the concept of "collaborative essayism." The authors survey existing theories of the interview as a genre, and they then outline the rhetorical practices behind and the formal choices made in the interviews for *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* in order to explore how and in which ways the interviews may be deemed "essayistic" and "collaborative." The chapter argues that these essayistic interviews extend and challenge already-existing genre definitions, and it proposes collaborative essayism as a form of thinking and a form of writing that depends on an experimental, collaborative and dialogic interplay of voices.

Keywords: essay, essayism, essayistic, collaboration, essayistic interview, authorship, genre, rhetorical practice, style

Introduction

Essayists often draw on interviews among the myriad materials they assemble for their writing—both those they conduct and those that they have been thwarted from conducting. Tressie McMillian Cottom's "Modern Folklore" features interviews with five Black women, who are all country-music singer-songwriters, to explore how they are changing audiences' expectations for their genre. By contrast, Gay Talese—one of the most lauded figures in the New Journalism movement of the mid-twentieth century—launched his career in 1966 by crafting a profile of Frank Sinatra despite his subject's *refusal* to be interviewed; Talese's accomplishment in "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" relies instead on his first-hand observations of Sinatra and nearly 100 interviews with people in the celebrity's sphere. While essays, clearly, can be deeply shaped by interviews, it is worth considering whether the inverse holds, as well. What characteristics might make an interview essayistic? How would one conduct, edit and then present an interview in ways that bring it closer to the essay as a form? What would such a process reveal about the relationship between the interview and the essay both as genres and as rhetorical practices? These are some of the questions underpinning our

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conception of eight interviews that, as editors, we conducted and curated for *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, a volume that gathers contributions by thirty-five essayists, literary critics and writing instructors (Aquilina, Wallack, and Cowser Jr., *Edinburgh Companion*).

As a scholarly book that provides an overview of literary, political, theoretical and pedagogical debates around the genre, this volume did not strictly require interviews. Indeed, the timelines associated with academic publishing, often spanning more than two years between commissioning and publication, may seem antithetical to the genre of the interview, which often responds to a sense of occasion at a particular moment in time. Nonetheless, as editors, we were granted permission by our publisher to experiment by interviewing eight prominent contemporary essayists about their essays and their thoughts about the essay, and then curating the transcript and presenting it in a written essayistic form.[1]

The interviews were not only meant to make the volume more attractive to prospective readers but also to allow us to explore specific ideas and issues that we considered important for the volume as a whole. Consequently, the interviews we conducted were a hybrid of the "author interview" focusing on the works and experiences of the author and the "literary interview" discussing "literature [in our case mainly the essay], its writing, or its experience" (Masschelein et al. 13).

Working on the manuscript of the book throughout 2020 and most of 2021, that is, during a pandemic, meant that all the interviews for the book had to take place remotely and virtually. One interview was conducted via an email exchange between the editors and the interviewee, while the other seven took the form of recorded Zoom meetings, each lasting between one and three hours. Through this contemporary accommodation of our limited mobility, we we were enacting a dynamic in interviewing that goes back to antiquity. As Kevin J. Peters notes, the private and public dimensions of any interview may be navigated both informally and formally. Peters identifies how in Plato's *Phaedrus*, for example, the "walk of Socrates and Phaedrus from the city walls to the shadow of the plane tree [...] conditions the manner in which they perceive, approach, and engage one another." More specifically, the "private topography provides the participants in the dialogue with a pedagogical site in which a sense of intimacy may develop" (*Captivating Question* 10). The virtual setting of the Zoom meetings, which the editors as well as the interviewees attended from their own homes, conflated the public and private spaces of the interview. On the one hand, the participants were not

1 In alphabetical order: Robert Atwan, Brian Dillon, Kaitlyn Greenidge, Leslie Jamison, Jamaica Kincaid, Claudia Rankine, David Shields and Rebecca Solnit.

in each other's physical presence. On the other hand, their screens gave them access to each other's private, domestic spaces. This, together with the fact that the interviewees were informed that the video recordings would not be shared, contributed to the creation of what Peters describes as "a private, pedagogical place free of distraction where intimacy may emerge and truth may be pursued" (*Captivating Question* 17). In the context of our interviews, the pedagogy went in two directions: as interviewers, we learned about the authors we met, but several of them also indicated that they had never been asked to reflect on the essay's affordances and limitations as a genre and as praxis. Through the dialogue, the interviewees had space to reflect aloud both about why our questions felt new to them and how they chose to respond to them. These moments of metacognition, which occurred in almost every interview, struck us as deeply essayistic both in content and form.

