



Sarah Einstein

## “The Self-ish Genre”: Questions of Authorial Selfhood and Ethics in First Person Creative Nonfiction

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### Introduction

As a writer, I am deeply concerned about what an ethical writing practice might look like, particularly but not exclusively when writing work that claims a nonfictional position. Some questions are more easily answered than others. For instance, I feel comfortable saying that it’s categorically unethical to write a piece with the sole intention of doing harm to another person. I’m equally certain that it’s always ethical to write as truthful an account of one’s own experience as one is capable of writing, when the intended audience is only oneself. (It may not always be wise, since diaries and journals are often not as private as we had believed them to be, but it’s ethical.) Beyond that, it begins to get murky for me. Can I ethically write, with the intention to publish, a piece that will harm another person, even if it was not my intention to harm them? Is writing as truthful an account of my own experience as I can, again with the intention to publish, ethical when there are other accounts—also by people doing their best to be truthful—which contradict my own, and which suggest that my understanding of the events and situations considered is limited by privilege, naiveté, or bias? Does it matter whether or not those other accounts which contradict my own are published and available to readers to serve as a counter-balance to my own? Does it matter whether or not I am a more or less central actor in the events being considered than the people whose accounts contradict my own, or whether or not I seek publication in a more or less prestigious venue with a greater or smaller readership than they do? How does non/payment for the work itself factor into the ethics of publishing such a piece?

As I said, I’ve been told I worry too much about all of this, and that’s almost certainly true.

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There is an argument to be made that concern for ethics over artfulness in crafting the authorial persona in creative nonfiction is deleterious to the genre itself. In speaking with Jared Levy at *Interview Magazine* about his book *The Lifespan of a Fact*, in which he and Jim Fingal construct an over-the-top dialog about the process of fact-checking D'Agata's not-completely-nonfictional essay "About a Mountain," John D'Agata says,

(W)hen I'm called an asshole by a major media outlet, or a jerk or a liar or a hack or a whatever, it's very clear that these reviewers are reading the persona in that book as me: that I'm behind that figure. Which, for me, proves how we approach nonfiction at a much different level than we approach fiction or poetry or drama: that there's almost no room for metaphor. We expect the "I" in any nonfiction text to be an autobiographical "I" when there is a history in the essay of the "I" being a persona. And, it's certainly disheartening to realize, throughout this book, that we are really nowhere when it comes to reading this genre. It at least has helped me understand where we need to go, what more we need to do.

The argument here seems to be that there is no ethical obligation that the "I" in nonfiction be constructed in such a way as to suggest the author is making the effort to offer a true account of herself. It's important here to note that elsewhere in the interview, D'Agata uses the term *nonfiction* interchangeably with the term *essay*, and that he is not arguing for the validity of the persona essay, a form that is recognized and accepted within the genre, but rather that the construction of a self in the nonfictional essay is always inherently fictional, and that a failure to read it as such is a failing on the part of the audience, rather than the author.

D'Agata is not alone in making this argument, though he is at the extreme end of it. In "Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction," Lynn Z. Bloom asserts that "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'*" (278). She argues against allowing interventions in the work such as fact-checking by other participants in the events described, a willingness to correct factual errors where

they are found in the writer's memory of events, or even concern for the feelings of the others who were impacted by those events and for their own understandings of them. This idea that the author's account of events need only be consistent with the author's own feelings about them is a popular one, and while it's one I would trouble (if someone can show you incontrovertible proof that you are wrong about some important factual thing, I believe—and think most authors do—that it the correction should be made), for the sake of my exploration here, it does point us toward what I believe to be the most significant ethical question facing writers of creative nonfiction at this moment. Namely, what is the value of first person creative nonfiction to the reader, and how might we as writers construct an ethical writing practice based on this relationship with the reader?

These are weighty questions, and it is not my intention here to weigh down the work of others writing within the genre(s) of creative nonfiction. Rather, what follows here is an examination of how this exploration impacts my own writing, and of the ethical obligations which I take onto myself in answer to the questions this exploration raises. It is, then, a self-justification, one that must begin by first identifying what, exactly, is meant by “self” and go from there.

