

Rethinking the Whole “Truth” Thing (Or, Assaying “Answerability” and the Reader/Writer Contract)

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To tell nothing *but* the truth—must, in all cases, be an unconditional moral law: to tell the *whole* truth is not equally so.

—Thomas De Quincey, Letter to the Editor, *London Magazine*, November 27, 1821

Dear reader. Yes, I am going to adopt the outmoded form of direct address to *the reader*—which was probably already quaint and artificial even to readers of eighteenth-century novels—to discuss terminology related to issues of identity. Some of you have, no doubt, already started to position yourselves for or against certain terms and phrases: authenticity, the true self, self-knowledge, free will, the search for identity, the social construction of identity, inner vs. outer, introversion vs. extraversion, private selves vs. social selves, modernism vs. postmodernism, the individual vs. culture, and so on. Such terms as these recur time and again in discussions of narrative. In narrative generally (and life-writing in particular), you might argue for the phrase “the social construction of identity” over the term “authenticity,” or vice versa. “It has to be one over the other,” you might say. Or, “I need definitions.” Readers have critiqued and problematized. You have used terms imprecisely, as if pointing to an object on the horizon. You have found them inadequate. All of them. The terms should have disappeared long ago, but you continue to use them, or at least some of them. This is probably because, as David Graeber and David Wengrow, who have studied cultures across the globe and through history, say, identity historically “came to be seen as a value in itself” (504). So, the terms linger.

The least problematic terms or phrases, I imagine, are “sense of self” or “project of self,” because they hint at something without any pretense of certainty. The most problematic, I also imagine, are “the search for the true self” and “the social construction of identity.” They seem to force a choice upon us. They are mutually exclusive, circles that do not overlap. But maybe the concepts are less pure and more complex than my readers might first expect. While you might think of authenticity as the search for and expression of the “true self,” it might be viewed as emerging interpersonally and socially, as a negotiation between self and social norms. The authentic self might come to be in a private space, but any private space, no matter how separate, is never entirely apart from

the social. If you accept this, *then nonfiction becomes a site for the negotiation among these terms and phrases* as we struggle with the project of self. All of these terms and phrases fail us, as does pointing to a distant object, but it is hard to avoid pointing.

I am going, here, to shift from addressing the reader as some vague and distant *you* to the more dialogic *we*. We often explore the private self and the public self. It seems intuitively evident to most people that we have both, but the boundary between the two is always fuzzy, especially if we think about different cultures and historical periods, different forms of media. One of the seldom acknowledged effects of social media is its damage to private space with both saccharine praise and brutal blame. While private space was never apart from the social in any absolute sense, it is less so now. It is less safe. If the private is affected by the social (C.S. Peirce says that individuals are a “we” before they are an “I”), in what sense does privacy serve authenticity? While pure isolation does not exist, we can still find spaces where we feel less pushed by the social. In such spaces, deep reflection—a critique of social norms—is more possible. In a safe private space, we are more able to assess the effects of the social on our bodies. We might think of this as exploring our emotions, but this experience is ultimately rooted in the human body.

It is more typical to think of the social construction of the self as interpersonal or social, but we should ask who is behind the wheel of this drive toward a construction of self. There must be some “I” there. And it is hard to imagine this construction of self as happening without the same kind of negotiation with social norms that happens with the expression of an authentic self. Once we have constructed a self, isn’t that self also authentic, especially if it fights against an assortment of social norms? What makes “authenticity” and “the social construction of self” seem so different is the term “true self,” which is not a particularly useful concept. What makes “authenticity” and “the social construction of self” seem more like parts of the same process—which we might call “the project of self”—is “freedom” or “agency.” Certainly, the social and how power works within our society are also part of the process. The project of self is complicated, but that’s what makes writing and reading nonfiction interesting.

To begin an exploration of the project of self, we should begin with the simple statement that nonfiction makes a certain kind of truth claim: *This is what actually happened*. This truth claim defines the broad genre of nonfiction, and this is where we begin the search for its ethics. In “Living to Tell the Tale,” Lynn Z. Bloom writes of what might be called the categorical imperative of nonfiction:

Writers of creative nonfiction live—and die—by a single ethical standard, to render faithfully, as Joan Didion says in “On Keeping a Notebook,” “*how it felt to me*,” their understanding of both the literal and the larger Truth. That standard, and that alone, is the writer’s ethic of creative nonfiction. (278)

Bloom is even against changing names, which she feels is the first move toward fiction. But, does the genre itself embody this kind of absolute fidelity to facts?

