

# Narrating the Past



Narrating the Past:  
(Re)Constructing Memory, (Re)Negotiating History

Edited by

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

Narrating the Past, edited by Nandita Batra and Vartan P. Messier

This book first published 2007 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN 1-84718-114-7; ISBN 13: 9781847181145

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## PREFACE

Established over forty years ago, the Caribbean Chapter of the College English Association is a branch of the national College English Association in the United States, an organization with several regional chapters all across North America. Its mission is to promote the teaching of college-level English, each regional chapter operating independently. Throughout the years, conferences hosted by the Caribbean Chapter (which is known as the CEA-CC) have tended to focus on literary and cultural themes in addition to pedagogical ones. The CEA-CC has attracted participants from a wide geographical radius, a radius that has been amplified since the advent of the Internet. Although topics addressed at CEA-CC conferences do not solely focus on Caribbean issues, they nevertheless provide an optimum forum for both Caribbean and international scholars to discuss such issues from a variety of approaches. This has allowed us to develop and promote a dynamic forum where students and scholars in the Caribbean can be stimulated by international scholars to present, share and discuss their academic interests and research projects, and vice-versa. Consequently, we felt it would be a shame not to have some permanent record of these symposia, and it was with this goal in mind that we began publishing the proceedings of our conferences. Following the success of *Transgression and Taboo: Critical Essays*, the first CEA-CC publication, this volume represents our second publication as an association. “Narrating the Past:(Re)Constructing Memory, (Re)Negotiating History” was the topic of the CEA-CC Fall 2005 conference<sup>1</sup>, which included presentations by scholars from the Caribbean, the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East.

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<sup>1</sup> We thank those who helped in organizing, especially José Jiménez Justiniano, Thea Leticia Mateu and Stéphane Pillet.



# NARRATION, MEMORY, HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION

VARTAN P. MESSIER AND NANDITA BATRA

Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been people without narrative.

Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives"

Narrative, as Barthes reminds us, constitutes an integral part of human existence, being omnipresent in our ordering of the world and the ways in which we transmit both knowledge and experience. For instance, Paul Ricoeur has argued that it is only through narrative that the abstract concept of time becomes human time and that hence, if we are able to confer meaning and credibility on events, it is by placing them in the time/space continuum that narrative structure provides. Likewise, recognizing the etymological link between 'narrating' and 'knowing' (while the former comes from the Latin *narrare*, to tell, both can be traced back to the Indo-European root *gna*), Hayden White has argued that narrative might be a "solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*" ("Value" 5). One could say then, that most attempts to communicate knowledge take the form of a narrative: of shaping events, be they laws of physics, mathematical formulations, incidental anecdotes, or everyday occurrences, into a *sequence of events*, or in broader terms, into a *story*.

The pull towards shaping events—or rather, as Michel Foucault would put it in poststructuralist terms, the "statements of events"—into comprehensible and/or logical form, seems particularly pervasive when attempting to communicate knowledge of the past, especially as the past serves as a tool for understanding the present and possibly envisioning the future: from the self-shaping narrative of personal identity to the collective narratives that define a

culture or nation.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the intersection of various historical narratives has played a crucial role in the transnational exchanges brought forth by globalization and the push to deconstruct and redefine national boundaries and identities. Personal, national, and hybrid identities have all been forged through the collection, construction, and dissemination of narratives, whether fictive or not, that have been produced for the purpose of *making sense* out of a patchwork of sometimes random, isolated, and often discontinuous events. Yet there appears to be some ambivalence with regard to conveying such knowledge. On the one hand, for many peoples and civilizations, knowledge of the past has been conveyed amongst and through generations in the form of myths, legends, anecdotes, and oral histories, where multiple versions of each event or series of events run parallel to each storyteller's layer of subjectivity. On the other hand, history as a discipline of western thought has promoted the institutionalization of what Jean-François Lyotard calls a "*grand récit*,"<sup>2</sup> an authoritative, official, and "true" account of a nation's past, which has traditionally been considered a source of objective knowledge.

Until recently, the discipline of historical writing—so called "normative history"—has eluded the categorization of subjectivity inherent in narratives, specifically because historians have for long donned the cloak of objectivity by either choosing what Hayden White describes as "non-narrative" or "anti-narrative" forms of discourse (such as annals and chronicles)<sup>3</sup> or by admittedly relating only what were considered "true," accurate, and thus verifiable, "facts": by communicating a representation of the past "as it really was." However, this claim to objectivity has come under intense scrutiny in the last quarter of the twentieth century with the proliferation and consecration of

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive investigation of the link connecting narrative, identity, and community, see the collection of essays edited by Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, *Memory, Identity, Community: the Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*. Albany: State University of N.Y. Press, 1997. Notably, in the introduction the authors posit that "the story of one's individual life depends on the larger stories of the community to which one belongs. That community, in turn, crystallizes around a stock of common memories revived in stories" (xxiii-xxiv).

<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard coined the term "*grand récit*," which has been translated as "metanarrative" but has also been referred to as "grand narrative" or "master narrative." See *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Trans. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984, reprint 1997.

<sup>3</sup> See White's "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" in *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980): 5-27, reprinted in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1987, a study of historical narratives, which includes an explanation by the author of the differences among the various genres of history writing.

postmodernism in the social sciences and the humanities<sup>4</sup>. The so-called “narrative turn,” which was part of the wider “linguistic turn,” marked a shift from what Jerome Bruner has described as the “paradigmatic mode of cognitive functioning”—whose objective was a “formal, mathematical system of description and explanation” (12)—to a mode of cognition that privileged what he calls “verisimilitude” or “lifelikeness” (17). Hence, the wide-ranging influence of postmodernism initiated a transition where *meaningfulness* became more important than *truthfulness*, inasmuch as narrative construction challenged the supremacy of empirical fact.

