

Telling truths

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Workshop

International Conference on Autoethnography

13 July 2025

In this two-part workshop, we will explore what “truth” can mean in our writing, research, and creative work.

Part One will emphasize how truth matters in the gathering and representation of personal experience. We will discuss historical and narrative truth, accuracy, and the tenuous intersection of fact and fiction.

Part Two will emphasize techniques we can use to tell our truths, ones that, if shared publicly, might generate harm to ourselves or others. We will discuss how this harm can happen, and how to use fabrication, composite characters, varying authorship, and pseudonyms to avoid such harm.

Time will be reserved for interaction and application.

T/truth Matters (?)

What do we mean by “truth”?

What words do we associate with truth?

How does truth matter for your work?

When do we care about the truth of a work?

When does seeking the truth(s) of a work seem irrelevant, or an inappropriate criterion for evaluating a work's quality?

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.

Interview: Janice Morse
Saturday, May 6, 2006; 7:30pm
Second International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry
Urbana-Champaign, Illinois

Tony: I heard that Carolyn's panel already had a few questions lined up there?

Jan: How do you know that I answered them all? I said "pass" once.

Tony: Which question... [Laughter] So the class, an overview: The class is doing an ethnography of the conference and we wanted to see how certain areas of research are represented. My group is interested in issues of life writing, particularly autoethnography, memoir...

Jan: That's not me, don't ask me...

Tony: That is why...

Jan: Oh, oh...

Tony: Mitch is not really either...

Jan: He likes bones and stones.

Tony: Yes, he does like bones and stones. What are...

Jan: You should say "tell me what you do."

Tony: Tell me what you do.

Jan: I do anthropological research in hospitals. And there's a need to study anthropological behavior because there's only one book out. And I don't like it because it's very psychological, psychological testing, and a bit quantitative. So I have to write the anthropology behavior book. Won't that be good?

Tony: That would be good.

Jan: High quality. And then we'll do another book: Antropology Behavior 2. I'm really interested in... I started studying comfort. When qualitative researchers go to study something like that, they don't study the average behavior for every situation. They study extreme situations like when are the patients most likely in need of comfort. ... We go to the emergency room. I study nurse behaviors towards patients in various states of agony. I videotape them.

Tony: Wow!

Jan: Yes. If I had my computer here, I could show you stuff. I used to study narratives of suffering. But they're not very good because what people tell you about suffering is muted by their state of enduring, trying to bear it. They're overwhelmed by their suffering behaviors. Making them wait and stuff... I have trouble with those interviews... These are people who are dying very fast through resuscitation. So I had to go see what the nurses did. It was very special. And they said "Well Jan you can come and see what we do, but you can't stay long..." And I said "if I bring some donuts can I stay?" So I've noticed various modes of nurses talking. Patients who have been drinking or on drugs come in in a state of shock and they fight their caregivers. It becomes a while before they're anaesthetized. If they had a head injury, it increases the blood pressure, which increases the severity of the brain damage...

Tony: Wow. What was your... Why this now? What got you're here?

Jan: At this conference?

Tony: This type of research. Did you just one day "I want to do this work..."

Jan: I started studying comfort a long time ago. And then I realized that I needed to understand suffering in order to understand comfort. ... I couldn't understand comforting. I studied types of touch in postoperative infants, pain states in postoperative infants. So it's really ethnological research. And I studied Alzheimer's patients, patients who were restrained. I studied children who were nursed at home on a tracheotomy ventilator at least 12 hours. I did an ethnography of that.

Tony: What is your... So you're mentioning issues of research. What is research?

Jan: I grew up discovering knowledge, finding out what is going on. We have to video when we're looking at touch and talk because the behaviors are so transitory and so fast that we need to slow them down to see. We need to get someone from Speech Communication to study language and intonation. There are three international registers [of intonation]: baby talk, birthing talk, and comforting talk. And it doesn't matter what language you speak the intonations are the same. When I was in Hong Kong I talked about comfort talk... I came along with a tape of Catonese. So we're confident [they're universal]. It's useful for very distressed patients, patients screaming and yelling.

Tony: So research deals with discovery?

Jan: I think it does. I don't think just description but discovery. There's all kind of relationships in the data. So if I were to... I really hate stuff used statistically. I'm trying to change that. Basically we use logic. Group simulation. Other forms of evidence used in other disciplines like engineering. So discovery could be [finding] quite high level correlations or associations. It's not just description. It's stuff that's new and not known.

Tony: So it's [discovery] finding this new knowledge. So what are your thoughts with... What are your thoughts about life writing? Does life writing do this?

Tony: In research, tell me what issues of truth look like.

Jan: Oh no! Who thought of that question?

Tony: I think we all...

Jan: Truth is what a person perceives to be right. So what do the people think in the trauma room is the truth? The answer is usually, if they're intoxicated and fighting and kicking and out of control they have no recollection. So their truth is that they were stoic. But they weren't stoic so what's the truth? Other people are unsure. I had one person so badly burned and her children died. And it seemed... It was very important for her to know that she was screaming for her children [in the trauma room]. She went back to the trauma room six months later for answers. People do that. They try to find the EMTs that picked them up off the road. They go back to the trauma center to find out what happened ...

Tony: So what happens with that?

Jan: The people who remember them tell them. In this case, the physician told the [woman] he remembered her.

Tony: So in this situation, she came back, and it sounds like... If I was a physician and this person came back six months later, I probably wouldn't be able [to remember]...

Jan: They would because it's such a horrible thing.

Tony: So [the people involved with this woman] could recall everything?

Jan: They could recall this patient being there. But they knew what to say. [The doctor] took her [the patient] by the hand and told her that she was screaming for her children.

Tony: So I think that's interesting from a truth standpoint... In this situation it sounds better... Truth exists somewhat altered for the audience. So she needed to hear this...

Jan: Maybe she was yelling. And who cares [if she wasn't]!!!

Tony: And who cares. So it really was...

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.”

Part One

What counts as “T/truth”

Part Two

Telling (our) “truths”

Part One

What counts as “T/truth?”

T/truth Matters (?)

What do we mean by “truth”?

What words do we associate with truth?

How does truth matter for your work?

When do we care about the truth of a work?

When does seeking the truth(s) of a work seem irrelevant, or an inappropriate criterion for evaluating a work's quality?

T/truth

Fiction, nonfiction

Facts, lies, accuracy, false information/fake news

Becoming an unreliable/untrustworthy narrator

Resonance/narrative fidelity

Form/genre: Is fiction truthful? Is poetry truthful? Is a drawing truthful? Are songs and song lyrics truthful? Do these questions matter?

