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Crafting Presence: The American Essay and the Future of Writing Studies

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Crafting Presence: The American Essay and the Future of Writing Studies

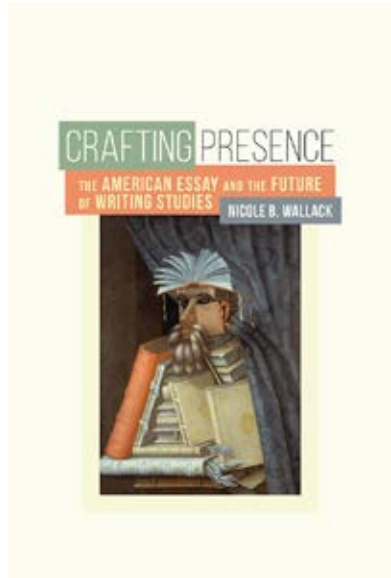
Nicole B. Wallack

Logan: Utah State UP, 2017. 230 pp.

Reviewed by Josh Privett

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In *Crafting Presence: The American Essay and the Future of Writing Studies*, Nicole B. Wallack offers a perceptive and stimulating account of what essays are, how they work conceptually and aesthetically, and why it is important for American university writing programs to adopt an essay-centered curriculum. In an age of the Common Core State Standards, the essay has been marginalized by curriculum reform that reduces literacy to “skills acquisition” and assumes student writers are simply “protean workers who need to be readied to fulfill others’ goals for their thinking and writing: intellectual ‘stem-cells’ for the world beyond school” that can be replicated indefinitely for someone else’s use (3–4). The director of the Undergraduate Writing Program at Columbia University, Wallack argues that the essay—and a curriculum centered on having students read and write essays—promotes the values of a liberal arts education, while also establishing common ground for the fields of composition studies, literary studies, and creative writing. Interdisciplinary in its approach, this book will appeal to writing program administrators, scholars of writing and literature, creative writers and essayists, and teachers of writing across the disciplinary spectrum. *Crafting Presence* includes chapters on the history of the essay as a genre distinct from other forms of nonfiction writing, close readings of specific essays from *The Best American Essays* series, and short pedagogical reflections, informed by Wallack’s twenty-plus years of teaching experience. Although the essay may have been discarded from much of today’s writing curricula for its association with the tradition of *belles-lettres* on the one hand and well-worn “school writing” on the other, Wallack maintains that the essay not only fulfills the goals of national curricular standards but also cultivates the intellectual, creative, and ethical thinking students need in order to become “reflective citizens,” to borrow Andrew Delbanco’s term, who serve their community with their education. Some readers may chafe at Wallack’s appeals to the values of good, old-fashioned liberal humanism, but her book presents a timely and inspiring vision of what the writing classroom—and, by extension, the university—could become.



Wallack explains in chapter one that the essay as a genre has been increasingly devalued by recent curriculum reform at the high school and college level, although the debate over the role of the essay—and, more generally, of writing—in American public education is by no means new. The Common Core State Standards, published in 2010 by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, replace previous curricular emphasis on learning various genres for acquiring specific discursive skills through writing argumentative, informative, and narrative texts. The same goes for the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, a white paper published in 2011 by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project that summarizes the rhetorical skills students need to succeed in college writing and beyond. In both documents, the essay as a genre is mentioned only in passing, sidelined largely for its association with self-expressive pedagogies, academic scholarship, and standardized tests. But by divorcing genre from function, Wallack argues, these standards effectively “reduc[e] genre to an occasion or site for skill-performance without other intellectual value” (9). Even if the skills students are expected to learn closely resemble essay writing, the focus on skills acquisition simplifies writing to a perfunctory school exercise, fails to address how students can create ethos as writers, and downplays the personal and public benefits of reading and writing essays as ends in themselves. In response, Wallack defends the essay, with its focus on the writer’s self, as a genre of writing that allows students to learn the specific skills outlined by the standards as well as engage with others’ ideas, reflect on their own way of thinking, develop original ideas and values of their own, and form a relationship with their work and their readers.

The pedagogical argument of *Crafting Presence* depends on a theoretical one that explains what an essay is and what kind of work it does. Wallack’s second chapter provides an important clarification to what we mean by the word *essay*. Eager to wrest the essay from its association with formulaic “school writing” and the “essay-as-test” model it inculcates (11), Wallack recounts the origins and development of the essay and argues that it is a genre distinct from other forms of nonfiction writing—namely, the scholarly article. As Wallack explains, Michel de Montaigne, arguably the inventor of the modern essay, used the term *essais* (meaning “to test”) to distinguish his compositions from those of other scholars of his day, who parroted knowledge from ancient sources in an effort to establish their own authority and certainty on a topic. Despite sharing their training, Montaigne rejected their approach to writing as unethical—even dangerous—because it promotes a model of learning that separates knowledge from experience. His solution was to develop a new form of writing that allowed him to examine and critique his own thinking and his representation of himself as a thinker. It is the questioning, searching self that Montaigne presents in his essays—his presence—that Wallack identifies as the genre’s hallmark.