It is probably also necessary here to talk about my idiosyncratic relationship to theory, and how that relationship informs what I've written here. The best analogy that I can give for how I read, and make use of, theory is to say that I read it the way my great-grandfather would have read Talmud, which is as a way to think about and instruct my ways of being in the world, but not with the intention of adding to it, and with the knowledge that I am reading toward, rather than with, an understanding of the texts. Here, then, Levinas, Ricœur, and Butler are my Hillel and my Maimonides. I read them as the learned interpreters of experience and with the goal of gaining greater grace through their insights. This makes me perhaps an overly friendly reader, but as it is my goal to engage with rather than to intervene in their works, I hope this can be forgiven.

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## The Significance of the Authorial Self in Creative Nonfiction

Creative nonfiction, as a genre (which encompasses the forms of literary journalism; memoir; cultural criticism; travelogue; lyric, personal, and hybrid essays—which do their best to engage with the nonfictional), can be understood as writing which is centered on the experience of the author. Barrie Jean Borich, in trying to find a unifying element across the subgenres of creative nonfiction, suggests “What links all these forms is that the ‘I,’ the literary version of the author, is either explicitly or implicitly present—the author is in the work.” The centrality of the authorial “I” is what sets creative nonfiction, then, apart from adjacent genres such as biography and journalism, in which the author is reporting on people and events with a primary concern for accuracy, and in which the authorial perspective is of lesser concern than the events or people themselves.

Why would anyone want to read such a thing? What value is there for someone who wants to understand the atrocities of World War II in reading, for example, the memoirs of Auschwitz prisoner Tadeusz Borowski—whose understanding of the events surrounding *Shoah* were limited to that which he could know as a prisoner of Auschwitz—when there are such moving novels as *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and comprehensive histories such as Saul Friedlander’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews*—with its careful scholarship and breadth of information—available? What can we learn from David Wojnarowicz’s AIDS memoir *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* that we can’t learn from Jonathon Engel’s sweeping *The Epidemic: A History of AIDS* or Tom Kushner’s excellent play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*? There must be something of value to the memoiristic genres that goes beyond their flawed recounting of history, their imperfect narrative arcs limited by the arc of actual events, which allows them to endure. I argue that this value is in the connection between the reader and the author of the work of creative nonfiction, that this connection is one that depends on readers understanding of the author as present *as herself* rather than as a fictional construct on the page, that this connection differs significantly

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from the connection between the reader and characters in works of fiction, and that certain ethical obligations adhere to both the author and the reader as a result of this connection.

Toward these ends, I engage with both critical theorists and with writing about writing from authors of creative nonfiction. The role of theory here is to provide me with the ability to ask the questions I wish to ask; to give me the conceptual framework that makes their asking possible. But this is still an essay, and as such, it seeks to engage with these concepts in an open-ended way. As Adorno has written, “The essay... takes the anti-systematic impulse into its own procedure, and introduces concepts directly, ‘immediately,’ as it receives them. They gain their precision only through their relation to one another” (160). And so it will be here. It’s my goal to ask “What is the self in self-centered writing,” and then to think—in the company of the others I cite—about the ethical relationship between that self and the reader, but it isn’t my goal to come up with an answer. I doubt there is *an* answer. But there are certainly questions.

### **Modernity and the Birth of the Essaying Self**

The personal essay arises in and from modernity, a period marked by its ethos of rationality and its concern for the “self” (Wain 352). The modern subject as an autonomous rational being capable of both self-awareness and self-construction is, I argue, necessary for the birth of the genre as we know it because it is otherwise unthinkable that the self reflecting on itself would be of interest to another—rational, autonomous, but also unspecified—self. Where the genre is presaged in the Western canon prior to modernity, it’s necessary for the author to construct an audience to address: Seneca’s essays are epistolary, Augustine’s *Confessions* are addressed to God. And although we as readers are aware that the constructed audience and the intended audience are not the same—clearly both Seneca and Augustine are actually writing works they intend to be public, even as they are framed as private—the specific audience is a necessary conceit when the construction of the self is one that is not self-reflexive or self-constructing.

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It makes sense, then, that Michael Montaigne, often heralded as the father/patron saint/first practitioner of the personal essay, wrote during the early days of modernity. (The beginnings of modernity are placed by various scholars as from as early as the mid-1400s and as late as the early 1500s. For the sake of this essay, I've settled on the dates 1500-1789 for Early Modernity, 1789-1900 for Classic Modernity, and 1900-1989 as Late Modernity (Osborne 25).) Philip Lopate describes the atmosphere of these times, and their enabling of Montaigne's "circling, minute self-observations," as one of a new spirit of humanism which "gave Montaigne license to write in support of pleasure and an integration of mind and body" (44). In defense of this new sort of personal writing, Montaigne says "I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as with a life of richer stuff. Each man bears the entire form of man's estate" (611). The idea that a "humble and inglorious life" is as instructive to our understanding of moral philosophy as is one elevated by piety, heroics, or nobility is both central to and centered in humanist philosophy.