Historical truth, narrative truth

Hindsight | memory | variations in interpretation

Semantic contagion

Form/Genre

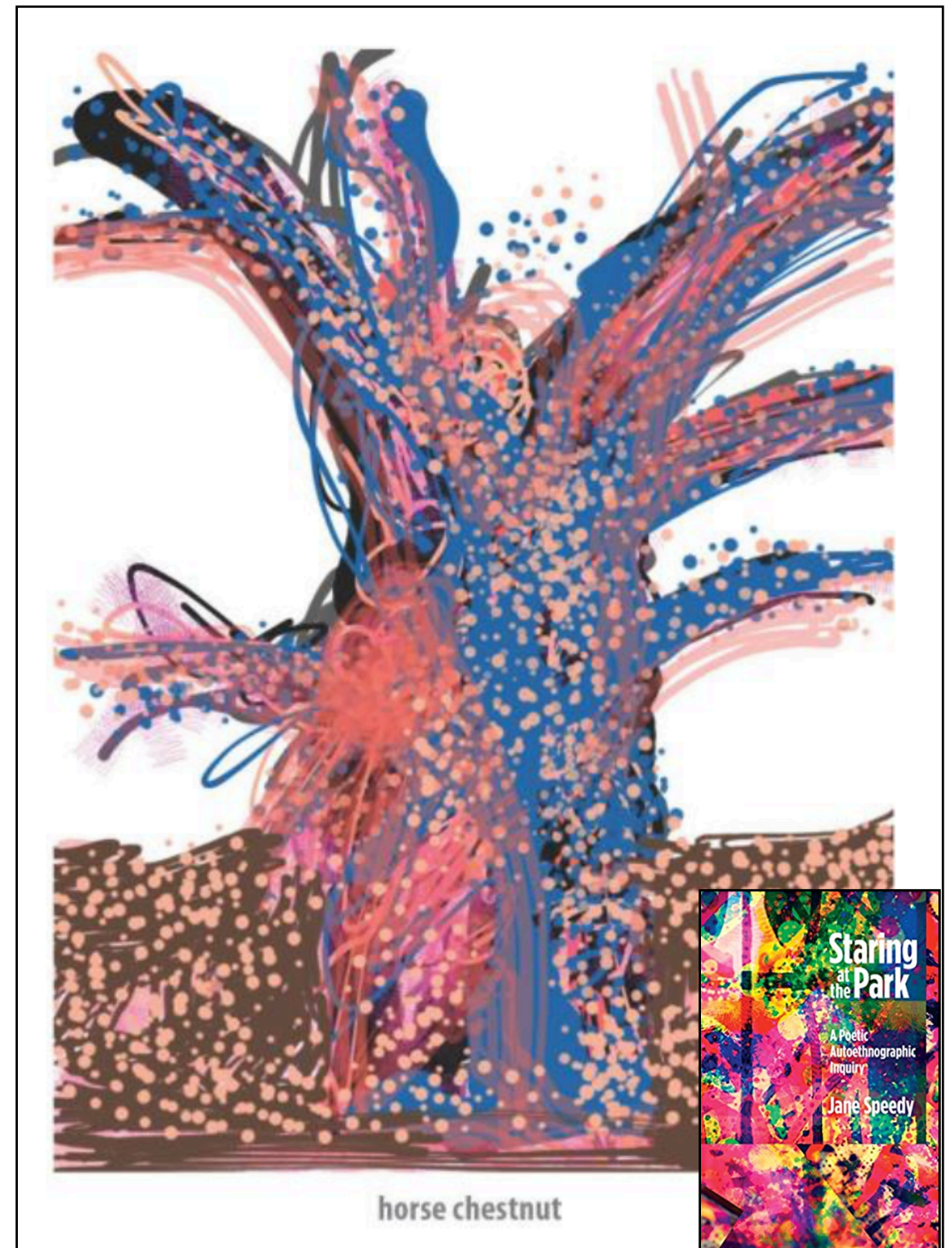


Figure 25.1
"The Beast."
Painting by
Sarah Jayne
McKay and
the author.¹



Figure 25.2
"Caught in
His Own
Web."
Painting by
Sarah Jayne
McKay and
the author.

Putting the Body on the Line: Embodied Writing and Recovering
Through Domestic Violence, Marilyn Metta, in *Handbook of
Autoethnography* (2013)



Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

When we need to know what happened—to hold others accountable, memorialize and challenge problematic practices, realize the conditions of our existence—then historical truth seems to matter most. When our ideas and arguments are consequential, we need to be “realistic” and care about **facts, accuracy, and material circumstances**.

When we want to imagine possibilities for living, new ways to be, when we need convey the significance of an experience, **what it meant and how it felt**, then we are more concerned with narrative truth.



Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

Grandma

Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

PLACE OF BIRTH		INDIANA STATE BOARD OF HEALTH		
DIVISION OF VITAL STATISTICS		22419		
County of <u>Warren</u>	CERTIFICATE OF BIRTH			Registered No. <u>380</u>
Township of <u>Shelburn</u>				
Town of _____				
or				
City of _____	(No. _____)	St. _____	Ward _____	
FULL NAME OF CHILD <u>Jessie Caroline King</u>				
If child is not named, make supplemental report.				
Sex of Child <u>Female</u>	Twin, Triplet, or other? <u>—</u>	and Number in order of birth <u>—</u>	Legitimate? <u>Yes</u>	Date of Birth <u>4-17-18</u> (Month) (Day) (Year)
Full Name FATHER <u>Patrick King</u>		Full Maiden Name MOTHER <u>Bessie Lee</u>		
Residence <u>Marionfield Ind</u>		Residence <u>Marionfield Ind</u>		
Color or Race <u>White</u>	Age at last Birthday <u>31</u> (Year)	Color or Race <u>Mulatto</u>	Age at last Birthday <u>26</u> (Year)	
Birthplace <u>Vincennes Ind</u>		Birthplace <u>Warren Co Ind</u>		
Occupation <u>Farming</u>		Occupation <u>Housewife</u>		
Number of children born to this mother, including present birth <u>1</u>		Number of children, of this mother, now living, including present birth <u>None</u>		Were precautions taken against ophthalmia neonatorum? <u>No</u>
CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDING PHYSICIAN OR MIDWIFE*				
I hereby certify that I attended the birth of this child, who was <u>not</u> <u>born alive</u> at <u>5 P</u> M. on the date above stated. (Born alive or Stillborn)				
When there was no attending physician or midwife, then the father, householder, etc., should make this return. A stillborn child is one that neither breathes nor shows other evidence of life after birth.		(Signature) <u>Dr. W. Dale</u> <u>West Lebanon Ind</u> (Attending physician, midwife, householder.)		
Given name added from a supplemental report <u>—</u> , 19 <u>—</u>		Address <u>—</u>		
HEALTH OFFICER. <u>—</u>		Filed <u>4/20</u> , 19 <u>18</u> HEALTH OFFICER. <u>—</u>		

Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

PLACE OF DEATH
Warren
County Warren
Township of Sheldon
Town Sheldon
or City Sheldon

CERTIFICATE OF DEATH
STATE OF INDIANA
DIVISION OF PUBLIC HEALTH
BUREAU OF VITAL STATISTICS

Local No. _____
Registered No. 22359

Length of residence in city or town where death occurred _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ ds.
How long in U. S. if of foreign birth? _____ yrs. _____ mos. _____ ds.

FULL NAME Gordon M. Gee
Residence No. 5-21-53 (Usual place of abode) St. _____
(If non-resident give city or town and State)

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

SEX <u>male</u>	COLOR OR RACE <u>black white</u>	Single, Married, Widowed, or Divorced (trifle the word) <u>widower</u>
NAME OF HUSBAND OR WIFE (of deceased)		
DATE OF BIRTH (of deceased) <u>April 14th 1867</u>		
AGE <u>71</u> years <u>3</u> months <u>8</u> days		
OCCUPATION Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done, as spinner, sawyer, bookkeeper, etc. <u>retired farmer</u>		
Industry or business in which work was done, as silk mill, saw mill, bank, etc.		
Date deceased last worked at this occupation <u>1937</u>		
Total time (years) spent <u>40</u>		
BIRTHPLACE (State or country) <u>Chillicothe, Ohio</u>		
FATHER NAME <u>John R. Gee</u>		
BIRTHPLACE (State or country) <u>unknown</u>		
MOTHER NAME <u>Jane Cunningham</u>		
BIRTHPLACE (State or country) <u>unknown</u>		
INFORMANT Name <u>Bruce Gee</u>		
Address <u>Williamsport, Ind. R R # 2</u>		
PLACE OF BURIAL OR REMOVAL <u>Hope cemetery</u>		
Date <u>July 24 1938</u>		
ADDRESS <u>Earl A Hamilton West Lebanon, Ind</u>		
WAS THE BODY EMBALMED? <u>yes</u>		
EMBALMER'S LICENSE No. <u>1802</u>		
Filed <u>7/23</u> 19 <u>38</u>		

Medical Certificate of Death

DATE OF DEATH
July 22 1938
(Month) (Day) (Year)

I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from
July 16 1938 to July 22 1938
and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at 6:40 A.M.

