

LEARNING TO CARE: ENCOURAGING PUBLIC INTELLECTUALISM
WITH RESEARCH NARRATIVES

by

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Miles David Nolte

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DEDICATION

This paper is for Greg Keeler who has repeatedly given me some of the best advice of my life: “Go fishing.”

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ABSTRACT

Public engagement in matters of academic discourse is essential for both the validity of academic work and the agency and influence of general citizenry. The function of academia is the pursuit of inquiry for the general betterment of society. Facilitating meaningful communication between scholars and the public is a problem for a number of reasons, and it is not an exchange that we are currently stimulating with any degree of success. In fact, the perceived divide between academics and lay-people is expanding. Writers who utilize research narratives to frame topics of scholarly research offer a possible tool for encouraging effective public intellectualism. The work of Sarah Vowell and David Quammen represent successful examples of how research narratives can engage a broader audience in academic work.

PART 1: OVERVIEW

Introduction

I do want to be read by as broad an audience as possible. I want to reach people who are urban and verbal and skeptical and couldn't give a shit about butterflies and deer. I want to reach people who just love to read and want to know about the world—David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

Research and scholarship identify and shape the topics that our most important to our society. Yet researchers and scholars are not very good at writing texts that are interesting to anyone except other researchers and scholars. I'm not identifying a new problem. No one I know outside of academia has any interest in the texts that academics create for each other. They are, however, often interested in the subjects those texts address; they just don't know it. I don't think that researchers and scholars *should* be responsible for writing documents that are interesting to non-scholars. We've tried this. It doesn't work. We need non-academic writers to facilitate this exchange. We need storytellers to get interested in academic work and write the narratives of their intellectual journeys. *That's* how we get more people to pay attention to salient topics. I toyed with the idea of suggesting a reality TV show focused on university faculty. Imagine water cooler talk like: "Can you believe that chick Marinello got tenure over whats-his-face, the dude who's always wearing corduroy? He's got way more publications than she does; that was all about grant money." But then I decided against it. Academics don't usually televise that well. I think research narratives are a better choice.

Academics don't come up with ideas and topics through alchemy or magic. Academics also don't have ideas *because* they're academics. We all build our ideas because things happen to us and we want to figure those things out. We have experiences that pique our interest and make us want to learn more. What sets scholars apart from non-scholars is training. Academics are trained to take these experiences and turn them into products of academic value: papers and theses and articles and conference presentations. Training, and the fact that scholars are praised for sitting around reading, thinking, and scribbling about these things instead of being told to get to work.

The truth is: the whole point of research is to make meaning of our messy storylines. We take the stuff of everyday life and craft that into rational, scholarly prose. This "academic" paper sprouted from fuzzy public radio lunches, my need for mental stimulation while scrubbing floors for rent money, and an inability to understand why scholastic prose tends to be so boring. I was also trying to impress a woman.

Academic writing offers the representations thinking and study without ever explaining what initially drew the researcher to the question in the first place. These sculpted products are often so well crafted it's easy to forget they start as shapeless blobs of experiential clay. We need more creation stories for research. I see them as valuable for many reasons (as you will learn if you choose to continue reading) but primarily I see them as important because they let readers understand why academic research is important. They help readers to care. And readers should care. When you scrape away all the soap-scum of convention, academic study often investigates fascinating and important topics.

Researchers can spend years or decades invested in a topic. That level of commitment has a story behind it. Those stories have the potential to reach out to audiences who otherwise would not pay attention. It is that intersection that interests me. The narratives about the personal connection to academic research usually get polished away in academic writing. What if we use those narratives to give more readers a reason to pay attention to important discussions and be participants? What if we use research narratives as tools of empowerment?

This project investigates the attributes and limitations of the narrative autobiographical genre as a rhetorical tool for getting more people engaged in intellectual inquiries. There is power in research storytelling. We think of storytelling and research as mutually exclusive but that's because we've agreed to believe that information and entertainment cannot exist simultaneously. Just because you enjoy a text doesn't mean that it cannot contain and represent valid ideas.

A Matter of Personal Interest

Let me preface with the simple fact that when I sit down to write something, anything really, I do not think about these things **at all**. I rarely ponder my own motivation, intent and how others experience my writing. If I ponder the audience at all it is only when I strive to make complicated situations more clear. And while that might make me seem user-friendly and compassionate toward the reader it's more wrapped up in my own pride, wanting to avoid cloudy writing because it's simply bad writing—Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

I am not an ecologist, or an historian, but I find value in the work done by ecologists and historians. I'm also not a chemist, a medical doctor, a sociologist, a psychologist, a nutritionist, or an economist. I don't have enough background knowledge

to read the research of those fields and understand it in any meaningful way. I certainly don't have enough information to be a part of the conversations taking place *between scholars* in any of those fields; but in the past month I have read, and become engaged in, articles in each of those specialties. These articles were all published in places where general readers would see them, without discipline specific language. More importantly, they were all written with the intention of getting me invested in topics that previously didn't seem worthy of my thought or attention. All three of these elements are necessary to bring me, a non-specialized audience, into conversations that I don't already think of as important in my life.

I don't have the luxury of time to spend learning the nuances of every academic discipline, and neither do you. I don't have the resources to keep up with all the publications of *my own* colleagues, much less learn the ropes of all other fields of study and read the articles that they are publishing. I don't know any scholars who have the time or inclination to engage in such Faustian aspirations; the whole idea of it is ridiculous. Yet, academics continue to think, research, write, and publish . . . extensively. Why do we do this? Primarily, we do this to communicate with other people who are already interested and have a strong knowledge of the rules for talking about those topics. We do this to tell all the other professional academics in our rarified fields the *really interesting* new idea, angle, theory, hypothesis, experiment, conclusion, or refutation that we've just worked out. But this isn't the only purpose of our work. There are other, broader implications that every scholar/writer wishes to affect. It's true that we do this work to get ahead in our careers, but we also share a less cynical and selfish goal. We

want our work to have meaning and implication beyond the limited networks of our conferences and journals. We don't *just* want to impress our mentors, friends and rivals; if that were as far as we ever hoped our work to reach, we wouldn't dedicate our lives to it. Academia would be the sad parody of wasted time that congressional budget debates and B-movie comedies portray it to be.

The Broad Problem

Society pays for most of this science, pays for the CDC, the NIH, pays in one way or another for the academic scientists too. So scientists have to justify what they're doing and what they're spending to the general public. In order to do that, they need the general public to understand what they're doing—David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

If professional scholars find it ridiculous to imagine being fluent in the conversations of all academic disciplines, imagine how far beyond the scope of the non-academic this is. Most people (if they're lucky anyway) have jobs and families; they have reality television and social media; they have video games and professional sports. They have Steve Martin's *Twitter* feed (that guy is *still* hilarious). Most people are not fluent in any academic discourse, much less capable of keeping tabs on all of them. But all the work that we do in sequestered offices and labs is supposed to benefit them. Isn't that the whole point of having a research university? Don't such places exist to give space and resources to solve meaningful problems and expand useful bodies of knowledge?

The problem is this: professional researchers necessarily need to be highly specialized in order to be significant contributors. Since scholars engage in ongoing conversations with other experts who share background knowledge, it makes sense that

these conversations utilize the lexis and genre of the respective field. Doing so is both utilitarian and effective. This excludes all non-experts from the conversation, which undermines our goal of affecting a broad spectrum of society.

Anyone who reads work in a refereed journal already cares. A person who reads a peer-reviewed journal about plant-biology is not doing so to discover *if* she has an interest in plant biology. If she made it to the journal article, she is already interested in the topic. That's why research journals are not sold at supermarket checkout lines.

The academic mode of communication saves a great deal of writing time because scholars don't have to worry about providing readers enough context to give a damn. The system in place for specialists within disciplines to share knowledge with one another works effectively and efficiently. There is, however, no such system in place for the professional thinkers in our society to communicate with everyone else. We have walled ourselves into a corner. We are convinced that the work we do is important but have mostly ceased trying to convince anyone but those who already believe. We need to be less like Catholics and more like Mormons.

The reason that no such system exists is that it is a far more complicated and far less immediate problem. If the best physicists weren't able to interact with one another, the progression of the discipline itself would be stifled and there would be an outcry within the community for immediate problem solving and change. As it stands, most people never have access to the work of the foremost physicists. That's acceptable because most people would not have any clue what those researchers are working on or how it might pertain to their lives. They would neither understand the terminology, nor be

able to relate the information to what they do everyday. It is logical that solving the problem of information transmission from specialist to layman is not a high priority for either side. The specialists are able to do their work most efficiently when they are only culpable to their peers; and the non-specialists aren't crying out for access to information that they assume to be both over their heads and boring. Besides, *American Idol* is on.