The idea of a grand narrative as championed by traditional historians has come under attack from two distinct yet complementary perspectives. On the one hand, the deconstruction of language by semiotics has demonstrated texts in general and narratives in particular to be a reconstituted description by someone, i.e. a “narrator,” of a sequence of events experienced and retold by distinct characters, thus not only producing multiple layers of subjectivity in the processes of memorization, extraction, and reconstruction, but injecting a dose of fictionality into the stage of reconstitution and narrativization as well<sup>5</sup>. On the other, cultural critics and new historicists have questioned the authority of master narratives by considering other genres as historical writing<sup>6</sup> and have argued that Historians, in relating historical events, are subjected to various socio-political forces that influence and mould their work to conform to certain prevailing ideologies. Yet it would seem somehow out of place for the scope of this introduction to attempt either to retrace the ways in which semiotics has deconstructed language and decentered the subject, or to summarize the interdisciplinary debate spurred by the narrative turn<sup>7</sup>, or even to reiterate the

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<sup>4</sup> The work of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Hayden White and especially Paul Ricoeur has had considerable influence on the way we conceptualize and approach narratives in general and historical texts in particular.

<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth exploration of the vanishing boundary between fact and fiction in historical narratives, see for example Roland Barthes’s “Le Discours de l’Histoire” *Information sur les Sciences Sociales* 6.4 (1967): 65-75, Paul Ricoeur’s *Temps et Récit* (3 vols) Paris: Seuil, 1991, and Hayden White’s *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 1987. For a contemporary debate, we refer the reader to Volume 9, Issue 2 of *Rethinking History* published in June 2005, which contains a number of essays that specifically address this topic.

<sup>6</sup> See for example, “History and Biography: An Editorial Comment” by Alan Munslow in *Rethinking History* 7:1 (2003): 1-11. Munslow considers biography to be a “significant historical genre” wherein the distinction between history and biography operates on different levels of the author’s consciousness.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of this debate, see *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No.1, containing contributions by prominent figures in narrative theory such as Paul Ricoeur, Hayden

new conceptual paradigms instilled by contemporary critical theory. Nevertheless, an overview of the ways in which critical discourse has shaped our approach to narrating the past seems warranted, especially since the negotiation of history and the reconstruction of memory carry a number of theoretical and practical implications that are in direct correlation with the configuration of past events into narrative form.

In parallel to the general state of scepticism towards the master narrative brought forth by postmodernism, feminist studies in particular—and later, cultural studies—have challenged normative history specifically in addressing the patriarchal authorial subjectivity of historical texts, where the relative, symbolic, and discursive importance of women and social “others” has systematically been underrepresented<sup>8</sup>. To that effect, Canning points out that although the intersection between poststructuralism and feminism is a possible site of conflict, one considerable area of agreement between the two lies in “the reformulation of subjectivity as a site of disunity and conflict” (371).

Similarly, drawing from the work of Michel Foucault and the French *École des Annales*, new historicists in the United States rely on the premise that history is prone to the same subjectivity and relativity as literature, i.e. fiction, and thus, every historical narrative is the product of various complex and intricate discourses between social, economical, political and cultural forces. In other words, a historical text does not present a thoroughly truthful or strictly objective account of history, but rather, it is the attempt by an author—thus labeled “historian”—to makes sense of a series of historical events by moulding them into a plausible story to produce meaning, a process that Hayden White has dubbed “emplotment.”<sup>9</sup>

But while cultural critics and new historicists consider Foucault’s work more specifically as it revolves around the discourse of subject, agency, power and knowledge, his contribution to psychotherapy and his discussion on historiography are equally important. *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish* have all had considerable influence on the

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White, and Robert Scholes.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Ralph Cohen’s “Generating Literary Histories” in *New Historical Study* edited by Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993 for a concise overview or Joan W. Scott’s “The Evidence of Experience” in *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 773-797 for a specific case study on the ways in which the challenge to normative history has been brought forth by texts of social others, and how such texts historicize their otherness and their difference.

<sup>9</sup> White apparently coined the term in “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” printed in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978, which, according to the endnote, is a revised version of a lecture given before the Comparative Literature Colloquium of Yale University on January 24, 1974.

field of narrative therapy, as psychoanalysts<sup>10</sup> have adapted Foucault's conceptualization of systems of thought as institutions of power to the extent that one's sense of exclusion in a community (e.g. the marginalized member of a family) can be mediated by the inclusion of the person's story within the dominant narrative that has shaped that community. Through the deconstruction of the various processes that lead to the establishment of *discursive formations* and their emerging disciplines in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault questions the view that these formations are constructed around unified and continuous discourses. Rather, he believes that these discursive events, which are sporadic, isolated, and dispersed in their manifestation, are only assembled through an intricate web of connections and interchanges. Foucault's explanation of his methodology, his "archaeology," and the concurrent demystification of the tenets of continuity and unity, bring forth a perspective that runs against the grain of traditional historiography and "normative" history which consider historical writing to be cohesive and objective.

Perhaps more significantly, structuralists and poststructuralists have been most active in voicing widespread scepticism towards both the authority and the assumed objectivity of History by claiming that the very structure of narrative is *de facto* a construction, i.e. a "fabrication," by someone for somebody, and that hence, in such a process, a certain degree of fictionality and subjectivity is unavoidable. A brief reminder of the basic conceptual implications of the phenomenology of experience, memorization, extraction, and communication would not only allow us to understand this claim but also to attempt to grasp the theoretical and practical consequences of narrativization.