The principal cause of death and related causes of importance were as follows:

Cerebrum -
Myocarditis - Atherosclerosis
1931

Other contributory causes of importance:
Age.

Name of operation _____ Date of _____
What test confirmed diagnosis? _____ Was there an autopsy? _____

If death was due to external causes (violence) fill in also the following:

Accident, suicide, or homicide? _____ Date of injury _____ 19____
Where did injury occur? _____
(Specify city or town, county and State)
Specify whether injury occurred in industry, in home, or in public place.

Manner of injury _____
Nature of injury _____

Was disease or injury in any way related to occupation of deceased? _____

Signed Earl A Hamilton M. D.
July 23, 19 (Address) W. Hamilton

Health Officer & Registrar

Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

or City _____ No. _____
(If death occurred in city or town, where death occurred, yrs. mon.

Length of residence in city or town, where death occurred, yrs. mon.

FULL NAME **Gordon M. Gee**

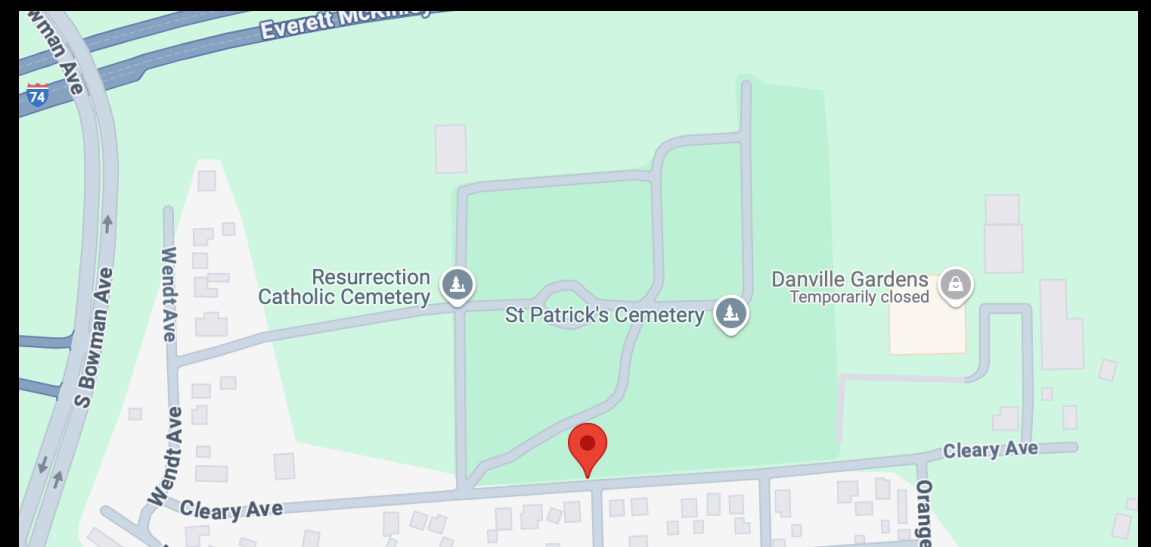
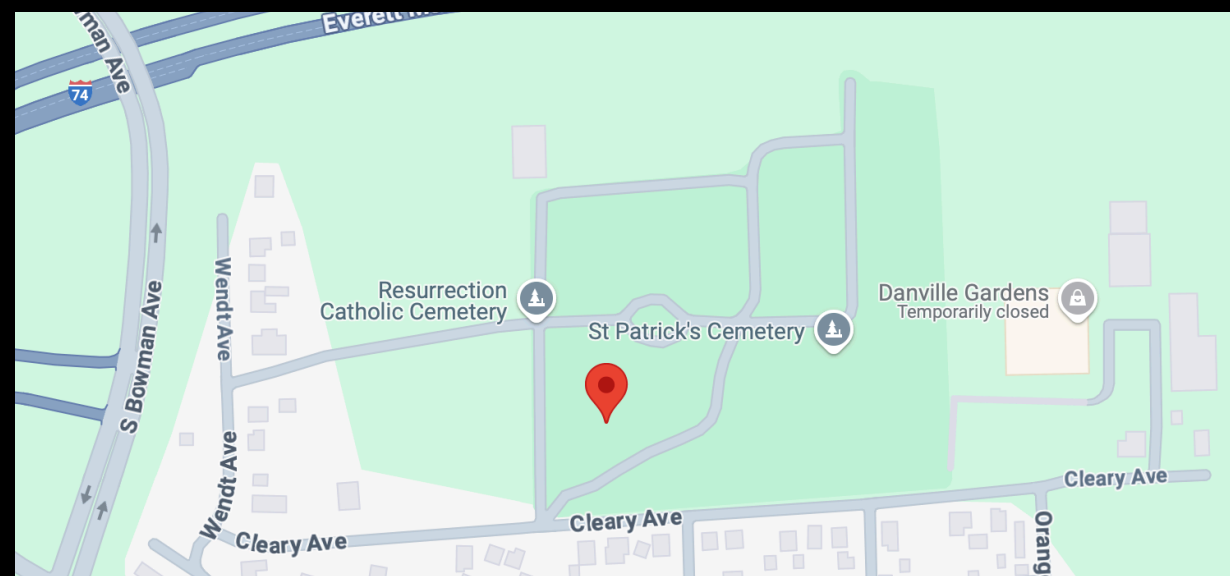
Residence: No. _____
Success
5-21-53 (Usual place of abode)

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

SEX male	COLOR OR RACE black white	Single, Married, Widowed, or Divorced (write the word) widower
NAME OF HUSBAND OR WIFE (of deceased)		
DATE OF BIRTH (of deceased) April 14th		
AGE 77 years 3 months 2 days		
If LESS than 1 day, hrs. min. 1867		
Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done as spinner, weaver, farmer, etc.		

ACTUALLY DIED, NOT WHERE LIVED.

Historical Truth - Narrative Truth



Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

I have images of documents that—I trust (?)—are original. Yet humans created these documents and there was an apparent error... 15 years after the man's death?

What is the truth of race and racism in my (past) family? I don't know with certainty. I have dates and names and locations—the facts, the historical truth that certain people did certain things at certain times in certain places.

Yet these truths only take me so far. I care more about learning, creating, and adjusting the story of my family—a story that stemmed from finding these facts. You'd likely be bored by a mere listing of facts. How do we make the facts come alive? That's narrative truth: What might those facts have meant?

Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

A NEED TO KNOW

The Clandestine History of an American Cold War Family

Harold Lloyd Goodall, Jr

FOR FEDERAL EMPLOYMENT

Form shown: Budget Bureau NSL 50-2046

Elig. Contact Reg CAF130-7

Advised Price 0

9/23/96

9258

NAME Harold Lloyd Goodall, Jr

ADDRESS 2040 LLOYD GOODALL

CITY HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA

STATE WEST VIRGINIA

ZIP 29316 22366

DATE OF BIRTH 10-17-22

AGE 23

SEX Male

MARRIED Yes

HEIGHT 6 feet 0 inches

WEIGHT 165 pounds

EDUCATION High School Graduate

EMPLOYMENT CLERK-TYPIST CAF-2

DATE APRIL 23-1946

APPROVAL

APPROVED Yes

REASON See CAF130-7

APPROVAL

APPROVED Yes

REASON See CAF130-7

APPROVAL

APPROVED Yes

REASON See CAF130-7

ADVANCEMENT

ADVANCEMENT

ADVANCEMENT

PRESENT POSITION

NAME CLERK-TYPIST CAF-2

DATE APRIL 23-1946

LOCATION HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA

DESCRIPTION OF WORK SUPERVISION & DELEGATION OF ALL WORK TO BE DONE. CHECK VALIDITY OF ALL INVOICES FOR TRAILS, EQUIPMENT, & SUPPLIES FOR VETERANS IN TRAINING. AN-THE-TOB. SUPERVISE PREPARATION OF TRAVEL REQUESTS & VOUCHERS FOR ALL TRAINING OFFICERS. ADVISE TRAINING OFFICERS OF POLICY REGARDING PURCHASES, TRAVEL, NEW REGULATIONS, CONCERNING SAME - CONT'D

FIGURE 3.1 Lloyd's initial Application for Federal Employment, 1946. From the dummy folder.