The Problem of Interacting with an Informed Public

Because [researchers] have a very specific set of skills and they're very busy and they're generally very bright people but they've got a lot of different tasks, they generally don't develop their skills as communicators to the general public—David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

This problem of interaction is persistent. I'm going to anchor this problem in the idea of the "public sphere", originally conceived by Jurgen Habermas, and re-interpreted by Nancy Fraser as "an ideal of unrestricted rational discussion on public matters" (59). I assert that the work done by university researchers, much of which occurs in publicly funded research universities with assistance from governmental grants, is a "public matter". The idea of the public sphere is the idea of a democratic populace who have agency, influence, and voice, and who exercise these rights through the free transmission of information and ideas in order to influence "public opinion". Essentially, this is the idealized democratic state, one where citizens engaged in informed and lively debate to shape public decisions. This has become the basis for some permutations of the concept of "public intellectualism". The value I see in the ideal of public intellectualism is in its

capacity to engender a well-informed populace who are engaged in the problems and questions explored in Universities and research centers.

In his 2003 book, *Clueless in Academe*, Gerald Graff explains his perception of why non-academics remain disconnected from scholarly discourse; “[non-academics] won’t become engaged in academic debates about ideas unless they have a reason to be interested in them and can gain the rudiments of the public discourse in which these debates are conducted” (13).

As I have already noted, getting people to pay attention to academic discourse involves three elements: getting the public access the material, making the language understandable, and finding ways to get people personally invested in the substance of the material itself. In other words, to get people involved in a conversation, just getting the words in front of them and simplifying the language is not enough. People have to recognize the pertinence of this work to their lives otherwise they will spend their time doing other things—*Angry Birds* for example. It’s a great game.

In the contemporary information age, access is hardly a problem. The availability of information is staggering. The problem is not information deficit but information overload. With so much material available, even individuals who are committed to informing themselves on particular discourses may find it difficult to navigate the gulf of published content. After all, the purpose of a graduate degree is to give people the time and resources to do just that.

Access and fluency, however, aren’t the only hurdles; we still have the problem of investment. I’m sure that some of the new work being done in biochemistry, for example,

would be fascinating to me if I understood enough about it to place it in a context that relates to me. Eventually, that work will probably end up impacting a variety of medicines, policies, environmental regulations, and consumer products that will have impact on my life. But right now, they're just articles that I can't understand and won't spend my precious time reading.

Narrative Autobiography as a Tool

I use autobiography because I want to tell the reader: I'm your proxy. I'm on your side. I come to this as an outsider—this scientific stuff—just as you do so trust me. I'm your friend and if I can understand this stuff you can too so walk with me, stay with me and we can do this—David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

There are a number of authors who are recognizing this gulf and bridging it, with differing levels of success, in various ways. Authors like Malcom Gladwell, Stephen Hawking, Oliver Sacks, E. O. Wilson, David McCullough, and many others are making academic research accessible and interesting to a relatively broad spectrum of the public. These authors are using various rhetorical strategies to accomplish their shared goals of exposing many people to valuable research. They're selling a lot of books (which I'm sure they appreciate) but they're not being recognized for the larger role they are playing. Academics more often receive scorn for being “popular” than praise for helping readers understand their disciplines.

For the purposes of this document, I want to step away from academics writing for a public audience. I want to focus on authors who are not specialists and use narrative autobiography as a frame for scholarship that gives everyday readers a reason and

opportunity to pay attention. Writers who utilize personal narrative as a frame to enclose rigorously researched information for a general audience have a number of advantages. First, they are employing a genre that is currently popular and has been gaining popularity with the rise of “new journalism” or “creative non-fiction” in the past decades. This genre was one of the first places where the idea that texts had to be *either* informative *or* entertaining was challenged. Informative and entertaining are not parallel types of texts that can never meet. Information does not negate entertainment, but balancing those two intentions in a singular text is delicate and has the potential for misrepresentation.

Writers who are using narrative autobiography to frame well-researched material can create a transparent presentation. By that I mean that they can tell the audience not only what they studied, but why they were interested in it, and how they went about conducting their research. This has a number of important advantages. A transparent research narrative is one that explicitly exposes both the motivations of the writer, and her methodology of research. This voluntary openness nurtures a sense of trust with the reader and erodes the barrier that exists between a scholar and an interested person. It also intentionally rejects any claim, implicit or explicit, to objectivity. This transparency of intention and methodology allows authors to avoid some of the dilemmas that arise when they try to present research as truth. When the author lays all her cards out on the table, including her reasons for being interested in research in the first place, her personal biases, and her inherently limited channels of research and interpretation, there can be no claim to objectivity. In this case, objectivity is traded for a much more rhetorically

effective state: honesty. By honesty I don't mean claiming to present the audience with absolute truth but instead exposing the entire process that the writer went through to understand and represent the text.

Narrative autobiographical scholarship has limitations. Narrative absolutely privileges a perspective. It requires a thoughtful, self-aware, and critical reader to appropriately grapple with narrative that informs. Presenting information as objective also has limitations and serious ethical questions. "Objective" texts endeavor to minimize both the influence of the researcher who interprets the research and the voice of the writer in the text itself. Narrative does no such thing; it silences perspectives other than that of the narrator. Narrative scholarship gives the reader increased responsibility. In order for this to work, the narrative researcher must provide the reader with as much information as possible to be critical and responsible.

Though I do recognize the limitations of this frame, it is necessary to recognize that *all* approaches to writing have drawbacks. There is no pure or perfect way for an individual or group to observe, interpret, and report an event or phenomenon. There are only agreed upon rules of rationality, and those rules change between different communities. No research, analysis, or writing will ever be disinterested or flawless. If we want to continue to use texts as research tools, we have to recognize the value and limitations of different presentations of information, treat them as rhetorical constructions, and encourage other readers to engage them as such. Narrative autobiographical scholarship, particularly the work of David Quammen and Sarah Vowell, has the potential to encourage this type of reading.

Two Authors

My goal in producing my work is] my own freedom–freedom to write about what I want in the way that I want–Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

Two writers that I will examine and hold up as examples of successful narrative autobiographical scholarship are David Quammen and Sarah Vowell. These writers base their work on researched scholarship and use the frame of narrative autobiography. Their work successfully overcomes the three major hurdles to getting a public audience involved. I'm not saying that either of these writers sit down everyday mindful of the lofty goals I'm attributing to their work. Sarah Vowell explicitly told me that she *does not* do this. Their books and essays function as translational documents anyway. Vowell and Quammen are simply writers interested in academic subjects who *prefer* writing that is clearer and more approachable than most academic texts. By just doing what they like to do, they are performing a valuable function. I'm stepping in as another writer and pinning all these implications on them.

In terms of access, their work is published primarily in books (in some cases New York Times bestsellers) from major publishing houses (Scribner and Simon and Schuster respectively) that are marketed to a broad readership. This is in stark contrast to the writings of most scholar-writers whose prose is bound by niche publishers and targeted to academics and educators. Quammen and Vowell have also written for popular periodicals: Quammen was a columnist for *Outside* magazine for fifteen years. Vowell was a contributing editor for the popular NPR program *This American Life* and has written for *Salon*. They are widely accessible to a general public audience.

Possibly because both authors are not professional scholars in the fields they find interesting, they are careful to avoid language that would be confusing to lay-readers. When they do include terminology that is not widely understood and is important to the material they are discussing, these authors take care to define the words in more generalized language.

The third, and most difficult, hurdle to engaging a broad public in scholarly research is where I argue that these authors make significant contributions. They each give readers a reason to be interested in the material they are discussing. Interest has three distinct definitions in English. The first refers to right, title, or investment. The second refers to personal engagement (a judge is disinterested because she has no stake in the outcome of a case.) The third is the drawing of attention. When I state that these authors give their readers reason to be interested, I mean this in all three senses of the word.

These authors compel their readers to be invested in the worth of the information that they are presenting by contextualizing it in such a way that it is pertinent to readers' lives. Vowell and Quammen both accomplish this by telling the stories of how they came to understand the meaning and value of their subjects of study. They both also directly explain how the substance of the research has pertinence to, and effect on, our culture, the broader society, and (in the case of Quammen who focuses on Ecology) our planet and its species.

