



Ruth M. Van Dyke
AND Reinhard Bernbeck

Subjects
AND Narratives
IN Archaeology

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In fall of 2010, Binghamton University archaeologist Ruth M. Van Dyke emailed me with a curious invitation. A group of her colleagues were engaged in experimental methods of telling their research stories—“challenging the prevalence of the passive, expository style,” as she put it—and intended to present their work at the 76th meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA). Would I be willing to join their presentation and offer a critique of their work? At first I was somewhat flummoxed—I am, after all, a journalist and a professor of nonfiction writing—and it wasn’t clear to me what I had to offer. But as I reflected on the invitation and we discussed the group’s goals, it became clear to me that Van Dyke had presented an engaging challenge, one that complemented my own abiding concerns about the value of fact-based writing in works of nonfiction.

Is it possible to write creatively and to acknowledge the slipperiness of truth and facts while still staying true to what we commonly understand to be nonfiction? If not, what do we mean when we present a piece of writing as nonfiction? And how does the public understand the term? In recent years, these questions have gripped the field of creative nonfiction (as it is known in MFA writing programs), pitting the established ethical values of journalism against a literary license that has increasingly been claimed by writers who assume the mantle of nonfiction but who challenge our notion of what is true. It became clear to me that these archaeologists

were entering the conversation from a different disciplinary foundation, and it could be illuminating for us to talk across disciplines.

The archaeological narratives included in this anthology (first presented at the 76th SAA conference) wrestle with questions of truth and invention in a variety of ways. Many deliberately blur the boundary between science and artistic invention, many employ a nonlinear approach to tell stories, some express a desire to share authorship of archaeological interpretation with the readers of texts, and a few experiment with new technologies to achieve these ends. Alternatively, some of the included essays challenge aspects of the experimentation and caution against it.

The motivations articulated for such narrative experimentation are various. Some argue that there's a growing consensus that most archaeological interpretations are as much art as science or social science, and they say that creative interpretations are useful in making archaeology more relevant to those outside the discipline. They propose narrative invention on a continuum that may even include making up details or elements to speak to an emotional or historical "truth" that does not (by virtue of being made up) reflect factual reporting. Some express a strong commitment to giving voice to long-passed peoples whose lives are excavated in, while others caution that fabricating imagined voices may be another form of appropriation.

Reinhard Bernbeck, a professor at Freie Universität Berlin and Van Dyke's co-editor for this volume, underscores some of these risks and raises pivotal ethical concerns about what invented narratives mean to the discipline of archaeology. "The invention of subjects, however well meant the empathetic effort is, implies a certain disrespect for past people," he writes (see Bernbeck, this volume). "Not knowing the motivations for past practices and actions, we project political desires back in time, carrying out in the process an act of colonization."

Similar ethical issues to those raised in this volume have gripped the broader nonfiction-writing community for the past decade or so. On one extreme, you have traditional journalism with strict standards for fact-checking and a clear notion that if you call a piece of writing nonfiction, it had better be as close as you can get to factually true. At the other extreme, you have proponents of a nonfiction that claims an artistic license to write *as though* something happened but with liberty to invent subjects and adjust (or invent) facts as seems useful to the author. The argument made by those advocating this position is that such artistry gets at a more true truth than strict adherence to fact can achieve and is also perhaps more engaging.

Even as this anthology was being edited, the issue surfaced anew in the literary world with the publication of a book by John d'Agata and Jim Fingal

(2012), *The Lifespan of a Fact*. The book purported to be an accurate accounting of the correspondence between a writer (d'Agata) and a magazine fact-checker (Fingal) in which they engage in "a fascinating and dramatic power struggle over the intriguing question of what nonfiction should, or can, be" (d'Agata and Fingal 2012: jacket cover). Fingal was fact-checking an essay for publication, much of which was later adapted nearly verbatim for inclusion in d'Agata's (2010) much-acclaimed book about the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste dump, *About a Mountain*. D'Agata, who argues that he can change even the most verifiable facts (the name and location of a bar [d'Agata and Fingal 2012: 32], the content of people's quotes, what sights can be viewed from a particular vantage point [ibid.: 84], even the color of a fleet of vans, from pink to purple) to suit his artistic inclination, was pilloried (McDonald 2012). Then it turned out that the *Lifespan* book itself was a fabrication, an after-the-fact dramatization intended to heighten the ethical conflict and make it more marketable.