ROSLYN S. FRASER

Your Grandfather Is Wong Tin Lee

An Autoethnography of Family Stories and Racial Formation in White Australia

ABSTRACT In this autoethnography, the author uses racial formation theory to contextualize her family experiences and the life story told to her by her grandmother. In an effort to clarify some aspects of family history after her grandmother passed away, the author searched Australian archival records looking for new information and accidentally uncovered a family secret. Specifically, their ancestors were neither upper class nor were they all white Europeans; the family story in Australia actually begins with an interracial marriage between a man from Canton, China, and a white woman born into extreme poverty. Moreover, two generations of children in this multiracial family had been removed from their parents and placed in institutions and foster families. The family history presented here challenges assumptions about what it means to be Australian and who was living in the Australian colonies at the time of Australian Federation. White Australia is explored as both an immigration policy and as a racial project that shaped the lives of non-whites living in Australia, including that of Chinese and multiracial Australians like the author's maternal ancestors. **KEYWORDS** autoethnography, Chinese Australians, family secrets, immigration, racial formation

THE TIN LEES.

There is a treat in store for Wellington. The Tin Lees are moving. At the Central to-day Wong Tin Lee and Kate Tin Lee were charged with committing a nuisance by being the keepers of a house frequented for immoral purposes by blackfelows, Chinamen, and others. It was stated by Sergeant Jeffes that Wong and Kate had shifted out of the house since their arrest, and as they were about to leave for Wellington there should be joy in the city, and the charge should be withdrawn on their keeping to their bargain to clear out.

Figure 2. From *The Australian Star*, Sydney NSW, Thursday, 29 October 1903, page 5: THE TIN LEES. There is a treat in store for Wellington. The Tin Lees are moving. At the Central to-day Wong Tin Lee and Kate Tin Lee were charged with committing a nuisance by being the keepers of a house frequented for Immoral purposes by blackfellows, Chinamen, and others. It was stated by Sergeant Jeffes that Wong and Kate had shifted out of the house since their arrest, and as they were about to leave for Wellington there should be joy in the city, and the charge should be withdrawn on their keeping to their bargain to clear out.

Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

THE EVIDENCE OF FELT INTUITION

**Minority Experience, Everyday Life,
and Critical Speculative Knowledge**

Phillip Brian Harper

GLQ 6:4

pp. 641–657

Copyright © 2000 by Duke University Press

Historical Truth - Narrative Truth

When does, or has, **historical truth** mattered in your work?

When does, or has, **narrative truth** mattered in your work?

Hindsight | Memory | Variations in Interpretation

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 *anything* 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?

Hindsight | Memory | Variations in Interpretation

Smacking(s)

Hindsight | Memory | Variations in Interpretation

What is the true interpretation? Who is accurate? Who decides?

Could we ever determine the historical truth of either situation? Should we even care about historical truth?

Can you identify a situation from your work where “claims” or “facts” were disputed?

Hindsight | Memory | Variations in Interpretation

Share your journey and
struggles with readers ...

Sometimes the search
for truth is the goal/
reward/contribution.

Text and Performance Quarterly
17 (1997): 343–351

Desire in Evidence

Stacy Wolf

This textual performance of research charts the writer's attempt to prove that Mary Martin was a lesbian. The writer uses her own "quest" to raise questions about gay and lesbian historiography, the status of evidence, and the usefulness of desire to biographical, critical work on performers.

Keywords: Musical Theatre, Queer, Lesbian, Feminist, Mary Martin

TEXT AND PERFORMANCE QUARTERLY
2019, VOL. 39, NO. 3, 250–267
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2019.1643906>



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Dirty

Ragan Fox

Communication Studies, California State University, Long Beach, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This is an autoethnographic account of child molestation. I use "dirty work" as a methodological instrument to explore the ethics and nuances of recalling and writing about child sex abuse. The essay also investigates intra-familial communicative breakdowns that often emerge after child sex abuse survivors disclose mistreatment they have endured.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 March 2019
Accepted 3 July 2019

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography; child molestation; dirty work; incest; rape

DESIRÉE D. ROWE

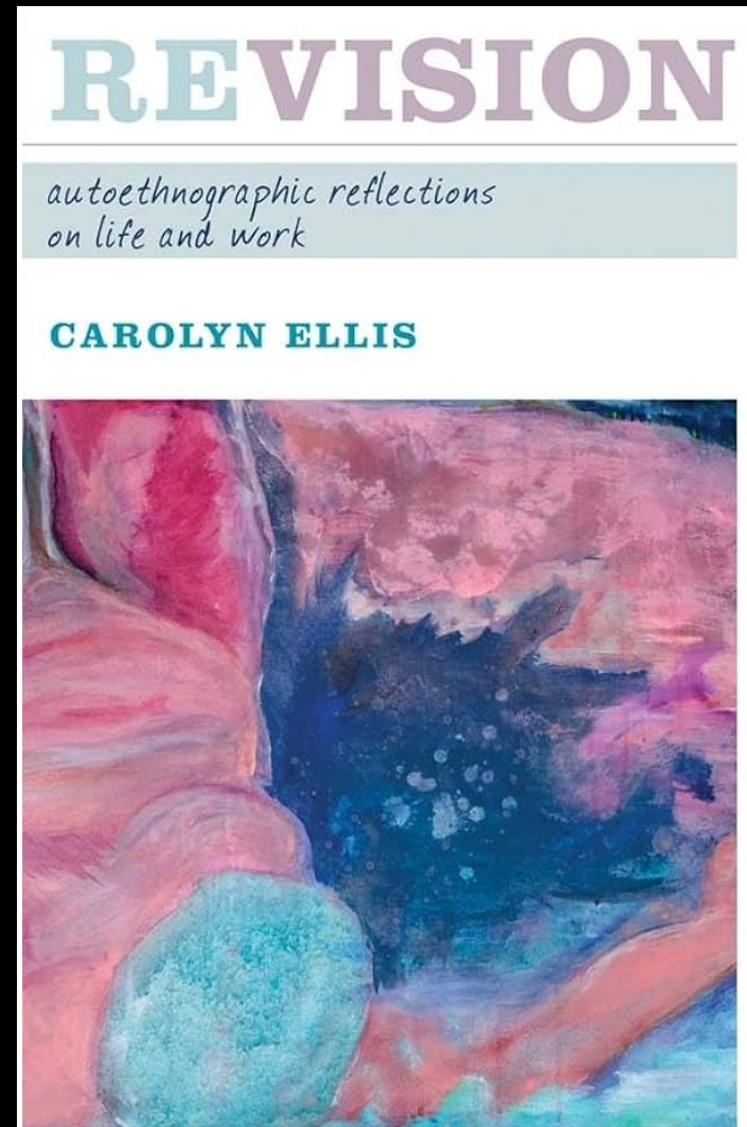
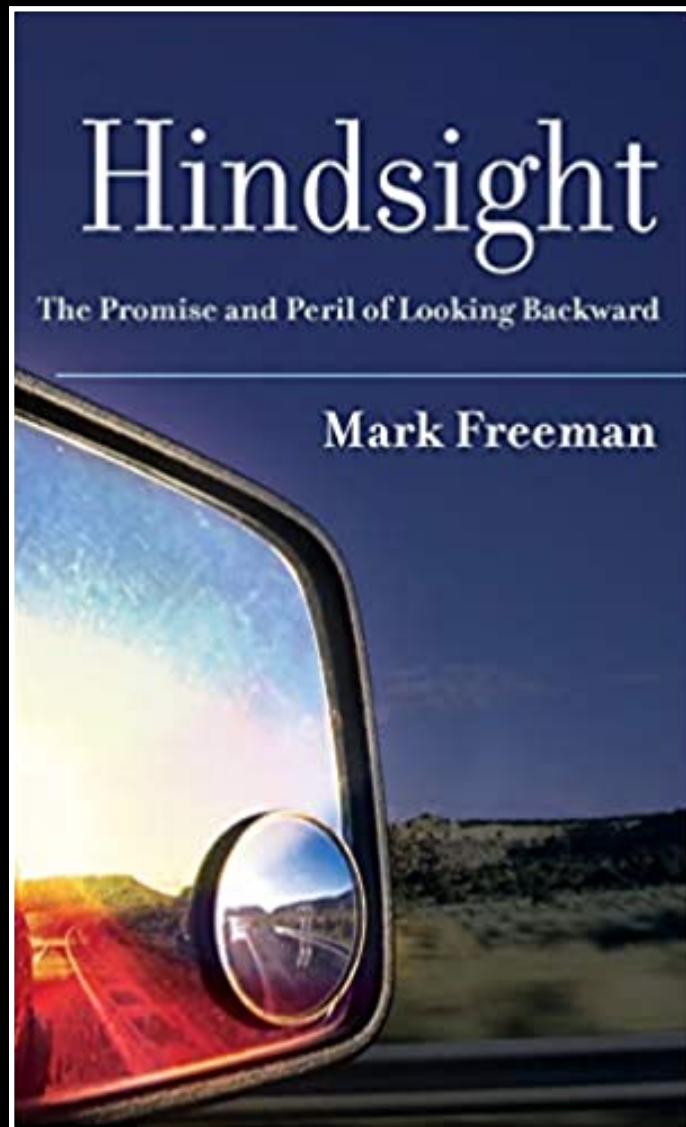
ROSES AND GRIME