The centrality of this idea to the personal essay from early through classical and into late modernity is made clear from the way in which essayists, up and until about the 1950s, regularly move between a first person singular and first person plural (and, less frequently, the second and even third person) narrator without signifying a shift in either the narrative voice or the intended readership. So thoroughly have essayists embraced humanism's universalized rational subject that the "I" and the "we" of the essay are undifferentiated. In "Of Greatness," Abraham Crowley (an essayist writing in the mid-1600s), in writing of reading Seneca, uses the first person to describe the actions of reading ("I believe," "I speak," "I remember," "I know not what"), but the third person when writing of his reaction to that writing ("we stand amazed," "if we were always bound") (117). Thoreau's "Walking," published in the 1850s, moves between "I" and "we" several times, generalizing the benefit he finds in walking as a benefit for all (whom he assumes to have the freedom and capacity to walk, because as has oft been noted, the universal subject of modernity was always assumed to be an able-bodied white man). In the 1952 essay *Such, Such Were the*

*Jays*, Orwell makes the move from the first to the third person mid-sentence: “I base these generalizations on what I can recall of *my own* childhood outlook. Treacherous though memory is, it seems to *me* the chief means *we* have of discovering how a child’s mind works. Only by resurrecting *our own* memories (emphasis mine)...” (301).

It is only in late modernity that we see the rise of the essayist speaking as *the other*, not as a universal subject, but as proof against the very possibility of a universal subject. Mary McCarthy, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Richard Rodriguez... the canon of creative nonfiction begins to fill with narratives from outside the imagined commonality of the “rational man.” Their narrator voices don’t have access to the easy movement between the “I” and the “we,” and their presence in the canon also makes it clear that neither does anyone else. Their presence requires that all writers of creative nonfiction must return to the position of singular voice, speaking only from singular experience rather than as a synecdoche for the whole of humanity. It is this self, the self that speaks only for itself, but which speaks nonetheless authoritatively about itself, that is the voice of narrative nonfiction in late modernity.

In post-modernity, we are beginning to see the ways in which constructions of the self as not self-knowing, even of the self as incapable of self-knowing, inflect the voices of essayists. In this transition, we see a rise of the discontinuous voice. “Essayists... have made a virtue of fragmentation, offering it as a mirror to the unconnectable, archipelago-like nature of modern life” (Lopate xliii). It is this construction of the assaying self that most interests me, and which is ultimately where I will come to rest in finding an ethical voice for myself as an essayist. But to get there, I must first decide for myself what exactly a self is.

### **First Person Creative Nonfiction and Paul Ricœur’s Narrative Self**

If we have lost the modernist voices of the essay—the universal subject and the self knowing *other*—how are we to understand the authorial self in relationship to the nonfictional narrator? How does one construct a self on the page that is meaningful to anyone but that self, if one doesn’t have a coherent,

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aware self to begin with? To begin to answer this question, we need first to reconstruct the self in a way that acknowledges its incoherence but none the less allows for the narrative voice in nonfiction that works toward, if not coherence, at least intelligibility.

At the heart of Ricœur's exploration of the concept of selfhood in *Oneself as Another* is the idea that the self exists in two different and irreducible modalities: the *idem* and the *ipse*. The *idem* identity can best be understood *sameness* (18), as that which is a singular, continuous instance of humanity. I am, at fifty, the same singular example of humanity that I have been since my birth, even though the person I am now has almost no recognizable commonality with the infant that I was. I understand this best when I think of the sameness of a seed and the flower that grows from it; it is that small part of identity which is constant over time. The *ipse* identity, on the other hand, can be understood as *selfhood* (24) and requires no consistency over time; it is that expression of the self which is manifested in the moment. It is, then, akin to the seed's sprouting, the flower's flowering. These two versions of self-identity are linked by a third, which Ricœur identifies as the narrative self. It's this tri-part idea of the self that has, in one way or another, informed my understanding of how I construct the narrative character in my first person creative nonfictions.

