CULTURAL COMMENT

THE PERSONAL-ESSAY BOOM IS OVER

By Jia Tolentino

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A genre that partially defined the last decade of the Internet has essentially disappeared. ILLUSTRATION BY ELENA XAUSA

There's a certain kind of personal essay that, for a long time, everybody seemed to hate. These essays were mostly written by women. They came off as unseemly, the writer's judgment as flawed. They were *too* personal: the topics seemed insignificant, or else too important to be aired for an audience of strangers. The essays that drew the most attention tended to fall within certain categories. There were the one-off body-horror pieces, such as "My Gynecologist Found a Ball of Cat Hair in My Vagina," published by xoJane, or a notorious lost-tampon chronicle published by Jezebel. There were essays that incited outrage for the life styles they described, like the one about pretending to live in the Victorian era, or Cat Marnell's oeuvre. There were those that incited outrage by giving voice to horrible, uncharitable thoughts, like "My Former Friend's Death Was a Blessing" (xoJane again) and "I'm Not Going to Pretend I'm Poor to Be Accepted by You" (Thought Catalog). Finally, there were those essays that directed outrage at society by describing incidents of sexism, abuse, or rape.

These essays began to proliferate several years ago—precisely when is hard to say, but we can, I think, date the beginning of the boom to 2008, the year that Emily Gould wrote a first-person cover story, called "Exposed," for the *Times Magazine*, which was about, as the tagline put it, what she gained and lost from writing about her intimate life on the Web. Blowback followed, and so did an endless supply of imitations. By September, 2015, online first-person writing was so abundant that Laura Bennett, at Slate, could refer to a "first-person industrial complex" in a takedown of the genre. "Every site seems to have a first person vertical and a first-person editor," Bennett, who also cited Gould's *Times* story as a turning point, wrote. One could "take a safari" through various personal-essay habitats—Gawker, Jezebel, xoJane, Salon, BuzzFeed Ideas—and conclude that they were more or less the same, she argued. While she granted that not all first-person writing on the Internet was undignified, there were far too many "solo acts of sensational disclosure" that read like "reverse-engineered headlines."

The market, in Bennett's view, had overinflated. She was right: a year and a half later, it barely exists. BuzzFeed Ideas shut down at the end of 2015, Gawker and xoJane in 2016; Salon no longer has a personal-essays editor. Jezebel, where I used to work, doesn't run personal essays at its former frequency—its editor-in-chief, Emma Carmichael, told me that she scarcely receives pitches for them anymore. Indie sites known for cultivating first-person writing—the Toast, the Awl, the Hairpin—have shut down or changed direction. Thought Catalog chugs along, but it seems to have lost its ability to rile up outside readers. Of course, *The New Yorker* and other magazines continue to publish memoir of various kinds. Just this week, *The Atlantic* published a first-person cover story by Alex Tizon, with the provocative headline "My Family's Slave." But there's a specific sort of ultra-confessional essay, written by a person you've never heard of and published online, that flourished until recently and now hardly registers. The change has happened quietly, but it's a big one: a genre that partially defined the last decade of the Internet has essentially disappeared.

What happened? To answer that, it helps to consider what gave rise to the personal essay's ubiquity in the first place. Around 2008, several factors converged. In preceding years, private blogs and social platforms—LiveJournal, Blogspot, Facebook—trained people to write about their personal lives at length and in public. As Silvia Killingsworth, who was previously the managing editor of *The New Yorker* and took over the Awl and the Hairpin last year, put it to me, "People love to talk about themselves, and they were given a platform and no rules." Then the invisible hand of the page-view economy gave them a push: Web sites generated ad revenue in direct proportion to how many "eyeballs" could be attracted to their offerings, and editorial budgets had contracted in the wake of the recession. The forms that became increasingly common—flashy personal essays, op-eds, and news aggregation—were those that could attract viral audiences on the cheap.

Sarah Hepola, who worked as Salon's personal-essay editor, described the situation to me in an e-mail. "The boom in personal essays—at Salon, at least, but I suspect other places—was in part a response to an online climate where more content was needed at the exact moment budgets were being slashed." When I worked as an editor at the Hairpin and Jezebel, from 2013 to 2016, I saw up close how friendly editors and ready audiences could implicitly encourage writers to submit these pieces in droves. For the first two years that I edited personal essays, I received at least a hundred first-person pitches and pieces each week.

But an ad-based publishing model built around maximizing page views quickly and cheaply creates uncomfortable incentives for writers, editors, and readers alike. Attention flows naturally to the outrageous, the harrowing, the intimate, and the recognizable, and the online personal essay began to harden into a form defined by identity and adversity—not in spite of how tricky it is to negotiate those matters in front of a crowd but precisely because of that fact. The commodification of personal experience was also women's territory: the small budgets of popular women-focussed Web sites, and the rapidly changing conventions and constrictions surrounding women's lives, insured it. And so many women wrote about the most difficult things that had ever happened to them and received not much in return. Most sites paid a few hundred dollars for such pieces at most; xoJane paid fifty dollars. When I began writing on the Internet, I wrote personal essays for free.