As a genre, the "author interview" involves a dialogue between someone in the role of interviewer who asks questions and an interviewee, the "author"; the author may be an "authority" or "noteworthy" for their artistry or their status in public life. Regardless, the author's words are reproduced—with different degrees of faithfulness—by the interviewer, who often assumes the role of a secretary-witness. While there is collaboration, the relation is asymmetrical in that it is assumed that the interviewee knows more about a subject and that the prospective readers are primarily interested in their words. However, the interviewer can also be thought of as not simply a "listener" or reporter but as another active participant in a conversation.[2] Along these lines, Gerard Genette and others distinguish between the interview, with its dependence "on specific circumstances," and the "conversation" that exhibits a less hierarchical relation between the interviewer and the interviewee (Genette 358–59). The literary interview, with a wider scope than the work of the author, tends to be held more like a conversation and requires interviewers who can participate more actively, bringing their knowledge of the subject to bear in more direct ways on the proceedings of the discussion. Having essayists being interviewed by editors who are themselves essayists and published scholars meant that the interviews for this book went beyond a question-and-answer reporting format, and they included a conversational element with the editors often presenting interventions in the form of comments and reflections rather than simply questions. This also meant that what Peters describes as the pursuit of "truth" in the interviews required a series of collaborations among different participants over the course of the texts' production.

2 See Jean Royer, "De l'entretien."

The editing and curation of the recorded interviews was done in a process lasting several months after the interviews were recorded. The interviews were first transcribed by a person who was not a part of the interview itself. Therefore, the transcriber could not rely on first-hand experiences of the interviews to supplement the recordings. At this point, a crucial decision had already been made by the editors to ask the transcriber to only render fully the words of the interviewee.[3] As a result, the conversational element of the actual interviews held in intimate spaces shared by different individuals was effaced by the transcriptions that retained only the faithfully reproduced words of the interviewees.

As editors, we selected which sections of the transcribed interviews would be included on the basis of their relevance to the volume, in some cases cutting up to one half of the text transcribed. We rearranged the sequencing of the interviewees' words to group similar ideas, thus creating a conceptual arc within the text, moving, for example, from the personal to the public dimensions of the essay and then to reflections about the future of the form.

We were also responsible for the division of the text into sections with different subheadings meant to emulate essayistic titles, such as "On the Essay as Political Discourse," "On Journalism and the Essay," "On Form," "On Language and Possibility" and "On Other Voices." At this point, the curated versions of the texts were forwarded to the interviewees, who were asked to suggest further corrections and additions. Revisions by the interviewees at this stage ranged from no changes to substantive ones for style, clarity and accuracy. While our iterative approach to these interviews is not typical, we strove to ensure that the authors approved of the version that would be published in the volume. In this effort, the authors' own revisions helped their interviews achieve greater conceptual and formal coherence. Counterintuitively, we found that the more layers of collaboration each piece accrued through the editorial process, the more essayistic it appeared on the page.

Such editing of the texts represents not only a modulation of the intimacy of the interview by the awareness of the demands brought about by the public dimension of the volume but also a radical recontextualization of the interview. From an interview in which, using Peters's words, the participants are "seemingly unconcerned that anyone might be listening," the interview is transformed into an object for public consumption. In this process, from a discursive virtual exchange, the interviewee's words were reconceived into essayistic texts to be printed and read ("Captivating Question" 122).

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3 The words of the interviewers were transcribed for one of the eight interviews for possible future use in a different context than *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*.