Arguments ensued at the 2012 annual professional meeting of creative writing programs (Associated Writers and Writing Programs), with panelists and writers both challenging and supporting d'Agata's transgressive approach. (For the flavor of the discussion, see commentary and reports in Dzieza 2012; Farrar 2012; Moore 2012; Nester 2012; Read 2012; Stuckey-French 2012.) I agree with the comments in an essay by *Brevity* editor Dinty W. Moore, who expressed distress about what he called d'Agata's disrespect for his colleagues and readers. Moore also pointed out that d'Agata was playing into the hands of those who would undermine the entire field of nonfiction, including "those on the political right who criticize journalists for 'just making everything up,'" as well as "those who want to discount the entire memoir category as baloney because memory is not a perfect tool" (Moore 2012).

For another example, consider the quagmire in which author and actor Mike Daisey found himself after his theatrical monologue, *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, hit the big time. The public radio program *This American Life* aired the show, which detailed purportedly truthful facts about how workers in China were exploited to create products for Apple. Much of the material was well documented, but when it turned out that parts of Daisey's account were fabricated, *This American Life* ran a full-episode retraction on March 16, 2012. After ten days of criticism in the press and blogosphere, Daisey wrote an anguished apology on his blog. "When I said onstage that I had personally experienced things I in fact did not, I failed to honor the contract I'd established with my audiences over many years and many shows," he wrote. "In doing so, I not only violated their trust, I also made worse art" (Daisey 2012).

The core issue in both examples is whether one can credibly label outright inventions nonfiction. It is clear that creative, imagined literary and theatrical expression can achieve true and beautiful renderings of our common world. And it is clear that great artistry has been achieved in accurate and creative reporting of events. The ethical trouble surfaces when a writer assumes the mantle of authenticity associated with nonfiction as he or she simultaneously subverts the common understanding of what that label means.

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I am not alone in arguing that the stakes here are high: if a work pretends to be factually true and is not, it then becomes a lie, and such lies are dangerous to a society in which we depend upon evidence-based arguments to make social and political choices. Though the literary provocateurs would dismiss such an allegiance to facts as *outré* and unachievable, I echo the position of literary scholar Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, who argues that writers and scholars in particular have a moral responsibility to resist “the tidal wave of contaminated information” that threatens to drown us (McEntyre 2009: 62). While acknowledging that truth is ambiguous and complex, she says, our response should be neither cynicism nor naïveté; nor should we fall into the existential abyss. In other words, while we may agree that positionality, memory, and the very nature of language preclude some Platonic absolute conception of one fixed universal truth, to acknowledge the slipperiness of narrative or presentation does not equate to giving up adherence to empirical facts.

We come to this confusing juncture for a variety of reasons, some of which also are driving the experimental narratives included in this anthology. Literary theorists and philosophers have long been dismantling our notions of truth and raising important and provocative questions about its definition. Objectivity is now widely agreed to be unattainable. And yet, if we are to present a work as nonfiction, there is something critically important about our fidelity to the effort to *get it right*, to tell the truth as best we can, to adhere to the facts as we are best able to establish them, a fidelity that is essential to the social contract. Because when the theoretical argument is transported out of the halls of academia and into our common culture, a great deal is at stake. We can no longer say that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

While it may be important to challenge the notion of truth in texts—historical accounts and laws that pretend to lack bias are, for example, dangerous indeed—that position becomes corrosive when taken to an extreme and then translated into the larger realm of social discourse. If we can't agree on what is true—if, in fact, we have no common agreement that it's even possible or

necessary to agree on a truth—we have a society in which politicians can lie to us without consequence, in which “news” programs can freely distort the events of the day to suit their political agendas, in which even the Holocaust can be discounted as merely a rumor.

You may say we’ve already come to that. Indeed, McEntyre asserts that great damage to the social contract has been inflicted by the subversion of the value of truth: “The generation of students coming through high schools and universities now expect to be lied to. They know about ‘spin’ and about the profiteering agendas of corporate advertising. They have grown used to the flippant, incessantly ironic banter that passes for conversation,” she writes. “I don’t know how many times over the past year I’ve heard students, trying to make sense of the news, lament, ‘I don’t know how to tell what to believe!’ ‘How do I tell what’s reliable?’ ‘How do I distinguish what’s true?’” (McEntyre 2009: 7).