As events are *witnessed* or *experienced* by various people, passive or active participants, they are stored as a particular and personalized image and/or impression in their individual and/or collective memory,<sup>11</sup> through an unconscious process of internalization. To be transcribed into intelligible form to be communicated, shared, and understood, these events (or their corresponding images and impressions) are collected or extracted from each individual and/or collective memory ("rememorized") before being reconstructed.<sup>12</sup> They are then codified into common language in the form of

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<sup>10</sup> Psychoanalyst Michael White has drawn extensively from the work of Foucault and other poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida in his seminal article, "Deconstruction and Therapy," in which he describes the narrative approach to therapy which has gained widespread popularity amongst family therapists.

<sup>11</sup> In *Mémoire, Histoire, Oubli* Paul Ricoeur suggested that there is some tension regarding the intersection between the public/private and collective/individual properties of memory.

<sup>12</sup> Ricoeur has also pointed out that memory can either be stored as a vivid image or dwell in one's unconscious until it is reenacted through a conscious process of extraction.

statements and sentences—marking textually the existence of actors, their actions, and their consequences: subjects, verbs, objects. Consequently, these statements are organized into a *sequence*—it is this particular sequencing of events that constitutes “narrativizing,” i.e. shaping events into narrative form—according to various organizing principles before adopting the shape of paragraphs, series of paragraphs, and text.

The configuring of events into a narrative structure is what poststructuralists consider to be the construction of a plot—i.e. emplotment—a process that confers symbolic or factual meaning to a succession of events and which closely replicates the structural foundation of a story, whether imaginary or real. To that effect, Paul Ricoeur explains how the gap between events and story is bridged by the concept of plot:

By plot I mean the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story. This provisory definition immediately shows the plot’s connecting function between an event or events and the story. A story is *made out of* events to the extent that plot *makes* events *into* a story. (“Narrative Time” 171)

In broader terms perhaps, a narrative is a story insofar as it contains distinctive protagonists (*who*), actions (*what*), and a plot (*who* does *what*, *how* and possibly *why*), and a beginning, middle, and end. From this perspective, then, it is easy to understand that since there is a multitude of ways of sequencing events, there is consequently a multitude of narratives: “It is a commonplace of modern relativism,” W.J.T Mitchell observes, “that there are multiple versions of events and the stories about them and that there is something suspect about claims to having the ‘true’ or ‘authorized’ or ‘basic’ version in one’s possession” (2).

The Historian’s work, then, not only demands both the reconstruction of memory and a renegotiation of the past generated by the task of unearthing a wide variety of sources (such as personal and collective memories, archives, literature), and compiling them alongside an already existing body of work, but also their (re)structuring: the sequencing and ordering of the events depicted in this body of work through narrativization. It is through this very process that meaning is conveyed to the reader—to make sense of real events, events that, in their sporadic and isolated manifestation, do not necessarily follow an organizing principle; as White suggested, the push towards narrativization “arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (“Value” 27).

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In parallel, studies in psychoanalysis suggest that certain memories are repressed or suppressed and therefore require a conscious effort to be brought to light.

More specifically, in narrating the past, the *historian*—or *author* who coincidentally also becomes the *narrator* or even perhaps the *storyteller*—selectively remembers and/or collects and selects—whether consciously or unconsciously—events or their statements (such as anecdotes, texts, records) related to or revolving around a specific culture or community. These selected events and the “relative reality” they represent are then organized, i.e. put into a *sequence*, according to a number of organizing principles such as chronological order or level of importance (for that given culture or community). Of particular interest within the process of selection and categorization in the transcription of past events is the unavoidable presence of the narrator’s subjectivity in transcribing these events not only through the possibilities offered by the organizing principle but also by the various stages of the process outlined above. This is particularly accurate from the onset of the process if we consider that events, or in this case “historical facts” (which, one assumes, are based on “reality”<sup>13</sup>), are built upon experience, then the subjectivity of such experiences (whether from the person experiencing it or the historian recounting it) is unavoidable.

The classical historicist claim to objectivity falters in the face of the aforementioned claims. On the one hand, feminism and cultural studies have enlightened our reading of normative history by unveiling subjective ideologies of exclusion and discrimination and by drawing our attention to texts of social others that have been suppressed as a result of these ideologies. On the other hand, studies in the phenomenology of memorization and narrativity have not only revealed the subtleties of fictionality in history writing but also questioned the objectivity of historical writing. As Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, there are always two central questions in his phenomenology of memory: “de quoi y a-t-il souvenir? de qui est la mémoire?” (*La mémoire* 3). This view with regard to the inherent subjectivity of narratives parallels Scholes’ observation that “Narrative is not just a sequencing ... narrative is a sequencing of something for somebody” (209).

It was with these questions in mind that we planned the Fall 2005 conference of the CEA-CC, hoping to receive a dialogue that would address the key issues related to the ways in which narratives, both personal and collective, fictional and historical, literary as well as visual, are shaped and created, told and retold, read and reread, grasped, understood, and reassessed by authors and audiences, past and present, in a wide variety of contexts. Considering key theoretical issues and addressing three distinct yet intersecting discourses—the boundary between fact and fiction, the influence of postcolonial literature and

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<sup>13</sup> This apposition would be refuted by Roland Barthes, however, who argued that “facts” only exist linguistically: *le fait n’a jamais qu’une existence linguistique* (73) in “Le Discours de l’Histoire” *Information sur les Sciences Sociales* 6.4 (1967): 65-75.

theory on world history in general and the Caribbean in particular, and the challenges posed by feminism to normative history—the contributions to this volume offer an eclectic array of case studies at the crossroads of narrativity and history.