The rest of this collaboratively written chapter provides further reflections on these interviews by focusing on the implications of these interviews for our thinking of genre as rhetorical practice; the relationship between the interview and the essay; and the concept of collaborative essayism that arises from our work on these interviews.[4]

Genre as Social Action

The interviews created both logistical challenges and presentational ones for our editorial group: while their exigence was clear to us from early in the project, it took longer to determine the published form the interviews would take, how we would decide to place them in the text, and how the interview-essays as a distinctive sub-genre would shape our readers' experiences of the whole book. We sought to signal clearly both the similarities and differences between the interviews and the other offerings of the book, namely chapters written in a more academic style. That is, we faced a problem of genre that involved both literary and rhetorical considerations.

The past forty years have provided key insights into the social and rhetorical dimensions of genre study. By attending to key findings from this extensive literature, we can begin to reflect about the ways in which we might think of these interviews as a form of what we are calling "collaborative essayism." Until 1984, when the rhetorician, Carolyn Miller, published her landmark essay, "Genre as Social Action," a primary approach to analyzing genre was largely based on the idea that genres are pre-determined formal "containers" for content. By contrast, Miller proposes that genre should be defined "not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish" in "recurrent [rhetorical] situations" within specific social contexts (159). Focusing on rhetorical action allows us to identify everyday sites in which written genres are the means by which people interact and collaborate—from laboratories and law offices, to union halls, hospitals, and, of course, classrooms. The sites for the interviews in the volume included the virtual and physical spaces in which the interviewing was done, but they also extended to the long discussions among the editors about how to best use the interviews in the volume. As such, from a rhetorical perspective, we note the importance of collaboration not only in the process of selecting

4 For a rare use of the term "collaborative essay," see Patrick Madden, "This is How You Write a Collaborative Essay."

the interviewees, conducting the interviews and then curating the transcripts for publication, but also in determining the genre characteristics that the interviews would take in their printed form.

Because genres are both sites and means of permitting people to engage with one another, they tend to achieve common features over time. Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff note that "genres normalize activities and practices, enabling community members to participate in these activities and practices in fairly predictable, familiar ways in order to get things done" (79). The editors and the interviewees in the interviews for *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* had all participated in several ways in interviews before, and this meant that they came with expectations about what an interview is and does. However, as editors intent on transforming the transcripts of the interviews into texts that could be described as "essayistic," we also brought an understanding of what the essay tends to do as a genre. To increase cohesion between the interviews and the other chapters, we sought to heighten formal properties of the essay in the interviews. This fundamental commitment meant that the rhetorical actions associated with the genre of the interview were, in this project, combined, qualified and challenged by the rhetorical and formal demands of the essay.

As Bawarshi and Reiff argue, if genres help people to get the work of the world done, they cannot remain static, because they are also responsive to their "conditions of use" (79). This responsiveness requires genres to change in different times and contexts. Amy Devitt notes that genre is a "dynamic concept created through the interaction of writers, readers, past texts, and contexts" (699). The specific combination of and tension between the generic and rhetorical expectations associated with the interview and with the essay meant that the essayistic interviews published in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* represent a somewhat distinct intervention in and deviation from these two well-established genres.

Approaching the generic qualities of a text in terms of social actions reveals how the participants understand their work not only as fulfilling social or discursive functions, but also as contrasting their goals with other possibilities. Jacob Nyboe theorizes that "genre labels" signify how texts both fulfill and violate expectations for the genre through choices of form: "An attempt to perform a different action can be expressed as a deviation in form" (369). In this chapter, we are referring to the texts we produced for the volume as "essayistic interviews," a term which has very limited circulation, with Timothy Corrigan being a notable exception who uses the term primarily to talk about specific types of film essays (88). It should be noted that in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay*, we group these texts under the generic title of "Contemporary Essayists in Focus," and each

text is then individually labeled as per the formulation "[Author's name] and [Surname] on the Essay," for example, "Rebecca Solnit on the Essay." In our "Introduction," we describe the interviews as: "eight experimental texts presenting the thoughts of important contemporary writers about the essay," (4) as "collaboratively edited versions of interviews"; and as texts "presented in the form of a series of more or less essayistic interventions" (5).

