truth Troubles

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"truth" is an issue of public discussion, research, and everyday performance. Processes of navigating truth, however, are obscure and often unknown. In this project, the authors highlight truth(s) of written life texts. They conceive of truth as *a* rather than *the* "rhetorical device" to use for evaluating personal research and believe that demanding factual, historical truth-of-life research is faulty and problematic. By illustrating how genre, trust, memory, and confession influence truth telling, the authors hope to question and enhance truth-related conversations.

Keywords: *truth; life writing; James Frey; evidence; autoethnography*

The heart learns that stories are the truths that won't keep still. There is always another version, another eye to tell what it sees, another voice ready to speak.

Ronald J. Pelias, 2004

I'm a storyteller. I'll work to make you believe me. Throw in some real stuff, change a few details, add the certainty of outrage. I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth.

Dorothy Allison, 1996

I (Chris) wake up and turn on my computer. I walk into the kitchen, pour myself a cup of coffee, and move to my desk. I open a news Web site. The headline reads something like "The Wrath of Oprah" or "A Million Little

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Lies" or "Oprah Apologizes to Readers." Perhaps it was "Oprah Shreds Frey." I am intrigued.

I've intended to read *A Million Little Pieces* (Frey, 2003) for some time. Even with the headlines I still want to believe I can read it as if I do not know that the author, James Frey, fabricated anything at all. I'm not sure which parts are false. I want to read the book as a reader who knows nothing of the contemporary context. I want to think that my reaction to the book would be the same reaction as if I never turned on my computer.

I begin to read my copy of the book. There is something exciting about a book that has never been opened before. It's as if I am the first person to read these words, even though they have been printed and read a million times by others. Turning to the back cover, I wonder, "What am I getting myself into?"

"Addict." "Alcoholic." "Drug addiction." "Rehab." These words scream that I cannot trust this author. *He's an addict! You can't trust an addict. He's probably still addicted.* My mind wanders to past experiences with addicted people. Manipulative. Untrustworthy. Dangerous. I don't know if I can trust Frey. I don't know if I want to.

This description reveals Chris's thoughts prior to reading James Frey's (2003) *A Million Little Pieces*. Set primarily in one of the nation's top addiction rehabilitation programs, the book is a graphic memoir of drug and alcohol abuse, addiction, and recovery. In October 2005, Oprah Winfrey said that "for two nights, this man [James Frey] kept me awake" and selected the memoir for her book club (Rakieten, 2006a). After this distinction, Frey's work became the best-selling nonfiction book of 2005. In January 2006, however, an investigative reporting Web site, TheSmokingGun.com, released a report revealing fabricated aspects of the memoir.

Winfrey initially supported Frey and his memoir, even phoning in her support on *Larry King Live* and stating that "the underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me" (Douthit, 2006). Within 2 weeks of this call, however, Winfrey changed her position on the truths of *A Million Little Pieces*. "I made a mistake," she said. "I left the impression that the truth does not matter" (Rakieten, 2006b). Winfrey

felt "duped," and on a special live episode of her show demanded that Frey tell her and her viewers *the* truth. Frey explained that he presented some of his experiences as he recalled them but could not state, with certainty, that aspects of his story were indisputable facts.

Individuals began to take Frey to task for the accuracy of his narrative such as why he changed individuals' names, the length of time he spent in jail, and ways certain characters died. Frey responded by stating how and why he manipulated the text:

> In certain cases, things were toned up. In certain cases, things were toned down. That names were changed, that identifying characteristics were changed. . . . Sometimes those changes were made to protect the identity of certain individuals. Sometimes things were changed because they were too ridiculous. Sometimes things were changed for simple reasons of efficiency. . . . In the memoir genre, the writer generally takes liberties. You take liberties with time because you're compressing time a lot. You take liberties with events and sequences of events. (Douthit, 2006)

Frey also argued that even though there are more than "200 pages of recreated conversations in the book," no one questioned those "because in that area it is understood it is a memoir, it is a subjective recreation of my own life" (Douthit, 2006). This is a crucial point in the James Frey discussion: Only a few fabrications were at odds with readers whereas others went unchallenged. But because writers lose authorial control of a text once it becomes publicly printed, they can never know for what they or their work may be held accountable. As Wolcott (2002) suggests, "We never know how our studies will be used or where they will go" (p. 159; see Ricoeur, 1979).