Wallack traces the concept of a writer’s presence from its emergence in Montaigne’s essays in the sixteenth century to its codification as a critical term in Robert Atwan and Donald McQuade’s 1994 collection *The Writer’s Presence: A Pool of Essays* (whose ninth edition, slightly renamed, was published in January 2018). Acknowledg-

ing the term's opacity, McQuade and Atwan, who is also the series editor of *The Best American Essays*, describe a writer's presence as the feeling that an essay was written by—though not always in—the first-person singular, by someone “alive” who invites readers into her essay and guides them through it. A writer crafts this feeling by using her personal experience as evidence, creating a unique voice, choosing a specific point of view toward her subject matter, and repeating key images or words. Missing from McQuade and Atwan's analysis, however, is what motivates and enables a writer to create a presence in the first place: an idea. Without an idea, Wallack explains, there is no essay. As an essayist works with her evidence and develops her own ideas about it, she seeks a form to embody those ideas, and those ideas in turn influence the formal choices she makes in her essay. This dynamic process—the influence of ideas on evidence, of evidence on form, of form on ideas, and so on—manifests itself as a writer's presence.

Over the next three chapters, Wallack analyzes eight essays from *The Best American Essays* series, using the concept of presence as a heuristic to account for how “the writing ‘I’ makes sense—explicitly or implicitly—of the experiences recounted or constructed as evidence” (58). Her decision to organize these chapters by the type of thinking—historical, ethical, or ontological—an essay requires of the writer and his readers poses a challenge to taxonomies that classify essays as either “personal” or “critical,” a distinction Wallack is keen to disrupt because it perpetuates a false dichotomy between writing about the self and the world. As Wallace argues in chapter three, the essay is a genre that allows writers to draw and reflect on their own experience of loss while simultaneously addressing broader social concerns. Wallack examines “haunted essays” by Kenneth McClane, Jamaica Kincaid, and Richard Rodriguez that are characterized by the writers' attempts to come to terms with the “ghosts” in their pasts. In response to a personal loss, these writers avoid the temptation to compose an elegy, a mode of writing that too often conforms to a predictable, predetermined structure and promises the comforts of closure. But ghosts are seldom placable, and writers of “haunted essays” find themselves trapped in history, unable to exorcise their demons. As a result, they create a presence that straddles the past and present as well as the roles of participant and spectator. The body of evidence they animate and the pronouns and verb tense they choose allow them to interrupt and reverse the flow of history and haunt the past themselves as they reflect on the meaning of their lives, and the lives of those they have lost. Although the ghosts of the past are rarely laid to rest, and history resists tidy endings, the “haunted essay” is able to reveal that the “work of mourning . . . is not one person's responsibility, but rather a call to action for writers and readers in communion” (114).

Chapter four looks at “reading essays” by Susan Sontag, Gerald Early, and Franklin Burroughs, which exemplify how the act of reading—and misreading—a text of any kind changes the reader's values as well as the form of the essay itself. Invoking Virginia Woolf's figure of the “common reader” who reads for pleasure and forms opinions and judgments for her own edification, Wallack argues that the essay is a genre that synthesizes an essayist's reading and writing presences. The “reading essays” she analyzes rehearse the fact that writers need to read primary texts—visual,

material, aural, verbal—in order to generate their own ideas and that they can represent themselves as reliable thinkers without relying on secondary sources. When writers of “reading essays” interpret a text, they do not try to “get it right,” but instead let the text work on them. As Wallack explains, simply being aware that an interpretation of a text is incomplete or incorrect will establish rapport with other readers and illuminate new possibilities for living in the world. While the “reading essay” dramatizes a reader’s “moral obligation to do something with what [she] has learned” (138), the “awakening essay,” which is the focus of chapter five, represents a writer’s process of self-work to live more fully in the world. Wallack reads essays by Mary Gordon and Charles Simic that explore timeless philosophical questions. For example, what does it mean to be human? Where did I come from, and where am I going? Even though these essays meditate on the writers’ personal experiences, they avoid sliding into solipsism because they turn to the world outside of the self for illumination. Gordon and Simic awaken to deeper understandings of themselves as human beings by practicing the art of looking and reflection through the recursive structures of their essays. Wallack concludes that it would be inaccurate to label these essays “personal” because they “need the self and world in dynamic relation to realize the possibly that our work might transcend the limits of both” (196).

The final chapter returns to the book’s pedagogical argument, focusing on American higher education today, when the future of a liberal arts education seems uncertain and many English departments are characterized by disciplinary rifts between the subfields of composition and rhetoric, creative writing, and literature. According to Wallack, the survival of the humanities *and* the university depends in large part on whether writing programs will continue to be “sites of rigorous inquiry into teaching and learning, writing and reading, drawing on the many literate traditions from which the majority of us come” (200). A curriculum dedicated to writing essays and studying the history of the genre and its most important practitioners, Wallack argues, will instill in students the values and habits of mind—especially the ability to reflect on and revise their own thinking—that are central to the liberal arts; learning these qualities, not the conventions of academic discourse, will prepare them for further schooling and life. Depending on their attachment to postmodern theory, readers may distrust Wallack’s repeated endorsement of “the aesthetic and conceptual project of essayists as a humanizing and humanistic one” (173), and Wallack herself acknowledges that the essay—on its own—cannot fully “prepare students for every future writing task or context they are likely to encounter in and out of school” (4). Readers may also be distracted by the number of typos, especially in chapter one. But the spirit of *Crafting Presence* should not only inspire writing program administrators and teachers of writing to rethink the curriculum in their writing classrooms but also awaken them to see the essay “as a technology for original thought and deep engagement with texts, with the self, and with the world” (4).