Each author draws the attention of the reader through well-crafted prose, compelling story, wit, and (in the case of Vowell) effective sarcasm. Each is a talented wordsmith who utilizes characters, both themselves and others, to create a narrative that

is engrossing. Prose that tells a story, that paints a landscape with characters, tensions, scenery, and drama, is engaging. Both of these authors utilize narrative autobiography (and talent) to craft documents that include all of these elements and successfully draw and hold the attention of readers.

Choices

You have to be very conscious to calibrate the detail, to calibrate the precision so that you don't offer too much. When a fellow like me comes along to popularize scientific information to offer it to the general public, the job is to dial down on the precision without sacrificing the accuracy at all—David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

Applying a narrative autobiographical frame to an informed topic is a choice.

Students of rhetoric and composition are well aware that every move in a text represents a choice made by an author or authors that will have benefits and consequences. Authors must make these choices in the hope that they are going to be most effective at conveying their thinking to their intended audience. My primary argument centers on the choices that these two authors are making and the value that I see in these choices. Again, I'm not trying to put words in their mouths and tell you that these authors choose to write the way they do for the reasons I claim in this paper.

I want to focus on their work for *my* reasons: because I've read so many theories about the value and limitations of narrative in scholarship. I'm interested in their work because composition scholars continue to argue about the nature, shape, and implications of the public sphere in writing without noticing (or perhaps intentionally ignoring) the work of the popular authors. These authors are involving a broad audience in meaningful,

specialized research. That's important in a culture where our president is described as "elitist" for encouraging young people to attend college. And, if I'm to be honest, I'm hoping to validate my own reading choices and make myself seem like a good academic.

I'm not condemning the constructions of scholarly texts, though I admit I don't enjoy reading academic journals nearly as much as I do Vowell or Quammen. I'm also not saying that researchers or scholars themselves must utilize autobiographical narrative. I just want to demonstrate the important role that these writers are playing as intermediaries. I also hope to encourage more people to think in meaningful ways about how writers can bridge the gap between academics and the public. Writers have a complex relationship with the public. They're kind of like celebrities only they're usually socially awkward and aren't freakishly symmetrical. They also have a complex relationship with academics, possibly because many academics (at least the ones in the humanities) once harbored dreams of being writers before they settled into safer paths of employment.

PART 2: INTELLECTUALISM REALLY IS PUBLIC

The NRA Vegan and the Metaphor of Soft Hands

If I'm truly honest I don't really care [how readers use my texts]. That's up to them—Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

There are many curious and intellectually capable persons outside of the academic fold. I know; I'm one of them. I have sat beside many construction sites in my 1987 Mitsubishi long-bed pickup listening to *NPR*'s "Talk of the Nation" and stuffing a gas station sandwich between my jaws. My own opinions about these debates often ended up as a spray of food detritus across the inside of the windshield. Most of the "serious" discussions I had with bearded co-workers and GED friends felt similarly futile, and there were many of them. I can't recall how many economic, political, historical, literary, spiritual, and even neuropharmacological debates I've engaged or overheard while pouring concrete, scrubbing dishes, prepping food, setting up retail displays, folding pizza boxes, grouting tile, or stuffing envelopes. These conversations are happening constantly, often between people who may not be valued for their intellectual contributions but whose votes count equally to those of Stanford deans. Interested, capable, and intelligent individuals generally feel voiceless and futile in matters of academic, political, or scientific discussion. Their perspectives and understanding seem to amount to little more than white bread, cold-cut, and mayonnaise particles expelled in frustration behind the wheels of rusting automobiles.

When I was 19, I took a summer job doing under-the-table landscaping work for cash. It was July in Hawaii—hot, dirty, palm-callous work. I was preparing to enter my

junior year at an elite, private, liberal arts college in Southern California. This was an obvious transition after I had earned my diploma from an elite, private, college preparatory high school constructed to educate the spawn of missionaries with colonial aspirations. Though I never felt myself to be intellectually deficient in either milieu, I never felt that I fit in very well. This was certainly influenced by my adolescent awkwardness, but I'm claiming it was more than that. There was something about the abstraction of scholastic training that left me despondent. I felt like something was missing. I wanted to know the taste and feel the stickiness of blood, not just analyze it under a slide.

I went to work every day that summer building planter boxes, moving gravel, mixing and pouring cement, laying sod. I worked at a wide range of decidedly non-intellectual activities that were completely foreign to my soft, keyboard hands. I got the job through my mother (of course) and was completely unqualified. Building things in the house where I grew up did not extend beyond assembling model airplanes or painting miniature lead figurines of dwarfs, elves, or other fantasy characters.

My employer/mentor for the summer assembled real airplanes. He was an aeronautical mechanic and instructor married to a colleague of my mother. He was perhaps the best read and most intellectually curious individual I have ever met in my life. It seemed to me at the time, and remains so in hindsight, that this guy knew about everything—from building aircraft to growing food to interpreting literature. He introduced me to Persig and taught me the basics of masonry. There were no exams, no essays, none of the formal constructions that I associated with learning or study. Yet I left

work every day feeling that I had been stretched—physically exhausted; rotely apprenticed at some new tactile skill, and intellectually challenged to an extent I rarely experienced in formal schooling.

While we worked at whatever project had been laid out for the day, he gave me instruction and feedback on the particulars of whatever task I was struggling to get right: “When you’re laying cinderblocks, be sure that none of the seams line up but instead stagger them so that the blocks themselves create a staircase-like pattern.” I also received historical background and important context: “The use of rebar predates the use of modern concrete in construction by a good 150 years. Rebar is necessary when building with concrete and masonry because these materials are extremely strong in compression but weak in tension, much like the modern screw. When rebar and concrete were brought together, it was the most revolutionary architectural advancement in history.” This was often mixed with more existential musings: “I am always struck by the intensity of effect that comes from the simple chemical reaction of mixing mortar or cement. The Romans first discovered it. Think about the enormity of that discovery. Can you imagine? Someone mixed lime and crushed rock with water. First it produced heat, and then it turned into a substance that was temporarily malleable stone. Amazing. What role did the discovery of concrete have in motivating the hubris of the Roman Empire? I think we can compare it to the effect that the internal combustion engine has had on the contemporary United States. Do you see that Miles?” Being utterly inexperienced with wet concrete, I was more immediately concerned with the burning and cracking effect it had on my skin. Besides, I knew nothing about internal combustion so I nodded often.

I could have simply been employed as a grunt-worker; that was all he needed me for. My employer walked with a severe limp, the remnant of a motorcycle crash suffered in the Seventies. As a result, he wore one platform shoe at all times, like one leg was stuck in 1976. He had the knowledge for all the jobs we completed but lacked some of the physicality, hence the reason for hiring me. He was also a strict vegan, an avid supporter of social services, as well as a card-carrying, bumper sticker displaying, proud member of the NRA.

To me this seemed contradictory. I knew lots of vegans, but none who advocated for gun ownership. At that time in my life, I assumed that all NRA members spoke with a drawl, lived in a trailer, voted republican, and tended to breathe orally. This man fascinated me because he did not conform to any of the social categories I had unconsciously accepted. He was a mechanic, and a gun-owner; he knew how to build and fix things. All of these attributes I associated with the blue-collar, the unintellectual, the base and even urbane. And yet I was absolutely certain that this was probably the most intelligent, knowledgeable, well-informed person I had ever met in my life.

This was not the first time that I had contemplated how flimsy the barrier between “academic” and “layman” might be. But it was the most glaring exception I had found to the dualism that I had swallowed through my cultural experience. I had never recognized that there was any option; it seemed to me that people had to be one of two things. Either they were well-educated and therefore part of the cultural elite who dealt in matters of polysyllabic abstraction, or under-educated and part of a workforce who executed the technical specifics of ideas conceived by others.

My employer that summer shattered my belief that people had to be either cerebral or physical, but that idea had been cracked already. Some of my closest friends at the end of high school and through the first few years of college had given me an example that eroded the foundations of that binary. Through a web of acquaintances, I had fallen in with a group of people who existed outside my known social world. These people were mostly older, in their mid-twenties and early thirties, and they were mainly craftsmen. There were carpenters, house painters, production potters, a surfboard shaper, a fine artist, a grocery clerk, an exotic dancer, and a guy who made his living selling illicit black market items. None of them fit the mold that I had internalized as “successful”. There were no college degrees, no “real jobs”, no collared shirts. They smoked cigarettes and drank canned beer. The coffee table was scattered with surfing and motocross magazines rather than issues of *The New Yorker*, or *Science*, or even *Newsweek*. There were none of the trappings that I associated with intellectual inquiry and yet the conversations that I heard and explored there were meaningful, interesting, and important. And the ideas expressed by these men and women were nuanced, complex, and original. In other words, the discourse that I participated in while sitting in that rambling bungalow where the jungles of the Ko’olau mountain range met the latticework of city streets, was just as challenging, engaging, and valid as any I experienced in climate controlled classrooms. In fact to me, they felt more so, even if the language was different.