When writing qualitative research, specifically life research (e.g., personal narrative, autoethnography), we are guilty of the practices Frey describes. We are taught to construct texts in an enjoyable way for readers. If we write for a traditional academic audience, we follow a story (Richardson, 1990) that often consists of an introduction, literature review, method section, findings, and conclusion (Creswell, 2003; Knapp & Daly, 2004; Pelias, 2004; Wolcott, 2001). Even if our research doesn't fit into this structure, we must mold manuscripts accordingly if we desire publication. From an audience standpoint, this formula provides a textual path to follow when reading, discussing, and understanding published studies. We also change names and places for individual and organizational protection. An institutional review board typically requires us to do this, especially if we work with high-risk populations such as children, prisoners, or the elderly. We compress years of research into a single text, and depending on the

arguments we may alter the sequence of fieldwork happenings. We make decisions about the "emphasis, tone, syntax," and "diction" of our writing (Mandel, 1968, p. 218). No one questions the "recreated conversations" we produce from interviews, but questioning could occur if we claim to have conducted and transcribed conversations.[1]

Although Frey works in the memoir genre, the majority of social scientists do not. His work, however, is classified by his publisher as nonfiction, the genre most social scientists call home. Frey's concerns are thus our concerns: We engage in similar writing practices, and when these conventions are called into question the validity of the work is challenged, potentially jeopardizing our careers. How might others perceive our research if they are uncomfortable with how we alter our "findings"? How can we argue for the legitimacy of memory (Bochner, 1997, 2007; Hacking, 1995; Hampl, 1999)? Should we leave out information that jeopardizes our arguments (e.g., Eakin, 2001; Wolcott, 2002)? How much do we disclose (Ellis, 1995, 2007a, 2007b; Rambo, 2007)? If we intentionally choose to not reveal elements of an experience, are we accurate? How should we navigate historical truth? Should questions of truth enter into critiques of life writing? In this project, we argue that truth is *not* an appropriate criterion for evaluating life texts.

The "Frey Fray" is an excellent opportunity to consider what qualitative researchers can learn from memoir. In this project, we highlight negotiations of truth in life writing.[2] We also illuminate why demanding truth is faulty and problematic. We specifically consider what truth looks like in life texts, how genres affect writers and readers, the function of memory, and the ethics of disclosure. We do not provide a definitive typology for understanding truth in life texts but rather establish, continue, and enhance truth-related conversations.

Method for Troubling truth

In May 2006, we attended the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where we conducted interviews with 10 qualitative researchers to understand how we can negotiate truth in life writing. Mitch Allen, Tim Bond, Devika Chawla, Clifford Christians, Norm Denzin, H. L. "Bud" Goodall, Marco Marzano, Janice Morse, Ron Pelias, and Chris Poulos offered their perspectives, which we captured during audio-recorded interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and was transcribed within 1 week of the conference. Interviewees later authorized our use of their observations in this article.

We inductively allowed themes to emerge from our interviewee responses rather than deductively applying preformed themes to the commentary. These themes—unifying essences we noticed in interviewees' talk (Sandelowski, 1998)—inform our discussion about truth and life writing as well as illustrate how some researchers negotiate truth in scholarship. Scholars use various "rhetorical devices" to engage and maintain readers' interest in a story, such as the use of composite characters and manipulating genre conventions (see Booth, 1989; Ellis, 2004, 2007a). Truth, or suggesting a text is "based upon a true story," is one such rhetorical device. Claiming a story is true challenges how we evaluate texts.

truth Troubles: Evaluating Life Texts

Plummer (2001) distinguishes between making sure stories have "internal consistency" and/or rest on valid "external events" and making sure stories have "outer pragmatics" by which they become "evaluated in terms of their uses, functions and the role they play in personal and cultural life" (p. 401).[3] Plummer's idea of outer pragmatics resembles Frank's (1995) call to live *with* stories rather than to think *about* them (i.e., engage their internal consistency and validity). Both views make possible different conceptions of truth. For instance, historians value the internal consistency of stories more than what these stories *do* in the world (Gaddis, 2002; also see White, 1980). Life writers, however, produce work to engage audiences rather than worry solely about whether a (re)creation of the past is factually accurate. The importance of a life story often rests on what the story *does* for others (Couser, 1997; Kvale, 1995, 2002) as well as what it reveals about the self (Hampl, 1999). These different conceptualizations of truth trouble truth and invite truth troubles.

Bochner (2002) discerns another approach toward truth in life writing. He presents the debate about the "connection between experience and story" (p. 85; see Bochner, 2007), specifically two contrasting views of narrative and life. "Is life narratively structured?" Bochner asks. "Or is human narration an ad hoc grafting of story onto experience?" (p. 85). If we turn experiences into stories, which he suggests we do, then this conversion makes a life appear "fictionalized" (see Freeman, 2001). A life becomes something it would never have been absent narrative capabilities. An alternative view assumes that we can discuss experience without story, that we can somehow adhere to a "possibility of undistortion" (p. 86).

Writing, however, is only one way to conceive of life; as Denzin (1998) notes, "There is nothing outside of the text; that is, a thing [e.g., a life] is

only understood through its representations" (pp. 405-406; also see Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 1998; Richardson, 2001). Bruner (1993) argues that a life text does not record or signify a "life as lived" but rather serves as one

> way of construing experience—and of reconstruing and reconstruing it until our breath or our pen fails us. . . . The "rightness" of any autobiographical version is relative to the intentions and conventions that govern its construction or its interpretation. (pp. 38-40)

Plummer (2001) reminds us that "the narrative of a life is clearly not *the* life; and it conforms much less to the contours of the life as lived than it does to the conventions and practices of narrative writing" (p. 399); Atkinson and Delamont (2006) suggest that "a narrative of a personal experience is not a clear route into 'the truth,' either about the reported events, or of the teller's private experience" (p. 166). If truth changes based on representational convention, which we believe it does, then framing a life in life writing as "accurate," "correct," and "truthful" is contingent and futile. As Plummer (2001) writes, "To recognize that lives are constructed means that we then need to search out ways for evaluating just what it is that is being constructed, and how their constructions may lead to different kinds of 'truths'" (p. 401). Thus, we now ask, what is this thing called truth?