Writers of nonfiction create a certain kind of contract with their reader. The author says, “Everything I have written actually happened.” This seems to mean the facts of the story correlate with the facts of memory, history, and biography. The contract might be

announced by a subtitle like “A Memoir” or the label “Nonfiction” on the back cover. It is easy to problematize this view of the genre. The assignment of a work to a genre is, at some level, arbitrary, more related to marketing, the cataloging system for the Library of Congress, and the layout of brick-and-mortar bookstores. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* was labeled nonfiction, fiction, sociology, anthropology, biography, woman’s literature, Chinese literature, and Asian literature (Hsu 35). Without being too legalistic, let’s explore this already fuzzy contract. It all seems to come down to a simple transaction: When this contract is violated, when the facts don’t correlate, readers are offended. Thus, when a truth claim is made, it is obviously important to many readers. James Frey first tried to sell *A Million Little Pieces* as fiction, without success. He later sold it as a memoir, and it became a national best-seller. Oprah read it and recommended it to her viewers. Frey appeared on her show. Then, she learned large sections of the book were fabricated. In other words, Frey violated the contract with his readers. She demanded that Frey come back on her show so that she could vent her rage. It was pretty ugly—for Frey, at least. Oprah did not appreciate being lied to, nor did other readers (Crouser 16–17).

Similarly, when nonfiction authors are accused of breaking this contract, they are also often offended. In “The Singular First Person,” a personal essay about writing personal essays, Scott Russell Sanders admits: “What the essay tells us may not be true in any sense that would satisfy a court of law.” Yet, he and other writers of nonfiction often recoil when their work is described as fiction—as untrue. He continues:

[N]ot long ago I was bemused and then vexed to find one of my own essays treated in a scholarly article as a work of fiction. [...] To be sure, in writing the piece I had used dialogue, scenes, settings, character descriptions, the whole fictional bag of tricks; sure, I picked and chose among a thousand beckoning details; sure, I downplayed some facts and highlighted others; but I was writing about the actual, not the invented. I shaped the matter, but I did not make it up. (10)

Writers of nonfiction acknowledge that they must shape the story, as Sanders does. But how much shaping is permitted without violating that implied contract? Is the Hollywood claim “based on a true story” enough? In shaping the matter, if the author goes too far, does the work cross over from the true (nonfiction) to the invented (fiction), or outright lies? Should authors protect themselves by labelling their works of nonfiction as fiction, as Dave Eggers does with *Zeitoun* and *What Is the What*? Or, is it more important that authors own that their works are true stories, even though some details have been added to enhance the narration? Should we view all truth claims as equal? In Eggers’s *What Is the What* is the claim that what happened to the Lost Boys of the Sudan is true, that it happened, is it the same as the claim that the layout of a refugee camp, as imagined by the author, is true? Is it ethical to make both kinds of truth claims in the same work of nonfiction?

In the implied contract, the author is at least claiming to tell as true a story as possible. Does this mean that the author cannot craft the story, as Sanders indicated when he wrote about “using the whole bag of fictional tricks”? When Michael Herr was asked about whether or not he created composite characters in *Dispatches*, he replied, “Oh yeah.

A lot of *Dispatches* is fictional. I’ve said this a lot of times. I have told people over the years that there are fictional aspects to *Dispatches*, and they look betrayed. They look heartbroken, as if it isn’t true anymore. I never thought of *Dispatches* as journalism. In France, they published it as a novel” (Ciotti). In many parts of Europe, narratives may be described as “novels” or “stories,” rarely with a distinction between nonfiction and fiction. In the United States, however, *Dispatches* was published as nonfiction. Americans expected it to be true. Some of them felt betrayed. The need to certify nonfiction as fully true, the “single ethical standard,” may be particularly American.

But not all Americans view the divide so purely. Pam Houston says her fiction is about 82 percent her—as in things that actually happened to her, that is, are 82 percent true. She claims her nonfiction, with a schmear of irony, is also about 82 percent her. What do we do with that 18 percent? Do we call it craft? Does even one percent of “not me” mean the work is fiction? Should even works that are mostly nonfiction, say 93 percent true, be called fiction to protect the author against claims of fabrication? Or, is this just a copout? Given that there are at least bits of factual reality in most works of fiction, should parts of fiction be viewed with the same standards for truth as nonfiction?