Of course, as I am primarily a writer of narratives, it's Ricœur's construction of the narrative self that has most impacted my understanding of the work of creating the authorial character in the essay and memoir. It's the existence of the narrative imagination—because by nature the narrative of a life is an imagining of it—that Ricœur asserts is that which allows us to understand ourselves as ethical beings:

(T)he tormenting question 'Who am I?...' can, in a certain manner, be incorporated into the proud declaration 'Here is where I stand!' The question becomes: 'Who am I, so inconsistent, that *notwithstanding* you count on me?' The gap between the question which engulfs the narrative imagination and the answer of the subject who has been made



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responsible by the expectation of the other becomes the secret break at the very heart of commitment (168).

As I have understood this, Ricœur is saying that my ability to think of myself as a continuous being capable of ethical action is dependent completely on there being an/other who believes me to be capable of accountability. Or, put another way, that my ability to narrate myself requires that I have someone to whom to I offer the narration, and that someone must be willing to believe that I am capable of that narration in order for meaning to adhere to it.

It's this construction of the narrative self as dependent upon, and responsible to, a receiving other that initially shaped my sense of obligation to speak as truthfully as I am able in my work, and it's at the heart of my vehemence when confronting John D'Agata's argument that reading the narrative character in creative nonfiction as an honest representation of the author is a failure to appreciate the genre as an art form.

### **Levinas and the Ethics of First Person Nonfictional Narration**

Emmanuel Levinas insists that ethics, rather than arising from the fact of selves, is in fact the pre-ontological requirement for the emergence of the self as a self. "In opposition to ontological formulations of the self, for Levinas, the construction of the self begins in its relation with the other, in an 'ethical intrigue prior to knowledge'" (Loureiro 6). It is this awareness of the other that makes it possible for the self to be aware of itself; we come into being only as selves when the other impinges upon us, before we are even capable of willing the other's presence, by confronting us with the fact of its existence. In short: I am only because you, also, are. If not for you, there would be no cause for me.

This is difficult stuff, so please forgive me a perhaps overly long quotation directly from Levinas:

The epiphany of the absolutely other is a face, in which the other calls on me and signifies an order to me through his nudity, his denuding. His presence is a summons to

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answer. The I does not only become aware of this necessity to answer, as though it were an obligation or a duty about which it would have to come to a decision; it is in its very position wholly a responsibility... To be an I means then not to be able to escape responsibility, as though the whole edifice of creation rested on my shoulders. But the responsibility that empties the I of its imperialism and its egoism, even the egoism of salvation, does not transform it into a moment of the universal order; it confirms the uniqueness of the I. The uniqueness of the I is the fact that no one can answer for me. (“Meaning and Sense”)

The presence of the other not only, then, calls me into being, but it does so by obligating me to answer for myself. And this obligation to answer for myself also obligates me to the well-being of the other to whom I am answering, what those discussing Levinas often shorthand as “the obligation of the face.” And, because this obligation adheres before ontology, in the moment that the I becomes aware of itself as an I, there is no possibility of refusing it. He writes, “The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no ‘interiority’ permits avoiding” (*Totality and Infinity* 201).

It’s this understanding of myself as constituted first and only through my relationship to the other, and of the obligation to answer the other for myself as myself in response to an obligation which adheres to me before and beyond the possibility of refusal, that is at the heart of my own ethical understanding of how the self in creative nonfiction must be ethically constructed. But how this obligation manifests is different in the two distinct modes of being a self on the page: the creation of the self through writing, and the offering of the account of that self to others through publishing, or making public, that account.

Both Ricœur and Levinas consider that it is in the act of giving an account of oneself that one experiences oneself as a self. Conversely, we also call the other to whom we address our account into being through the act of giving that account. I would argue that it’s an unethical act to offer a false account of

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oneself as a true one to the reader precisely because of fact that in giving an account of myself, I impinge on the reader—I call the reader into being as a subject—because I have presented my face to them.

For that to be true, we must, of course, agree that the act of presenting a nonfictional account of oneself is an act of presenting one's face to another. Is it necessary for the other to be physically present to impinge on the self, to call the self out of interiority and into discourse? In writing about Levinas, Derrida does not think so: "(T)he writer... expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech... Is not the 'He' whom transcendence and generous absence uniquely announce in the trace more readily the author of writing than of speech?" (127). If an embodied, literal face-to-face encounter is not a necessity of the encounter with the other, if the impinging occurs and the obligation adheres when the self is confronted with the other on the page, then I argue that a unique ethical relationship is formed between the reader and the author of nonfictional first person writing.