Janice Morse argues that truth is "what a person perceives to be right" (personal communication, May 6, 2006). This statement implies a relative meaning of truth: truth is what a person believes "really happened." As an example, Morse describes a situation she frequently encounters in her research with trauma rooms and patient comfort. She says that intoxicated individuals frequently enter a trauma room "fighting off caregivers." Later, when no longer intoxicated, these individuals cannot recall how they behaved when they arrived at the hospital. Often, Morse says, they cannot recall their experience and believe they were stoic. "So what's the truth?" she asks. "The out-of-control patients perceived themselves as stoic. That is their 'truth.' However, the medical personnel recall the situation differently. They have other 'truths' of the care." Truth, here, takes the form of what a person remembers happening—her or his own reality.

This idea of truth materializes in writing about human experiences, wherein we trust the individual's account. This is the writer's truth, whether or not any external evidence exists for the claim. "I don't know if I believe that I can ever tell the truth," Pelias says,

> But I can tell the truth as I understand it. And I know when I'm lying. I try not to lie . . . but I recognize that any kind of narrative that I might [write],

any story that I might perform has other versions. And the people I implicate in that story clearly might not like my version. Whatever story I am telling is not going to be *the* story. (personal communication, May 5, 2006)

Morse highlights another trauma room situation. During one of her research interviews, a woman came in "badly burned from a fire" (personal communication, May 6, 2006). The woman's three children died in this fire. Six months later, this horrific experience compelled the bereaved mother to be reassured that she did care for her children, by screaming for her children, despite her own excruciating pain while receiving care in the trauma room. Thus, she returned to the hospital to confirm her conviction that her children were uppermost in her mind.

Tony: What happened?
Morse: The physician remembered this woman and told her what happened.
Tony: But if I was a physician and she came back 6 months later, I may not remember.
Morse: The physician would. It was such a horrible, extraordinary event!
Tony: The people involved with this woman could recall everything?
Morse: The physician could recall this patient being there. But he also knew what to say. He took her by the hand and told her that she screamed for her children.
Tony: So, in this situation, truth was contingent upon audience needs. This woman needed comforting.
Morse: But she *was* yelling. And who cares if she wasn't!

If truth is "what a person perceives to be right," according to Morse, it has to be assumed that the physician's recall is his "truth." The physician could recall the care and her response, knew empathetically what this mother needed to hear of his perceived truth, and knew how she needed to be given the information. Alternatively, it is possible that the physician is endorsing *a* truth and molding it to the audience. In life writing, striving to meet a specific need in an audience may carry more weight than a need to state "just the facts."

Denzin (1989) distinguishes among "historical truth," truth based on "existing empirical data" (e.g., museum artifacts, police records), "aesthetic truth," truth based on how well a story fits with the conventions of particular writing genre (e.g., memoir, autobiography), and "fictional truth," truth based on creating for an audience "believable experiences" (p. 23). Denzin views "autobiographical statements" as comprising all of these, "a mixture of fiction and nonfiction" that address truths "about life and particular lived

experiences" (p. 24); he suggests that when it comes to autobiography, "it is necessary to do away with the distinction between fact and fiction" (p. 25). Bruner (1993) believes that good life writers know how to construct honesty and present "convincing realities" (p. 46). Here, the life writing genre welcomes believable experiences and possibilities rather than demands a strict adherence to past events. Bruner's excerpt also acknowledges that no singular reality or truth exists in personal storytelling. Life stories fold under pressure when questions of truth and objectivity become criteria by which they are evaluated.

Denzin also argues that truth in life writing involves a writer's relationship to an experience and, as such, becomes constructed and mediated in the creation of the text. Truth is "contested, partial, incomplete, and always in motion," says Denzin. "Every time you return to truth it is different" (personal communication, May 5, 2006).

> "I'm trying to write this scene I remember living from 1958 or 1959," Denzin begins. "It's a dance scene set in my family's dining room. It's a scene from a party my parents had. I hear Pete Fountain playing the clarinet. I see people dressed in 1950s outfits, women with Mimi Eisenhower bangs, and men wearing dark pleated trousers. I'm trying to write a scene that embodies this moment I remember."

> "But since you're writing it from today. . . ." Tony offers.

> "Yes!" Denzin responds. "So what's the truth of that scene? I try to be true to the experience, but of course it's my experience."

> "You're trying to write the scene through the lens of a kid. . . ." Tony interrupts.