Tattoos, Texts, and Failure

J. Wyatt, T. E. Adams (eds.), On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss, 33–37.

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Hindsight | Memory | Variations in Interpretation



Presentism | Semantic Contagion

Child abuse

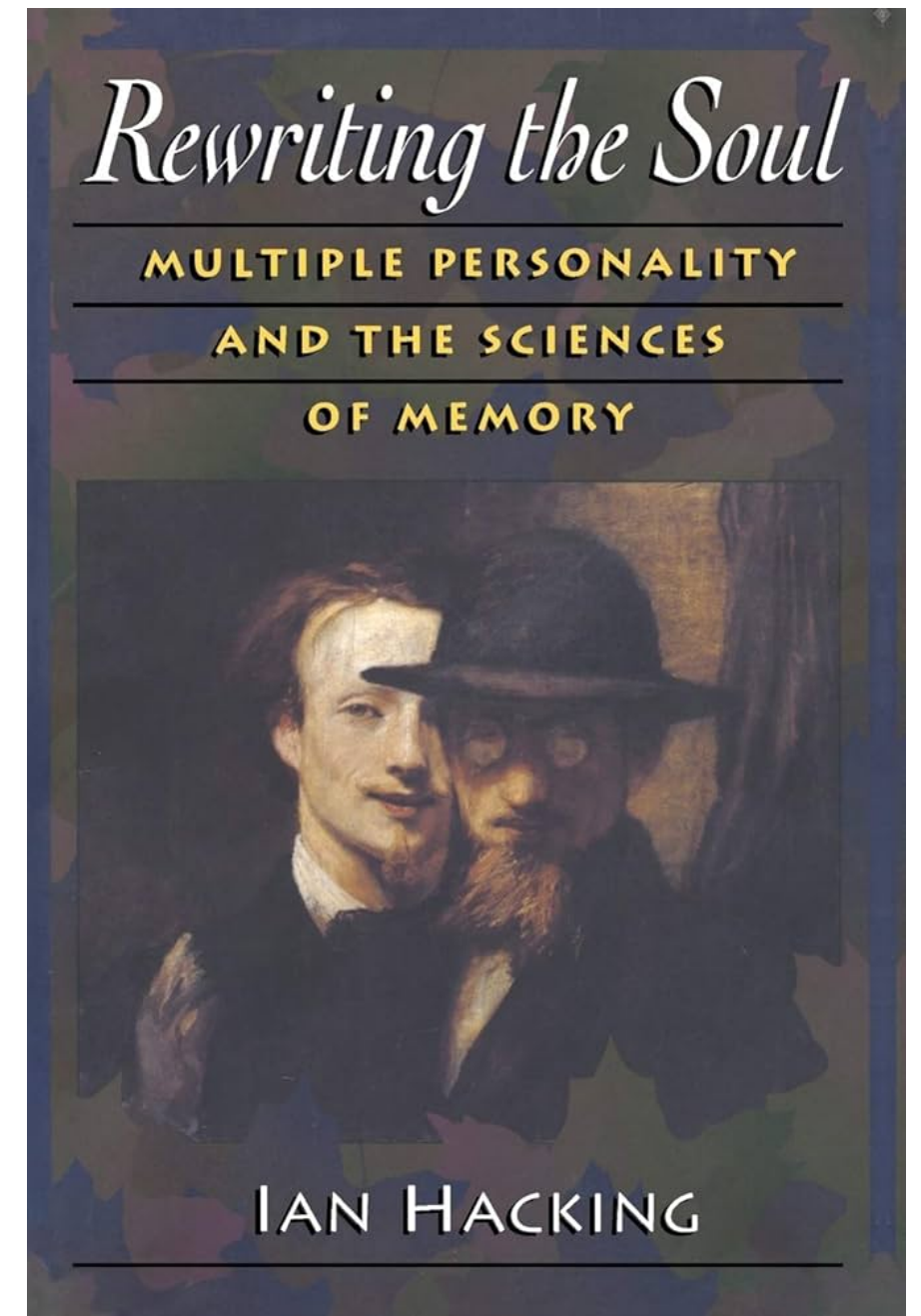
Sexual harassment/abuse

Race (e.g. “mulatto”)

Ability

Sexual orientation

Gender identity



Presentism | Semantic Contagion

I think about other articles and historical documents that espouse heterosexism and homophobia. I have more understanding/forgiveness toward a homophobic text from 1955 (e.g., Rees & Usill, 1955), less for a text published in 2003 (e.g., McLaurin, 2003), and much less for a 2015 letter written by a priest and still posted on a church's website (2019). I have more understanding/forgiveness toward a person who argued for only cisgender, heterosexual marriage in 1970 than a person making the same argument in 2019. Yet even with the arguments from decades ago, I wonder how I should view the agents who created and perpetuated hate and the homophobic discourse, even though it may have been acceptable at the time. I try to monitor “semantic contagion” (Bochner, 2014; Hacking, 1995)—applying current terminology, meanings, values to past practices—but I struggle.

Part Two

Telling (our) “truths”

Telling (Our) Truths

Are there truths you cannot share? Are there people, contexts, and topics you cannot write about/represent?

When should we NOT tell our truth(s) about certain people, contexts, topics?

Telling (Our) Truths

You own everthing that
happened to you.

Tell your stories.

If people wanted you to
write warmly about them,
they should have behaved
better.

