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Metacognition of Memory

Truth Telling in Creative Nonfiction

Courtney Nichole Bulsiewicz

Much of creative nonfiction is born out of the past, and most creative nonfiction writers understand the complicated nature of memory in which the histories of our individual and collective experiences exist. Theorist Paul Ricoeur discusses many of these memory complexities, delineating how elusive memory can be and showing how even in the moment we are experiencing an event, we are engaged in forgetting pieces of it (30). Likewise, as we move on from the event and try to recollect and engage in anamnesis (Aristotle’s term to denote an active search of our memories) our current understanding and experience alters the remembered event (Ricoeur 17–18). This intricate process of memory is a core issue in the debate surrounding creative nonfiction and truth, for if our memory is imperfect, and we are writing a piece representing an experience contained in the past, how can that representation be true, particularly when the idea of truth further confounds the matter through its ambiguity?

Ricoeur raises this question of truth in historical representations of memory asking: “How does history, in its literary writing, succeed in distinguishing itself from fiction? To pose this question is to ask how history remains or
rather becomes a representation of the past, something fiction is not, at least in intention” (190). Ricoeur’s idea of truth asserts that “true” and “false” can stand in for the terms “verifiable” and “refutable” (179), respectively—a helpful view in looking at what truth is in creative nonfiction. Ricoeur goes on to posit that representations of history are true if they show events and experiences “as they really happened” (279). His ideas of truth are Aristotelian in this sense, calling back to one of Aristotle’s famous phrases when defining “what truth and falsehood are: for to say that that which is is not or that which is not is, is a falsehood; and to say that that which is is and that which is not is not, is true” (23). In creative nonfiction then, truth would become a matter of writing that which is (or was) rather than that which is (or was) not.

Some creative nonfiction writers expand their narratives outside of what is true by Ricoeur’s and Aristotle’s standards, creating characters, inventing conversations, and combining events all for the sake of “moving the narrative forward” (Gornick 9). Vivian Gornick admits to altering time in her memoir Fierce Attachments, “mak[ing] a composite out of the elements of two or more incidents” and “play[ing] fast and loose with time” (9). Likewise, other authors (such as Elie Wiesel) make the same moves in their work, moving further away from a verifiable representation of history. Wiesel’s acclaimed memoir Night involves the use of a composite character, which, for some, invalidates the entire memoir. Other writers, however, believe that moves such as these create a work of fiction rather than nonfiction. In his essay “Of Liars,” Montaigne said, “In plain truth, lying is an accursed vice. We are not men, nor have other tie upon one another, but by our word. If we did but discover the horror and gravity of it, we should pursue it with fire and sword, and more justly than other crimes.” Montaigne’s point of view has many followers, who believe that truth is what makes humanity, and that forgoing truth in creative nonfiction in order to sweeten the piece is an injustice to readers and other writers of the craft. This debate regarding truth in nonfiction is an intricate conversation that has been going on for years and has been limited in only designating two arguments: first, that some fiction can exist and is inevitable in creative nonfiction, and second, that nonfiction must only testify to the past as it actually existed. This two-ended spectrum fails to recognize the intricacies of truth and how it is achieved in recapturing memories. Viewing the discussion through this dichotomy neglects a third approach where authors recognize the difficulties memory holds when trying to create a completely accurate or true testimony, yet still see merit in striving for that difficult truth and showing that war on the
In grappling with the difficulties in this metacognitive way—the author being self-consciously aware of his or her thought processes and memories and the inadequacies inherent in both, and sharing them with the readers—these authors can show readers and writers that “reality is sly, people are complicated, and truth is slippery” (“Reality is Sly”). Presenting metacognition of memory on the page shows readers that even through the difficulties of representation, every sentence in our piece can still “aim for a truth that is a communication between the reader and the writer” (“Reality is Sly”). Authors who engage in this form of communication demonstrate to their readers the struggle of trying to be truthful in their depiction, cueing their readers to parts of the memory that might be less than whole. Some may think this visible metacognition muddies the creative piece, but I argue that an open representation of memory will split open the conversation regarding truth, creating a piece of creative nonfiction that merits both parts of that title.