> "Yes!" Denzin replies. "I was 17. We write in this type of space. We all do it."[4]

Denzin's attempt to capture the imagery of a 1950s party scene requires that he call on certain historical knowledge while engaging contemporary writing conventions, particularly language, to effectively describe the scene for modern audiences. Hacking (1995) and Bochner (1997, 2007) address the dynamics of "semantic contagion," the understanding of past behaviors using present terms. Although we can never return to a prior period to see how people used words, it is important to realize that the ways we language past behaviors may serve as inaccurate views of these behaviors; as Brockmeier (2000) says, "The plot of a life narrative, even though it mostly deals with the past, always emerges as an order of the present" (p. 63).

For instance, "child abuse" did not linguistically and thus conceptually exist 100 years ago. Behaviors we may deem abusive today, however, may

have existed. The challenge of semantic contagion resides in *trying* to understand how our use of new terms affects our understanding of old scenarios. If spanking children was a widely accepted form of discipline in 1943, is it possible to label such behavior as child abuse (Bochner, 1997, 2007)? And what if once we acquire terms of child abuse we seek out our abusers to take them to task for their past actions? Our point is not to suggest or establish a correct way to deal with understanding prior situations through the lens of new words. This is inevitable. Rather, we highlight the dynamics of reviewing the past and consider what gets lost or gained via linguistic hindsight inherent in the writing process.

Let's revisit Denzin's situation of writing the past in the present. Denzin highlights the possibility of "temporal contagion," the possibility of using current circumstances to understand past experiences. He reminds us that life writing involves these hindsight practices. We agree. What we find important is the *attempt* to note how one's current situated-ness affects looking back.[5] For instance, many recent media portrayals of the 1950s (e.g., *Pleasantville* [1998], *Far From Heaven* [2002], *Good Night and Good Luck* [2005]) nostalgically construe the era Denzin describes: popular types of music (e.g., jazz), what people wore, and ways occasions such as "dinner parties" occurred. Whether true or not, we could say that Denzin's present description of a past experience possesses remnants of media culture. This does not suggest that his description is invalid, that the media portray an inaccurate representation of the time, or that we could ever know what definitively happened "back then." We note, however, the dynamics of looking back and recognize what we may alter via temporal hindsight.

Truth again takes on a contingent character. Although we do not speak for Denzin, we believe that if he described this scene 10 years ago or 10 years from now, or if he would even find the scene important at such temporal benchmarks, he would describe it differently. And as he says, we all work in this way: Our conceptions of the past change over time. Our truths of situations change, too. We find it important to understand these different truths but also suggest that trying to definitively discern what happened can serve as an exhausting, senseless endeavor.

History shapes truth in a second way. Tim Bond suggests that a writer's writing history affects our reception of "fiction" and "fact," two truth-related issues. He contends that audiences perceive writers differently depending on the author's writing history. For instance, if a writer previously worked in a nonfiction genre, then the work she or he produces under the label of "fiction" can have a nonfictional tint (personal communication, May 6, 2006).

"You mentioned that Irvin Yalom [a therapist] has moved into a fictional, novelistic way of writing," Tony says. "Do his fictional accounts also serve as historical accounts?"

"Well, there's no clear historical evidence for the encounters Yalom currently writes about," Bond replies. "Yalom acknowledges that. But in his previous works you see so much systematic work around particular historical contexts for therapy. You see ways people spoke, types of medical treatments available at the time. . . ."

"So it's a mix of fiction and nonfiction?" Tony interrupts.

"In one sense Yalom's writing is fictional. But I got a better feel for the times in which Sigmund Freud was working," Bond notes. "Yalom casts [prominent therapeutic figures] in new ways. If I had to use his work as a serious [historical] study then I would have to dig into its historical basis. But I have not bothered to do this. Intuitively it feels informative. And I'm not going to say it is 'right' because [right and wrong] constructs are so fluid."

Bond's comments do not suggest that a nonfiction writer's fiction possesses the "historical truth" Denzin (1989) describes but rather that a nonfiction writer's fictional work might be *perceived* to have historical truth, thus motivating audiences to act *as if* fictional events were facts. Wolcott (2002) similarly illustrates how his early, strategically and necessarily fabricated research about "Sneaky Kid" continues to affect audience trust of himself and all of his work (p. 121).

Lives are narratively constructed, and so when we seek to write a life we must simultaneously engage historical facts but not place excessive emphasis on *the facts* that we fail to engage audiences. The slippage between these truths creates a challenge for evaluating truth. Language, particularly semantic contagion, is another. Both mold how audiences connect with a text. In the next sections, we focus on how genres, memory negotiations, and norms of confessing can affect truth telling. These factors influence our ability to evaluate truth(s) and, as such, are important expectations for us as life writers and readers.

truth Troubles: Trust, Genre, and "Contractual Obligation"

Our inclination to classify narratives parallels our desire to tell stories. Genres develop to facilitate understanding and establish criteria for working with texts. As Vande Berg, Wenner, and Gronbeck (2004) note, "A genre is

both a static and a dynamic system" (p. 111). Devitt (2000) believes that the dynamic quality of a genre is "created through the interaction of writer, reader, and context" (p. 699). Vande Berg et al. agree and suggest that genres emerge from the writer–reader–context, making possible reader and writer expectations and allowing for variation. No two memoirs or autobiographies of the same events and people are the same despite the generic distinction.