-Anne Lamott

Telling (Our) Truths

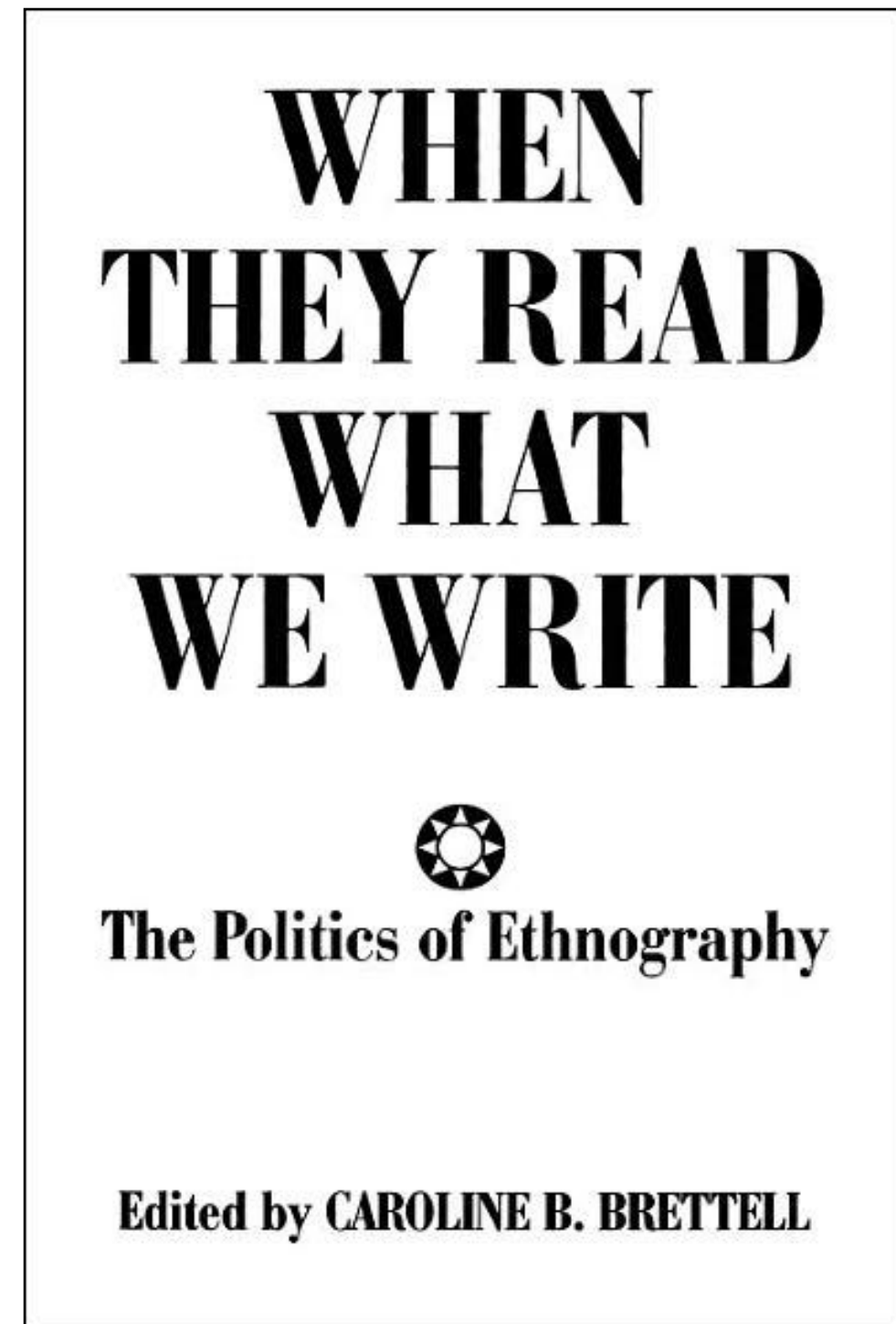
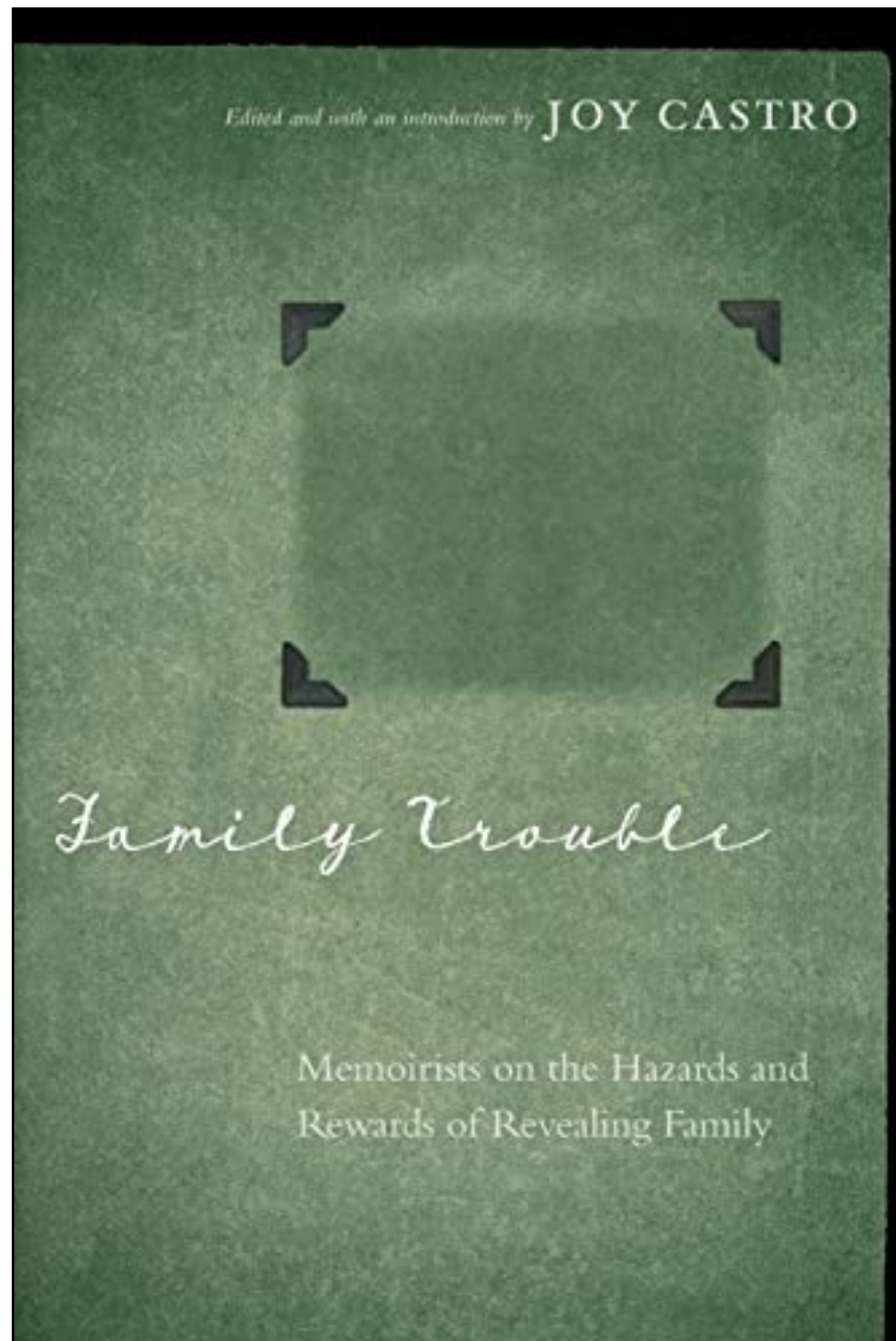
Aunt

Telling (Our) Truths

Making Coming Out Relational

I remember uttering the phrase “I am gay” to my father. He responded by not speaking to me for six months. When I told my mom I found men attractive, she supported my attraction as long as I promised to never tell relatives—she feared they would abandon her for having a gay son. Thus, at some family gatherings I entertain being asked if “I have a girlfriend” and justify why I am not married. In December 2005 my cousin did not want my boyfriend and me in her house—she refused to have gays contaminating her space. Saying “I am gay” influenced my relationship with her, too.

Telling (Our) Truths



Telling (Our) Truths

Narrative Privilege | Publishing | Accessibility

Who can write/produce/access a text? Who can respond to an account?
Exercise caution with fault and framing — which can alter historical truth.

Changing names and identifiable characteristics

Fiction/composite characters

Manipulating Authorship

While I was, and am, thoughtful about what I reveal about my child, we have recently had difficult conversations about the availability of my work online*, its potential accessibility to her school friends and as a possible source of embarrassment.