For some writers, these essays led to better-paying work. But for many the thrill of reaching an audience had to suffice. And placing a delicate part of your life in the hands of strangers didn't always turn out to be so thrilling. Personal essays cry out for identification and connection; what their authors often got was distancing and shame. Bennett pegged her Slate piece to an essay that Carmichael and I edited at Jezebel, written by a woman who had met her father for the first time as a teen-ager and engaged, under emotional coercion, in a brief sexual relationship with him. Bennett deemed the personal-essay economy a "dangerous force for the people who participate in it."

By that point, writers, editors, and readers had become suspicious of one another, and the factors that produced the personal-essay boom had started to give way. Some of the online publishers that survive have shifted to video and sponsored posts and Facebook partnerships to shore up revenue. Aggregation and op-eds—the infamous, abundant takes—continue to thrive, although the takes have perhaps cooled a bit. Personal essays have evidently been deemed not worth the trouble. Even those of us who like the genre aren't generally mourning its sudden disappearance from the mainstream of the Internet. "First-person writing should not be cheap, and it should not be written or edited quickly," Gould wrote to me. "And it should be published in a way that protects writers rather than hanging them out to dry on the most-emailed list."

There are still a few outlets that cultivate a more subtle and sober iteration of this kind of first-person writing, some of them connected to book publishing. There's Hazlitt, launched by Random House Canada, and Lenny Letter, which now has a publishing imprint, and Catapult, which describes itself as a book publisher with a daily online magazine. (The managing editor of Catapult is Nicole Chung, who previously worked for the Toast.) But the genre's biggest migration has been to TinyLetter, an e-mail newsletter platform. Gould, who writes a newsletter called Can't Complain, suggested that TinyLetters are doing what personal blogs did fifteen years ago: allowing writers to work on their own terms and reach "small readerships in an intimate, private-feeling, still public enough way." Carrie Frye, formerly the managing editor of the Awl, also has a TinyLetter. She told me that it seemed like "writers—particularly female writers—had said, 'O.K., I'm going to make an Internet on which my essays go out in pneumatic tubes to just who I want them to go to, and no one else.' "

It's clear, in any case, that the personal-essay boom is over. If it had already peaked by the time Bennett wrote about it, in the fall of 2015, we can locate its hard endpoint about a year later, in November of last year. After the Presidential election, many favored personal-essay subjects—relationships, self-image, intimate struggle—seemed to hit a new low in broader social relevance. "I feel like the 2016 election was a reckoning for journalism," Hepola wrote to me. "We missed the story. Part of why we missed it might have been this over-reliance on 'how I *feel* about the day's news'—and now the journalism world recognizes that we need to re-invest in reporting." Killingsworth echoed this, talking about her work at the Awl and the Hairpin: "I want to encourage people to talk about mostly anything other than themselves."

There's been a broader shift in attitudes about this sort of writing, which always endured plenty of vitriol. Put simply, the personal is no longer political in quite the same way that it was. Many profiles of Trump voters positioned personal stories as explanations for a terrible collective act; meanwhile, Clinton's purported reliance on identity politics has been heavily criticized. Individual perspectives do not, at the moment, seem like a trustworthy way to get to the bottom of a subject. (Even Tizon's piece, which was published posthumously and uses his damning closeness to his subject as a way to elucidate the otherwise invisible captivities of the Filipino *katulong* servant class, prompted an immediate backlash—which then prompted a backlash to the backlash, mainly among those who think Western readers have misunderstood Tizon's understanding of his own position.) Writers seem less interested in mustering their own centrality than they were, and readers seem less excited at the prospect of being irritated by individual civilian personalities. "The political landscape has been so phantasmagoric that even the most sensationally interesting personal essays have lost some currency when not tied head-on to the news," Bennett said in an e-mail. "There just hasn't been much oxygen left for the kinds of essays that feel marginal or navel-gazey." These days, she tends to see pitches "that center on systemic rather than personal trauma," she added, "or on orienting personal trauma in our berserk new reality."

No more lost-tampon essays, in other words, in the age of Donald Trump. And yet I find myself missing aspects of the personal-essay Internet that the flashiest examples tended to obscure. I still think of the form as a valuable on-ramp, an immediate and vivid indication of a writer's instincts—one that is accessible to first-time writers and young people who haven't developed experience or connections. The Internet made the personal essay worse, as it does for most things. But I am moved by the negotiation of vulnerability. I never got tired of coming across a writerly style that seemed to exist for no good reason. I loved watching people try to figure out if they had something to say.

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