Instead of recognizing that there was no rule mandating that I had to choose between the culture I was familiar with and the culture of those I admired, I felt trapped

and out of place. When in school I felt detached and distant from both my studies and my peers. When sitting among stained workshirts and tanned faces, I felt like an imposter, and an inept one at that. During the summer that I worked for the NRA vegan the gap seemed to diminish. One day when I went to visit my carpenter friend, I shook his hand and he looked at me surprised.

“You’re hand feels way different man. It feels like you’ve been working. Every time you come over here I hate shaking your hand because it’s always clammy and soft; it feels nasty. I figured that was because you were just nervous or something but I guess I’m used to shaking hands with guys who are always working so their hands are always rough.”

That was one of the proudest moments of my life.

That moment happened thirteen years ago but that confusion and struggle continues to shape many of the choices I make and work I do. I still occasionally run into the NRA vegan at my mother’s social functions. Last I heard the beds we built are still producing some of the food that he consumes. Though I’ve lost touch with all the folks from the bungalow, they materialize spectrally in my life and my choices. Those folks have come to represent my understanding of the engaged and interested public, the people who are engrossed in the life of the mind, even if they are not fluent in the conventions of academic discourse.

These are not folks that attend conferences or read refereed journal articles. They don’t publish or give lectures. But many of my first metacognitive lessons were learned on that splintered porch. I remember their opinion about my schooling any my choice to

attend college. I also remember my mother's opinion of *them*. One of the major difficulties facing our culture is the assumption held by both cultural camps: That bright and interested citizens who don't hold graduate degrees have no interest in, or capacity to inform, the sorts of conversations that scholars make their life work.

The binary I felt trapped between remains real, if only because it serves to re-enforce the concept of otherness that exists between academics and non-academics. While there are real differences in the conventions of discourse between professional scholars and everyone else, that doesn't mean these groups cannot both benefit from increased interaction. It is because of my experience straddling these two social worlds and realizing that they are not actually so far apart that I began to take interest in ideas of public intellectualism.

A Re-Vision of Public Intellectualism

I suppose I hope that Americans become more informed about their history considering how much influence we have over other people's lives outside our borders—Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

The concept of the “public intellectual” is problematic, particularly in composition studies. Christian Weisser defines a public intellectual broadly as “one who speaks to diverse audiences on issues that affect segments of society outside of academia” (118). While a bit ambiguous, this definition reflects the value that the concept of public intellectuals hope to represent. What intellectual wouldn't want to affect society broadly? This quote demonstrates the potential implicit in the core ideas of public intellectualism. It strives for generative communication between academia and the

general public. That communication could be an effective move toward including the public in the powerful discourses being shaped and guided by professional scholars. As a composition researcher with scarred hands, I am in a position to identify and work to understand the particular modes that facilitate this communication.

Weisser's simple and abstract definition, however, has never actually become a reality. There are limitations and problems with the public intellectual, the public sphere, and public writing. I suggest an alternative framing for public intellectualism that looks at how writers can create texts that meaningfully engage public interaction in academic discourse. I think writing has the potential to bring the carpenters and the professors into the same metaphorical room.

Writers can shift the power of ideas away from individual academics. They can separate the value of the concept from the ethos of the academic and allow readers to decide for themselves in an informed way. My intention is to revise the conversation about public intellectualism in order to bridge the gap between academic and public discourse without reverting to a problematic and discredited model where academics dictate to the public what they should know. The work of Sarah Vowell and David Quammen are examples of this.

The idea of the public intellectual is often colored with a lens of nostalgia, a pining for polymaths of a bygone era. As Wayne C. Booth puts it in "The Idea of a *University—As Seen by a Rhetorician*," "Centuries have passed since that fabled moment—was it in the eighteenth century or the late seventeenth?—when the last of the Leonardo da Vincis could hope to cover the cognitive map" (231). A public intellectual is now often

thought of as one of the renaissance men who once had the ear of a generalized audience and the power and influence that accompanied such a position. In this sepia scene, the intellectual lowers himself out of his gothic office window and speaks to the gathered yearning public in attempt to raise them up toward his level of knowledge. A modern incarnation of this can be seen in E.D Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and its appendix of required information for Americans. This book literally dictated a list of information that Americans were supposed to know. Perhaps Hirsch should have done a bit more research about the American psyche, we're not particularly keen on being told what do to.

Other than just pissing off most anyone who encounters a text like Hirsch's, attitudes such as his raise serious problems. Primarily, and most widely written about, is that the concept of the public intellectual centralizes the power of public influence in a handful of generally wealthy white men from particular segments of society. Additionally public intellectuals re-enforce the notion that the general public has no voice in academic conversations but should sit and passively wait for a 'truly great thinker' to step out and tell them what they need to know. This centralizes the power of discourse in an *individual* instead of in the *content*. Though not as widely recognized, this last part is the most important structural flaw in our conception of the public intellectual.

These problems with public intellectuals as disseminators of important knowledge are significant but we still need to facilitate public engagement in academic work. The lack of interaction between the public and academic both minimizes the impact of professional intellectual work and marginalizes non-academics who wish to participate in public discourse. It *is* valuable to have interaction between academics and a general

public, “that generalized body that wants, not unreasonably, to believe that the cultural activities it sustains have a benign relationship to its concerns and values” (Fish 115-116). Even if we prefer to go without public intellectuals, we still need *someone* to help the public get informed access to important academic work. My answer: long-form popular writers.

When writers are successful in helping readers to overcome the obstacles of access, lexis, and interest, the readers can become participants in powerful discourse. They are capable of engaging meaningful discussion about current topics of interest in academic circles, an ability that is obviously empowering. These conversations might have broad implications for their lives since academic research is often the starting point for meaningful social, political, scientific, and technological change. If they are aware of these discourses and sufficiently informed about them to make their own critical judgments, they have the potential to use appropriate democratic social channels to voice their concern or support.

I do realize that these channels of communication and participation are limited according to social stratification and power dynamics. Many groups of our society are minimized by, or completely locked out of, the democratic process. I don't have a solution to that. If I did, I would be running for office rather than working on a master's degree in English. The thing is, if people are unaware, or lacking in appropriate knowledge, of important discourses, they have absolutely *no* capability to participate even in the limited options that exist. So, while my ideas about public intellectualism won't do a damn bit of good when it come to state redistricting processes or the electoral

college, the basic element that is necessary for the general public to be part of the public sphere is that they be sufficiently knowledgeable as to be aware of the conversation topics in the first place. I realize that being aware of and basically fluent in discourses is not, in and of itself, *sufficient* for meaningful participation in them. Having that awareness and fluency is, however, *necessary* for that participation to occur. What I am suggesting is that writers can help to involve the general public in foundational conversations and that involvement is a mandatory step toward further empowerment.

This idea that information can lead to agency and democratic participation is part of what what Jurgen Habermas was explaining in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. This seminal work has become the basis for the idea of the “public sphere” and “public writing” in the arena of rhetoric and composition studies. Subsequent criticism of his work, however, has shown both the unlikelihood of successful “public intellectuals,” and the need for a new approach to the problem. Broadly stated, public writing “consists of written discourse that attempts to engage an audience of local, regional, or national groups or individuals in order to bring about progressive societal change” (Weisser 90). I’m suggesting that Vowell and Quammen’s work represents a specific manifestation of public writing and public intellectualism. This writing can have valuable influence on the interaction between academic and public audiences, without ignoring the power relationships that have tainted Habermas’ utopia.

Habermas’ original vision of bourgeois society debating matters of “private interest” in a “public space” has proven generative but problematic: While Habermas envisioned a forum open to all voices regardless of social status, no such entity of

inclusion has ever come to pass. We like that “all men are created equal” line in theory but prefer when it refers only to people who look, think, and live like us. If you read the work of contemporary composition and cultural studies scholars, a space of egalitarian public influence seems relatively impossible. There are too many barriers of class, culture, language, and ideology. People with social influence don’t give up that power voluntarily (Fraser, Berlin, Weisser).

