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That Snow Didn't Simply Fall:
How (and Why) to Frame the Personal Essay as a Critical Inquiry into Memory in the First-Year Writing Classroom

I begin with the snow story, my earliest memory: I am a tiny person—two years old? three?—and in my bulky pink snowsuit, I rock on the brown plastic horse that hangs from the swing set in our South Jersey backyard. Beneath me, the snow is several feet deep, up to the horse's belly. I am alone until Aaron, the older boy nobody likes from across the street, appears and gives me a shove that knocks me down into the snow. Not unlike the younger brother in *A Christmas Story*, I roll around for a long time, unable to stand up. No one comes to help. The snow turns to ice water, seeping through my mittens. I am crying.

I tell my students this story on the first day of class, and I explain that as an adult I turned this snow story over and around in my mind. I began to question the details, not because it was a particularly significant event in its own right, but because it seems to be the earliest I can recall. In my memory, I was engulfed in a lot of snow—a whole lot. No one in my family remembers a big storm during that time, so I researched the snow accumulation from the winters of 1980 to 1982. I decide it must have been sometime during these years that the event took place, but according to comprehensive weather history data, the snow simply didn't fall in substantial amounts during that time. There *was* a big storm in February of 1983, so perhaps I was a little older, but at five, surely I could have helped myself up. And then I consider my overprotective parents, constantly following

my brother and me around, calling upstairs or downstairs to ensure we are conscious and unharmed. Surely they wouldn't have allowed me at that age to play alone outside for such an extended period of time.

I begin to examine this story in the framework of the questions that will guide our class for the following 16 weeks and the culminating assignment series, examined in this paper: *How much confidence should we put into our memories? Why are certain events, people, images, and conversations seemingly so clear and, at times, important in our memories, while others appear to fade immediately? If memory is flawed—and we understand that it is—how do we know if what we are recalling really happened? If our recollection is inaccurate, does it change the ways or degrees to which it is meaningful to us? Should it?*

And then it's my students' turn—*write for ten minutes about one of your earliest memories*—after which I ask them to consider possible discrepancies in their own stories. What are they sure about? Less sure? What's utterly hazy? What feelings are central to this memory? I ask them to imagine they are writing a memoir. This story they've just described is crucial. How would possible mistakes in recollection be represented? Does the accuracy matter if one is certain about how the memory *feels*? Is this emotional memory "good enough" for nonfiction literature? Should this memory be in print as nonfiction even if we're unable to verify every detail, every word, every fall from the horse?

Telling True Stories: Truth and Memory in Creative Nonfiction is a special-topic first-year writing course. My school's University Writing Program is comprised of a multi-disciplinary faculty, and these themed, required writing courses are designed to teach not only college-level writing, but also research and critical thinking. Topics run the gamut across areas of study, with other course titles including *In on the Joke: Humor and What's Behind It*; *The Good Food Revolution: Food Movements and the*

Rhetorics of Social Change; *Turf Wars: Architecture, Urban Planning and Ecology*; and other, equally compelling topics.

My course description reads:

> *Is the truth precisely what occurred, or is it in how we recall an event, or a conversation, or an image years later? Should we trust our own memories in storytelling? What about those of other people? How should gaps and haziness in memory be addressed in writing? Does a text's "truth" affect its power? Is emotional truth equal in value to fact? Do the answers to these questions shift with audience, or the purpose of a piece of writing?*
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> *In addition to countless literary scandals surrounding memoirs and creative nonfiction over the past several years, the exploration of what constitutes "the truth" in writing is an essential and fascinating element of not only literary study, but also in examining our world and its stories. In this class we will read a variety of nonfiction texts—from literary journalism and essays to memoirs and book-length creative nonfiction—and we'll write intensely both about the ideas and arguments of these writers and about our own experiences and research. We will also focus significant time and energy on examining audience, purpose, evidence, revision, and writing for clarity.*

We spend the four months that follow that first day of class considering these central questions from all angles, from examining scientific texts that provide insight into memory to seeing how published creative nonfiction writers handle such dilemmas. Depending on the semester, we read essays and book-length creative nonfiction in the form of personal narratives, true third-person accounts, and more complex hybrids, such as, respectively, Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun*, and *The Lifespan of a Fact* by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal. Discussions center mostly around the presentation of memories, details, rhetorical strategies, confidence of voice, and what is not said or left out for the sake of a cohesive narrative. For instance, in *Autobiography of a Face*, a memoir in which Grealy tells the story of her childhood

experiences and adult struggles with cancer of the jaw, we were particularly interested in concepts such as possible composite characters. (*That boy I the hospital—was he really one boy, or a combination of a number of different kids there, drawn as one for the sake of emphasis or to avoid confusion?*). More recently, we look to Leslie Jamison's *The Empathy Exams* to consider disclaimers that speak directly to the fallibility of memory. Despite the inclusion of dialogue, for instance, Jamison states, "I'd be lying if I wrote that I remember exactly what he said." Finally, we also read scholarly works that care about these questions, such as the crucial work by Lynn Z. Bloom, "Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction."