Once the nonfictional work is presented to the reader, the reader becomes the self and the author the impinging other in the discourse. As such, the reader becomes ethically obligated for the well-being of the author, at least within the confines of their interaction mediated through the page, and that this is a substantially different relationship than the reader has to the author of fictional works as a result. When a reader reads my memoir or personal essay, my existence as the other calls that reader into awareness of herself as a self and obligates her to me precisely because it is an account of a self, the presentation of a face if you will.

In fiction, there is always an awareness that one is being presented with a construct, not an actual person, and that any peril the fictional characters encounter exists solely in the narrative world of the book. While we experience empathy for these characters, we also know that nothing we can do will intervene in their well-being (although an argument could be made that the phenomenon of fan fiction, particularly fan fiction which resurrects characters killed off in their narrative worlds, suggests an impulse

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on the part of readers to do just that). Readers of nonfiction, particularly memoir, are faced with a more complicated dilemma.

Levinas asserts that “(A) face imposes itself upon me without my being able to be deaf to its call or to forget it, that is, without my being able to stop holding myself responsible for its distress” (“Sense and Ethics”). If we accept (as I believe we should) that the reader encounters the face of the other through nonfictional first person narrative, then we must also accept that the reader is compelled by the encounter with the text to hold herself responsible for the author’s distress before the moment of choice; that the reader cannot choose to ignore the pre-ontological demands made by exposure to the other. He writes, “By this susceptibility the subject is responsible for its responsibility, incapable of withdrawing from it without retaining the trace of its desertion” (“Humanism and An-Archy”). If the reader turns away from the work upon finding the particulars of the author’s distress distressing in a way that makes her put aside her responsibility for the well-being of the author, then she is still implicated, still carries with her the trace of the unethical act of turning away. In fact, it may not even be necessary for the reader to read the text at all to be called to responsibility by it; Levinas’s construction of the encounter with the other as happening in the moment the other appears, rather than through relationship in discourse, would mean that she is implicated as soon as she intends to read the text, that the obligation adheres at the moment she recognizes the text as an encounter with the other.

If this is the relationship of the reader to the author—the reader as subject called into being and responsibility upon being confronted with the other—then what is the relationship of the author of first person creative nonfiction to the reader? Here, it can’t be that the reader impinges on the author, and in doing so obligates the author to her well-being, because the reader remains an abstract construct to the writer as she is writing... there is no concrete other, only the construct of an other—or, if the author is lucky, many others—who encounter the text through the social worlds of literature and commerce.

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Here, then, it becomes necessary to explore Levinas's construction of morality and justice, which come after ethics, and which requires the presence of an other other, and happens only in the context of the relation between the I, the other, and what Levinas calls The Third Man: "(M)orality is a plot with three personages: the I approaches the infinite by going generously toward the you, who is still my contemporary, but in the trace of illeity, presents himself out of a depth of the past, faces, and approaches me. ("Phenomenon and Enigma"). In other words, through my contact with the other, I become aware of myself, and my awareness of a third other makes me aware of myself as an other. It's through this awareness of myself as both self and other that I am able to understand my own actions as violent and arbitrary, and to judge myself, and to hold myself accountable for the harm my actions do, and in doing so to understand my actions, and the actions of others, as just or unjust. It is also the existence of this other other, who can be hurt by my actions toward the original other, which calls into being the need for justice. In the intimate society of the self and the other, violence (by which I understand Levinas to mean anything which impinges on another) is always pardonable (if not always pardoned) because it is always within the power of the other to grant absolution. However, violence against another which harms a second other cannot be pardoned, because it is not within the power of the other to grant pardon on behalf of the second other. It is from this understanding that I assert that the relationship the reader has with the author of first person creative nonfiction is an ethical one, but that the relationship the author has with the reader(s) is a moral one, and one thus bound to abide by the rules of justice ("The Third Man").

What, though, does it mean for me to be bound to behave toward the reader in a just way? I would argue that the first requirement is that, if I present my work as a nonfictional account, it must be nonfictional—it must be as true to my own experience as I am capable of making it—both because any untruth has the capacity to do harm to the reader because she is bound to me in an ethical relationship, one that forces her to acknowledge my distress and be responsible for it, and because the harm that I do to her might also harm another other. If I have impinged on her with a false account of myself, and that

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falsity is discovered, I have not only damaged her credulity and done harm (violence) to her, but I have harmed the other other who will encounter a less credulous, generous person when she encounters the reader.