This is part of the reason why we bristle at the very idea of a renaissance-man academic who once stepped down from on high to “inform” the yearning masses. It reinforces that some people have social capital and others don’t. Stanley Fish refers precisely to this when he derides the “academics [who] once did have such a pulpit, the college president or major deanship, offices that for a long time carried with them not only the possibility but the obligation of addressing issues of public concern” (120). We have moved away from such a model intentionally, and usefully, because this model reinforces the exclusionary structure of dominant cultures and discourses.

As a result, when theorists talk about “public writing” they usually focus on the interplay of power dynamics in social stratification and which voices actually get heard. The concept of the public intellectual has been discredited because it helps to maintain an unjust status quo and is unrealistic in the contemporary academic and cultural climate. It’s no longer acceptable for academics to elevate themselves as public intellectuals. Where it was once a sign of ascendancy, it’s now an emblem of arrogance and elitism. In his book, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*, Stanley Fish explains a different reason why he thinks it impossible for academics to be

successful public intellectuals. “[A] public intellectual . . . *has the public’s attention*. Since one cannot gain that attention from the stage of the academy . . . academics, by definition, are not candidates for the role of public intellectual” (118). Scholars are mandated by their careers and colleagues to become specialists rather than generalists. But even if they do attempt to produce research that is not directed at a limited number of colleagues, they struggle to find an interested public audience. “Almost everyone wants to speak to more people, but the trick is getting those people to listen or even hear you” (Fish 116). Fish was intending to complain about the nerve of the public to not care about academic work. But I think his point stands even if his blame was misplaced. We need to address all three major hurdles to successful communication but the main problem is interest.

In rhetoric and composition studies there is broad agreement that writing can be empowering. People have the potential to realize and exercise their power through texts. What has not been explored sufficiently is the potential of broad readership. By intentionally including a wide spectrum of readers in conversations that are currently narrow in audience we can empower that audience. Let people have access to the conversations that are taking place and let *them* decide how and when to participate. Christian Weisser describes a “public discourse” that is precisely what we should be striving to achieve.

[P]ublic discourse must address an eclectic audience, since speaking to an assorted constituency is the only way to bring about widespread changes in thinking and practice. In other words [. . .] public discourse must address the “general public,” and the term public is often taken to encompass all members of a society, or at least a representative microcosm of them (120).

This is the concept that I find important about public intellectualism. In order to get public discourse to include the general public, we don't need to revert to the antiquated notion of a few impactful public intellectuals; we need to reconstruct a new model of public intellectualism, one that gives the public agency in their participation. In the discredited model of public intellectuals, academics were imagined as self-mediated public missionaries, and that is why the model failed. Instead, we need a public intellectualism where the work of academics is mediated by a third party: writers who refuse to self-identify as academics but rather target a popular audience. These intermediary authors take the conversations of academics down from the tower windows and onto airport bookshelves.

Popular writers can influence public participation in democracy. This influence depends on their chosen topics, their methods of research, and the way they frame their prose, but it can be done. Writers who are not academics can choose to focus on the research and discussions taking place in university offices and refereed journals. They can recognize the value and power of those discourses and produce documents that include new readers. These writers can circumvent many of the problems that cultural theorists and composition scholars have identified as valid hurdles to the rosy ideal of public intellectualism and the public sphere.

Due to the limited space of this text, and because I'm a fan of their work, I'm looking to Sarah Vowell and David Quammen as examples. In their writing, I see the potential for a decentralization of power. Neither of these authors identify as scholars in the fields they choose to write about. Nor do they participate in the refereed discourse of

the fields. Their work, however, is based in the rigorous scholarship of academic communities. It also successfully engages a broad readership in the substance of academic work. They are facilitating a form of public intellectualism, but one where the power is seated in the ideas and readers rather than the researchers.

Academic conversations (peer-reviewed journals, lectures, conferences) are fragmented public spheres. They are public, but only those with the right backgrounds actually have any influence over the conversations. Therefore writers who find effective ways of transmitting academic discussions to a general public can help people understand the substance of academic discussions. Granted, reading a book or magazine article is not going to give readers immediate influence; but it can give them digestible and contextualized information. This is a necessary first step for people to participate in public discourse. As I discussed earlier, having this information is not sufficient but it is necessary. If those texts are getting more people to pay attention to research and discussions with political and social implications, then more people will be better informed. At the very least, more people will be aware of subjects that influence their lives. That awareness could empower some people to be motivated to affect political and social discourse. While the “Occupy” movement may be fractious, ill-informed, and virtually impotent, it does suggest that the “general public” (the 99%) would like to have more influence on the trajectory of our nation. If these people had better and more consistent access to influential conversations, they *might* have the opportunity to articulate coherent goals and suggestions. Or they just might have more interesting things to talk about in the drum circle.

Texts that are created outside the academic fold and directed at non-academic readers, like those of Vowell and Quammen, do not seat the power of the ideas in the individual or intellectual. The power is in the text itself. It's in the ideas. What that means is these texts have a very different set of intentions behind them; they derive their power from the engagement of readers rather than the status of the authors. The authors are acting as intermediaries between the professional scholars and the public who funds them. They are *not* the scholars themselves making a case to justify their own importance and employment. This is critical because these authors are recognizing the general value of the scholarly work and choosing to frame the writing of this work so that a large cross section of the society will read it. The authors are then lending some "street cred" to these ideas that would have otherwise never reached most readers. This differs from our concept of the public intellectual because, in this case, a non-scholar is finding these ideas, recognizing them as valuable, and getting other non-professional intellectuals involved. The ideas themselves have the power, not the elite individual telling people what they should know.

The writers themselves do have some interest in the form of capital: They want to sell books. This is how it happens in a capitalist society and most of us are generally happy with the comforts of capitalism. I would argue, however, that intending to sell books does not negate or even minimize the social value of the work. It benefits these authors to find research and scholarship that is truly meaningful to a broad section of society, the broader the better. It is in their interest to find and write about topics with implication for the most possible individuals because those individuals are the target

demographic. These authors are aware that academic discourse covers many subjects that are potentially fascinating once removed from the dense gruel of journal conventions. When these writers successfully sell books that focus on and detail scholarly research, they successfully hurdle the interest barrier. Remember that when I refer to interest I'm not just talking about holding attention for the purpose of entertainment; I'm talking about getting people involved.

While this idea of public intellectualism is a clear departure from Habermas' original notion (that simply *creating an open space* for public dialogue is sufficient for broad agency), it is also not a return to academic journalism. Vowell, Quammen, and other writers doing the kind of work I see as unique and important are not bound by the constraints of classic journalists, nor do they have the same intentions. Journalism that focuses on academic inquiry and publication is most often associated with haste, sensationalism, and reductive thinking. Most professional journalists are usually working under tight deadlines that leave them little time to understand or represent the highly nuanced work of scholars. When journalists do contact researchers in order to gain information for a story, the researchers themselves generally construct the correspondences, which means the journalists become the mouthpieces of the researchers. This is no different than the model of the public intellectual.

I'm not laying blame on journalists here. Newspaper readers expect a very brief summary of a topic rather than a thorough explanation of intentions, methods, conclusions, and limitations. They want simple, clear answers, not thorough explorations and complicated studies. In this way, journalism functions in ways that are irresolvably

different from academia. Because of this, when most journalists deal with topics of academic study, they either misrepresent the work, re-enforce the notion of the public intellectual, or do both.

The work of Vowell and Quammen offers an alternative. Their writing has clear and specific traits that delineate it from the classic journalistic model. The format of Vowell and Quammen's work is closer to that of academic discourse than traditional journalism. These authors' commitment to specificity, authenticity, and accuracy in representation distinguishes them from other journalists. Their work offers readers the opportunity to value, consider, and construct thoughtful ideas.

In an interview with David Quammen, he explained how he viewed the work that he does as different from newspaper journalists.

Most scientists have had a lot of bad experiences with newspaper reporters because newspaper reporters are always in a hurry. They're going to write the story tonight and it's going to be in the newspaper tomorrow. They don't double check; they don't make sure they have everything accurate. Consequently they frequently get things wrong and they embarrass the scientists who they're writing about. But if you're [. . .] an author of books then you have the opportunity to take more time. And scientists, in my experience, are very willing to cooperate with you and value you if you're conscientious about double checking about getting back to them after you've written something and saying 'look here's what I've said, did I get this right or am I confused? Are these facts accurate or not?' And I've done that with my science books (Quammen).