While acknowledging that some gray areas will always exist between genres, we should still try to understand the nature of the implied contract between author and reader. Embedded within it is a definition of the genre of nonfiction: Unlike fiction, which strives to tell “the larger Truth,” nonfiction, no matter how creative, must also tell the “literal” truth. Bloom’s discussion of what it means to tell the truth—her single “standard” or foundation for the ethics of nonfiction—is admittedly complex: Is it okay to change the names of “characters,” should the author resist urges to self-censor, should the “real” people who form “characters” in nonfiction be allowed to read drafts, and should secrets be revealed, even when it might harm others? However, this focus on “literal” truth—facts—ignores other aspects of telling a story. If an author sticks to the facts but shapes the narrative, like a good comedian structuring a joke, does the work cross over into fiction? If an author sticks to the facts but alters the emotional frame of the facts, is that enough to move the work into the territory of fiction?

We, you and I, need a new way of thinking about telling true stories, which carries with it a responsibility, a contract with the reader, but maybe not the contract we might expect. We can, I would like to argue, tell the truth unethically—or, safely. We can miss opportunities to act ethically within nonfiction; in other words, we need to go beyond the ethics producing writing that corresponds to facts. If Freudianism and postmodernism and everything that followed problematizes the whole project of knowing the self, the task of writing the truth about the self is not so simple. Is identity discovered or constructed? Postmodernism has questioned the very nature of “the Real,” a term that Lacan used to point to something beyond language, the Symbolic Order (Mansfield 44–45). I will use “the actual,” a less majestic term borrowed from Scott Russell Sanders, to indicate a truth less certain than “reality” or “what actually happened,” a truth that has enough of a material reality to push back against any urge to distort and question the limits of memory.

If nonfiction is to play a role in the project of self, we need to move beyond the ethical implications of what we, as a community, have already written. While discussing

breaches of ethics in the history of nonfiction is important, we need also to explore opportunities for ethical action; in other words, we need to move beyond “not doing harm” to seeking out the means of doing good or working on the “project of self.” When we are too focused on “not doing harm,” we can sometimes become paralyzed. Not writing, like not acting, does not ensure an ethical stance within the world. The most unethical pieces of writing are the ones that were never written. As Morson and Emerson write of Bakhtin’s ethics, “Dishonesty may result not from a motive, but, quite often, from the failure to undertake the project of responsibility” (31).

We should also think about the truth claims we make. It will be more useful to think of nonfiction as related less to some simple correspondence between the facts of a story and the facts of some conception of reality and move to the relationship between the author and the text—how the author does research, how the author seeks a story, questions memory, and contextualizes documents. If authors are doing all this, aren’t they trying to figure out what actually happened? Isn’t this different than fiction? Nonfiction will also relate to how authors answer or respond to their texts. Do authors claim their texts by saying “this is what happened”?

When attempting to differentiate fiction and nonfiction, it is not adequate to talk about how one is made up and the other is true. We need to think about what Bakhtin calls *answerability*, how authors answer to their texts. As related to nonfiction and writing about the self, we cannot answer to our texts without understanding the appeals we make about our relationship to the truth:

- This is the truth.
- This is who I am.
- This is my world, at least, as I understand it.
- This is the meaning I have made of my life.
- I know how hard it is to find the truth, but let me show you how hard I am trying to figure it out.
- Let me show you the damage that lies and secrets have done to me and my family.

Fiction writers don’t make these claims, especially *This is who I am*. Once we make even one of these claims, we are creating a different kind of relationship between author and text. The author answers in a different way. This is a kind of truth that is open to its own process, even in a world where truth is constantly shifting and texts are a kind of erosion.

With the Internet, with massive networks, truth is not established through authority or science; it is established through circulation. The more a claim moves through interlocking networks, ever present at the same moment, the truer it becomes. It doesn’t need a foundation or ground. In fact, the statement seems more true because it doesn’t seem to have a source. In this grey world, we can admit defeat, become lost in what Baudrillard calls “the ecstasy of communication,” or we can assert a reality and an ethics that comes from a different time—the truth of our physical bodies living in a particular time and place. This kind of truth, the truth we seek in nonfiction, is at odds with the truth of circulation, which is often reduced to soundbites or tweets. The truth of nonfiction is complex and situated and grounded. Said another way, it is human. It is part

of a dialogue. While it might be entirely appropriate for an author to make these claims, we should not assume they are self-evident or transparent. Readers will likely contest some or all of them, especially readers who are also mentioned in the text. This, too, is part of the process, part of answerability.



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