These questions are good ones for all of us, and they are critical catalysts for these experimental archaeological narratives. Some of the authors herein suggest that to deliver an account in the passive, fact-driven authoritative voice of science may imply a degree of objective, unbiased knowledge that is often false. In other words, the form itself can render its content false. They are looking for a way to challenge the conventional way of presenting “truth” and to chart a new, more imaginative path to tell their stories. So how do they decide what is “true”? The same question has entangled many of us trying to tell nonfiction stories in creative ways, to get at truths that would otherwise remain unexpressed.

In pursuit of some answers, author Bonnie Rough (2007) decided to interview scientific artists when she set out to articulate clearer boundary lines for the creative nonfiction genre, particularly memoir. Ironically, she turned to a paleontological reconstructionist and a forensic reconstructionist. Rough articulates the boundary between fiction and creative nonfiction as follows: “The difference comes with intent. Nonfiction writers imagine. Fiction writers invent. These are fundamentally different acts, performed to different ends” (ibid.: 66). The scientists she interviewed described a careful process in which they first gather all the data points available and then, “in very good faith,” use what paleontological reconstructionist Robert Walters calls *disciplined imagination* to fill in what is missing. They trust their experience and build on what is known, and then they add details to create the most likely story: they take conservative leaps to decide, for example, what colors to use in painting dinosaurs for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh.

The challenge for many of the authors in this collection is to determine exactly how disciplined, or conservative, their imaginative leaps must be. Many of them feel enchained by what they call academic subjectivization, and they resist a policing effort that would discount their narrative contributions. And the best of this work falls more within the realm of Walters's *disciplined imagination* than the creative process described by d'Agata, who claims artistic license to turn a pink van purple to achieve a certain rhythm in his sentence. Or Daisy, who invented characters and events and thus transformed his work from documentation to untrustworthy propaganda (albeit for a worthy cause).

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The porosity of the boundary between fact-based imagination and invention is not the only experimental aspect of the narratives in this anthology. The archaeologists experimenting here also share a narrative playfulness and invention that is percolating throughout the literary world. Like other nonfiction (and fiction) writers, they are experimenting with multiple strands of narration, the use of hypertext, and stories in which the reader directs the outcome (see Tringham, this volume). The two most revolutionary aspects of the new technologies, in my view, are the de-prioritization of the traditional linear narrative and the increasingly interactive engagement of the reader, so that the line between author and reader is softened. All these choices raise fascinating questions about the nature of narrative and the parameters of nonfiction and fiction (or, for archaeologists, of science versus art).

When Van Dyke asked me to comment on these experimental essays, she proposed that I offer guidelines and insight from outside the discipline. Given the battles being fought in the world of literary nonfiction, I cannot provide unequivocal directives about how to navigate this new, occasionally perilous terrain. But I can offer some suggestions.

First, be respectful of your audience, which means be clear with them about what you are doing. My graduate students, who had been reading d'Agata's book *About a Mountain* as part of their course work, felt betrayed to find out that his "facts" were unreliable. (The book created a simulacrum of facticity by including 193 endnotes that seemed to clarify what material was reshaped, what is imagined, and what were the sources for the factual assertions he made.) What had once appeared to be a beautifully and persuasively rendered portrait of the cultural context of Las Vegas—a city that had embraced a massive nuclear waste dump—lost much of its credibility when the readers could no longer be sure of the facts. Among other things, students thought d'Agata had made a powerful case against the pro-nuke propaganda disseminated in

support of the waste dump (d'Agata 2010: 51–79), but the case collapsed if his “facts” were no more reliable than those proffered by the other side. When the conversation veered from the content of his narrative to the trustworthiness of his account, the book became substantially less valuable.

The problem is that we read a narrative differently if we believe it to be *true* vs. imagined. In nonfiction, it is the *actuality* of the experience that touches us. While fiction may touch us equally, for different reasons, part of what compels us in nonfiction is that the events actually happened. I believe we undermine our authority as writers of nonfiction if we include fiction *disguised as fact* in our narratives. Why label it nonfiction if it is not? But that does *not* mean we cannot be creative, poetic, and experimental with our material. It means we need to keep track of what we know and what we do not know and provide the reader with signposts that distinguish those elements.