Quammen's conceptualization and execution of his research process is more in line with what we hope for in academia. His goal is to accurately represent the ideas he finds valuable and interesting. Additionally, there is a different degree of rigor in the work of Vowell and Quammen than in most journalists. I use the term rigor with full understanding of the weight it carries in academic communities and assert that these

authors hold themselves to rigorous standards of research and representation that are on par with the demands and expectations of an academic community. They just get to have more fun with the writing process.

I take this very technical or scientific information, present it *accurately* so that readers understand it, but create something that's interesting and entertaining, that's a page turner and not just an instruction manual" (Quammen).

Vowell and Quammen aren't just parroting what other people say with shiny language. They do not convert complex and multifaceted academic research into provocative headlines. They're examining information critically rather than providing simple answers. Simple answers may be easier to write, read, and think about but they encourage passivity. If people are accustomed to having complex situations pre-chewed and digested for them, they cannot participate meaningfully in important public discourse because they don't have anything to say.

In *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*, Gerald Graff suggests that analyzing, interrogating, and learning from conflict is how people can become effective, independent thinkers. He claims that without disagreement, there can be no meaningful discussion. "In this book I argue that the best solution to today's conflicts over culture is to teach the conflicts themselves, making them part of our object of study and using them as a new kind of organizing principle" (12). Whereas journalism, in Graff's view, intends to present simple answers to questions that ignore conflict. Simple answers may be comfortable but they are not empowering. Quammen and Vowell are closer to academia in their commitment to

complexity and meaningful representation. Their work encourages active thought. It presents conflict.

For authors like Quammen and Vowell who choose to construct research narratives with an intention of reaching a public audience, brevity is not an option. Not only must these authors devote significant text to conveying academic work accurately, they must explain concepts that, in a peer-reviewed journal, could be represented with discourse specific terminology. Additionally, these authors have to find very specific ways of generating interest in the material on the part of an audience who does not already have investment in these topics. In other words, these authors have to make people care about things they often think of as dry and uninteresting. Vowell and Quammen often use narrative autobiography for this purpose, doing so requires space and text.

These authors compel their readers to be invested in the worth of the information that they are presenting by contextualizing it in such a way that it is pertinent to their lives. Vowell and Quammen both accomplish this by telling the stories of how they came to understand the meaning and value of their subjects of study. Both of these authors produce documents that successfully draw and hold the attention of readers who previously did not realize that they had any investment in the topic being discussed.

In *Wild Thoughts From Wild Places*, David Quammen relates the story of being trapped underwater in his kayak and then uses that intensely dramatic move to lead the reader into some basic principles of fluid dynamics. The result of this approach is that the reader has a real investment and reason to care about what could otherwise be seen as a

very dry subject. “Instantly I was upside down. The water whomped me and snatched me from all directions. I had one breath of air, gasped in as I’d gone over and good for fifteen or twenty seconds. That, to my best recollection, is when I began wondering seriously about the subject of fluid dynamics” (*WTFWP* 48). Following that gripping narrative, Quammen goes on to explain, in exhaustive detail, many specifics of the scientific study of fluid dynamics, a topic that I, frankly, never thought I would care to learn about.

In *Take The Cannoli: Stories From the New World*, Vowell retraces the Trail of Tears in 21st century America. Most Americans are aware of this event, but a simple awareness is not what Vowell intends; she hopes for a much more pertinent and complex engagement. In this passage, Vowell connects the historically significant events of the past to the situation of the contemporary. She also employs sarcasm and humor. The effect facilitates meaningful interaction between a long-since-past event and the immediate lives of 21st century readers. To do this, Vowell brings us with her as she visits roadside attractions and tourist traps devoted to making a quaint profit from the vague and detached interest that passing motorists might have in the site of one of this country’s most horrific federally sanctioned acts.

Ross’ Landing also functions as Chattanooga’s tourist center. Up the hill from the river is the gigantic Tennessee Aquarium and an IMAX theatre. The place is crawling with tourists—a crowd so generic and indistinguishable from one another they swirled around us as a single T-shirt. One hundred and sixty years ago, thousands of Cherokees came through this site. In the summer of 1838, they were forced onto boats and faced heat exhaustion, and then later a drought that stranded them without water to drink. In the fall, they headed west by foot, eventually trudging barefoot through blizzards. Either way, they perished of starvation, dysentery, diarrhea, and fatigue. A quarter of the tribe was dead (138).

These authors are acting as translators. While they may not self identify as academics; they still perform the function of intermediaries. Neither of them has formal training in the disciplines that they translate (both do have master's degrees but Vowell's is in Art History while Quammen's is in Literature). As non-specialist writers, they are finding academic topics with broad social value and working to articulate them so that other non-specialists will also be able to understand and interact with them. These authors are opening up a new venue for the realization of public intellectualism in its most positive and utopic state: As a way for the worthy ideas being turned and mulled in universities among colleagues to be held and appreciated by a wider audience These readers can then be further empowered if they choose to participate in meaningful discussions. This is important because the discussions in academia are important; "much is at stake in them, as controversies over bilingual education, evolution, and creationism, the new gender and race studies, grade inflation, and the teaching of literature, mathematics, and history extend far beyond the campus" (Graff 19). And the more we can meaningfully involve a broad cross-section of the society in these conversations, the stronger we become individually and collectively, as problem solvers and members of a democracy.

Because of this, I propose a re-vision of public intellectualism. Not a resurrection of the public intellectual as an individual agent of information dissemination to the masses, but a recognition of the importance of a public that is excited by and interested in at least some of the work being done by academics. That excitement and interest can lead

to informed engagement, a bottom-up version of public intellectualism rather than the top-down approach of the public intellectual.

Despite the limitations that have been identified in theories on public sphere, public discourse, and public intellectuals, the idea of public intellectualism remains a worthy goal. If scholars and academics truly value the importance of the work they are doing as well as the value of an interested, informed, and engaged public in a democratic state, we must work to find ways to deconstruct the barriers that exclude non-academics from meaningful academic discourse. To do this we don't need public intellectuals but we do need public intellectualism. Introducing autobiographical narrative as a frame for academic writing is one method of encouraging this version of public intellectualism.

Why Autobiographical Narrative?

People like to read stories about human beings. Even if you're writing about diversity of beetle species or the clinical understanding of Ebola virus or whatever, people still want human beings to be this subject of the story. So I always look for human beings when I write about science—David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

The initial choice to focus this paper on autobiographical narrative was a personal one. I gravitated toward the work of Vowell and Quammen because autobiographical narrative is a genre that resonates with me personally. I have subsequently followed through with critical study. This study has illuminated many of the reasons why this particular genre is an effective engagement tool and lens for many people to interact with academic texts. I have found that my interest is common. Autobiography, in its many different contemporary manifestations, is ubiquitous in 21st century global media.

Because it is a genre that is both popular and comfortable, it is a particularly effective tool. Additionally, as I will demonstrate later in the section on “Transparency”, autobiographical narrative allows for an ethical and realistic presentation of research material in the wake of both the post-enlightenment exhaltation of objectivity and the postmodern rejection of objectivity and recognition of privilege and perspective. But first, I’m going to tell you how I got here and then we’ll back our way into the theory and the validation, because that’s how it actually happened.

Stumbling into Intellectualism

The honest truth . . . is: I get curious about a topic then I set out to learn more about said topic– Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

The most intellectually challenging part of the job was figuring out how to keep the bottle of window cleaner from freezing while washing the outside of the glass doors. Determining a consistent interval of functionality for the spray bottle in cold weather was difficult because it changed depending on the ambient temperature and humidity. If I waited too long and the nozzle froze over, it was a good half an hour before the device became servicable again. Of course running the frozen nozzle under hot water for a few seconds would have solved the problem, but the buildings I cleaned for a living were not equipped with public restrooms. If I wanted to relieve myself, I had to drive to the nearest gas station (not billable hours), or sneak out behind the parking structure and find something to pretend to “fix” while turning a patch of snow yellow. It seemed idiotic to

lose my winter job for peeing behind the building. The job already tested my self-image so I spent a lot of time pressing my knees together and dancing like a supermarket toddler. It was winter in Montana and I had a job doing maintenance for a private community. This was the kind of place where you pay enough money to ensure that your surroundings are always perfectly manicured and shiny, but you don't actually have to *do* anything. In places such as this the hardwood and marble accented boxes that people live in are not called apartments; they are lofts. My job was to keep the communal areas of the lofts clean and functioning. Three days a week my body polished the lobbies until their glass exteriors and mahogany interiors sparkled, vacuumed the elevators and hallways, changed out light bulbs, wrestled dumpsters, and emptied dog waste containers, but my mind was barely involved. This was the only time in my life when I carried a hip-flask. It was during this stint of seasonal employment when I discovered podcasts and, subsequently, the work of Sarah Vowell.