Paralleling the debate addressing the literality of history, liberal humanistic studies have always regarded literary texts to be representative of distinct periods of history and have considered that, to some extent, the work of some authors resembles that of a historian. As suggested earlier, perhaps the most central issue regarding narratives, whether historical, fictional, or biographical, has revolved around what can be regarded as “fact”—what is/was “real”—and what can be considered “fiction”—what “imaginary” elements have been woven in or added by the author. At one end of the spectrum, beyond the need to transcribe events into meaningful form, historians have always relied on fictional elements to provide continuity and comply with the ideological and stylistic canons of history writing. On the other, authors of fiction very often rely on certain geographical, political, historical, and/or cultural elements, injecting a dose of fact, e.g. “reality,” into their texts to create a distinct space of temporal and spatial liminality, and thus becoming themselves subjects of the specific context from which they draw their inspiration. Although there seems to be some amount of debate among scholars with regard to the perception of falsehood that accompanies the fictionality of historical narrative,<sup>14</sup> the distinction between history and fiction, as Robert Scholes has pointed out, principally rests on the assumption that in history proper the events described did occur (in “reality”) before the text—history is then, as commented above, a “selective” representation, whereas in a work of fiction the events are created for and within the text (211).

Consequently, a number of papers at the conference specifically addressed the intersection of fact and fiction that narrative addresses. Mary Leonard’s essay engages with the work of writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Yann Martell, and Ian McEwan in order to assess the ways in which fiction and nonfiction are used to explore, illustrate and/or represent the turbulent history of our world. In particular, the essay takes as its starting point Naipaul’s assertion that the novel is a dead form because the world has lost interest in fiction. While some authors may indeed argue that at the dawn of the twenty-first century history (i.e. fact) has by far exceeded the imaginary (i.e. fiction), others claim

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<sup>14</sup> See for example, Stephen Carr’s “History, Fiction, and Human Time” and “Narrative and the Real World: an Argument for Continuity,” in which the author responds to poststructuralism’s scepticism towards the aptitude for historical writing accurately to represent the past “as it really was.” In opposition to the concept that historical narratives are pure fabrications, Carr posits that narrative structures form an inherent part of reality as it is experienced and represented.

that fictive literature remains an important narrative genre. Leonard contends that the fictional narrative is not dying but “evolving.” On a different level, Darrell Fike’s contribution combines the two (“fact” and “fiction”) by using both creative and critical prose to explore the shared border of the remembered world and the dreamed world. Echoing observations made earlier regarding the properties of recollecting, Fike notes that while “remembering” can be characterized as an activity of the conscious mind to recall empirically provable events, it shares many psychic qualities with a principal function of the unconscious mind—that of dreaming. Memory, when viewed from this perspective, can be seen as a psychic construction that comes into being not purely as an artifact of the outside world but as a function of the interior world that serves as the site of its creation, existence, and retrieval. The discourse connecting Truth, Fiction, History, and Memory is also addressed through an investigation of literary texts. Christopher Powers’ paper analyzes Toni Morrison’s novels *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* to investigate Morrison’s “spatialization of time,” arguing that “Morrison does not spatialize time with the purpose of undoing master narratives” but “because it is part of her innovation as a writer to show how people experience memory synchronically.” Powers stresses that the political reading reproduces “a stigma long attached to African American writers, who are presumed to be more political because they are African American.” In “Truth versus Knowledge: (Re)Interpreting the Traumatic Memory of Chappaquiddick in Joyce Carol Oates’ *Black Water*,” Matthew O. Cleveland retraces the incident that occurred at Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts on the night of July 18, 1969, when Senator Edward Kennedy drove off a wooden bridge in an accident that caused the drowning death of his passenger, 28-year-old Mary Jo Kopechne, as it is told in Oates’ novella. Using Jean Laplanche’s elaboration of Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (which Laplanche terms ‘afterwardsness’) dialectically with Lacan’s conceptual dichotomy between Truth and Knowledge, Cleveland’s essay demonstrates that the author’s *interpretation* of the traumatic (historic) incident at Chappaquiddick enacts an hysterical discourse that in turn reveals important Truths about individual and collective desire beyond the ‘objective’ (and objectifying) versions of the incident provided by Kennedy and other ‘official’ sources. While this discussion might accurately illustrate the debate regarding the oppositional binary of fact and fiction as it pertains to historical writing, as W.J.T. Mitchell has pointed out, “the real problem, however, is not the telling of true stories from false ... but the very value of narrativity as a mode of making sense of reality (whether the factual reality of actual events, or the moral, symbolic reality of fictions)” (2).

As perhaps the most prominent figure in cultural studies, the late Edward Said reminded us of the crucial role played by postcolonial literature in the (re)affirmation of “otherness” not only within the social sciences but within the context of world history as well:

... in the decades-long struggle to achieve decolonisation and independence from European control, literature has played a crucial role in the re-establishment of a national cultural heritage, in the re-instatement of native idioms, in the re-imagining and re-figuring of local histories, geographies, communities. (1)

This reimagining has been of particular importance in the history of the Caribbean, whose legacy of slavery, genocide, colonization, and diaspora is interwoven with its art and culture. In response to V. S. Naipaul’s assertion that culture was “mimicry” and history “dead” in the Caribbean, Derek Walcott famously argued:

In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered. What has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention. (6)

