

Inside the Box: On Queering the Fragment

Emilio Williams

“I lived my life in fragments. For I knew
nothing was so dangerous in the world as love, my kind of love.”

Richard Rodriguez

Atlanta, AD 1993. I start classes in one of the local public universities. In the library’s bathroom, the stalls are covered with messages. I read them one by one. Other restrooms, more messages. In my native Spain, I had never seen anything like them: detailed calls for sexual encounters, with phone numbers or specific times and places to meet; obscene messages; rants; toilet wisdom. Before AOL chat rooms and Craigslist personals, before Facebook walls and Twitter, before hookup apps and fake news, there were bathroom stalls.

Index cards. I have used index cards to do research and organize my convoluted musings ever since I can remember. Later on, Post-it Notes joined my desk. While Anne Lamott’s father was suggesting to her brother to finish a school report by going “bird by bird,” across the Atlantic, my dad was teaching me how to eat an elephant. The editor of this section wants this essay to be under 1,200 words. About 90 words fill the box above. That means I have twelve bites to “incomplete” this essay. In real life, I do not place myself at the receiving end of bondage; in writing, I find restrictions freeing.

Burn this letter. From Sappho’s fragments to the graffiti of male-staffed brothels in Pompeii, the earliest queer texts have reached us in snippets. For centuries, the only possible first-person narratives for gender dissidents were diaries and letters, always expected to remain in the private sphere, destroyed posthumously, and often “pre-humously.” Perhaps historical impediments may have inspired the virtue of fragments to a more liberated generation of writers. Call it a lyric essay or not. But if we consider fragmented text, those are intrinsic to the queer experience.

First draft. In my word processor, I insert a table that is one row by one column. A rectangular box appears. Inside, I can write as many lines as I feel may work best for the project. (Seven-line fragments for this craft essay). It's not about getting my writing into a corset. I don't like corsets, even if, after the lockdown, I could use one. I think of this box in terms of casting the text into a mold like artists do with wax or plaster figurines. The effect can be to give the words the sharpness of a dart. Or braise them in a dutch oven to reach the distilled efficacy of a metric poet counting syllables.

Pointing in a direction. W.H. Auden wrote several fragmented essays collected in *The Dyer's Hand*. In "Hic et Ille," he puts forward his belief that all sufferings worth mentioning should be articulated as an aphorism. In "Writing," he delivers: "It takes little talent to see clearly what lies under one's nose, a good deal of it to know in which direction to point that organ." A Japanese theater master said that with some actors pointing at the sky, you see a finger, but with the best of them you see the moon. Condensing makes you hypervigilant. The less space you have, the less room you give to the obvious.

Dropping French words. The idea that gender is performative is now so mainstream that it's starting to feel trite. Everything human is performative. This affects how I see the world and how I write about it. For those in need of certainties, it's all about being right or wrong, about being good or bad. But for those of us searching for something less binary, that elusive *je ne se quoi*, it cannot be about simple subjectivities. It has to be about putting on a great dress rehearsal. In Spanish, the word for essay, *ensayo*, also means rehearsal. Performing the page. *Mise-en-page*. This rectangle, my stage.

Aphoristic DNAs. Like Roland Barthes, his avid fan Susan Sontag had a more personal than political positioning on her same-sex desires and relationships. They were both attuned to most things but their own petulance. Sontag compares Barthes' taste for the aphoristic to Wilde and Proust. Add any other queer writer you may admire – I nominate here Gertrude Stein and David Wojnarowicz – and you get a constellation of authors who show what Sontag calls a "perception of structure." As Barthes wrote, inspired by another sexual renegade, André Gide, the fragments are "preferable to a distorting order."