Vowell gained much of her reputation through the popular radio show *This American Life* where she was a contributing editor for eight years. Several of the essays in her second and third books, *Take the Cannoli: Stories From the New World*, and *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*, were first heard as segments on *This American Life*. For me, *TAL* was kind of like narrative methadone. Despite the intellectual withdrawal drudgery of my days, I was able to sample small hits of writers making sense of lives. I was not personally able to mine brilliant epiphanies from vacuuming piles of dead flies from stairwell corners. Instead I listened to other people's meaningful stories. I quickly

exhausted the backlog of episodes available online. And since *TAL* only produces one show a week, I had to find alternative suppliers for my habit.

If you've ever listened to podcasts, you know that they often have some corporate sponsor or another that is appropriately geared toward their listening audience. *TAL* is supported by an online audiobook source and they give specific authorial suggestions for listeners. They also had a special deal where listeners could get a free audiobook. The ad suggested that I might like *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*, and I figured 'hey, it's free.' I'm a little embarrassed to admit that a major source of my graduate research came from a podcast advertisement, but that's the truth.

In Vowell's work I discovered a balance of wit, cultural insight, humor, engrossing personal narrative, and historical information. Since I'm admitting to slightly embarrassing truths, I should also tell you that virtually everything that I know about Presidents Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley, as well as the Massachusetts Bay Colony of pilgrims, the Trail of Tears, and the Salem Witch Trials came from Vowell. I'm pretty certain these topics were covered in the U.S. history course I took as a high school junior but all I retained from that experience was how terrible my teacher's toupee was. If I got anything out of that class it was the certainty that I'll never wear a toupee; I'll just age gracefully with Rogaine.

Had Vowell's work been traditional historical scholarship, I would *still* not be knowledgeable about any of these things. This is not because I am intellectually deficient or insufficiently curious; it turns out I am fascinated by these topics. Without the autobiographical narrative frame of Vowell, however, I would not have realized that

interest. My days of scrubbing and polishing would likely have degenerated into the ennui of sports news podcasts. I would never have realized what Vowell later told me in an interview; “the past is just as dramatic and riveting as the present.”

PART 3: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Narrative is Dangerous

I . . . take pride in myself as a stylist and as an entertainer— Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

I'm not the first person to notice that reading narrative is more enjoyable than reading standard academic prose. This is an old conversation. In the debate about narrative in scholarship, narrative has lost. Narrative lost because, despite the limitations of objectivity, rational logic continues to be the most accepted tool we have for evaluating information (at least in the West). So texts that focus on supporting their claims through a disembodied sequence of events reported by an expert seem more trustworthy than texts that represent individual human experiences.

I'm not willing to dismiss narrative so easily. My stubbornness may be because I'm unwilling to accept that the reading I enjoy cannot have intellectual value, or that reading informative texts cannot be enjoyable. I admit that narrative scholarship can be dangerous because stories are powerful. They are the general ordering tools by which we attempt to make sense of who we are, why we're here, and where we're going, "We live our lives as stories—or as "narratives," as the literary scholars prefer to say" (Rodden 148). The danger here is that well-crafted narrative can make anything "feel" true.

Narrative, as a writing form, is dominant in literature for a reason. Literature is the realm of the fictional. The goal of fiction is to bring the reader into the *experience* of characters. When the reader experiences a character's storyline, that character "feels" real. Narrative is the optimal tool for making the unreal believable because humans, as

“story-telling animals”, interpret everything that happens to us, and around us, through narrative. “We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.” (Hardy 5). Because the narrative form is so similar to our own experience of consciousness, it can make fiction seem real. “Narrative when done with skill feels true in some strangely automatic way. It is very close to being the basic means by which the human mind organizes experience (Leeman 797). Narratives create a structure that the human mind automatically follows, with characters to whom we can relate, and sequences of events that offer us a seemingly natural ordering and understanding.

This makes narrative dangerous. Narrative has the potential to dress up false information. The same can be said, however, for expository texts and research-based scholarship. The difference is that narrative is better at hiding BS because *anyone* can pick up a narrative and experience the intention of the author.

This is not true for texts published in refereed journals. We put more trust in articles that have survived the peer review process. Those articles are not written as narratives. This presents us with a bit of a red-herring. Perhaps narrative itself is not untrustworthy but the venues in which narrative is considered appropriate. My suggestion in this chapter is that all information represented in texts is framed according to some conventions of rationality and that these conventions are social agreements. Every discipline has rules for what counts as valid and what is unacceptable conjecture or editorialization.

Let's think about this public intellectualism goal that I've laid out as a sort of discipline itself. Let's assume that autobiographical narrative, in *this* discipline, is a valid mode of presenting information. This does not mean that we toss out rationality and have a free-for-all. Claims here must be based on evidence, the same sorts of evidence that would count in professional journals. But let's think of autobiographical narrative in terms of its potential strengths as much as its potential dangers.

Autobiographical narrative can be a frame, a way of presenting whatever it is that the author is trying to get across in a way that will be successful with the audience. All writing is framed in some manner so as to be most effective: be it an article in *Science*, *The American Historical Review*, or *US Weekly*. The difference is that autobiographical narrative is not just a frame; autobiographical narrative is consciousness. It is the universal frame.

Autobiography as Consciousness

Objectivity is difficult to achieve at best or impossible. I think it's sort of a false god— David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

Some theorists and historians claim that the rise of the bourgeois and the acquisition of leisure shaped the way we experience our inner selves (Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 90). Here I must disagree. I understand inner-dialogue as more biological than social. Thinking about ourselves is like walking upright, not like speaking with an accent. Leisure and capital gave us more time to do this narcissistic thinking but that inner space was not fundamentally reshaped, just allowed to take over. Existential thinking and contemplation of selfhood are easier to do when you're not being chased by

a large predator or forced to scrape rocky soil and do battle for a feudal lord. I admit that. But I'm pretty sure that the guy running from a saber-toothed cat was acutely aware of his inner self. I do agree that once people had time for activities other than work (or running for their lives) and when they had income to purchase tools such as pen and ink, they were able to compose accounts of their interior experience. So we don't get much in the way of self-representation in texts until the eighteenth century (Sidonie and Watson). While Paul Eakin is correct when he says "Modern autobiography seems to have emerged concurrently with—and is perhaps a symbolic manifestation of—people's acquisition of a distinctly personal space in which to live . . . in which . . . the bourgeois values of privacy, intimacy, and 'home' could flower (*Touching the World* 100), there is strong evidence to suggest that the concept of self-narrative is more a neurobiological construct than a social one.

In 2008 Eakin published *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. In it he combines literary theory, psychology, and neurobiology to present an exploration of the role of autobiography in identity construction. His claim is that our sense of self, our very notion of personhood *is* our narrative. It's not that we have a consciousness that interprets narrative; our consciousness and our narrative are one in the same. There is no separation between the psychological and the somatic in autobiographical construction.

Eakin draws from many different researchers and theorists (literary, biological, psychological) to build this argument. The work of Antonio Damasio is central to his conclusions. Damasio is a professor of neuroscience at USC and is working to locate the

physical parts of the brain that account for selfhood and determine the biological function of a unified self. Eakin, by looking at Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens*, presents an idea that is utterly counterintuitive about the nature of self and autobiography. He disputes the idea of homunculus, the idea that there is a center of consciousness in each of us, a "little man" in our brains. Neurobiology has not located a consciousness center in the human brain but shown that consciousness is the result of many different parts of the brain working in concert. Therefore there is no center, no place in the brain where consciousness resides. Despite the fact that you experience your "self" and your consciousness as a singular and cohesive whole with a central processor, Damasio's ideas suggest that this experience is an illusion and that illusion is what we think of as "self".

The premise of Damasio's theory of self is "the idea that a sense of self [is] an indispensable part of the conscious mind" (7). Self is a feeling, specifically "a feeling of knowing," "a feeling of what happens." And what does happen? The body responds to its encounters with objects in its environment, and it also responds to its own changing internal states. And *self* is Damasio's name for the feeling of awareness of knowing that these events are taking place. To be conscious is to be endowed with this feeling of knowing that is self (68, emphasis in original).