Creative nonfiction allows writers and readers to engage in a discovery of the world around them—that which they see and experience in everyday life. Readers come to the piece with an understanding that they will be reading a true account, or rather, an account that does not deviate from what was and existed in the experience being shared. Nancy Mairs defines what it means to be truthful in creative nonfiction that emphasizes this relationship between reader, writer, and the responsibility of truth even in its difficulty. She states:

> When I write a piece labeled nonfiction, I make an implicit contract with the reader, who reads with a set of expectations different from the ones fiction elicits. . . . Perhaps I could have gotten away with some embellishment of the facts and my own popularity would have soared, but I’d have strayed from my aim of plumbing the significance of ordinary human experience. (Mairs 89)

Mairs points to the idea that truth is ordinary human experience. When a writer consciously combines multiple people into one character, the character no longer belongs to ordinary human experience; it becomes extraordinary. It no longer exists as it was. It doesn’t represent reality but an unreal character. Furthermore, when that author fails to alert the reader to the deviation, there is a “disconnect” between the author and reader. Some writers of the creative nonfiction genre may think that the expectation readers have is the very problem of the debate—that readers anticipate too much from creative nonfiction, not understanding that truth is difficult to grasp. If this is the case, then shouldn’t we, as creative nonfiction writers, take it upon ourselves to inform the reader
of the problematic nature of memory and truth in creative nonfiction through demonstrating the memory wrestling that takes place?

Memory theorists as well as creative nonfiction writers recognize that it isn’t possible to remember every minutia. Both groups, however, also understand that it is still necessary to tell the story, to share the witness and testify to events and experiences that exist in our past even if those events and experiences are constantly moving away from us. In her award-winning memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion demonstrates to us the importance of the act of writing to understand, and at the most basic level, writing to remember. Throughout the entire work, Didion is writing through the death of her husband, remembering what that encompassing grief felt like, what grief means, and what grief tells us about human nature and human experience. At the same time, Didion’s memoir demonstrates how memory has shaped her experience. Didion tells of an instance that demonstrates the fickle nature of memory as well as the necessity of writing as a means of remembering when she recalls her husband, who was also a writer, having a moment of creativity and finding himself unprepared: “He had thought of something he wanted to remember but when he looked in his pockets he found no cards. I need you to write something down, he said” (23). She goes on to wonder about the forgetfulness of her husband, questioning if it was an indication of his approaching death, since she knows he had an understanding of memory and writing. She asks herself, “Why had he forgotten to bring note cards to dinner that night? Had he not warned me when I forgot my own notebook that the ability to make a note when something came to mind was the difference between being able to write and not being able to write?” (23). She wrote it down for him for the same reason he asked her to: writing is to remember. Writing is a form of memory preservation and dissemination. Even with the uncertainty of memory, Didion recognizes the importance of communicating the past, sharing it, protecting it from extinction in fading memory—the fate of memories not communicated (Lowenthal 196). Didion writes, “This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed, weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, . . . about life itself” (7). Didion understands the importance of trying to contain this memory as much and as completely as possible for her own understanding as well as for the understanding of others, that it may “connect [her] with a meaningful cosmos” (Lowenthal 197). Even though complete remembrance isn’t possible—for, as Lowenthal argues, “the passage of time induces qualitative memory change as well as loss” (208)—what
is possible is to be as truthful as we can about the reality of the event or experience being shared, maintaining honesty regarding what is remembered and what isn’t. It is necessary to have an open and honest conversation with oneself as a writer and with the readers as they read the piece.

To facilitate this conversation of memory in a creative nonfiction piece, Giorgio Agamben’s ideas of subjectification and desubjectification provide an apparatus with which creative nonfiction writers can understand the questioning that needs to take place when testifying to personal and collective memories. Agamben argues that testimony takes place once the “I” is spoken. As soon as we identify ourselves as the subject of discourse, we begin the process of subjectification and begin giving a testimony, even if, due to our wavering memory, it is an inaccurate testimony. Subjectification, the construction of the self and making the self a subject of exploration, is essential for desubjectification to take place, and vice versa. Desubjectification is the act of stepping outside of ourselves and the testimony we are giving, becoming an onlooker of that self, and deconstructing that self to understand more fully who we are and the experience we are unearthing. Put simply, subjectification is the recognition of the self, and desubjectification is an attempt to analyze oneself from an exterior position as an object rather than a subject. Agamben recognizes that no one can put off their subjectivity but argues that in order for discourse to take place, “the psychosomatic individual must fully abolish himself and desubjectify himself as a real individual to become the subject of enunciation” (116). In creative nonfiction, once the “I” is written the author is engaged in testifying to something; whether the work is a journalistic piece or a memoir, a testimony is being given of some person, event, or experience, and desubjectification should be the goal.