* My work is typically available only on password-protected databases, though sometimes it becomes more widely available when others post files of my work. In the past, I have written to those who have posted these works and asked them to remove the works in an effort to protect my child's privacy. Still, publishing the work means that it is accessible—and that I want it to be accessed and read—by others, including people who may know my child.

Adams, T. E, Holman Jones, S., and C. Ellis. (2015). *Autoethnography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

“Sometimes I think they deceived me—told me tall tales as truth—while I deceived them—pretended to be just talking when I was recording ... They thought I was coming to ‘sit and talk a spell’; I thought I was coming for data. They thought they were entertaining me with tales; I thought they were telling me what really went on.”

Ellis, C. (1995). Emotional and Ethical Quagmires in Returning to the Field, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, p.93

Changing Names and Identifiable Characteristics

"I'd like to move to New York," Maria says. "But if I do, Susan would move with me. And this means that I'd probably have to tell my parents about us."

"You haven't told them?" I ask.

"No."

"But the two of you have been together for three years," I say.

"I know, but we tell a lot of people that we're only friends. I'm scared of how my parents would react. I don't want to be kicked out of the house. I don't want them to cut me off financially. I don't want them to hate me."

"Then why do you have to tell them? Why not keep the relationship a secret?"

"They'd think it's weird if Susan and I moved to New York together, and it's difficult knowing that those I love do not know who I love. What happens if I die? What if I am remembered to have never dated, never loved? What would Susan do? Come to my funeral and tell others that she was just a good friend? I've already had to face my death once. I can't think about my life and death without Susan."

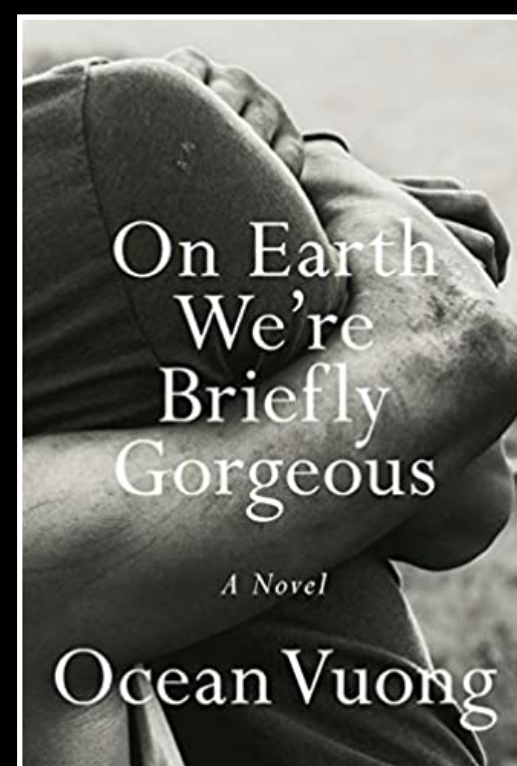
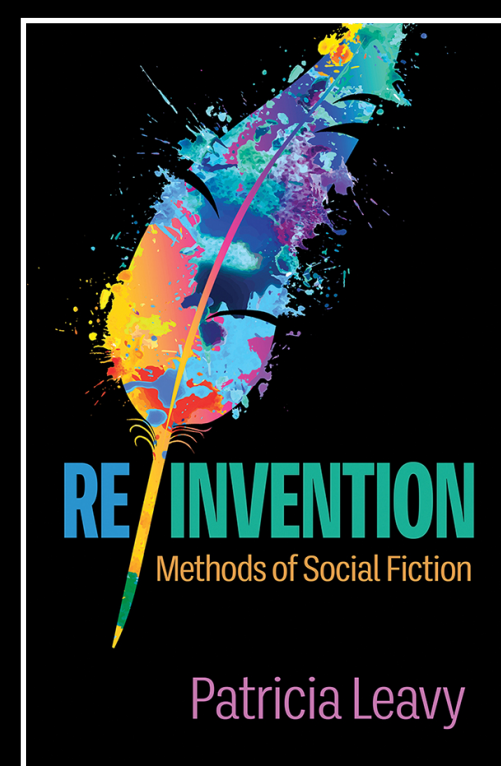
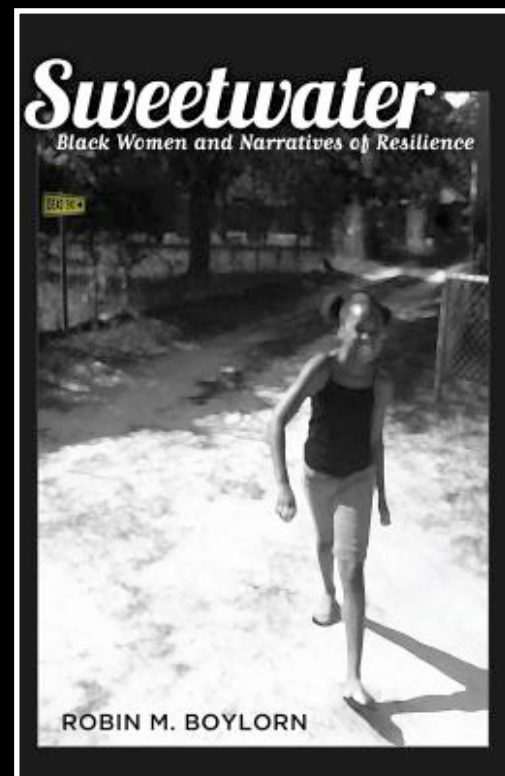
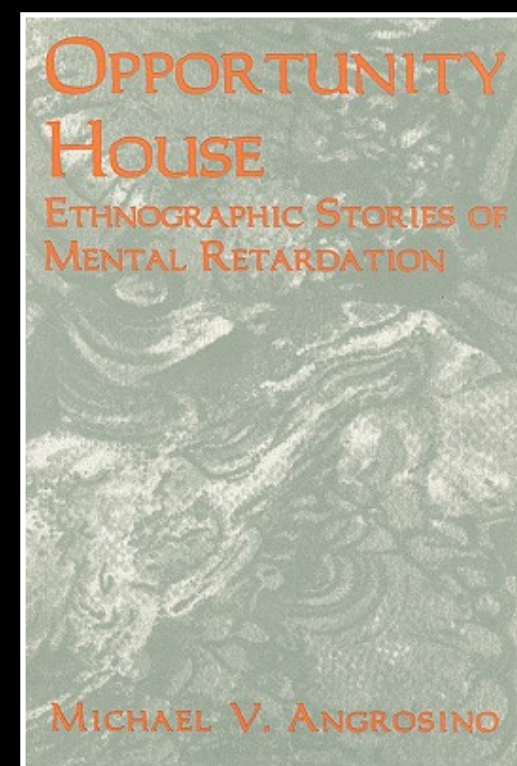
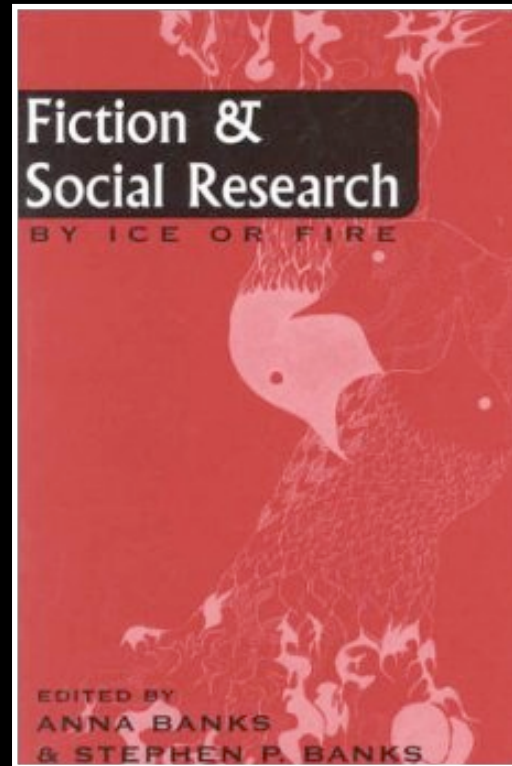
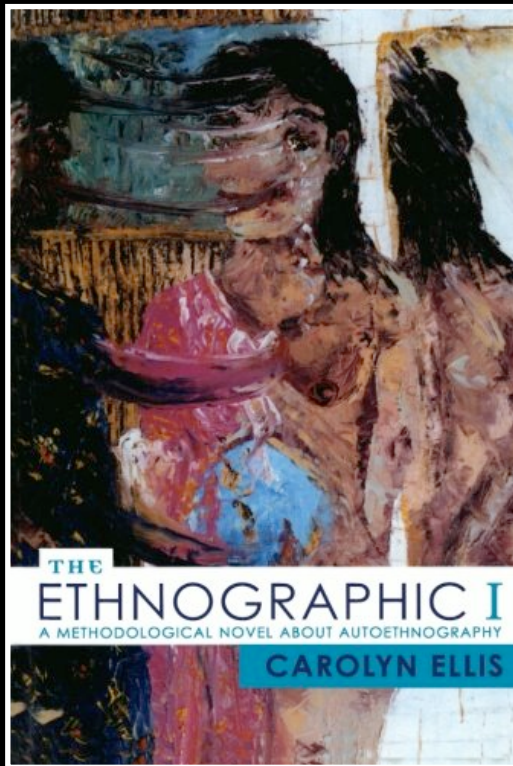
I met Maria in one of my classes. She is someone I consider a "pillar of strength," a person who withstands significant turmoil but exudes self-confidence. When Maria was 25, she was diagnosed with cancer. She underwent chemotherapy; the cancer is in remission.

