

EVENT TITLE: What Is and What If: The Speculative in Creative Nonfiction

Event Description: Five authors consider the speculative as a deft and bold tool in creative nonfiction. Panelists read from their innovative creative nonfiction that pries at the real and imaginary and discuss how speculative, mythic, ghostly, and otherwise more obviously imaginative modes wrangle events from life into narrative. This panel asks what's at stake in inviting speculation into our nonfiction and interrogates whether speculative creative nonfiction is a new genre or integral to creative nonfiction's lineage.

Event Category: Nonfiction Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator

Adèle Barclay: Adèle Barclay is the author of *If I Were in a Cage I'd Reach Out for You*, winner of the Dorothy Livesay Prize, and *Renaissance Normcore*. Essays from her forthcoming memoir *Black Cherry* have placed in contests from *Room*, *Event*, and *Prism International*. They teach creative writing at Cap U.

Event Participants

J. Nicole Jones: J. Nicole Jones received an MFA in creative nonfiction from Columbia University and has held editorial positions at *VICE* and *VanityFair.com*. Her essays and writing have appeared in the *LA Review of Books*, *VanityFair.com*, and others. Her memoir *Low Country* was published in 2021 by Catapult.

Nisa Malli: Nisa Malli's first book, *Allodynia* (Palimpsest Press, 2022), was longlisted for the Pat Lowther Award and the Gerald Lampert Memorial Award. Her chapbook, *Remitting* (Baseline Press, 2019), won the bpNichol Prize. She teaches generative writing workshops on speculative futures using design fiction.

Alex Marzano-Lesnevich: Alex Marzano-Lesnevich is the author of *The Fact of a Body*, which received a Lambda Award and was translated into 11 languages, and the forthcoming *Both and Neither*. A 2023 United States Artists fellow, they live in Vancouver, Canada, where they are the Rogers Chair in Creative Nonfiction at UBC.

Emilly Prado: Emilly Prado is an award-winning author and journalist, community organizer, and DJ based in Portland, Oregon. Her debut essay collection, *Funeral for Flaca*, was a winner of a 2022 Pacific Northwest Book Award, among other prizes. She has taught creative writing at PNCA and Williams College.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Welcome to “What Is & What If: The Speculative in Creative Nonfiction”
A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, that’s me Adèle Barclay, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

I will now identify all of our wonderful speakers for this afternoon.

Thank you for being here as we consider what place does the speculative, the ghostly, the mythical, the fantastical have in creative nonfiction?

Today our authors will go beyond defining speculative nonfiction, but assert the creativity, nuance, emotional truths, political gestures, and insight that the speculative mode makes possible in creative nonfiction.

My interest in the speculative mode grows out of my background as a poet where I was used to flickering between fiction and nonfiction, as Ben Learner would say. For me, this flickering between the real and unreal meant pairing emotional truths with fantastic metaphors to excavate the magic and terror dormant in the mundane. Similarly, my fiction hovers into weird territory where lonely queers date/become monsters or traumatic grief becomes a series of portals that degrade my protagonist's apartment much like the faulty plumbing. When I began writing creative nonfiction, I started to wonder how I could channel this sense of "what if" when writing about "what is." The anchor point for my lyric memoir is grief—a powerful and tormenting generator of "what if" thinking. After my sister died, I was unable to write and my thoughts were flooded with what ifs, which is incredibly common in grief, especially traumatic grief.

When I was finally ready to write, a sense of what if shaped my writing. I speculated about the different timelines my sister and I could've inhabited. I imagined conversations with her. I imagined what was happening to her body underground. I imagined my sister as colours. An older sibling is a way to step into the future and imagine potential avenues for oneself as the older sibling goes first and tests the waters and leads through example, showing avenues the younger sibling could take—the hairstyles, clothing, abusive lovers, partying, drugs, vocations. Sisters function as multiverses for each other and I had lost mine. So I

had to write with the speculative in mind in order to capture the essence of our sibling relationship.

Even further in the process of writing this memoir I realized invention, imagining if not full blown speculation is inherent creative nonfiction whether we acknowledge it or not. While revising my creative nonfiction memoir *Black Cherry* about sibling grief, an editor kept compelling me to insert more scenic detail—asking me to describe what I was wearing, to reconstruct dialogue, gestures, blocking, to depict the weather and everyone’s haircuts, to rearrange timelines to construct a more sturdy narrative arc, to turn multiple people into a composite character for simplicity. All the tools of narrative fiction. Of course, these requests turned my deeply faded and patchy memories into vivid scenes.

Yes I was wearing my favourite red shirt when I visited my sister in the hospital. Her hair was pulled back into a bun when she snuck me into the Sundae bar at Pizza Hut where she worked for free. Of course, my father laughed at the neighbours’ pomposity before digging to overcooked spaghetti. All of these concrete details very likely took place and also I had to make an imaginative leap to render my wisps of memory into full-fledged scenes.

I started to think: what would be possible if I could make more imaginative and playful leaps. Why did I have to stick to imagining the mundane with a so-called realist aesthetic? Why couldn’t I wield the fantastical to better understand the events of my past and turn them into story?