Addressing the issue of the necessity of imagination in the telling of Caribbean history, Robert Miltner investigates the work of poet Rane Arroyo who explores his Puerto Rican heritage in the poetry sequence *Hungry Ghost* in which he, as poet, engages in dialogue with the historical figure of Ponce de León rather than with grand narratives. In his essay “Masks, Mirrors, Mirth and Memory in Rane Arroyo’s *Hungry Ghost: The Ponce de León Poems*,” Miltner argues that in the process, “Arroyo learns to confess the scars of history, of blood, of hunger, and finally, his need for ‘an honest ghost’ to aid him, even if that ghost is de León.” The confluence between loss and amnesia in the Caribbean is also addressed by Jocelyn A. Gélige Vargas in an essay that examines the reconstruction of Puerto Rican historiography as projected in Noel Quiñones’ 1986 documentary *Raíces Eternas*. By exploring the various views on the relationship between history and film—some seeing documentary as evidence, others as didactic, and still others as a reconstruction of the past—Gélige Vargas sees documentary film as “not just a purveyor of history but also an intervention in the making of history,” and contends that *Raíces Eternas* is a “project as well as a projection of Puerto Rican history.” She posits that while the film was/is considered by many to be a faithful reconstruction of Puerto Rico’s history, it contains numerous ruptures that put into question its actual validity as historical document. At a slightly different latitude, Tatiana Tagirova’s essay retraces the world travels of Jamaican-born Claude McKay from the perspective of his reception in Russia, arguing that as his national and international consciousness grew as a result of

his travels within the United States, England, Russia, Germany, France, Spain, and Morocco, his awareness of social injustices and inequalities also increased.

Earlier, we noted that the narrative turn brought forth by poststructuralism had a far-reaching interdisciplinary impact. Don Walicek's "Stories that Save Themselves: Notes on Fieldwork in Anguilla" questions the tendency in sociolinguistics to "relegate the 'non-linguistic' and personal narratives to the margins." His essay unites the "personal" with the "scientific" to combine a set of personal stories and recollection with data from interviews with Anguillian "culture-bearers," thus explaining the shift of his "attention from the analysis of synchronic phenomena to the relationship between processes of language- and history-making." In doing so, Walicek draws from the conceptual frameworks of James Clifford and Roy Harris, which link history-making with language-making, to go beyond "empiric" data and offer an account of Anguilla's past in which personal narratives are not relegated to the margins, but centered, re-told and re-created, focusing especially on "the role the anecdotal can play" in comprehending the breadth of the processes by which "Anguillian and the social identities of its speakers are constructed." As Walicek's essay illustrates, "Stories populating lived experience serve as a reminder that taxonomic systems, like representations of the past, are constituted in use."

As noted previously, at their intersection with postmodernism, feminist studies were instrumental in decentering the western patriarchal subject alongside, or perhaps even preceding, cultural studies. Considering the female subject with regard to classical texts, Nick Haydock offers an intertextual reading of the stories of Troy by Homer, Chaucer, and Robert Henryson at the crossroads of feminism and postmodernism in his essay "Preposterous Women: The Truth of History and the Truth about Women in Ancient and Medieval Troy Narratives." Examining the influence and portrayal of women with regard to artistic production from Antiquity to Modernity, Haydock argues that "the debasement of women in Troy narratives is repeatedly allied with failures of artistic control, incomplete revision, and especially with false, incongruous supplements." Proceeding to stories actually told by women, Dorsia Smith and Libe García Zarranz examine the narratives of women by focusing on the intersection of gender and oppression in diaspora texts by women: Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat (who now lives in the US) and Merlinda Bobis (a Filipino-Australian writer), respectively. Smith's essay focuses on Danticat's novels *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *The Dew Breaker*, which through the memories of their protagonists take the reader to Haiti during the time of the corrupt rule of Haiti's President François "Papa Doc" Duvalier from 1964-1971 and the feared *Tonton Macoutes* policemen. Her essay investigates the ways in which the violent history of Haiti during Duvalier's rule is reconstructed and re-told

through Danticat's novels, by drawing attention more particularly to the mental and physical abuse suffered by women at the hands of the Macoutes. From the viewpoint of narrative therapy, Danticat's narratives parallel stories that aim to heal the psychological wounds of the traumatized subject through the externalization of such traumas. García Zarranz's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Women in Merlinda Bobis's *White Turtle*" analyzes the complex significance of some of the female characters portrayed in Merlinda Bobis's short-story collection *White Turtle* set in the South Pacific. In particular, her study focuses on two key issues—sexuality and identity—which enable us to concentrate on other relevant aspects such as motherhood, power structures, the role of silence, and the construction of a "displaced" self, thus encapsulating Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman's claim that "narrative ... emphasizes the active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity" (xiv). In a sense, Bobis's stories may well be seen as counterstories, or "narratives of resistance" to use Hilde Lindemann Nelson's definition<sup>15</sup>, stories that aim to re-position the marginalized other by challenging the prevailing hegemonic narrative.