Let me offer a concrete example, although to do so I will have to resurrect the dead horse of James Frey and his not-fully-factual memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. I return to this well-trod ground not because I think anything needs to be added to the conversation about this book, but because it is the best example I have from personal experience of the sort of harm I mean to suggest.

When Frey's book came out, a woman I know—like many other mothers of children struggling with drug addiction—bought and read it precisely because she believed that it offered a truthful accounting of Frey's recovery from addiction, and because the possibility of his recovery suggested also the possibility that my brother, too, could recover. At the time, her adult son's life looked quite a bit like the life Frey described in the book (but did not, in fact, live), and it was the similarity of experience as expressed in the particular details of the book—time in jail, amount and type of drugs used, etc.—that allowed her to make the move from Frey's recovery to the possibility that her son might also recover. When it was revealed that these details were largely fabricated, that in fact Frey's issues with addiction never rose to the level of serious criminality and did not involve the length and quantity of use he portrayed, she felt a very real betrayal. In her own words, "Well, I guess he's just another junkie lying to get my money." In this betrayal, too, she saw her son. During the weeks between her reading of the book and her discovery that it was largely false, she had in her hopefulness been able to offer up to her son the kinds of help the book had led her to believe he needed: yet another stay in a rehab facility, some financial support to get back on his feet afterwards, the warm regard of his family. In the weeks and months following the revelation of Frey's deception, she was less able to offer those things than she had been even before she had read it. Thus, Frey did violence to her because he had made her responsible to him and for his distress and then misrepresented that distress, but he also did violence to her son, whose requests for

help were met with less generosity than they would have been had Frey not thus harmed his mother. Had his mother read the book with the understanding that it was a novel, she might still have felt more generously toward her son after reading it, as her identification of him with the *character* of a work of fiction might have made her equally hopeful. This is part of the value of fiction, that although we understand the narrative world of the work to be untrue, we are nonetheless able to feel empathy for the characters who inhabit it. It isn't the fact that the story isn't true which was damaging, but that it was presented as true when it was not. It is the presentation of the false as the true that is, I argue, both unethical and unjust in the writing of first person creative nonfiction.

But what, some will argue, about the idea that creative nonfiction is art, and that as art, it cannot and should not be held to the same standards as other utterances? In "Reality and Its Shadows," Levinas confronts this issue. He acknowledges that literature is a specific sort of speech, precisely because of the completeness of any work. A work is finished not because of some social interruption, but because the work itself is complete and cannot hold any new thing; I understand him to be saying by this that a work of literature is finished in a way that resists, if not makes completely impossible, an ongoing discourse with the work and therefore it is fundamentally different from discursive uses of language. But he also speaks against the idea of art for art's sake. "The formula is false inasmuch as it situates art *above* reality and recognizes no master for it, and it is immoral inasmuch as it liberates the artist from his duties as a man and assures him of a pretentious and facile nobility." Because ethics are pre-ontological, no argument can be made for art to release the artist from her ethical responsibilities, as these responsibilities always adhere when one is confronted with the existence of the other.

Another, more compelling, argument often made against the requirement for truthfulness in first person creative nonfiction is that it is impossible to write the truth of our lives, because memory is faulty and, even if it weren't, we are often opaque to ourselves and don't understand our own motivations or the

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implications of our actions. And, since truthfulness is an impossibility, we are not bound to even attempt it. To address this, I will turn to Judith Butler.

### **Judith Butler and Giving an Account of Oneself**

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler's project is far more ambitious than my own here. She stipulates that "the 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms," and acknowledges that this problematizes the idea of personal responsibility. Her goal is to recover the possibility of responsibility for oneself from contemporary critics who, using this contingent self as a grounding point, "worry that this means there is no concept of the subject that can serve as the grounds for moral agency and moral accountability" (8).

Butler acknowledges that an "I" which could give no account of itself could also not be an unethical actor, and so her project is to discover how one can give an ethical account of oneself in spite of the fact that no self ever fully understands the matrix of social institutions from which it emerges. She accepts Levinas's assertion that the self comes into being only when confronted with the other, although she critiques his construction of the ethical obligation the self incurs in this moment of coming into being. For Butler, not only the call to give an account of oneself, but also the impossibility of doing so completely, problematizes the idea that in that moment the self becomes responsible for and to the other. She writes, "Before the other, one cannot give an account of the 'I' who has been trying all along to give an account of itself. A certain humility might emerge in this process, perhaps also a certain knowingness about the limits of what there is to know" (69).