My essay “WarriorGrrl at the El Mocambo” dramatizes my time partying with my sister and her punk band in Toronto in the early 2000s. My memories from this time are vibrant splotches amidst a grey haze.

As I began to describe my sister and her bandmates on stage at some dive bar, I figured the best way to illuminate the scene would be to render Elissa and her band into mythical creatures. That fabulist sheen articulates the awe and danger I felt as a kid sister tagging along with my feral sister, her wild bandmates, and her friendly giant of a boyfriend and drinking and doing drugs and Justin doing doing half-front flips that slamming his tall body into the dance floor at the after hours clubs in the west end of Toronto.

If I have to make up I was wearing a red shirt in order to better convey scenic detail while wrangling real events into a story, can't I import fantastical tropes to augment the setting and stakes? And isn't the rampant obviousness of my imagining a little more honest? Through using the speculative, I'm signalling to my readers that YES, part of this creative nonfiction story is made up because it's art. And at least I'm acknowledging that there's some conjuring going on instead of trying to smooth in over into a perfectly round little stone of realism that also requires a ton of fabrication.

Why I am drawn to speculative nonfiction...

For a long time I struggled with CNF because of my patchy memory. But eventually I realized I could use those gaps as a generative site rather than seeing them as a flaw or lack. I can write around what isn't there, speculate about it, or integrate it in some way.

Sometimes I can let the inky darkness of memory hit and haunt the reader as it does me. Other times, I can push the story into an other speculative space beyond the real to bring it to life and get the story's core insights and atmosphere.

As I write creative nonfiction about events from my life I'm writing about suicide, abuse, trauma. I can't always broach the topic head on—I

don't have access to familial histories and I don't always have access to my long-term memories because of trauma—history and memory are kind of considered the mainstays of memoir writing. But the speculative allows me to enter the stories sideways and tease out emotional truths. For example, I have a scene where my late sister and I hang out with Madonna at a Las Vegas buffet and that fantastical vignette accurately captures the texture, whimsy, and mood of my relationship with my sister more than enumerating the degradations she and I experienced growing up.

The speculative as an inherently queer mode

Queer and trans writers have tons of experience resisting and reimagining the received frameworks, worldviews, scripts, and so-called truths from the straight world. Queer culture thrives off of reworking items that don't fit into a crooked patchwork that does. The implications of this legacy is that speculative twists in nonfiction can perhaps be easily integrated into queer story because of these foundational queer acts of camping up, exaggerating, rejigging, remixing materials bequeathed by the cis-straight world into new narratives.

Central to this discussion of speculation and what's imaginatively possible in creative nonfiction is how marginalized writers invent new ways to engage with storytelling and form. The authors on this panel include queer, trans, POC, and women writers who have forged, innovated, and blended genre and played with the real and imaginary in order to make space for untold stories that defy mainstream narratives and expectations. The chance to speak about why we are drawn to imaginative modes and what is at stake when using them to write about life and history is tremendously important: our discussion highlights how the speculative innovates the aesthetic boundaries of nonfiction

genres and is a tool for radical storytelling that questions the status quo.

Participants Remarks

J. Nicole Jones

A memoir as a form is different from a straight history in that it has to be full of multiple layers of reflection, which makes it primed for structural, speculative, even supernatural elements. For me, writing a speculative memoir was the right form because of the setting I was writing about, the lowcountry of South Carolina, steeped in tragic history, violence, and rich folklore. It was the form in which I found the right opportunities for my family's particular stories, that I had the most fun in, and that allowed me to reflect on the role and shape of creative nonfiction and memoir as a genre. The speculative elements of my memoir allowed me to feel as if I could give different possibilities to people who were dead, while still being truthful with readers on the page. I was writing to recover my grandmother's words and her voice, but also to write her a better ending than the one she had, in some way. Additionally, I really wanted the speculative structure of the book to reflect what it's like to remember things, as a way of connecting with readers and sharing the process of remembering.

Nisa Malli

I'm a speculative poet and speculative nonfiction writer, a heavy speculative fiction reader, and I'm trained as a journalist and a policy analyst so I come at the genre a few different ways:

1. [Speculative poetry, as Romie Stott, Poetry Editor for Strange Horizons describes it](#), is not defined by it's form or method, subject or audience, but by a feeling or a set of references: "*Poetry's intense, elevated*

language lends itself to the exploration of larger-than-life—or the profoundly intimate. It scales up to eternity and down to the subatomic. This provides, perhaps, a working definition for speculative poetry: it is poetry on a scale that is not merely human.” Poet [Domenica Martinello](#) and I took this last phrase (“a scale not merely human”) as the title of a speculative poetry panel for the ill-fated March 2020 [Growing Room festival](#). In the speculative elements of my poetry, the monster is a metaphor and also not a metaphor. Real, realized monsters — creatures that walk the page in daylight — and ‘invisible monster’ tropes — the monstrous, scary, exhilarating, risky things we cannot bear to look at head on. So if you take speculative nonfiction as the prose form of speculative poetry it might be nonfiction that defies factual scale -- either larger than life or "profoundly intimate", the stories that are too much (too real?) for daily newspapers.

