The personal essay is the product of a writer’s free-hand, is predictably expressive, and is typically placed in a creative non-fiction category rather than in the category of the serious academic or programmatic essay. In the article “Democracy, Pedagogy, and the Personal Essay,” Joel Haefner explores the question of whether the personal essay is truly democratic. Ultimately, the point of his critique is to suggest a “pedagogy that attempts to balance the individualistic, expressive view of knowledge with a social, collective perspective” (515). His conclusion, while logically achieved, is narrowly tailored to fit his own agenda rather than accurately reflecting the status of the personal essay. As suggested by its very title, this form of essay is inherently an individualistic style of prose. Haefner’s attempt to blend a collective voice into what is by nature a personal voice ignores the purpose and nature of the personal essay. Haefner’s discussion of the democratic nature of the essay requires a working definition for the personal essay and an understanding of the audience for the personal essay.

The personal essay is written from the perspective of the author’s personal experience and recreates the author’s personal thoughts on paper. In her book The Art of the Essay, Lisa Fielder defines the genre in this manner:

Whether thinking about earthworms, or royal societies, or torture, or taste, or cities or canes, or walls, an essayist whose work is ‘moral,’ ‘reflective,’ ‘informal,’ familiar,’ cannot fail to speak in a ‘personal’ voice. The essay is personal because it is in my every movement on paper that ‘I’ come into being and thereby exist for my reader. (18-19)
In essence, the author’s personal, individual voice is heard in the essay to the extent that the reader recognizes a living persona behind the words. This quality of a felt existence of the author was also explored by Gordon Harvey in his article on “Presence in the Essay” in which he noted that the true personal essay may be best described as having the affect of “presence” where the reader receives a strong sense of the presence of the author. By these definitions, the personal essay is only limited by its subject matter and most certainly not by its voice.

Haefner’s misunderstanding of the personal essay begins in his inability to connect his theories to a solid definition of the personal essay. He correctly summarizes that the “essay synthesizes a diversity of forms” (510) but does not seem to realize that these forms are not inclusive of forms that are antithetical to the existence of presence in the personal essay. Any form of the personal essay that expands the authorship beyond the singular is no longer a personal essay. It may be informal or conversational, but the fact of the matter remains: the existence of a plurality of voices in the essay places it in the category of a collaborative essay. In a rather broad sense of the word, the essay is a collaborative effort. The author’s perspectives and opinions are formed through the discourse communities in which the author participates. Indeed, as this truly is the case, there cannot exist any form of writing that is not collaborative in nature, for assuredly as Donne so eloquently stated “no man is an island,” (108) but every writer speaks to a different discourse community. Yet Haefner’s point was not meant to be taken broadly, and we cannot be so generous as to ascribe unjustified interpretations to his words. Even Haefner unconsciously recognizes his point of contradiction. In challenging the “whole idea of singular authorship,” his suggestions include “having teams re-write personal essays from other singular viewpoints” and “a critique or review of the process of composing as a group behind the fiction of a singular author” (517). The challenge is an interesting one since the point of the challenge is
to diversify the voice, yet the end result only serves to more deeply entrench the necessity of a singular voice. Additionally, Greg Myers comments on the importance of reality in the essay when he writes:

Writing with power requires authenticity of expression and unmediated realism of perception in which the writer and reader must “see” the object written about. The problem with this call for direct experience of reality is that, as with Leonard, one must ask to which reality is one admitted. Elbow… acknowledges the existence of fundamentally different views of the world… and sees them as free and individual. (449)

Each individual experiences reality uniquely, making reality unique to the individual. The concept of multiple realities and voices in an essay is not achievable in an essay that supposedly speaks with one voice. Combining multiple view-points into one is, though difficult, certainly manageable. The conundrum is realized when one view of reality is achieved, however collaboratively reached, and once again, the essay has been expressed in one singular voice. In fact, the purpose of the essay is such that it requires a singular voice in order to remain in that genre. Wendell Harris observes in “Reflections on the Peculiar Status of the Personal Essay” that “most extended essays on and studies of the essay present the characteristics of the personal essay as though they were applicable to the whole genre” (935). Haefner has fallen into this category. By changing the definitions of the personal essay in order to include an entirely separate genre, Haefner is attempting to call a rose a daisy by simply renaming it or applying the characteristics of the personal essay to that of a collaborative genre. Only one style of voice will ultimately dominate in the essay and it is the voice that determines the category of the essay.
The Inexhaustible Voice of the Personal Essay