Our use of the term "essayistic interview" here is a response to the rhetorical demand brought to us by the offer to write a chapter for this volume. The invitation obligated us to reflect on our editorial practices in the previous two years and to try to find a way of accounting for the experimental texts we had produced together with the interviewees. Nyboe emphasizes that when one creates a new "genre signature" or label, it acts as "an appeal to consider the text as one that explores a specific genre, or the praxis of genre as such, and an invitation to expect the unexpected" (374). "Essayistic interviews" is the closest term we could find to match the rhetorical practices in the writing and the generic characteristics of the texts we produced, being neither conventional "interviews" nor "essays" but involving aspects of both genres. Anne Freadman highlights the centrality of deviations in understanding how genres are identified and why they are chosen to fulfill specific functions. She notes that while most theories of genre focus on similarities or "like-statements," "most descriptions of individual texts in terms of generic generalizations concentrate on 'not-statements'" (24). Much of the dynamism of genre as a category of analysis depends, therefore, on accounting for both a genre's change over time and context, but also how any given text tests the genre-category's boundaries or expectations for its users.

Central to these conceptions of genre as both expressions and sites of social action is David R. Russell's understanding of sites of discursive exchange as "activity systems." Building on the theoretical foundations set by educational researchers including Yrgo Engestrom, Russell defines activity systems as "any ongoing, object-directed, historically conditioned, dialectically structured, tool-mediated human interaction," where the "tool" in use can take discursive forms, such as interviews (510). Crucially, as Bawarshi and Reiff argue, citing Russell, "'[d]issensus, resistance, conflicts, and deep contradictions are constantly produced in activity systems' as subjects may have different understandings of the motives, and as the division of labor will create hierarchical differences and power relations" (511). As we shall see, essayistic interviews or forms of collaborative essayism may also be thought of as activity systems involving continuous negotiation among the participants. In other words, an interview represented in writing can be understood both as a form with recognizable features but also as an activity that calls on myriad genres in order to accomplish its goals for the

interviewer(s), the interviewee(s), and for publics who will encounter it in its final form.

On Interview as Essay

In which ways might one describe the interviews for *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* as "essays" or as "essayistic?" Most obviously, the texts were curated to look and read like essays in the printed volume or, in other words, to incorporate generic and formal properties of the essay. In his preface to *Interviews to Literature*, Jean Royer proposes "that the interview should be rewritten in order to produce a text of durable literary interest" (*Interviews* 8). Royer's focus is on how the interview can be conducted and curated to accrue literary value and thus enhance its readability and relevance over time. Among other things, he suggests thinking of the literary interview as a:

> Literary portrait, a report in which the person who is conducting the interview stays in the background. When the test [sic] is transcribed, it must be *written* so as to echo as closely as possible the speech and ideas of the writer; by turning the encounter into a narrative, by presenting a synthesis of the writer's views by means of a text which has literary value. (*Interviews* 11)

Our approach towards the interviews in the book had similar aims, but differed from the way Royer describes his work in that we specifically attempted to create *essayistic* texts using *essayistic* methods of composition.

Galia Yanoshevsky writes that the "literariness of the author interview" is "embodied and reflected," in part, "in its *style*." By "style," Yanoshevsky refers to a range of qualities in interviews, including the interviewee's "manner of responding to questions" but also the interviewer's "narrative" as well as the interviewers' development of their "own style in relating conversations with different writers" (184). In other words, the literariness of the author interview, which Yanoshevsky describes as a "mediated genre of conversational exchange" and "a place for cooperation between the interviewers and the interviewee," also derives from the contribution of both interviewer and interviewee as well as their mutual collaboration at the level of style (185).

Some of the stylistic features of the interviews published in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* take the texts close to the essay form. These include: the use of a first person "I" that, through the elision of the interviewers' questions, performs the self-reflexive voice we associate with the essay; the preservation of the conversational language used by the interviewees in the interview; the

organization of the material in short sections "on" different topics; and the resistance to comprehensiveness and completion in the development of thinking. However, besides their formal qualities as printed texts, the interviews were conceived as essayistic throughout also in terms of the rhetorical practices behind them.