This knowingness about the limits of what there is to know is always a part of the process of writing first person nonfictional essays. Butler is clearly indicating the sort of great unknowables—how did the social institutions which have shaped me come into being, how did those institutions shape the way I understand myself to be, how does the language I use to think these questions limit and define the



possible account I might give of myself—that trouble the critics to whom she is addressing her critique. For the memoiristic writer, there are always also more pedestrian unknowables—who said what twenty years ago, did the mechanic ask if we were from New York before or after he'd seen my West Virginia license, were we really watching cartoons when the firetrucks dopplered by—but they nonetheless introduce the unavoidable truth that every time the self tries to account for itself, the account will always be flawed by the unrecoverable facts and unknowable undercurrents of the events in question. There is always, in first person nonfictional writing, not just the specter of falsity, but the absolute certainty of it. There are always things which the author simply does not know.

How, then, can any argument for the best truth possibly hold up, when it is always true that this truth will not be absolute and will, of necessity, be tainted by misremembering or misunderstanding on the part of the author? For Butler, it is the fact that it is a universally inescapable truth that the self giving an account of itself will always be contingent and incomplete that suggests that the relationality between the speaking self and the receiving other becomes the basis for a new ethical understanding. The act of giving an account of oneself becomes an act of discovery, rather than one of reporting the already known. She writes, “Giving an account is thus... a kind of showing of oneself, a showing for the purpose of testing whether the account seems right, whether it is understandable by the other” (131). This is an ethical act precisely because the self is contingent upon the other, and it is through giving an account of oneself and discovering whether or not that account can be accepted by the other as an intelligible utterance that we put aside the construction of a self-sufficient ‘I’ and embrace the reality of an ‘I’ dependent upon its relations to the other. She writes, “(W)e must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” (136).

It's important to note here how like Montaigne's own undertaking Butler's idea of the act of giving an account as an act of discovery is. It was Montaigne's goal to—through assaying, or discovering his own

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thoughts through the act of writing them down and following his digressions and discoveries as they grew and changed on the page—to “put before the public a full verbal portrait of himself” (Lopate 43). The impossibility of that task, as made clear by Butler, in no way minimizes the value of it: it is the assaying, and not the coming to some final conclusion, which Montaigne put forward as an account of himself to the other. The essay, then, is in and of itself an artifact of an ethical act in Butler’s construction.

Inherent in Butler’s argument is the necessary assumption that the account one gives is the best account one is able give, that the falsity and incompleteness inherent in the account are only those which must be there by virtue of the fact that not everything is knowable to us. In fact, I would argue that because it is always true that a first person account is flawed for exactly these reasons, but is nonetheless offered to the other as an account of oneself, that it is a particularly unethical act to pepper it with intentional falsehoods. The work of the other, of the reader, is to receive the account as as true as the self giving the accounting has been able to make it, and to say back to that self whether or not it is understandable to them in spite of its incompleteness and its failings. To offer something which is not an account of oneself, but which pretends to be, is to ask of the other that she does her part of this labor even though no real value will adhere to her disclosure of the un/intelligibility of the account, as it is an account then of no one. It’s an act of bad faith, then, and one that asks the other to participate in a sham discourse without letting the other in on the fact that it’s a sham.

## Conclusion

But what about the artful essay that doesn’t pretend to be an account of oneself? How can this model allow for the possibility of the essay which is not also a nonfiction. In his introduction to the anthology *The Next American Essay*, D’Agata writes, “(H)enceforth please do not consider these ‘nonfictions.’ I want you preoccupied with art in this book, not with facts as facts” (1). And here I want to argue that one of the difficulties with D’Agata, and with the discussion of truth and deceit in the essay in general, is the

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conflation of the words “essay” and “nonfiction.” It seems to me that there are essays which are nonfictional and essays which are not, and that when we conflate the two we limit the possibilities of both.