Genre "boundaries" are also not rigid. Devitt (2000) argues that what constitutes a genre is just as much about similarities as it is differences: "Texts must not only participate in a genre but always participate in multiple genres simultaneously" (p. 699). Limits on genres can create truth troubles for readers and writers. For instance, strict adherence to genres can stifle creativity, and formulaic stories may disappoint audiences who demand stringent loyalty to story categories. Writers who work in a particular genre must often craft their life text as abstract cultural conventions prescribe (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006; Couser, 1997; Plummer, 1995), thereby influencing the epistemological function of a narrative (Brummett, 1985; Burke, 1973; Frank, 1995).

Traditional academic genres are not immune to these dilemmas. As Blair, Brown, and Baxter (1994) observe, academic "writings suppress our convictions, our enthusiasm, our anger, in the interest of achieving an impersonal, 'expert' distance and tone" (p. 383; see Boler, 1999; Keller, 1985/1995). These authors challenge scholars to reconsider what counts as research, and encourage us to scrutinize the practices that maintain rigid conformity to formulaic texts. Readers and writers conform to certain textual logics, and life writing genres require flexible understandings of what constitutes worthwhile evidence and meaningful truths.

Philip Lopate (1994) refers to the connection between a reader and a writer as a "friendship" (p. xxiii), and, like all (good) friendships, trust must exist and develop according to the guidelines of the genre in which a writer works. Trust—a "firm belief in the reliability, truth, or strength . . . of a person or thing" (Oxford American Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2001, p. 900)—serves as the foundation for many relationships. Maintaining trust is important for relationships to continue, and when trust fails a relationship suffers (Bond, 2007; Ellis, 1995). When a relationship suffers, truth suffers too.

A genre informs a reader's expectations of truth (Mandel, 1968). As writers, we are also responsible for a genre's textual conventions. Barrington (2002) believes that

> when you name what you write memoir or fiction, you enter into a contract with the reader. You say "this really happened," or you say "this is imaginary." And if you are going to honor that contract, your raw material as a memoirist can only be what you have actually experienced. (p. 27)

Pelias agrees, noting that readers and writers have contracts that create reader–writer relationships. "There are certain kinds of contractual obligations you evoke with certain types of genres," Pelias says. "So if you evoke the memoir, part of what you're saying is, 'I'm going to tell the truth as I understand it'" (personal communication, May 5, 2006).

Pelias shares his concerns about writing that fails to uphold the reader–writer contract and specifically references the *A Million Little Pieces* (Frey, 2003) debate. "As [issues of truth] get more and more publicity," he warns,

> it makes people more and more skeptical. That's truly troubling. We make this bid for [life writing as] research. We say we are going to talk about human experience as honestly as we possibly can to find a kind of collective humanness among us all. But if I start hedging on the truth then it's like I'm fudging on the data. (personal communication, May 5, 2006)

When speaking of contractual obligations, standards of trust and truth become increasingly troubling to figure out. As readers and writers, do we always immerse ourselves in unwritten contracts? How might we negotiate the terms of these contracts? And should we do all that we can to steer clear of "bad publicity"?

Genres affect writing and reading experiences. However, for life texts to help find a "collective humanness" and serve a beneficial epistemological function, we need malleable understandings of how genres help and constrain. A reader's expectation of truth symbiotically relates to her or his expectations of genre and degree of authorial trust. If trust wanes, truth follows.

truth Troubles and Memory Challenges

> Memory is volatile. Sometimes, memory's tales just won't do the work they are asked to do. They just won't settle, won't arrange themselves so that they might be left alone. They are like scabs itching to be picked. They are wounds always ready to bleed again. (Ronald J. Pelias, 2004)

Before I (Jillian) started my first job at Burger King, my mother informed me of the dangers of working in the fast food industry. Based on her experiences of working at McDonald's, she told me about a pimply-faced boy who mistakenly put his hand in a deep fryer in order to retrieve a pair of tongs. "Whatever you do," my mother said, "don't go after a*nything* that falls in a

fryer with your hand. *Just don't do it!* The boy burned his arm bad because he didn't think." Thankfully, I rarely worked near the deep fryer, but when I did I always thought of my mother's story. I also recounted the anecdote to my coworkers when discussing on-the-job injuries, but when I told my partner the tale a few years ago he said, "That's bullshit." Frustrated, I immediately called my mother to verify my memory and the truth. "I never told you that story," she said. "I don't even remember anything like that ever happening." Did my memory fail? Did my mother's memory fail?