The cardinal property of intimacy, which characterized the interviews we conducted, is also a widely acknowledged feature of the essay. The essay, as conceived by Michel de Montaigne—almost universally considered as the "father" of the essay in modernity—but also as written throughout a long subsequent tradition, is an intimate space not only in the sense of engaging the reader through conversational and discursive styles but also in being founded in and giving access to the most intimate of spaces: the essayist's thoughts in process, the sense of a mind in action laying itself bare to the readers' contemplation.

In most cases, the essayists interviewed for the volume were not "intimates" known to the editors prior to the interview, yet even when familiarity and intimacy did not develop in real time over the course of the interview, the approach was significantly more intimate than in the conventional academic essays that comprise the rest of the volume, wherein the authors present themselves primarily and almost exclusively in their public roles of critics, writers or instructors. In curating these interviews, while the editors' questions were excised, efforts were made to maintain the intimate presence of that querying other, "the essayistic spirit."[5] The essayistic quality of a mind in action that proceeds with digressions and hesitations towards a pursuit of truth is recreated also in the fragmented form of the texts with subsections that approach different subjects from different angles but without any pretense of comprehensiveness or completion. Consider, for instance, Leslie Jamison reflecting on "showing and telling" in writing:

5 For a discussion of the "essayistic spirit" or the essayistic as a "mode," see Mario Aquilina, "Thinking the Essay at the Limits."

> [G]ood telling [...] deepens and complicates a situation, rather than reducing it to any single pat meaning. It's thinking on the page. Isn't that—in some sense—the point? Isn't all showing, without any telling, evading some of the primary work that writing might do? If you are simply 'trusting a reader to figure it out for themselves' (an argument often proffered for showing rather than telling), doesn't that imply a claustrophobic understanding of the relationship between experience and insight? That some 'it' exists as the singular meaning that might be extracted from a given piece of narrative? That the reader is not—to some extent—*looking* to the writer not simply to narrate experience but also to analyze it? (Aquilina, Wallack, and Cowser Jr., *Edinburgh Companion* 311)

The slippage of the essay as a genre—its being characterized by resistance to and transgression of definitional limits—as well as its inherently dialectical or dialogic form—the essay being a performance of a mind encountering other minds or encountering itself in a process of self-reflection—gave us permission, so to speak, to think of the interviews we were going to be conducting and curating *as* essayistic. Thomas Recchio argues that the essay in its "Montaignean sense [...] is intensely dialogic, acutely sensitive to the pressure of other voices and to the imperatives of the subjective self" (280). Montaigne's essays, while deeply personal, are also meditations on and with others: the many voices and characters to be found in his (mostly classical and historical) library. There is perhaps no discursive practice more shaped by the ideas and tone of other voices than the interview.

The essay often performs or constructs a subjective self in dialogic contexts, whether the dialogism involves the essayist's confrontation of their ideas or thoughts with those of others or whether it involves a self in dialogue with itself. It is this kind of othering of the subjective self through confrontation or affinity with itself or with others that provides the swerves or turns of thought and feeling in the essay; or the deepening of insight—often inconclusive—that we associate with the essay. Our author interviews were dialogic both in terms of structure and substance: we structured them as conversational exchanges, but we also encouraged our interviewees to reflect on their own work, as well as the affinities and differences they discerned between their own writing and that of others. This invitation to reflect led Rebecca Solnit to speak at length about how writing about George Orwell "raised many more questions for [her] about pleasure and beauty in the natural world and all the things we do that are not productive in a Fordist assembly-line kind of way, but essential, nevertheless" (Aquilina et al. *Edinburgh Companion* 150). It led Claudia Rankine to identify the "great influence" of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein and Toni Morrison on her writing (156). It led Brian Dillon to detail the affinities with Roland Barthes's 'swerving from confession into something else" such as the "theoretical, the academic, the authoritative voice," a swerve that Dillon finds "tremendously moving" (162–63). It led Jamaica

Kincaid to recount her experiences of "always quarelling with" the Bible and of having her "view of the world as a writer" affected by Homer's peculiar sense of ethics and justice (471).