In order for an author to write a memoir or personal essay, she must engage in the text metacognitively and engage in the desubjectification of herself, stepping back and seeing herself being seen by others, and asking herself questions that will allow for fruitful analysis and further exploration of the event by the author herself, her readers, and her critics. Agamben indicates that at the moment of testimony there is a separation that occurs—the desubjectification where we divide ourselves into two parts: what he calls the human and the nonhuman. Many successful creative nonfiction writers engage in this dual conversation of the two selves. In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion goes on an honest exploration of her memory as she retells the account of her husband passing away from cardiac arrest. She details to the reader the memories that stand clear
in her mind and the events of the experience that have escaped her. Didion questions herself throughout the piece, engaging in a mode of reflection that is necessary for truth telling in creative nonfiction. In Agamben’s terms, the human part of Didion in this process would be her detailing the experience of losing her husband. The inhuman would be the part of her that existed in the moment her husband was dying—the moment of the personal narrative that has since past, which is currently being explored through writing. Didion is no longer watching the EMTs try to resuscitate her husband, but she once was, so there are two parts of her coexisting in this narrative that she needs to be aware of: the part of her that is currently writing what she experienced, and the part of her that experienced it. Didion recognizes these two parts, desubjectifying herself when she recalls her retelling of the experience to her friends and states, “Clearly I was not the ideal teller of this story, something about my version had been at once too offhand and too elliptical” (6). This confession that Didion makes, indicating she had honestly forgotten to tell her friends about the blood her husband’s body left behind from hitting something as he fell down, is a desubjectification of the self and an admission of a conversation Didion is having with herself and her reader about the role of memory in telling her story.

Didion is stepping back, desubjectifying herself and trying to see herself as others might view her, trying to see the holes in the witness she is giving. Making this conversation of desubjectification visible to herself and her readers allows Didion to further explore the event and her recollection of it, as well as form a relationship of trust between her and her readers. The readers recognize that Didion is keeping them in the loop, indicating where there is a weakness in her memory, and showing them the wrestling she is taking part in for the sake of relaying the event as closely as possible to how it really happened. Other writers may have ignored this lapse in memory, devised a scene to fill in the gap, and moved the story forward, simplifying the piece by not dealing with the messiness of memory. However, Didion makes a conscious choice to grapple metacognitively with her memory and bring reality, free from deviation, to her creative nonfiction. It is clear that this admission of the messiness of remembering and witnessing in creative nonfiction is much more interesting than a clean, contrived retelling of an event. This metacognitive approach allows the writer, reader, and critic more time for crucial pondering that could bring to light interesting questions on the nature of memory and recollection—questions such as why Didion forgot about the blood her husband’s body left behind. This pondering could then lead to areas where further analysis could
take place: perhaps at the time Didion didn’t remember because she didn’t realize the blood signified the horridness of it all to her, or maybe it was because she knew exactly the weight of the recollection and her memory was protecting her. If we have intrinsic systems in our bodies that protect ourselves from harm, such as nerves telling us a flame is hot, then our mind or emotions must have some aspect to protect us from the memories we are not prepared for or that may hurt us. This inquiry of self-preservation is a result of the relationship between the reader and writer that is created when the writer delineates the interworking of her mind as she remembers. Moves such as these in creative nonfiction writing not only open the conversation for analysis of memory, but also produce a venue for the writer and reader to engage in further examination of the piece and the experience being rendered, objectifying the narrative by looking at it in ways that extend beyond itself. In this way, a piece of writing such as Didion’s becomes so much more than a retelling of the events of a heart attack; it becomes a search for meaning in the unexpected.

Just as Agamben’s subjectification and desubjectification theory forces the author to acknowledge a duality in the memory process through the human and inhuman aspect of the witness, Dominick LaCapra’s theory regarding working through our pasts pushes us to engage in a similar dualism. LaCapra argues that we must be both within and without to gain a greater understanding of the event and learn from it. We must be able to revert to the moment of experience and nearly relive it while also acknowledging that time has passed. Only then can we use the dual perspective that naturally exists to look at the memory in more helpful ways that will aid in understanding larger questions we may have surrounding the experience.