Memory—or the accuracy of memory—affects the authenticity of a story. Most life writers strive for accuracy in the stories they tell, attempts that involve negotiations of narrative truth (conveying the essence of an experience) rather than historical truth (factually accurate, verifiable information; see Denzin, 1989; Spence, 1982). Holding memory accountable to historical truth is typically impossible and fatally flawed.

Ochs and Capps (1997) conceive of remembering as "a subjective event" (p. 83). Memory is partial, fleeting, subject to our positioning, intentionality, and audience at the time of an experience (Bochner, 1997, 2007). As such, memory is often a dilemma for life writers. Life writers desire to be accurate (Hampl, 1999), but memory and truth troubles arise when, for instance, family members share memories of the past only to discover that their renditions vary. The goal of life research, however, may not be remembering the past accurately but to convey the essence of an experience; accurate memory is not a *primary* goal. As Devika Chawla notes,

> You can't really recreate because when you recreate or when you think you are recovering a memory, you are really re-experiencing. It's a new [memory]. It's a new experience. . . . The beauty of a story is that each time you recollect you add a few more strands or plots. Sometimes you add characters and sometimes the story becomes a life, an organism. . . . There is not memory "out there" waiting to be discovered. . . . There is not one memory of an event. There can be different memories. (personal communication, May 4, 2006)

Chawla highlights the contingency of memory. Hampl (1999) continues the discussion about writing memories, noting, "I do not simply relive the experience. Rather, I explore the mysterious relationship between all the images I cold round up. . . . Stalking the relationship, seeking the congruence between stored image and hidden emotion—that's the real job of memoir" (p. 30). Writing memories requires recognition of the limits of remembering accurately. Memories are not as easily accessible as books in a library. Life texts also change as perspectives, intentions, and situations change.

> I studied Indian women in arranged marriages for my dissertation. There were things about the arranged marriages that I have grown up with. . . . I have told [my memories] so many times that each writing is very different. I don't think that is bad or devious . . . because I have to remember in light of who I am now. And what I say about [arranged marriages] now is my memory but it may not be what I said about [arranged marriages] yesterday or the day before. (personal communication, May 4, 2006)

Psychological research about memories supports Chawla's notion that memories change with time (Hyman & Pentland, 1996). Moreover, scholars agree that memory is continuously reconstructed when life writers write (e.g., Bochner, 1997, 2007; Bruner, 1993; Dewey, 1920/1936; Hacking, 1995; Rambo, 2006; Skloot, 2003).

Truth in memory is therefore not only subjective but also shifting. The search for truth in life writing is thus tenuous and involves more than documenting the remembered facts of an event. Chris Poulos, for instance, describes memories as fragments:

> Memories are pieces of memories, stories are pieces of stories. They are often interrupted in various ways either by the memory, the secret of the story or by something else that takes you away from it. . . . This makes a complex picture that you couldn't get to a generalizable science about. What you can get to is stories or pieces of stories and then interpretations of those pieces of stories. You then have an ongoing mosaic of stories, and imaginings, and dreams, and secrets, and whispers, and reflections . . . that you try to piece together in some way that makes some kind of coherent narrative. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes everything falls apart. (personal communication, May 6, 2006)

Poulos believes we need linguistic adhesive for memories to make sense. This requires us to embellish details, create characters, and/or alter time to keep an experience and a story intact. And these embellishments, creations, and alterations should not detract from truth(s).

For a story to be perceived as true, it must also cohere. This is what Fisher (1984, 1987) calls "narrative fidelity." Schank and Abelson (1995) contend that to achieve the fidelity Fisher describes, "one has to lie" (p. 34). A narrative writer must change elements, add, alter, or eliminate details, and strategically structure a story. The fallibility of memory requires invention (Hampl, 1999). These changes alter the truth(s) of memories; truth(s) becomes found not in memories but rather in how memories are told.

Discussions of historical truth, however, emerge with issues of memory and life writing: How do we know what one remembers is indeed what happened? Is a memory always based on an experience, or are some memories given to someone through a narrative?

> "I have a memory from childhood but I don't know if it's of an actual event," Poulos says. "I can picture it. I can draw up an image of it, but I don't know if I got that from a memory of the actual event [because the memory was] a central narrative in my family about my childhood."

The potential problem arises from how far back we believe we can remember. "I can picture myself as a 2-year-old clear as day," Poulos notes. "But do I really remember [an experience] or have I crafted the experience based on what my family has told me?" (personal communication, May 6, 2006). Others may have substantiated Poulos's memory, but does this matter? Could Poulos—or any of us—definitively remember what happened at 2 years old? What becomes an acceptable age for credible recall? And to whom does the memory of this story belong?

The consequences of misremembering *can* damage one's credibility as much as altering a story to achieve narrative coherence can, especially when memories substitute for truth (Schank & Abelson, 1995). But can we ever know when memory substitutions occur? Despite historical facts that contest, jeopardize, or support specific truths, Poulos's and the opening Burger King stories "really happened." The stories possess truth, but as writers we might decide to better qualify these memories.