Terry Eagleton recently announced the "Death of Theory" and while the 21<sup>st</sup> century might have claimed the lives of some of its remaining celebrated figures (such as Jacques Derrida and Edward Said), it is undeniable that their legacy is alive and well. The postmodern era has witnessed the promulgation of a multitude of critical approaches, each distinctive in its own way yet at the same time intersecting one another. Hinchman and Hinchman might differentiate theory and narrative by noting that "narrativists usually conceive theories as attempts to capture and elaborate some timeless, essential reality 'behind' the world of human events, whereas narratives undertake the more modest task of organizing and rendering meaningful the experiences of the narrator in that world" (xv). Yet very much like the multiple perspectives represented in the world narratives, these approaches have promoted a plurality of insights into the stories that have shaped our world. Whether biographical or historical, fictive or factual, imaginary or real, these stories are constantly being scrutinized by critics and scholars in order to reconstruct a more comprehensive and perhaps more accurate account of the past; a reconstruction which would possibly allow us better to understand the present and possibly prepare for the future. While the essays in this volume might only represent a sample of the exhaustive studies conducted of the many records that populate the shelves of the world's narratives, they nevertheless strive to reach the same objective. By

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<sup>15</sup> In "Resistance and Insubordination" *Hypatia* 10.2 (1995): 23-40, Hilde Lindemann Nelson explains that counterstories, which she describes as "narratives of resistance"(24), "are told for the specific purpose for resisting and undermining a dominant story" (34).

deconstructing and reconstructing their subjects from different narratives and theories, these essays unveil the existing ruptures in the form and content of master narratives, which they attempt to mend in order to produce a more inclusive and representative construction of the past, and perhaps at the same time, to create within and out of themselves narratives that more closely resemble the protean nature of what has been considered an unchanging truth.

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## Part I

### Telling the Past: Between Fact and Fiction

# TO NARRATE THE PAST: THE USES OF FICTION/THE USES OF NONFICTION

MARY LEONARD

According to Steven Connor, cultural changes occurring in Britain after the 1960s created the conditions for a “huge expansion of history and historymaking” in the contemporary British novel (qtd. in Tew 124). This fascination with history was also manifest in the development of British heritage cinema starting in the 1980s. The American historian Eric Foner notes a similar tendency for filmic and literary texts to engage increasingly with history in the United States starting in the 1990s:

To the surprise of historians themselves, in the final years of the twentieth century and opening moments of the twenty-first, history seemed to enter into Americans’ public and private consciousness more powerfully than in any time in recent memory. Our equivalent of what the British call the ‘heritage industry’ reached unprecedented levels of popularity and profitability. (ix)

Why then, if the above would seem to suggest that fictional forms have been energized by this engagement with history, does V.S. Naipaul, winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize for Literature, insist that the novel is a dead form? His words would appear to suggest that, for Naipaul, it is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century genre unsuited to the contemporary world:

We are all overwhelmed by the idea of French 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture. Everybody wanted to go to Paris to paint or write. And of course that’s a dead idea these days...We’ve changed. The world has changed. The world has grown bigger. (26)

Only by writing nonfiction in this new world, he asserts, is he able to continue to write fiction: “What I felt was, if you spend your life just writing fiction, you are going to falsify your material...and the fictional form was going to force you to do things with the material, to dramatize it in a certain way. I thought nonfiction gave one a chance to explore the world, the other world, the world that one did not know fully...if I didn’t have this resource of nonfiction I would have dried up perhaps. I’d have come to the end of my material...” (qtd in

Donadio, “Naipaul” 26). In April of 2005, the British writer Ian McEwan, who has written novels which explore the relationship of the past to the present, also voiced a need to turn to nonfiction in this post-9/11 world where older ideas of the fictional narrative suddenly seemed irrelevant:

For a while I did find it wearisome to confront invented characters. I wanted to be told about the world. I wanted to be informed. I felt that we had gone through great changes, and now was the time to go back to school, as it were, and start to learn. (“Conversation”)

How then *do* we make sense of the turbulent recent history of our world? What are the uses of fiction for such a purpose? What are the uses of nonfiction?

It has been said that the novel helps us know not the news of the headlines but the intimate details of the everyday historical world. It is usually assumed to be a fictional form, though there are, of course, non-fiction novels. Unlike the romance or certain types of poetry, it is not given to flights of fancy, but rather grounds itself in verisimilitude and the mundane. Jane Austen shows us the rituals involved in finding a suitable marriage partner in early 19th-century England, Zola the conditions of the poor in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, Thomas Mann the German evolution from 19<sup>th</sup>-century humanism to 20<sup>th</sup>- century decadence. However, as Naipaul asserts, we no longer live in the conditions that produced these novels. Marshall McLuhan has chronicled the rise of the media-saturated age which has supplanted it. Alvin Toffler has diagnosed our Future Shock. Frederic Jameson has lamented the loss of meaning caused by postmodern fragmentation. And Guy DeBord has claimed that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has made of us a “society of the spectacle.” Trapped in such a hermetic mirror world of simulated realities, composed of an avalanche of seductive imagery and sound bites, is it still possible, or even particularly interesting, to “know” the world in the novelistic sense? Naipaul seems to think not:

Books require an immense amount of energy. It is not just pages. It is ideas, observations, many narrative lines...I have no faith in the survival of the novel. It is almost over. The world has changed and people do not have the time to give that a book requires. (Atlas 14)

Benjamin Kunkel concurs, “The society of the spectacle has never before reared so high; the novel has never seemed so marginal a form” (14). Like Rushdie, he points to that power which novelists have traditionally enjoyed as social critics, and attributes it largely to an ability to use language, a skill that seems to have lost the importance it once had:

The novelist's command of language, his ability to represent things persuasively, his arbitration of the fates of (imaginary) human beings—all of these resemble actual political power, and probably involve a suppressed wish to wield such power. We can think of the correlation anthropologists have found in many tribal societies between eloquence and authority; we can recall, often with a shudder, various impressive orators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and we can reflect that in the 1960s, both Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal ran for political office. Both lost, but 30 years later would they even have tried? (16)

He concludes that “in modern societies literary power and political power long ago parted ways.” If one reflects upon the fact that one of the running jokes about the current American president has to do with his inability to use language accurately and effectively, Kunkel's view would seem to hold true.