The audience of the personal essay is ultimately dependent upon the rhetorical situation identified by the author. There are, however, a couple of identifiable principles for understanding the typical audience for the personal essay. First, because the author is given unlimited reign on imagination for his topic, the personal essay has unlimited potential topics and the language used to describe that topic. In this sense, the audience for a personal essay is quite universal. Whereas the language of the formal or programmatic essay limits the audience to the field of academia, the author of a personal essay could speak to a combination of auto-mechanics, political strategists, college deans, and church staff with ease. Chris Anderson notes that “the enabling assumption of the essay form is that all of us can write essays and all of us can read them. They are not mysterious, secret midrashes understandable only by the circumcised” (303), and is therefore open to a universal range of audiences. Haefner asserts that “the ‘universal’ audiences claimed by many essayists and essay theorists are careful fictions that counterbalance the restrictive discourse communities that inform different essays” (511). Yet, the second principle is that the personal essay tends to move from the particular to the universal, thus enabling an appeal for a broader range of audience than that simply identified by class. Candace Spigelman, in her article observes that even Aristotle discusses deliberative oratory, as a narrative style that is used to explore past events, for Aristotle states that “being reminded of those things the audience will take better counsel about what is to come” (Arguments, 272). Using a more personal voice through the narrative genre to impart wisdom places this text in a situation where “narrative seems closely associated with the use of ‘paradigm,’ or inductive argument from example, a common feature of deliberative rhetoric” (72). The personal essay is thus a medium of inductive argument, beginning with the particular experience of the author and moving towards a more universal idea. The audience of the personal essay is, in theory, limitless. The style and structure
of the personal essay itself poses no limitation to the author’s choice of audience. So while
Haefner contends that class is the limitation for the “universal” audience (511), and wonders how
we can “claim universal knowledge and common language for the essay” when it is “personal
and limited to the vision of a specific writer” (513), Harris notes that the personal essay opens
out and moves from an individual’s trivial occurrence to a larger insight. It is this process which
creates the sense of widening horizons that belongs to the inductive movement of the mind. The
specific occasion, issue, or problem becomes inessential as the audience connects with the
broader application. (“Reflections” 944). Despite the original, specific topic, the nature of the
personal essay is such that allows anyone the opportunity to explore the larger meaning or
significance of a particular circumstance.

Haefner opens his inquiry into the personal essay by questioning its “democratic” nature.
On its face, the question is certainly a fair one. Is the personal essay an inherent voice or
“shibboleth” of individualism and thus, of democracy? According to Haefner, “if the self is not
unitary” (512), then the essay is not limited to a presentation of the individual. He further argues
that there is “no evidence that using personal essays as expressive discourse does promote a
spirit of democracy or egalitarianism” (514). The “unitary” self Haefner refers to is an interesting
concept. Naturally, Haefner intends the phrase to mean, in essence, a single cell organism,
unaffected by its surroundings and disregarding towards outside influences. We know this to be
an impossible existence. Of course man is affected, molded and shaped by his surroundings and
experiences! To view man as an island is simply absurd; however, it is equally absurd to see man
merely as a walking amalgamation of culture. The elements and influences of culture combined
with the uniqueness of the individual creates the full picture of man. Harris concludes accurately
that:
Even if we accept for the moment that there is no core individuality, that each individual mind is indeed a thing of shreds and patches, the specific collocations of culturally induced thought and responses will vary with the elements of that culture to which persons are exposed, the order in which they are exposed to them, the number and intensity of the conflicting cultural attitudes and beliefs they encounter. The result is the individual. (Reflections, 943)

The impact and influence of a collective culture on an individual does not make that person any less individual. Even with this loose interpretation of the individual in play, that self is not unitary; Haefner still loses the point to the essential individuality of man. Egalitarianism is a fascinating concept. The idea that all are treated equally without regard to race, class, gender, or creed contains a unifying appeal that all gravitate toward. Does the personal essay promote this concept? Harriet Malinowitz, interestingly enough, notes in her essay “Business, Pleasure and the Personal Essay,” that the “personal essayist disclaims authority; she is not teaching a lesson so much as candidly revealing the process by which she has learned one” (319). The personal essay is seen as more of a mode of expression rather than a didactic or instructive tool. Since the author assumes only the authority necessary to communicate his or her particular experience, communication occurs on an equal plain with the reader. Chris Anderson succinctly noted that “the essay is fundamentally democratic. It enfranchises both the reader and the writer” (303). Haefner takes unjustified umbrage with this statement, but never responds to Anderson’s later explanation of this assertion when Anderson reminded his audience that “the naturalness of the essay can take place only as a result of the sort of education that gives us a “command” of words…any educated person can engage in this conversation. It is not exclusive. It is not secretive” (303) In short, the only barrier to communication through the personal essay is that of
illiteracy – a disease fully at odds with a democratic undertaking, but completely irrelevant to Haefner’s considerations.

The individualism valued by democracy is firmly entrenched in the heart of the personal essay. By its very nature, the essay is singular in voice, and no amount of collaboration or collective thought changes that in any stage of its formation. Haefner himself inadvertently recognizes that the singular voice is unique to the personal essay and cannot be removed, no matter how skillfully. The audience is open to the writer’s interpretation and treatment of the topic. Because the genre usually works from the particular to the universal, the essay is capable of appealing to any body of people. It is equally important to note that the personal essay truly enfranchises its audience to the extent that it treats all with equality and does not inherently discriminate based upon class, race, gender, or creed. That is not to say that the subject an author may choose will not discriminate, but the essay itself will be just as open to one class of people as another and is not limited to the realm of academia. Does that create a democratic genre? Most assuredly. Through the personal essay, man can realize an “inexhaustible voice,” one like Faulkner references in his famous Nobel Peace Prize speech, a voice all on his own and the beauty of his singular experiences are shared with a limitless audience.
Works Cited