For the first two-thirds of the semester, students work their way through these readings and classroom discussions and write both a critical analysis of a creative nonfiction text through the lenses of memory and truth and an interdisciplinary argumentative research paper examining the class' crucial questions in the context of another situation—meaning, how do our crucial questions play out in other places, other disciplines? For this assignment, to give a small sampling, I've had students consider these concerns as they apply to eye-witness testimony or anthropological endeavors, and others have taken on projects in which they considered the psychology of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in the framework of war memoirs. Others still have explored the truth in personal narratives in stand-up comedy and the standards we should hold "based on a true story" films.

Finally, as we near the end of the semester, the students take on their own creative nonfiction endeavor. Obviously, many first-year writing classes utilize the personal essay, but as one might imagine, in this course the project, its aims, and its results are quite different. Instead of an early, "softball" assignment that student believe they can write any way they like and still get an A (and often, in certain classrooms, they're right), the narrative project comes at the end of the semester, which suggests a weightiness to students more often associated with culminating essays.

Further, this two-part project is placed in context of all the essays and book-length creative nonfiction we've examined, critiqued, and questioned all semester, which ultimately forces students to think differently about this personal essay process overall. Because our course is centered around the literary, students also spend the last few days of the semester giving (and listening to) readings of these essays. The final—and perhaps most crucial—difference, though, from the typical first-year writing personal essay assignment is the memo, or rationale, also outlined below, which asks students to perform a critical inventory and exploration of the choices they made in the piece regarding truth and memory.

Rochelle Harris, in her 2004 article "Encouraging Emergent Moments: The Personal, Critical, And Rhetorical In The Writing Classroom," defines the title term "emergent moments" as "the point at which the personal, the critical, and the rhetorical intersect in a text, a point at which the student can hold multiple perspectives simultaneously and reflexively." This is the meeting point that the assignment strives to place students and their work. To bring together the personal, critical, and the rhetorical in this way is in my experience a difficult task—both for professors creating assignments and for students who have for so long been taught, whether explicitly or not, that their "real lives" are separate from their studies or their intellectual life. This is obviously both problematic and overtly in contrast to the genre of creative nonfiction at large.

Harris, in this same article, states that these "emergent moments" that are so fruitful for students "can be facilitated but not imposed, and they are often connected with narrative, especially when narrative moves beyond its familiar boundaries." Below I've provided a focused look at this final assignment, the two-part personal essay project as the result of our semester-long inquiry into truth in memory and the standards, ethics, and mysteries of how this plays out in the genre as a whole. Within this exploration, I also speak to individual student work and the ways in which it so often does move beyond familiar boundaries Harris speaks to.

This assignment is obviously a risk for my students. Most people—especially the personal essay and memoir enthusiasts among us—would agree that our memories play a huge, perhaps even the *most central*, role in helping us to define both who we are and why we are one way as opposed to any other. Sometimes even the tiniest, most mundane-seeming memories become bloated and puffy with meaning. Asking 18-year olds to not only examine a piece of their history so closely and thoroughly, but also to share it during this time in their lives when they are, in fact, often working to understand and redefine who they were as a child is a big, big ask.

And yet, despite these risks and the emotional toll the assignment has the potential to take, I receive essays that are far more thoughtful and inward-facing than I have in general writing courses in the past where the assignment is not designed within this very specific context of truth and memory. Topics can be tough, and have in the past included deceased siblings, deceased parents, divorced grandparents, and grandparents cutting off all ties. One student wrote about campaigning for Mitt Romney; another wrote about coming out to his parents in a steak restaurant just after his father has made a crass, horrific joke about an AIDS quilt. Another framed his entire essay in the one minute following an equestrian accident that caused internal hemorrhaging and cut off his breathing. In one of my favorite essays, a student wrote about working in a high-end retail shop near campus, where she sold bags and watches to fellow students. She was one of the few students I have who grew up in Washington, DC, where our university is. She had two jobs, and she wrote about her resentment towards these other young women with amazing honesty and a very nuanced, impressive, not-quite-cruel humor. She struggled with her feelings, and whether they were fair or legitimate. Another young woman wrote about trying to improve her chances of gaining admission to a good college by volunteering. The essay placed us there with her, stuffed inside a chicken suit, and was mostly about how much she hated volunteering, and how guilty she felt about how much she hated volunteering. It was wonderful.