The transcendental importance attributed to the “great works of art” that was still prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century would also now seem to be a thing of the past. For a modernist like Djuna Barnes, writing in the 30s, the rich complexity of meaning that can be achieved in artforms like painting or the novel can only be the fruit of a highly developed civilization. As she writes:

the purely happy and contented state of the native, say of Tahiti (before we got in there) was, as Melville found, too damned heavenly and perfect for endurance, we have eaten of the apple,—these peoples have music, dance (I never saw anything more beautiful than the Bal[i]nese dancers at the Paris exposition) and drawing, common to all heathen people, but they did not have books[. T ]they have folk tales, but that, tho[ugh] beautiful is not Shakespeare[.] they have music (and tho[ugh] I am most prone to it) they have no Bach, they have primitive drawings (which I love, in most cases) but they are not Giotto or Veron[e]se, or Carpaccio. Yams fall into their mouth[s], but perfection does not fall into their art complete and total, as it does from these masters. (Letter to Emily Coleman)

Like Naipaul, Guy DeBord suggests that in our increasingly fragmented and mediatised world we no longer have the attention span necessary for the appreciation of such “great art.” For him, the problem is not the loss of a particular art form, like the novel, as much as the loss of a unified and meaningful communal life. As he sees it, “Culture is the locus of a search for lost unity” (130), adding, “The greatness of art only begins to fall as dusk begins to fall over life” (133). In other words, the pathos of great art is related to its function of symbolically evoking the traces of a lost plenitude in which creativity was an organic part of the wholeness of communal life, that is, a world that is no longer ours.

Asked how he felt about living in this new kind of world, Marshall McLuhan responded:

I don't like to tell people what I think is good or bad about the social and psychic changes caused by new media, but if you insist on pinning me down about my own subjective reactions as I observe the reprimativization of our culture, I would have to say that I view such upheavals with total personal dislike and dissatisfaction. I do see the prospect of a rich and creative retribalized society—free of the fragmentation and alienation of the mechanical age—emerging from this traumatic period of culture clash; but I have nothing but distaste for the process of change. As a man molded within the literate Western tradition, I do not personally cheer the dissolution of that tradition through the electric involvement of all the senses: I don't enjoy the destruction of neighborhoods by high-rises or revel in the pain of identity quest. No one could be less enthusiastic about these radical changes than myself. I am not, by temperament or conviction, a revolutionary; I would prefer a stable, changeless environment of modest services and human scale. TV and all the electric media are unraveling the entire fabric of our society, and as a man who is forced by circumstances to live within that society, I do not take delight in its disintegration. (“The Playboy Interview”)

It may appear that Naipaul, DeBord, and McLuhan point to an inevitable loss of culture, to the death of literature and, by implication, to a tragic waning of our ability to write—and to read and understand—the collective histories and personal narratives of our culture(s) in the ways we used to. We are less than we were, they may seem to say, we can only lament the substitution of those rich and complex narrative forms by cheap and gaudy forms of spectacle which encourage us in our lazy tendency to abstain from active and informed engagement with the cultures we have created. Rachel Donadio would seem to agree when she claims that fiction does not now, as it did in the past, help us to better understand the world we live in. Despite the fact that escapist fiction, like *Harry Potter* or *The DaVinci Code*, sells well, she asserts, “To date, no work of fiction has perfectly captured our historical moment the way certain novels captured the Gilded Age, or the Weimar Republic, or the cold war” (“Truth,” 27), and adds, “The American appetite for experimental fiction does seem pretty small these days” (“Truth,” 27).

This does seem to be borne out. In the years after 9/11, nonfiction sales have greatly outstripped fiction sales. Reviews of literary works in the *New York Times* dwindled in comparison with the growing amount of space devoted to works of nonfiction such as journalism and biography. The *9/11 Commission Report* has sold over a million copies. Janet Maslin describes the new books chronicling firsthand experiences of the Iraq war as a veritable “deluge of memoirs” (E1). Elizabeth Becker’s 1986 history of modern Cambodia, *When the War Was Over*, and a 1994 Cambodian film based on one of the stories recounted in the book, have been enduring bestsellers in that country. Even serious writers and readers of literature like Naipaul and McEwan are resorting to nonfiction as a means of understanding the world we live in. And magazines

that used to publish fiction have been reducing or eliminating the space they allot to it. In August of 2005, Adrienne Miller, a novelist and the literary editor of *Esquire*, summed up the situation:

We're in a dark cultural moment. I think people seem to feel more comfortable with nonfiction. The tragic theme here is that literary fiction has very limited cultural currency now. Fewer and fewer people seem to believe fiction is still essential for our emotional and intellectual survival. (qtd. in Donadio, "Truth" 27)

But perhaps the message is less about death than it is about change, which sometimes feels like death. As Donadio, thinking about the present moment writes, "It's still early. Nonfiction can keep up with the instant messenger culture. Fiction takes its own sweet time" ("Truth" 27). And, in the interview cited earlier, McLuhan argues, in essence, that we cannot afford to take a pessimistic position about the changes we are now experiencing:

The world we are living in is not one I would have created on my own drawing board, but it's the one in which I must live, and in which the students I teach must live. If nothing else, I owe it to them to avoid the luxury of moral indignation or the troglodytic security of the ivory tower and to get down into the junk yard of environmental change and steam-shovel my way through to a comprehension of its contents and its lines of force—in order to understand how and why it is metamorphosing man.