What the essay tends to do with relations with other voices, though, involves a process of what might be described as curation or orchestration. That is, in understanding the genre of the essay is itself a "social action," the author reckons with the presence of other thinkers through the alembic of their own priorities and presence.[6] Even in highly intertextual essayists like William Hazlitt, who quotes (and misquotes) Shakespeare and several Romantic poets very frequently, the inherent dialogism of the essay exists in tension with the uniqueness and intimacy of voice curated by the essayist.[7]

The elision of the editors' questions in the published text of the interviews for the volume was meant to enhance the sense of the interviewees' individual voices as essayists. At the same time, the editors' traces are to be found not only in the text being a response to their questions but also in their own editing or curation responsible for the differences between the recorded interviews and the published texts. Paradoxically, the omission of the editors' own questions and comments turns out to be one of the most important interventions of the editors in taking the interviews closer to the essay form and thus recontextualizing them. It was not lost on the editors that effacing our presence from the public-facing version of these interviews amplified the fundamental dialogism of the essays' rhetorical and literary activity. The omission of the editors' voices, turning the dialogic interview into a monologue, took the interviewees' words towards the style of the essay. This, however can also be read as a form of imposition of style by the editors on the interviews, something which, for instance, Yanoshevsky notes as a characteristic of Frederic Lefevre's interviews that in their manner of presentation turned "each individual portrait into part of a larger one—that of the interviewer" (190). Indeed, while the editors' words were omitted, leaving eight monologues presented in an essayistic form, the editing in all the interviews bears the signature of the editors both in the resonances in the topics discussed as well as in the presentation of the material as essays.

While the essay often assumes a "conversational" style, and while a multiplicity of voices converge into the text of the essay through quotation or allusion, the essay tends to read more like a self-reflective monologue and seemingly

6 For a discussion of "presence" see Nicole B. Wallack, *Crafting Presence: The American Essay and the Future of Writing Studies*.

7 See Mario Aquilina, "Echoing as Self-fashioning in the Essay: Hazlitt's Quoting and Misquoting of Shakespeare."

performs the authoritativeness of a single voice in dialogue with itself. In some essays, the writer's dialogue with themselves has a retrospective quality. In 2002, for example, Susan Sontag uses the occasion of her essay "Looking at War" to reckon with—and reject—ideas she first had proposed in 1977 for *On Photography*: "Consider two widespread ideas [...] on the impact of photography. Since I find these ideas formulated in my own essays, the earliest of which was written thirty years ago, I feel an irresistible temptation to quarrel with them" (96). Such retrospective skirmishes between essayists and their former selves are the least congenial reason for these encounters. However, essayists also include the presence of previous selves to embody key moments from the past, provide a glimpse into an alternate reality, and to offer the writer someone to talk with or about. As Ned Stuckey-French wryly observes, "This essay stuff is getting complicated, isn't it? An essay recaptures the voice of a former self and in so doing enables one's current self to talk about that former self, and then one or both of them, though most likely just the current self, talks to the reader about the lives lived by both selves. Got it?" There are dialogic dynamics in the self-reflexive turns that the essay might take, as the essayist turns their attention to their own thinking by confronting it with that of others and with the world "out there," but even in the most tentative and inconclusive essayistic approaches, the voices of the other are subsumed under the voice of the essayist.

This quality of the essays contributes to the performance of authenticity. Volkmar Hansen and Gert Heine write about how the interview offers the reader or audience the promise of "authenticity—the interview gives us the feeling of truth coming from personal contact" (qtd. in Royer, "De l'entretien" 120).[8] Sometimes, like personal essays, interviews become a sort of "literary autobiography." Thus, for example, David Shields recounts the influence of his childhood experiences of listening to comedy on the radio on his writing style:

8 As cited by Jean Royer, "authenticité — l'interview nous donne une sensation de vérité proche du contact personnel" ("De l'entretien" 120).

