

Essays on Art

Nikki Harris, 2026

This summer, I had the opportunity to write five nonfiction essays about journalism, music and theater, all artforms that I love and spend a lot of time engaging with. As an English major, before this summer I had already studied nonfiction authors such as Audre Lorde, Joe Brainard, Eula Biss, and Samuel Delany. While reading those authors, I am always gripped by their writing even if I don't have any pointed curiosity about the specific subjects they're discussing. My goal while writing these essays was to create a similar effect, in which someone could read and enjoy these essays even if they had little interest in or knowledge about the topics at hand.

One essay is about under what circumstances a reporter's sources should be able to read, edit, or revoke their interview quotes before a story is published. I was interested in writing about this because there are strong arguments to be made for most of the possible answers to this question. When a reporter gives a source the chance to edit their quotes after an interview, they may enable that source to infiltrate and control the editorial process. On the other hand, I think some sources—particularly those who are taking a significant risk by going on the record, maybe by criticizing their employer, for instance—deserve more control over what they say on the record and should be able to edit their remarks after an interview.

I also wanted to explore this topic because many mainstream publications forbid all quote approval practices, which I think is too rigid an approach. But I do believe it's important to have a specific and consistent policy governing when you do and don't let sources edit their quotes. Otherwise, it's easy to let random factors—such as a source only agreeing to do an interview if the reporter agrees to let them edit their quotes afterward—determine this for you, which is unfair to other sources who don't think to negotiate in that way. So I wanted to find guidelines that would be fair, beneficial, and honest to reporters, sources, and readers.

Two of the other essays I wrote were about classes I took while abroad last spring at a physical theater conservatory in northern Italy. In my classes there, we did a number of movement and voice exercises that were super interesting and that changed the way I thought about the body. In one class, for instance, we had to chase each other without running, which made me think about all the potential ways one can move from place to place, and how we rarely explore those movements in our daily lives or even while playing most sports. In another class, we had to learn how to sing without holding any tension in our bodies, which was a really engaging challenge and which showed me how much physical restriction can block the voice. So with these essays, I wanted to recreate some of the experiences I had at the conservatory in nonfiction form.

Having the summer to work on my writing was an enormous privilege and gave me invaluable time to explore many of the ideas and questions I had been turning over in my head the last few years prior. I am extremely grateful to the Office of Student Fellowships and Research and its donors for making this opportunity possible.

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