Like stories, memories can serve as constructions and/or "life-altering events" (Lynn & McConkey, 1998, p. ix). We cannot demand historical accuracy of memories, nor do memories function as mirrors that reflect undistorted pasts. We also cannot demand that life writers tell stories that definitively replicate events or duplicate experience. To fill in the voids created by the inability to remember accurately, "memory impulsively reaches out and embraces imagination. That is the resort of invention. It isn't a lie, but an act of necessity; as the innate urge to locate truth always is" (Hampl, 1999, p. 31).

Truth troubles arise when we demand that stories and memories function as unedited video documentaries. Such rigid expectations place impossible, restricting demands on life writing. Rather than silence ourselves because of inaccuracy or the fallibility of memory, we should do as Poulos suggests: "*The* ethical thing to do is to draw stories out" (personal communication, May 6, 2006), to tell our tales, confess, and share.

Confessing the Mess and Treading
Through Disclosure

I (Tony) once used a story about the troubled relationship with my father in a class I taught on interpersonal communication. On the day we discussed this story, a student approached me in tears. She said that the story resonated with her and made her think about the troubled relationship between her and her father. I observed my writing affect a reader; my intimate disclosures made someone cry.

I encouraged this student to see a therapist to work through the problems with her father. She agreed, but soon she realized that she did not like counseling. A year later, I still talk to this student on a biweekly basis. She has graduated but enjoys talking with me about her troubled relationships. She asked if we were friends, and though I said yes, I was aware my answer came out of obligation. I think we are in our own troubled relationship.

"Am I responsible for this reader's response?" I ask Allen after telling him about this situation.

"With life writing you're demanding interaction," he says. "Other than writing in a diary that no one sees, why else would you write a story? You're writing for publication usually. . . . Part of the writing process is the expectation of response."

"But what do I do about this student?"

"This is an example of the law of unintended consequences," Mitch observes. "You put something out, and you don't know what's going to happen. How would you feel if that person jumped off a bridge the next day? That could happen. This person probably wouldn't jump if s/he read one of your 5-point Likert scales. Life writing's a bit riskier. It's risky research."

"But let's assume this person jumped off a bridge. Will I write anymore?"

"I'm not sure," he notes. "If you were Ernest Hemingway and someone reads your stuff and decides to kill themselves that could happen, too. But does that mean as a writer, as an Ernest Hemingway, that you aren't going to write anymore? That's a quagmire. Do life writers need 'informed consent' from their readers?"

"I didn't want this student's response," I reply. "But you can't control where a text goes."

"No," Mitch says, "you can't control a text once it leaves your hands. It seems, however, that responsibility becomes an issue if a text is an involuntary read. It

is your responsibility as a teacher for assigning the reading. This is different from a novelist who cannot say, 'You have to go to the bookstore and buy my book and read it.' If you're the teacher, you assigned it. You forced students to read it. You're culpable. If the reading was voluntary, then it becomes the reader's responsibility. There's not much you can do. Shit happens."

"Shit does happen," I respond. (personal communication, May 4, 2006)

Should I have shared this situation about my student? What if a student assumes this story is about her but it really isn't? What if I made up this story only to prove a point? These questions reveal how truth and self-disclosure are intertwined in ethics. As life writers, we must consider who we might harm with intimate confession(s) as well as who we might help.[6] Telling the truth is not always the ethical thing to do because choices of truth affect writers, readers, and communities. With life writing, truth telling is a messy, risky endeavor.

We do believe, however, that disclosure, when it's done with a helpful, hoping spirit, is essential to breaking up heavy, historical restraints of canonical narratives that perpetuate pain and paralysis of the human condition. Disclosure is political when it grants freedom to those who suffer under the impossible weight of dominant tales. Telling life stories matters. By confessing the messiness of our existence, we validate the experiences of others whose stories might not fit hegemonic storylines. In this sense, confessing is caring. And confession is deeply validating of our unique situated-ness as humans, as beings capable of altering inhumanities in which we are asked—and forced—to live.

truth Troubles: Concluding Thoughts

What counts as the truth depends on where you are standing when you observe or participate in it, what you believe about it in the first place, and what you want to do with it—or who is paying you to do something with it—once you name it. (H.L. Goodall, 2001)

We thank James Frey and Oprah Winfrey for bringing truth troubles into public discourse. Social scientists, particularly those involved with life research, cannot afford to dismiss this situation. Navigations of truth pose hazards in many areas of the academy (e.g., Fine, 1993; Rambo, 2007; Wolcott, 2002), in politics (e.g., Benson, 1981; Denzin, 2004; Goodall, 2006), and in relationships with others (e.g., Goffman, 1967; Henry, 1965; Medford, 2006; Postman, 2002). Truth is an issue we must negotiate in public debates, written texts, and everyday performances (Goffman, 1959).