> I grew up in LA and San Francisco, and I would listen to stand-up comedy shows on KSFO on Saturdays from 8 a.m until noon; they would have all of the best stand-up that you could air. It was San Francisco; it was the 1960s and 70s, so it was pretty lenient. [...] I would walk around with this little transistor radio pressed to my ear, and I used to just love, love, love the sound of these idiosyncratic voices imposing their consciousness on the world. As a kid, I had a horrible stutter, so the aggression of these comedians' voices was manna to me. I found them thrilling. So much of the way I write, still, is for the ear; I'm addicted to the staccato sound of a comedian's voice (which is why I love Leonard Michaels so much, Joe Wenderoth, Simon Gray, David Markson), the compression, concision, velocity, and brevity of stand-up are crucial to me. (Aquilina et al. *Edinburgh Companion* 465–66)

The autobiographical form of the interview and the essay thus resonate with each other in the way they suggest to the reader the idea of encountering the presence of an author as it is constituted through a specific voice. The essayist, like the interviewee, tends to speak in their own voice, even though of course this is a mediated and curated voice, a construction of sorts. Indeed, as Royer argues, the "contact" that the interview provides between the reader and the authentic self is "illusory" in the sense that it is always curated or mediated ("De l'entretien" 120).

Another essayistic quality that we note in the interviews is their relation to time and to occasionality. As Erin Plunkett puts it, "The essay begins with something. It is occasional. It is about something" (69). Or, in György Lukács's words, the essay "always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past" (10). The interviews we conducted often began from and kept returning to this "something that has already been there," whether that is the interviewee's previously published work or life experiences. Robert Atwan, for example, reflects on his experience of writing forwards for *The Best American Essay Series*:

> The April morning I sat down to begin the foreword to the 2017 edition I had just come across a message in my inbox reminding me that this day marked the one hundredth anniversary of our entry into World War I. As I reflected on that moment, I thought of an essayist who powerfully opposed our participation in that conflict, Randolph Bourne. I decided to devote the entire Foreword to a discussion of Bourne, his relationship to the essay, and the significance of irony in political writing. I had no idea when I sat down to write that the Foreword would take that direction. Since I believe essays are a form of discovery—that the departure is more delightful than the destination—I enjoy the act of composing the Forewords. Always eager to begin and curious as to where I will wind up. (Aquilina et al. *Edinburgh Companion* 316)

In this example, Atwan climbs the ladder of abstraction by moving from the sense of a specific occasion towards the claim that "essays are a form of discovery" (316). Likewise, the essay as a genre is occasional in its being provoked by specific

events, but the essayistic also requires a move beyond this occasionality towards thoughts and issues that have a wider and more durable relevance. The essayistic is also an oscillation between the particular and the general, the tangible and the abstract.

The interviews in our edited volume perform these oscillations, not only for texture or to follow the shape of our interviewees' thinking, but to dramatize how essayists approach thinking itself as an activity, one on which artistic (political, etc.) work is based. While the conversation often led to a discussion of specific works or events in the interviewees' life, they were not designed to respond to a specific event (such as the recent publication of a specific work) but to a subject, the essay. The focus, therefore, was at least dual in scope, oriented towards the work of the interviewees but also towards the subject, the essay, that was the occasion for the interview. This gave the interviews a strong sense of essayistic thinking, the movement from the particular to the general and back, as seen in these excerpts from Solnit, Greenidge and Dillon, respectively:

> Essays in particular ask us to think harder about something, look more closely at it, find out more about it. Just that process of thoughtfulness feels almost antithetical to what totalitarianism, fascism, cults etc. want of us, which is a kind of unthinking obedience to received ideas. (Aquilina et al. *Edinburgh Companion* 146)

> The idea that anger can be tempered through a craft, in writing, is an extremely difficult idea. Oftentimes, when you're writing as a woman, especially when you're writing as a black woman, especially when you're writing as a black woman writing about race or about politics, the biggest critique is always that this is too angry or you're too angry or it's wonderful that you were not angry. And the expectation that you leech out that anger is to make sure that you're actually going to be published by anybody; so you're already self-censoring just to get in the door. (323)

> The essay has a purchase on the world. It is not simply a matter of form, not simply a matter of the excitements of style, or the excitement of undoing style, of exploding style. It must also be—and this must be part of the excitement and part of the rigor, for me, as much as anybody else—it must be a question of trying to describe, accurately, some portion of the real world. It must be something to do with a commitment to conveying the reality of real things in the real world. To be made to say that right now is surprising to me—because I find myself talking about the essay so often, in much more abstracted and formal terms. (162)

The movement from a discussion of the occasional towards wider aspects of literature or writing makes these conversations more durable and also more relatable to a wider audience. Conversations about literature, as Genette argues, are thus more readily relevant for later collections than author interviews that focus exclusively on the author's work (359). This durability through abstraction and

through widening the scope of the discussion is an essayistic characteristic that the interviews in the volume share with the essay as a genre.