Take, for example, Van Dyke's Chaco Canyon narrative (see Van Dyke, this volume). It is clear that much of the first-person material must be invented, and I wanted to know, as a reader, which details were known data points and which were extrapolated. Van Dyke explains that she has grounded the material in empirical data and offers examples and specifics about what that distinction means. It is very helpful to understand where her imagination steps in, and I found it enlightening to read about how and why she constructed the imagined narrative of a ten-year-old girl. Van Dyke's contextualization provides an excellent rationale for the value of such imagined narratives.

However, some of these experimental narratives may make the assumption that one of the characters in the Praetzellis narrative (see Praetzellis and Praetzellis, this volume) articulates. The “character,” Adrian, says that “some archaeology may be science; some may be art; some may even be psychotherapy. And most thinking people are pretty clear which is which . . . We have to provide technical reports that document our methods and findings. But at that point it is anyone's game for interpretation.”

My editorial question is: *is* everyone clear about which is which? Is the public clear? Are there signposts in the narrative you are creating that establish those distinctions? If not, why not?

One of the places where I had no trouble making those distinctions is in what I have seen of the multimedia work of Ruth Tringham (see Tringham, this volume), which I find exciting. As a journalist, part of what I respond to in her work is the way she is clear about what material is hard data and what is imaginative. She is not *inventing facts*, but she is acknowledging through her multimedia approach that facts are limited and have limitations. She is building on her expertise to *imagine* what the data might mean and to offer

readers their own ability to create stories. In her work, narrative is open-ended and definitely not linear.

This narrative structure and openness resonates with the comments of Isaac Gilcad (see Gilcad, this volume), who cautions that “as archaeologists, we cannot emancipate ourselves from data.” Yet he references the multiple strands of text and commentary in the Talmud as “a mode of simultaneous or almost simultaneous presentation of data and narrative”—an analogy that has come up similarly in some of my colleagues’ creative nonfiction essays that use multiple narrative tracks on the same page (e.g., *Finding Faith* by Faith Adiele).

Tringham’s multimedia work also capitalizes on the explosion of cross-genre publishing work taking place in multimedia formats. Writers and publishers are just beginning to imagine how tablets and portable reading devices will change the nature of reading and how the new technology will more easily permit the exploration of nonlinear narratives. Writers have been imagining and experimenting with these ideas on the printed page and also on websites, CD-ROMs, and DVDs, but the new portable reading devices are making hypertext and nonlinear visual displays far more accessible to the common reader and are already changing the nature of publishing.

Overall, I think fascinating, innovative work is being created by these archaeologists, who are engaging in a conversation that extends far beyond their discipline. I believe they are correct in asserting that the most effective narrative is not necessarily linear, that stories may more accurately be represented by an accretion of fragments rather than a traditionally structured “arc,” and that truth is more elusive than a simple recounting of the “facts” would suggest.

But as scientists experimenting with new narrative forms, the authors would be wise to maintain an awareness of risk and a commitment to disclosure. A nonfiction writer who claims artistic license to invent facts and pretend they are true loses the authority granted to work believed to be nonfiction. Likewise, a scientist who fills in gaps between evidence-based knowledge with imaginative leaps is not, then, delivering a fully scientific account. The narratives can reach beyond the discipline’s boundaries and make archaeology more relevant—and even, arguably, more *true* to what is likely to have happened. They can give voice to long-passed peoples. But while such stories may be science-based, they are not, in and of themselves, science.

In this invention of something new, I recommend a few editorial guidelines:

- The authors should keep it clear to themselves (and to their readers) what is the implicit contract of their work and honor that contract.

- If an author departs from what is understood to be archaeology, it is important to instruct the "reader" how to read the text.
- Consider what is lost (or gained) by fictionalizing research. Are there ways to construct alternative narratives that include the imagined world without commingling it with the more data-driven material of traditional archaeology?

The presenters in this anthology are serious archaeologists, and they want the experimental work included here to represent them as such. The work is inventive, but in embracing the subjectivity of archaeological interpretation, they may sometimes confuse audiences about where scientific inquiry ends and disciplined imagination begins—especially when the audience is outside the field. Unless the authors of such texts are very clear to their readers about the parameters of their experimentation, they run the risk of sabotaging their discipline's scientific standards—and with that the discipline stands to lose essential value. Of course, all scientific inquiry involves the imagination, but if part of the agenda for creating these narratives is to reach an audience beyond the academy, then discursive framing is critical because it matters a great deal *how* that audience understands the material to be *true*.

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