"That's something many 25-year-olds don't experience," I say.

"I know," she responds. "I had to plan my funeral. I had to think about dying. And now I'm scared to tell my parents that I'm dating a woman." A tear runs down her cheek.

"I could die on the way home," she continues. "The cancer could return. My funeral would happen, and people would never know of my love for Susan, our love for each other."

Fiction/Composite Characters



Manipulate Authorship

How Much Subjectivity Is Needed to Understand Our Lives Objectively?

Shelly Carter¹

The author provides a first-person account, based on diaries and reminiscences, of a woman living in an abusive relationship. Using parallel texts, she juxtaposes the experience of spousal abuse against information derived from research literature and raises questions concerning objectivity in scholarship.

The powerful normally determine what is said and what is sayable. . . .
When the powerful label something or dub it or baptize it,
the thing becomes what they call it.

—Frye (1983, p. 105)

PROLOGUE

It is March 17, 2001. Robert and I are driving up to a popular tourist attraction—Rainbow Lake—with a friend. Ahead of us, one lone person on a mountain bike pulls out onto the road. His black tights have blue knee inserts—the same as I bought my former husband. The biker is wearing a blue cowl. It is identical to the one my former husband bought himself in 1991. I see the biker’s shoes. They are black with yellow stripes. I have seen these same shoes on the shelf where I once lived.

I look at the man’s face. It is “him.” His cheeks are thinner than they were 3 years ago. My mouth begins to sour. I turn to Robert. “You aren’t going to believe this,” I say, “but that is ‘him.’ ” I think to myself what an easy target he is. How can I still think this? The steering wheel I am holding gives me a sense of power over his fate. One small jerk of the wheel and I could run him over. I stop myself from thinking these thoughts. I feel as though I am entering into dangerous territory. “It is a very unhealthy place to be,” I tell myself. “You have moved beyond this.” Where does such anger come from? It lies dormant, and then it all comes back. It is all so clear again. The pain that I try to leave behind is ever present. Why can’t I let all of these feelings go? Is it because I have seen him?

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ANONYMOUS AUTHOR, PHD

Highlighting Numbers

Students Stalking Faculty and the Lasting Impacts of a Flawed System

ABSTRACT This autoethnography explores the communication and helpful/hindering systems available for faculty being harassed and stalked by current or former students. Highlighting general statistics and the numbers in my own student-stalker experience, I use this work to elucidate socio-psychological reports and qualitative accounts of stalking experiences, while integrating my own background and identity ambivalence as a combined woman, educator, and stalking victim. Last, I offer implications and practical insights regarding support for faculty within the university and criminal justice systems. **KEYWORDS** stalking, student-stalker, university safety, criminal justice, autoethnography

“The cultural constructions of romantic and passionate love throughout the ages in poetry, song, and historical narrative suggest that obsession and mad, driven pursuit of a love object is both terrible and often ironically heroic.”¹

39: the number of unwanted, direct communications from my stalker—often involving undying professions of love.

Stalking is generally defined as repeated, unwanted communication that produces fear about safety in its victims.² The latest statistics note that approximately 15 percent of women and 6 percent of men in the United States have been victims of stalking in their lifetime.³ Often managed with the assumption of a tryst gone wrong or of misguided fear, stalking is an insidious, misunderstood beast. Spitzberg and Cupach note that widespread discussion of stalking as a crime was not prevalent until the 1990s.⁴ The first anti-stalking laws developed in California, and many states quickly adopted their own. Social and behavioral scholars also began to take notice, and research about stalking, stalkers, and impacts on victims followed suit.⁵

Over 1,000: the number of days I felt things I should not have to feel because I wonder(ed) when he will/would contact me again.

Within the context of a university setting, student stalking on college campuses is widespread, and much literature devotes space to preventing these kinds of behaviors and their impacts for college students. However, little attention in the literature highlights student stalking of faculty members.⁶ In one study, 67 percent of faculty surveyed experienced unwanted contact from a current or former student, 6 to 11 percent of which were severe enough to warrant the label “stalking behavior.”⁷ Morgan found that the number may be even higher, with 33 percent of the 1,000 faculty participants

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TRACES AND SHARDS OF SELF-INJURY

Strange accounting with “Author X”

Brittany Presson, Brandi Barnes, Carol Rambo, and Author X

We attend a panel on arts-based research at the Thirteenth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, featuring Arthur Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, and Csaba Osvath. Osvath, a student of Bochner’s, is an artist who collects shattered glass from which he crafts large compositions to “create a new whole out of formerly broken parts.” Osvath has created a piece in response to Bochner’s (2012) paper “Bird on the Wire,” which imagines a “purifying conversation” with his deceased father. Many themes are discussed during the conference panel—freeing oneself from one’s history, using a story to heal from past wounds, restoration, transformation, and more.

The glass work is difficult. It involves meticulously laying the glass into place one shard at a time, as Osvath “thinks through his hands.” A paper copy of “Bird on a Wire” is rendered into bits and incorporated into the piece. The words, though distorted in places, appear through the transparent multicolored glass overlay. Osvath frequently slices his fingertips as he labors over a project.

Ellis comments, “His blood is literally in the piece.” Audience members respond with light-hearted laughter. Some of us in attendance who have done research on the topic of self-injury steal knowing glances at each other and fail to repress our smiles. Thematic mischief weaves in and out of our lives, connecting us, one to another. We are all thinking it, “Is Osvath’s artwork, in part, a form of unconscious self-injury?”

Something skitters across the floor. This chapter’s authors collectively track a jewel-toned shard of glass; it lands at our feet, inviting us to pick it up and fashion it into our own hybrid of art and social-science-based inquiry (see Ellis,

Lessons in truth-telling

Share what you did and didn't know, variations in interpretation, concerns about presentism and semantic contagion, privacy, how you altered information; honesty and vulnerability can enhance credibility, reliability.

Exercise caution when writing about others and particular contexts, especially academic contexts. Assume that everyone will read/view your work.

Just because we create/write something doesn't mean we have to share it.

Comments

Questions

Lessons

Telling truths

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Workshop

International Conference on Autoethnography

13 July 2025