Towards Collaborative Essayism

We conclude this chapter by reflecting on the extent to which essayistic interviews for *The Edinburgh Companion* may thus be considered an example of collaborative essayism. The rhetorical practice of collaborative writing is well established in academic writing, in pedagogy and in different work contexts.[9] In creative contexts, research has been done especially in relation to collaborative authorship in film studies, but the concept and practice of collaborative writing has not been given the attention it deserves in literary studies,[10] possibly due to, as Robert L. Callinger puts it, "a fear that alternative models of authorship might compromise authorial sacrality in the canon" (378). The same may be said about the essay. Essays are highly intertextual and often depend on an interplay—of affinities and contestations—between the authorial voice and that of others who are quoted, echoed or commented upon by the essayist. However, the actual writing of the essay is rarely thought of as a fully collaborative practice because the voice and style of an essay are deemed to be traceable in the individual essayist or organizing consciousness who authors it. The elision of the editors' questions and comments in the published texts of the interviews for *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* was indeed one of the stylistic choices meant to make the interviews come closer to an essay.

The interview, as a genre rooted in specific rhetorical practices, is more readily thought of as collaborative than the essay, but even here collaborative relations tend to be asymmetrical or conceived to be so. Genette writes of how the interviewer "effaces his 'person' in order to (confine himself to) play(ing) his role and in which the writer disregards his interlocutor enough to aim, through him, only at the potential addressee." The rhetorical relation established, therefore, is one in which the interviewee, despite the presence of the interviewer, is bypassing the interviewer to address the reading public. This conception of asymmetry detailed by Genette suggests that the interviewer is simply a "messenger"

9 See, for example, Lisa S. Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford, *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*.

10 See Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*; Andrew Bennett, *The Author*; Stephen B. Dobranski, "The Birth of the Author: The Origins of Early Modern Printed Authority"; and Carsten Junker, "Vicarious Writing, Or: Going to Write it for You."

(not an "autonomous" person) whose function is not so much to interact and collaborate with the interviewee but to relay what the interviewee says to the public (357).

However, while Genette's argument might seem valid when referring to the kind of interview he has in mind, that is, the interview of a primarily journalistic kind, it might be argued that denying the collaborative element of the essayistic interviews in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* would have to depend on forgetting the collaborative practice underpinning the whole process, including: the recording of the interview itself; the dialogic give and take in the development of thinking during the interview; the editing and curation of the transcript as it was transformed into a print version. Indeed, an element of collaboration is also to be found—to different degrees—in the academic chapters of this and other edited volumes, which are often the product of intensive editing processes that help the authors of the individual chapters conceive, develop and refine their writing.

This does not mean that the interviews in the volume should be described as symmetrical collaborations. Indeed, the editors' almost absolute self-effacement in the published interviews (with the exception of contextualizing and explanatory notes about the interviews in a separate section of the volume, the introduction to the book) would seem to reinforce the idea of the essayist as single author and authority of the texts. However, reflection on the whole rhetorical process of writing these interviews allows us to see how the dialogic and multivocal dimensions of writing that thinkers like Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and others make us aware of in their questioning of the idea of the "author" may be present in tangible ways in the essayistic interviews in the volume.

Perhaps, it would be productive to think of the collaborative essayism producing these essayistic interviews through an analogy with the collaborative experience of a curator curating an artist's installation, a practice in which what is produced and presented to be experienced by the author is to different degrees affected by the artist and the curator and by the rhetorical relations between them, their expected audiences and the site of the installation.[11] Essays, it might be said, are always collaborative in the sense of presenting an interplay of voices, but what the essayistic interviews in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Essay* try to do is experiment with writing practices to the extent that writing becomes less an authorial orchestration of multiple voices and more a fundamentally collaborative attempt to think essayistically.

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11 See Madden, "This is How You Write a Collaborative Essay," for an attempt to produce "collaborative essays."

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