2. The world of policy development is inherently speculative. As a policy analyst you wrap words around an idea and manifest into real life through law or declarative speech act. Good policy thinks beyond what the public service is told are the rules, the priority issues, the possible options, and plans for alternate futures. An imaginary, writes [Bob Jessop](#), is a “semiotic ensemble (without tightly defined boundaries) that frames individual subjects’ lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world.” [Lucy Mablin](#) describes it as “packages of beliefs, ideas, material circumstances and processes which together form a perspective on a current situation.” Hannah McGregor and Marcelle Kosman, on the podcast [Witch Please](#), explain Benedict Anderson’s use of the term “imagined communities” in the context of nation states as follows: “the way we identify the place, the boundaries we attach to it, the significance we attach to it, is not real....the nation is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may and indeed does prevail within each, the nation is imagined in

terms of fraternity, kinship, horizontal comradeship, very rose-colored glasses.”

The work of bureaucracy lives within this imaginary community of the nation state, in an imaginary community of bureaucrats organized into imaginary departments, functional classifications, and mandates; notoriously poorly equipped to handle problems that are less neatly categorized. As employees of the nation state, we collectively enact it through every bureaucratic act, every word of every briefing note that describes and reshapes the world, and it tells us what the bounds of those actions are. Author [Max Gladstone](#), writes in the voice of a fictional, magical bureaucrat: “The world’s a complicated place and it changes, that’s all. People interpret the universe and their interpretation alters it”.

You ask: Are there any examples from canonical creative nonfiction can we look to and find elements of speculative nonfiction?

I think all creative nonfiction has some speculative elements -- some imagination of things not on centre stage or within camera view, some theoreticals, some imagined conversations or dialogue or visuals that make the real feel realer (and often more human).

Alex Marzano-Lesnevich

- Archival erasure and trans history
- Speculative nonfiction as a mode for social justice
- animating the archive, imagining what is and isn’t there and *why* it isn’t there
- *Both And Neither* is a work of transgender and transgenre haunted nonfiction

- reworking the connotations of haunting for trans histories
- reaching beyond the binaries of fact/fiction
- queer chosen family and queer speculative histories

Emilly Prado

- Share how I came to speculative nonfiction + research findings:
 - Former journalist whose job it is to portray the truth
 - Fears of my mind's own "unreliability" to recall with "accuracy" my experience of being admitted to a psychiatric hospital in 2012, but wanting to write an immersive memoir
 - Being unable to write how I wanted because of these blocks towards focusing on the facts, and a mentor advising I needed to learn to "imagine around the corner"
 - Deep research during my MFA which led me to a 30-page paper, "Rewriting the Unreliable Narrator" in which I examined the intersections of memory, the roots of the "unreliable narrator" term in literature, and the impact of white supremacy and systemic oppression on truth, archives, and concepts of bias.
 - Key findings for me:
 - Memory for all people is scientifically slippery and changes over time
 - This malleability is also what makes healing from memory-based conditions, like PTSD, one of my diagnoses, possible.
 - Bias has, and continues to be, been embedded into record keeping based on who has been allowed power for centuries
 - Believability is a privilege not granted to those who are systemically oppressed/marginalized

- Understanding what speculative nonfiction means to me & how I've formed it:
 - Speculate AKA Investigate, fantasy, hope, wonder, invent, day/dream, question, imagine, meditate, ponder, to review inconclusively, to be curious about, to look at.
 - Writer Jaquira Diaz explains, "On the most basic level, speculative nonfiction is the art of filling in the blanks."
 - Inspirations: Octavia Butler, Carmen Maria Machado, Sadiyah Hartman, Jaquira Diaz, Maxine Hong Kingston
- Why some writers use it and some examples, including from my own work
 - By allowing our readers to join us into speculation, we can speak to larger truths not previously available to us through "fact" alone
 - Discuss examples of speculative nonfiction, but also warn of applying this label universally.
 - "No Name Woman," from *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong Kingston
 - "critical fabulation" coined by Sadiya Hartman, and example of her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*
 - In my own memoir draft, *OUTLINES*, I move backwards into imagined times, considering how my bipolar disorder might be seen if my family never left Mexico or weren't severed from our Indigenous beliefs or if our world wasn't ruled under capitalist structures that shape us into needing monetary output for survival.

Moderator Questions

- How would you define speculative creative nonfiction? What distinguishes it both from regular creative nonfiction and fiction?

- How did you come to speculative nonfiction as a genre? What have you learned about writing and storytelling from wielding this speculative mode?
- What does speculative creative nonfiction make possible? What does this mode offer our nonfiction writing? What are the genre's limitations or pitfalls?
- Are there any examples from canonical creative nonfiction can we look to and find elements of speculative nonfiction? I.e. is speculative nonfiction really as new-fangled as we often portray it as or does this genre have some roots?