Writers may not wield as much power and influence as they did in the past, but literary fiction has not outlived its usefulness. As Salman Rushdie noted in his welcoming remarks to the delegates of the 2005 Pen Club Conference: "In 1986 it still felt natural for writers to claim to be, as Shelley said, 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world,' to believe in the literary art as the proper counterweight to power, and to see literature as a lofty, transnational, transcultural force that could, in Bellow's great formulation, 'open the universe a little more.' Twenty years later, in our dumbed-down, homogenized, frightened culture, under the thumbs of leaders who seem to think of themselves as God's anointed and of power as their divine right, it is harder to make such exalted claims for mere wordsmiths. Harder, but no less necessary" (31). In like fashion, Yann Martell argues in the introduction of his bestselling novel *Life of Pi*, winner of the 2002 Man Booker Prize, that fictional forms like the novel continue to be extremely important since they enable us to imagine the world in a way which helps us transcend the crude or unpleasant realities we may be mired in, a necessary function in a world full of social, political and personal problems which can easily overwhelm and depress us: "If we citizens do not

support our artists, then we sacrifice our imagination on the altar of crude reality and we end up believing in nothing and having worthless dreams” (xiv).

In the introduction to his 1999 collection of short stories *Historias atroces*, (Atrocious Stories), the Puerto Rican writer Pedro Cabiya admits, perhaps facetiously, in erudite, contradictory and ludic Spanglish, to having a short attention span, as well as a number of other psychological disorders, which should perhaps disqualify him from being taken seriously as a writer, at least in traditional terms:

Si las composiciones de esta colección resultan poco entretenidas *in their own right*, a lo mejor pueda encontrarseles algún interés en el hecho de que son artefactos producidos por un individuo diagnosticado con *obsessive compulsive disorder*, *short attention span syndrome* y caracterizado como *anal retentive*. Y aunque mi doctor añade *hipocondriaco y paranoide*, ahí sí que no, porque no me invento yo estas taquicardias y además tengo pruebas incontrovertibles de que soy el objetivo de terroríficas conspiraciones. Ojalá las cosas nunca lleguen a tal punto que hagan decir mi terapeuta: ‘No sé cómo no vi los señales.’ Este libro es una posible señal de que algo no anda bien, o bien de que algo no andrà bien muy pronto. Alábalo que él vive.<sup>1</sup>

The last statement, “Alábalo que él vive,” is a play on words. It could be translated as “Praise the Lord!” But, in this context, it can also be understood to refer to the text itself, asserting the value of the bizarre and disturbing short stories which follow, perhaps precisely because of their strange idiosyncrasies. What is important about this statement has little to do with what neuroses Cabiya might or might not have. What is interesting is how the narrative strategies that he and other contemporary writers employ manifest in, sometimes shocking, but highly creative and articulate ways, the maladies of our time that the critics I have cited have been describing. This is not a writer who aspires to the artistic “perfection” Barnes praised in the thirties. In fact, he does not even seem to dare claim these “atrocious” texts as literature. They are merely “artifacts.” But neither is he representative of that “dumbed-down world”

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<sup>1</sup> 15-16. If the compositions in this collection do not turn out to be very entertaining in their own right, you might perhaps find some interest in the fact that they are artifacts produced by an individual who has been diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder, short attention span syndrome and characterized as anal retentive. And, even though my doctor adds hypochondriac and paranoid, there yes but no, because I am not inventing those attacks of tachycardia, and what’s more, I have incontrovertible proofs that I am the object of horrifying conspiracies. Hopefully, things will never get to the point where they make my therapist say, “I don’t know how I missed the signs.” This book is a possible sign that something is wrong or that something will go wrong very soon (translation mine).

Rushdie describes. And, if these are the maladies of our age, then these are the texts we must write.

The fictional narrative, I would submit, is not dying. It is, as we pass from one century to the next, evolving. Some, like Cabiya, are writing brief intense narratives for the jittery, fast-moving world we live in. New novels by writers like Ian McEwan, Pat Barker, Kazuo Ishiguro and others are engaging in striking ways with the traumas of our recent post-9/11 past and the insecurities of our continuing present and our uncertain future—September 11, terrorism, violence, the potential dangers of biotechnology—and showing how these experiences are shaping the texture of our brave new world. And the critics of the *New York Times* have returned to pondering the nature of the literature we are now producing. In fact, this paper is written largely in reaction to the conversation taking place in the *Times Book Review* during the second half of the year 2005.

If I have suggested that nonfiction is, by definition, more simplistic or transparent than fiction, I would like to correct that now by showing that nonfiction writers, like Iaian Sinclair, are also writing in new and challenging ways. Like Guy DeBord, Sinclair is a situationist who resists the loss of cultural specificity and of knowledge in our homogenizing age of the spectacle. In his psycho-geography *London Orbital*, he circumnavigates the M25, the highway that encircles London, and investigates the myriad ways in which it has transformed the psychic experience of space of those who live near it and drive on it. American readers sometimes complain that they find the cultural specificity of Sinclair's London references and the complexity of his language difficult to understand, but these are precisely the characteristics that make him the singular writer he is. John Joss praises the way in which Sinclair "pushes the limits of modern word usage" and marvels at how his "world view engages all six senses, back through the history of England and Europe, across the spectrum of human experience: past and present," and *The San Francisco Chronicle* calls him "a prose stylist without peer."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps we have not yet found the most useful words to describe the ways in which we are now trying to write our recent experiences, and the varied ways we are employing fiction and non-fiction forms to do it. Can we still just call the way we write Postmodernism, or is that too vague for the specificity of textual approaches like the ones I have discussed? Is it still productive to use a term like Postcolonialism? Or, as Ira Raja asked in a recent post on the University of Pennsylvania Call for Papers website, are we "past the post" now?

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<sup>2</sup> Blurb on the back cover of *London Orbital*.