One can certainly assay on purely imagined topics. For example, Lia Purpura’s excellent “On Coming Back as a Buzzard” is a first-person meditation on the place of the buzzard in the order of things, on waste and use, in which the narrator moves from buzzard to person fluidly. The reader understands that this lyric exploration is just that: an imagining, and there is no falseness in its presentation to the reader. Likewise, BJ Hollars’s book *Dispatches from the Drownings: Reporting the Fiction of Nonfiction* alerts readers from the outset that one fourth of the brief essays included—rewritten accounts of drownings in Eau Claire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—are fully false, and part of the energy of the book is that he refuses to tell the reader which accounts are which. There is a rich and varied tradition of essays that don’t portend to be nonfictional accounts of the author’s lived experience, including those that are, like Purpura’s, written in the first person. And there is no expectation from the reader that they are being presented with facts.

The problem with D’Agata’s argument against the necessity of truthfulness in nonfiction is that he conflates these two disparate ways of assaying. In writing about Jenny Boully’s imaginative essay “The Body,” he asserts that the piece challenges the very nature of what nonfiction means, and then goes on to say “What happens when the essayist starts imagining things, making things up, filling in blank spaces... What happens when statistics, reportage, and observation in an essay are abandoned for image, emotion, expressive transformation?” (435). But it’s key to note that, from the beginning of the essay—which is written entirely in disjointed footnotes—the reader is aware of the way lyric imagination informs the telling. The author is not in any way attempting to deceive the reader, but rather makes the imagined nature of the exploration clear on the page. This is substantially different than, say, Frey’s writing that he spent months in jail when he in fact had not, or D’agata’s own dismissive attitude toward the factual in his own work.

There is no reason to assume an essay has to be nonfictional beyond the signaling of the author to the reader that it is not. Would it be better if—as D’Agata seems to want when he insists in the Interview article quoted earlier that our reading nonfiction with the belief that the author has been as true to the facts as she is able to be is a failing of the reader—if readers assumed that the essay was full of untruths unless the author specifically told us that it were not? Perhaps. I genuinely don’t think it matters which we privilege, but it does matter that literary tradition has led readers to assume that essays which appear to be written truthfully are in fact making a serious and ethical attempt at truthfulness. The tradition makes room for the inclusion of imagined or even blatantly false narratives, but it is an expectation of the genre that when the author does this, she will also signal the reader that this is the case. This does not seem like an overly strenuous or prescriptive requirement, nor is it possible for me to see how this damages the essay as a work of literary art.

That said, I believe there is some specific value to the essay or memoir which works to truthfully give an account of the author’s experience and of her interior life, and that “art” which essentially calls out the reader as inadequately sophisticated if she accepts the nonfictional work she reads as such is harmful to the genre. It creates, should we embrace it, the impossibility of the sincere attempt. It’s a totalizing move, because the author impinges on how readers encounter all nonfictional work in the future. It is not art insisting on its place at the table, but rather “art” that seeks to banish everyone else from it. “Art” that, at its core, seems to persecute the reader for the generousness of credulity and the kindness of receiving the author’s best attempt to give an account of herself.

Ultimately, perhaps the issue is one of taxonomy. I don’t know anyone who writes “creative nonfiction” who loves the term, and so we are all of scrambling to lay claim to the essay and define its contours to meet our own aesthetics. I want the nonfictional nature of the essay to be the default assumption of the reader, and for the fictional essay to have to signal itself as such. My reading of D’Agata’s definition of the essay is that he would like the question of whether or not it is non/fictional to

be taken off the table completely; he would like for it to stand always and only as art, and never as an account of the author's self. I balk at this position because I believe that it nullifies the unique ethical opportunity that the best attempt at giving an account of oneself creates between the author and the reader of such an account. It removes the possibility of presenting our faces to the reader, and in so doing, to call them into awareness of themselves as selves, and it robs us of the opportunity to be made whole as selves when they say back to us that we have presented an account of ourselves which can be heard and understood by another. And I am not, for myself, willing to give up this opportunity for relationship with the reader; I am not willing to say that, for the sake of another's art, I will give up my own.

But, again, this is a deeply personal exploration, as perhaps all explorations about one's own art must be, and it isn't intended to make an argument for a universal ethic of the essay. Ultimately, my goal is only to suggest that we ought not to cut off any possibility for the form—that we ought not say that the essay can only be nonfictional, but also that we ought not to say that the essay can never be nonfictional—because to insist that our own practices are the only possible practices is to limit the possibilities of our art in unnecessary ways. We have, indeed, lost the universal, self-knowing subject of modernity, but that doesn't negate the value of the imperfect but sincere, partially opaque subject of post-modernity who is, nonetheless, doing her best to give an account of herself.

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