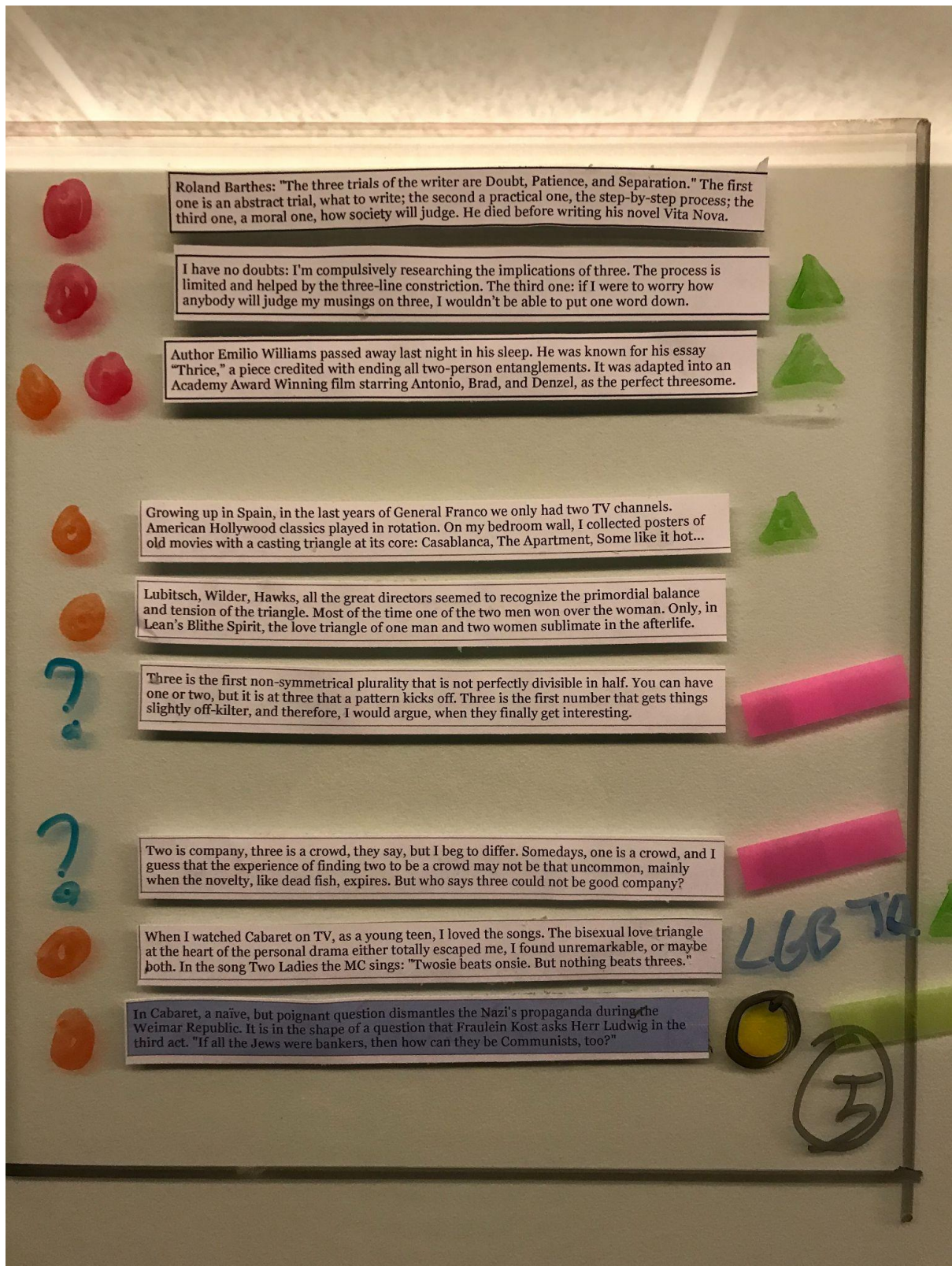
Shrinking. If the situation – a bathroom wall, or an editor's expectation – is creating a limitation to the length of your text, practice the queer art of "goading." Goading is a way of doubling down. If you're a gay boy and somebody tries to insult you by calling you a girl, you goad them by shamelessly femme-ing it up. If somebody calls you a degenerate, you increase the frequency of orgies in your schedule. Matthew Goulish, the dramaturg of the experimental performance troupe Every House Has a Door, once wrote: "If the setting strikes you as too small for your work, shrink it even more."

Piecing together. Those writers who don't look, sound or love the way the figures of the traditional canon did, research their own family constellations out of necessity, and vindication. On top of those mentioned so far, this is my partial litany of heavenly sinners, my aunties of fragmented nonfiction: Joe Brainard, Severo Sanduy, Gloria Anzaldúa, Derek Jarman, Lou Sullivan, Hervé Guibert, Assotto Saint. And many still among us, including Carole Maso, Dionne Brand, Kazim Ali, Maggie Nelson, and, recent discoveries (to me) Julietta Singh, Carmen Maria Machado, Emerson Whitney. Thank you, darlings!

It's always about something else. My father died in February 2020, just before the lockdown. A year later, I still couldn't make myself write about his death. Instead, I started obsessing on the number three. I wrote fragments made of three sentences, in three-line paragraphs. I organized those fragments in groups of three and placed three triads on each page. Nine pages total. The number was everywhere: in art, in philosophy, in history, in language, in my own biography. Somehow writing about non-binaries became writing about a liminal space between life and death: my grief. In retrospect, this was inevitable.

Cutting the mold open. I'm ready to take off the scaffolding. With the text out of the rectangles, I edit a word here or there without the original constraint. This may go on for days. And then comes the moment of sewing together the pieces. I named my essay on three *Thrice*. I printed all the rectangles, cut them apart, and reorganized them on a whiteboard, color-coding themes and topics and playing trial-and-error with their order. I thought of the AIDS quilt. My partner, Rob, thought I was trying to crack the modus operandi of a serial killer.

Jouissance. I catch a queer writer I'm cruising, cruising a third writer I'm also cruising. Wayne Koestenbaum considers Barthes to be in search of a poetical "condensation." He notices how Barthes, as Walter Benjamin before him, worked "in aphoristic fragments and assembled the pieces according to schemes nearly aleatory." The constellations of fragments may or may not be as aleatory as they seem at first. In the way constellations are arranged, there is madness to the method. Plus, it's always that pesky law of gravity. Mysterious craft here, magical physics there.



My essay "[Thrice](#)" in progress. Sorting fragments on a white board using color coding and non-permanent glue. (Summer 2021)

Recommended Reading: Nonfiction Texts Written by Queer Authors Using Fragmented Forms

Anzaldúa, Gloria. [Borderlands: The New Mestiza](#). United States, Aunt Lute Books.

Auden, Wystan Hugh. [The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays](#). United States, Vintage Books

Barthes, Roland. [A Lover's Discourse: Fragments](#). United Kingdom, Hill and Wang, Prologue by Wayne Koestenbaum.

Barthes, Roland. [A Barthes Reader](#). United States, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Edited by Susan Sontag.

Brand, Dionne. [A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging](#). Canada, Doubleday.

Jarman, Derek. [At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament](#). United States, University of Minnesota Press.

Saint, Assotto. [Spells of a Voodoo Doll](#). United Kingdom, Masquerade Books.

Singh, Julietta. [No Archive Will Restore You](#). United States, punctum books.

[Emilio Williams](#)' fragmentary essays have appeared in Hinterland Magazine (UK) and Imagined Theatres, with additional credits forthcoming from Transatlantica Journal (France) and the International Conference on Humanities, Social and Education Sciences. His award-winning theater plays have been produced and published in several countries, including the U.S., UK, France, Mexico and Spain, where he was born. He holds an MFA in writing from the School of the Art Institute. He currently teaches at Georgia State University and Dominican University.