Frey's situation also questions our (in)ability to recall past events, challenges memory's (in)accuracy, and illustrates dilemmas of genre. As writers, researchers, humans, we cannot record *everything* we experience. But this constraint should not preclude us from sharing our stories as the benefits of disclosure often outweigh a strict adherence to factual details. The moral of a story can trump its factual (in)accuracies, thus positioning truth as *a*—not *the*—rhetorical device we should use to experience life texts.

Although we focus on truth and its relationship to life research, our discussion can relate to other truth-valued contexts as well. For example, Frank Rich, a *New York Times* columnist, suggests that Frey's alterations of truths resemble other alterations of truth such as when corporations mask conspiracy (e.g., Enron), when reality television programs downplay and deny scripted qualities, and when U.S. officials justify the "war on terror" via a fictionalized account about weapons of mass destruction (Rakieten, 2006b; also see Denzin, 2004). Recognizing how truth functions in such situations is just as important as the truths themselves.

A definitive, nondialogic understanding of truth also ignores any possibility for multiple, truthful perspectives. "Truth enables and constrains," Bud Goodall says.

> We have a war being fought between a fundamentalist president and a fundamentalist terrorist organization. But the idea is that as long as there's no room for argument and as long as there's no room for negotiation then there's no room for ideal truth. At that point communication is impossible. Communication sets the conditions for that impossibility by being revealed, and then it sets the constraint by being nonnegotiable. There's a sense in which truth is not a good thing but it's both good and bad. (personal communication, May 5, 2006)

Communication allows us to negotiate truth unless conversation is constrained. Attempts to talk about truth become impossible; thus, truth can take an all-or-nothing form. Like the war on terror, a nondialogic blanket of truth covered Frey and the truth of his experience as well as his ability to navigate alcoholism and drug addiction; this blanket smothered the potential for positive, healthy truth-related discussion.

As I (Chris) drain my coffee and close my book, I glance at the back of *A Million Little Pieces* one final time. "Addict." "Alcoholic." "Drug addition." "Rehab." Might I add "liar" to this list? I don't know which parts of the story were fabricated, but I better understand how an individual can approach drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Frey's work is an intense and compelling tale of recovery. I shouldn't care if his book is true. I learned how addiction can feel for one individual.

As Goodall observes, truth enables and constrains. Just as genres pose different demands for writers and readers, thoughts of and criteria for truth also pose such demands. The truths of life stories develop through genre, convention, and memory. This development makes life research contextual, malleable, and vague. To demand truths of life texts fashioned via memory and contractual obligations is ethically precarious, and an indifference to Frey's plight of troubling truth is troubling. If "writing always involves ideological, aesthetic and ethical decisions," Richardson (1992, p. 110) suggests, then truth(s) is contingent on these decisions as well. Embracing truthful contingencies makes responsible life writing possible.

Notes

1. Fine (1993) argues that ethnographic writing is typically "accepted on faith" (p. 269): "In protecting people, organizations, and scenes, we shade some truths, ignore others, and create fictive personages to take pressure off real ones" (p. 287; also see Richardson, 1992). Such decisions resemble those made by Frey.

2. We consider life writing to include categories of personal narrative and storytelling, memoir, and autobiography, autoperformance, and autoethnography. See Ellis and Bochner (2000, pp. 739-740) for an inclusive list of genres affiliated with life research.

3. Like Plummer (2001), Bochner (2002) refers to narrative truth as pragmatic truth and considers narratives valuable in what they do for us as writers, audiences, humans: "It is not the 'facts' themselves that one tries to redeem through narrative tellings," he says, "but rather an articulation of the significance and meaning of one's experiences" (p. 86; also see Bochner & Ellis, 2006). Poulos agrees, noting that "by creating a powerful narrative the truth comes through in whether or not the story resonates with a wide variety of people" (personal communication, May 6, 2006); Fisher (1984, 1987) calls such resonance "narrative fidelity." Mandel (1968) believes autobiographers can use their personal accounts to "teach a lesson in living" (p. 221).

4. Devika Chawla notes that "how I remember [an event] six years ago is perhaps different from how I remember it now. Would that make my memory untrue? No. That's what . . . seems 'right' for me at the time" (personal communication, May 4, 2006). Freeman (2001) suggests that "to confer new meanings onto the past is not necessarily to falsify it, but only to situate it within a broader interpretive scheme, one that may have been unavailable at the time of experience" (p. 291; also see Bochner, 2007).

5. Present situatedness simultaneously affects our future and our past (Brockmeier, 2000; Freeman, 1998). For instance, why might we desire to write about a past experience? Do we want to better understand ourselves (for the future)? Do we want to share our stories with others (to mend past hardships and/or pave the way for future, positive interaction)? Do we want another publication because we have learned that in the academy we must publish or perish (our prior learning about and present behavior within academic settings will affect our future projects)?

6. See Adams (2006, 2008), Boylorn (forthcoming), Ellis (1995, 2001, 2004, 2007a, 2007b), Etherington (2007), Kiesinger (2002), Medford (2006), Rambo (2007), Wolcott (2002), and Wyatt (2005, 2006, forthcoming) for strategies about including intimate others in life research.

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