Of course, I also still receive occasional essays about first loves and seemingly cliché topics at the outset, but almost all of them show, because of the very specific context of this course, a really insightful, genuine exploration of what certain experiences mean, or meant, or how they actually happened, or didn't. One student wrote what was essentially a love letter to her first car—in second person—but it ultimately became an exploration of the vehicle meant for her in terms of her independence in a very strict, religious household. Another wrote about being separated from her parents at the beach as a three-year old—an experience many of us have had in one setting or another—but the essay took on the form, in some ways, of the rationale, examining how likely it was the memory of that sunburn and the sand under her fingernails are her own recollection, as opposed to having been created from family lore. Harris writes,

> This is the ongoing work of a critical composition classroom: to discover the ways in which even an essay about the 'big game' or the favorite stuffed animal brought to college are ideologically informed. Such a focus allows students opportunities to see how the personal already intersects with and is embedded within cultural narratives, to study how their texts write them as they write their texts, and to understand how they name the world around them.

This is exactly what my students are doing in, again, what I see as these "emergent moments."

In addition to being more inward facing, the essays are also, for the most part, flat out better. They're more interesting and engaging. Simply put, they're more like "real" personal essays, and by that I mean they read more like the writers most of us love and less like a college admissions essay. More impressive still, these memos in the form of a reflection about their own memory and related choices in writing about them, are often even more stunning than the personal essays themselves. Students grapple with family stories that don't quite add up and with hazy recollections—from youth or from emotionally charged moments; they try to figure out why the

feel so attached and so sure of certain memories despite all scientific knowledge pointing to the likelihood of inaccuracy. As Harris states, "Hundreds of decisions are made in each text, and many of them have to do with the ways in which students feel enabled, constrained, limited, and/or threatened by the textual territory into which they have written themselves. A writing teacher following the tenets of critical pedagogy would not just help the student find a transition sentence for the second paragraph or a public audience for that text; this teacher would ask that student what is at stake in that paragraph and offer the student readings that have different cultural, political, or social paradigms to help the student resee his or her own text." And ultimately through not only the decision processes they work through, but also through the reflection on these decisions, student do reach a point where they take a legitimate and often unexpected stand on where the meaning lies in all of this, somehow both despite these impossible questions and because of them.

Although I know I am forcing my students to struggle emotionally to some extent and despite the fact that (in some circles) the choice to use a personal essay in the first-year writing classroom is controversial, with some professors believing that focusing strictly on "academic" writing is more fruitful, I maintain that this work is crucial for them as first-year students learning to write in the academe. What is perhaps most emotionally complex in this assignment is also, to me, the most intellectually complex—that is, struggling with the ambiguity of both memory and how it fits into our vision of ourselves and our history. Memory is ambiguous, and the ways in which we make meaning from memory is even more ambiguous. I teach students who are most often coming directly from high schools, where gray area, as we know, is not only usually not encouraged as a space of consideration, but also often actively discouraged. The act of struggling with concepts and events that, as my prompt specifies, "didn't end neatly" is an act of critical thinking development as much as it is—especially with the topic of memory—an act of teaching

them to embrace uncertainty and complexity in general. We know this idea of "accepting" ambiguity and rejecting easy (and often false) distinctions is a skill that is crucial both in the future classes our students will take and in their future lives in general. As Hayley Mitchell Haugen argued in "Beyond the Narrative Mode in the Composition Classroom: Embracing a Return to the Personal Essay," "If we assign our students simple narrative exercises, they will write about what they already know about themselves in the world, unlikely to awaken their sense of discovery. The papers we will receive in return will be retellings of personal events they've already worked through, in the narrative structures with which they are most comfortable…The impact of these 'essays' will be unsurprising for both author and audience; there is little to discover there." They will fall back on moralistic conclusions and, to be frank, boring narratives that don't challenge them or engage their readers.

Memory is particularly valuable as a focal point here, first because my undergraduate students (likely all undergraduate student and all people, generally) find it engaging and engrossing, just as we do own memories (our own selves!). Second, as Kathleen Ryan writes in her 2004 article "Memory, Literacy, And Invention: Reimagining The Canon Of Memory For The Writing Classroom," this use of memory as guiding force and constant state of uncertainty is so crucial because "the imaginative, interpretive dimension of the art of memory helps students realize that composing a personal essay means shaping their memory material, not achieving perfect recall and transcribing it chronologically onto the page." She refers to teaching "students to practice interpretation and invention as part of the art of memory" (Ryan). And it's the intersection of this interpretation and the decisions and dilemmas students face that make them better thinkers and, thus, better writers. I have a hard time believing these essays would have been developed as they did without a genuine, critical focus on the unreliability of memory and ambiguity as a framework. This balance is consciously curated in this assignment and is central to the class' focus on memory

and the teaching that goes into guiding students, usually successfully, to achieve greater critical thinking and writing skills through the examination of these personal histories.

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