LaCapra points out the impossibility of testifying to an event with precision, for when expressing our testimony we are restricted to the modes of representation we hold: language, art, and other forms of depiction. The problem LaCapra sees in these representations is that they “may involve distortion, disguise, and other permutations relating to processes of imagination transformation and narrative shaping, as well as perhaps repression, denial, dissociation, and foreclosure” (89). He goes on to argue, however, that even with these weaknesses, “testimonies are significant in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with—or denying and repressing—the past” (87). LaCapra’s theory of being within and without when recalling our experiences can help us avoid these problems of representation. If we look at our memories as we are
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testifying to them in our nonfiction pieces, if we ask ourselves questions such as, “Is that how it really happened? Why do we remember certain things and not others? Why is it important that we remember at all?” and as we grapple with the complexities of those memories on the page, we can gain insight into the event, into memory itself, and (as David Lowenthal would argue), into our own identities (197–200). Additionally, if we allow ourselves to work through these questions within the narrative itself, as Joan Didion does, we engage the reader in the search for the answers, and our piece becomes honest and layered, begging for analysis of the event, the witness, and the world that contains them.

LaCapra believes working through the trauma of past events begins when “the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective” (90). Some creative nonfiction writers write in order to process the events in their lives. These writers approach an essay with a question and work toward understanding. Many who write personal essays with this purpose understand the need for distance to avoid the “Therapist’s Couch,” where the writer is still entirely consumed with conflicting emotions, or “Revenge Prose,” where the writer’s intent seems to be pure vengeance, both of which Brenda Miller discusses in Tell It Slant (44). Miller speaks to the same perspective for which LaCapra argues. She indicates the necessity for a writer to gain distance and emerge from the experience through time, wisdom, literature, and other forces to gain perspective and to look at yourself and your experience from a different point of view. She states, “This peripheral vision—this ability to sidle up to the big issues by way of a side route—is the mark of an accomplished writer, one who has gained enough perspective to use personal experience in the service of a larger literary purpose” (45). Didion had to have enough distance in order to write The Year of Magical Thinking with as much clarity, objectivity, and truth to the human experience as she did. Didion tried writing the experience earlier, but she could only get out four lines, as she hadn’t yet been able to remove herself from the past enough to view it in the present (Didion 3). After waiting some time before beginning again, Didion was able to give the past the space it needed in order for her to understand the experience, how her memory had changed it, and the larger context in which the experience existed. This distance from the event is the “without” of LaCapra’s memory process. The “within” aspect of the process is just as important in being able to work through our memories. There must be the ability to return to the past and achieve closeness to the event, even if that means acknowledging fear, sadness, or pain that our
memories and past can sometimes contain. Didion had to be willing to go back to the moment when her husband collapsed at the kitchen table; she put herself in a position to relive a sorrowful event for the sake of working through the trauma in writing. We must be here (the present) and there (the past) to gain a greater understanding of the event (LaCapra 90), learn from it and represent it as Ricoeur would say it truly was, without fiction, just as it occurred in the past. Not only would our work be honest, but we would be working through our past at the same time and engaging in “laying ghosts to rest, distancing oneself from haunting revenants, renewing an interest in life, and being able to engage memory in [a] more critically tested [sense]” (LaCapra 90), moving beyond a crippling past to a state of understanding of the event being shared.

Through engaging the analysis of memory with readers in our creative nonfiction pieces and inviting them into our incomplete memories through metacognitive writing, we provoke readers to extend their understanding of the world as they look at a subjective experience and as we try to make it objective. It would then be impossible for our piece to reflect anything other than the reality of ordinary human experience. Lee Gutkind writes that if creative nonfiction means anything, it means “we are attempting, as writers, to show imagination, to demonstrate artistic and intellectual inventiveness and still remain true to the factual integrity of the piece we are writing” (3). Through doing this, we are “reaching a deeper level of solidarity with those bearing a human form” (Ricoeur 259). If we write our creative nonfiction pieces as reflections of the ordinary human experience as it occurred, and if we lay bare the muddy waters of memory that make such a representation so complex, we will transform experience into understanding of that event and the greater world in which that experience existed, providing insight for the reader, the writer, and even the critic.
Works Cited


