

An Exploration of the Human Spirit

Ever since Montaigne used the term *essai* to denote idiosyncratic, exploratory writing that engages in a “trial, test, or attempt,” the literary essay has provided a loose genre for bent conventions, vernacular criticism, unorthodox scholarship, punk philosophy, and DIY theory. The work of Eula Biss, *English*, arises from the personal essay tradition, which has long insisted that the personal is political, the vernacular is poetic, and knowledge is multivalent.

Biss’s collection *Notes from No Man’s Land: American Essays* (Graywolf Press, 2009) is a personal exploration of the legacy of racial oppression in the United States. It opens with a litany of lynchings and closes with an interrogation of the limits of apology; other essays engage in both narrative memoir and cultural critique. *Notes* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, and *Salon* called it “the most accomplished book of essays anyone has written or published so far in the 21st century.”

Her recent book, *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (Graywolf Press, 2014), is a long essay about fear and physical vulnerability that asks what we, as members of a collective, owe to each other. In an extension of her thinking in *Notes*, this book explores how a majority might participate in the protection of a minority. Its point of entry is childhood vaccination, which allows the book to range from questions of parenting to feminism to environmentalism to science fiction to political power. Each of the essay’s 30 short sections are distinct (with moments of memoir, literary criticism, historical overview, and *ars poetica*, among others), but no single section is complete or stands alone; the book’s inquiry depends on interaction among all the sections. In this way, the book’s form mirrors its central argument about the essential interdependence of the human species.



Photo courtesy of Eula Biss

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Photo by Steven E. Gross

Exploring American Literature

Can literature written in a language other than English be considered “American” literature? Is literature published in Japanese outside Japan truly Japanese? Andrew Leong, English and Japanese, addresses these questions by exploring an archive of literary works lost in the no-man’s land between common understandings of what makes a national literature. Leong translates and interprets poems, plays, and stories that were written in Japanese by and for a Japanese immigrant readership in the United States.

In introducing some of these works to an English-reading audience, Leong worked with a team at Kaya Press to publish *Lament in the Night*, a critical edition of his translations of two novels by Nagahara Shoson, a writer active in Los Angeles during the mid-1920s. The project’s original aim was to translate only the title novella. But while conducting research in the Japanese American National Museum’s microfilm archives, Leong discovered

Shoson’s serial novel *The Tale of Osato*, which was published in more than 140 installments in the *Rafu Shimpo* (Los Angeles Japanese Daily News).

Written in an unflinching naturalist style, Shoson’s two novels portray the struggles of people on the lowest rungs of Japanese immigrant society: desperate vagrants and petty thieves, delinquent youths and aging gamblers, live-in maids and speakeasy waitresses, failed artists and nameless suicides. Shoson’s hardboiled depictions of Southern California anticipate by more than a decade such later English-language novels as Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939), John Fante’s *Ask the Dust* (1939), and James M. Cain’s *Mildred Pierce* (1941).

Building on his *Lament in the Night* translations, Leong is writing a book exploring how works like Shoson’s novels can provide new insights about both American and Japanese literature.