Eakin goes on to explain that the homunculus idea assumes that there is a "teller", a center in the brain where the self resides. That center interprets information and creates a narrative that we then experience. Both Damasio and Eakin claim there is no teller. There is only the "teller-effect" which is what makes the idea of homunculus so appealing; it "feels" right. We don't experience consciousness as a collection of separate parts coming together to create a narrative of self. We just experience the narrative of self, which gives the appearance of unity (75).

[F]or Damasio, narrative is biological before it is linguistic and literary: it denotes a natural process, the “imagic representation of sequences of brain events” in prelinguistic, “wordless stories about what happens to an organism immersed in an environment . . . self and narrative are so intimately linked that to speak of one is to reciprocally speak of the other; I believe the same holds true for autobiography” (75).

Autobiography *is* consciousness. There is no interaction between consciousness and self-narrative, they’re the same thing. This makes sense from an evolutionary standpoint, even if it seems counter to our lived experience. The “self is not some abstract philosophical concept but rather a name for a feeling embedded in the physiological processes necessary for survival. Self then, for Damasio, is first and last *of* and *about* the body; so to speak of the *embodied* self is redundant, for there is no other” (Eakin 73, emphasis in original). And if we can accept autobiography as self, if we can look at the construction of autobiography as a biological imperative rather than just a social norm, we begin to recognize the depth of its importance and influence. As Eakin says: “When we write autobiography and when we read it, we repeat in our imaginations the rhythms of identity experience that autobiographical narratives describe” (79).

Autobiography is not a choice. It is not *just* a literary construct. Autobiography is a frame of understanding that we all know on a biological level. It is still a frame; framing cannot be avoided, but it is a frame that everyone can relate to. As a result, autobiographical narrative is the perfect frame for encouraging public intellectualism. This frame does not need to be learned. It is *the* natural default that we all use to interpret experience.

Interpreting Experience

I will use objectivity as a tool to learn more about a subject– Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

Interpreting experience *is* the function of all academic study. We're trying to make sense of the world around and within us and then we're trying to convince others of the validity of that interpretation. That's the bedrock of study; it's the whole point. In order to do this, we need to construct some agreements about *how* we interpret experience in order to draw inferences or conclusions. We create agreements on what counts as evidence and how that evidence can be used. The specifics of these agreements are some of the primary differences between academic disciplines. When you study a field, you're not just learning the information that field covers, you're learning the ways that field collects and interprets information (or experience). This is also one of the reasons why most research is so difficult for non-experts to understand and use. It is one of the major challenges to public intellectualism.

Walter R. Fisher's article, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*, explains that scholarship has focused on framing information according to what he calls "the rational world paradigm" and suggests the value and possibility of recognizing what he calls "the narrative paradigm".

In order to clarify terminology, I will start with Fisher's definition of the term 'paradigm'. "By paradigm, I refer to a representation designed to formalize the structure of a component of experience and to direct understanding and inquiry into the nature and

functions of that experience—in this instance, the experience of human communication” (376).

Because Fisher is a communication scholar, his article is focused on how humans communicate. In order to talk about communication (an experience), he says we first have to agree to some rules for talking about communication. This definition of paradigm gets at the heart of exactly what I have previously explained: that every discipline has to “formalize the structure of a component of experience” in order to talk about it. Fisher goes on to argue that the “rational world paradigm” is the general method for evaluating “educated” Western thinking and discourse. It has been the unquestioned rule set of our construction of understanding “since Aristotle’s *Organon* became foundational to Western thought” (378). And, I would argue, has been the source of our culture’s fetishization of objectivity. This fetish culminated in the Enlightenment and went relatively unquestioned until the emergence of modernism.

Fisher covers a lot of ground in this article. What’s important to this conversation is that Fisher does a nice job of calling out the Western ideal of logic as socially constructed, rather than universally true, without rejecting logic entirely. He then explains that the rational world paradigm is not innate. It must be trained, and therefore drastically limits the population of people who can be considered rational. A person cannot be rational unless that person has been highly specialized and rigorously trained. This should all be sounding familiar. These are the same arguments I made earlier about who gets to participate in public discourse. “Where the rational world paradigm is an ever-present part of our consciousness because we have been educated into it, the

narrative impulse is part of our very being because we acquire narrativity in the natural process of socialization” (383). According to Fisher, you have to be educated about the rational world paradigm. So, if you are not specialized (as an academic), you *can't* inform yourself about important topics, much less have a voice in influential public discourse. Where I disagree with Fisher is where I agree with Damasio and Eakin. I don't think narrativity is acquired through socialization. As I said in the previous chapter, it is biological.

If we recognize that the rational world paradigm is not universal or absolute, which we have had to do as a result of modernism, then we should also recognize the value of other paradigms, specifically the narrative paradigm. Fisher suggests that narrative, as a way of interpreting experience, *is* universal and therefore much more accessible to a broader audience.

Recall the danger and potential of narrative. Because everyone can understand it, follow it, and connect to it, narrative can get readers to believe ideas that would be ridiculous when presented in other frames. Stephen King gets millions of people to suspend their disbelief of alien clowns, demon cars, and rampaging suburban dogs. These things don't happen; but in narrative we can believe that they do. Narrative texts are also naturally engaging to read, so no matter what they have to say or how unfounded their claims are, people will still read them. This is not true of classic “rational world paradigm” texts. Unless they have something really important to say that other people have validated, nobody reads them.

The narrative paradigm, according to Fisher, recognizes the limitations of external Truth without rejecting the grounding principles of truth. In other words, we as humans are trapped in our individual subjective experiences, so we do not have access to external Truths or universal Truths. We do, however, need to construct logical order for the world around us and we do that through agreed upon narratives. “[G]ood reasons are the stuff of stories, the means by which humans realize their nature as reasoning-valuing animals. The philosophical ground of the narrative paradigm is ontology. The materials of the narrative paradigm are symbols, signs of consubstantiation, and good reasons, the communicative expressions of social reality” (383). Fisher is asking us to move away from an objectivist demand for external “Truths” and accept that we construct our “truths” based on shared understanding of experiences that we interpret and evaluate through agreed upon guidelines.

An agreed upon rationality is not the same as relativism. Fisher’s text does not suggest that any interpretation of truth is as good as any other. I will repeatedly stress that Fisher did not advocate relativism and neither do I. He suggests that we recognize narrative as useful for understanding human attempts to make meaning of the world in which we exist, just as useful (if not more so) as any other paradigm of interpretation. I’m saying that a narrative *autobiographical* frame can be as rational as any other. Fisher manages to recognize the limitations of human understanding as necessarily constrained by the limitations of individual consciousness. He does not, however, descend into the anarchy of relativism. If everything is relative, and we have no hope of constructing truth, then we can never progress, problem solve, or build on each other’s

understanding. Relativism negates the idea of progress and neither I, nor Fisher, is willing to accept that.

The narrative paradigm does not negate the possibility of external Truth, it simply recognizes the inability of an individual to internalize or represent external Truth. To quote Doug Downs, “I cannot absolutely prove the laws of physics, but I trust that airplanes will still fly.” The narrative paradigm recognizes that we create truths (as opposed to discovering Truths) as the best possible explanations for why things happen (or don’t). We don’t need to ignore rational thinking to employ the narrative paradigm. Fisher states: “Rationality from this perspective involves, as I have proposed, the principles of narrative probability [the shared experiential evidence that constitutes a coherent story] and narrative fidelity [stories remaining true to previously lived experiences and constructed truths]” (384).

Fisher’s narrative paradigm is similar to current views of knowledge construction in the philosophy of science. Contemporary philosophies of science see knowledge and theory as continuously evolving narratives that explain phenomena (both internal and external) according to what model best explains the occurrence. Scientists observe events, compare those events with what they already think is true, and propose theories. The guidelines for judging the validity of these models are socially agreed upon conceptions of rationality. These guidelines, like the models themselves, are not static. They change as ideas and agreements shift. The philosophy of scientific realism adheres to the narrative paradigm. “Scientific realism represents a view of scientific theory which holds that . . . science aims to give us, in its theories, a *true story* about what the world is

like. This means that a scientific realist believes that the theory, observations, and nonobservable notions about nature are one, intertwined system of *evolving knowledge*” (Pickett 25 emphasis added).

Science is, after all, nothing if not fluid. In *Ecological Understanding: The Nature of Theory and the Theory of Nature*, the authors set out to summarize the work being done by scientific philosophers and describe how understanding these philosophies is useful for practicing ecologists. The implicit message behind this book is that most classically trained scientists (or at least ecologists) are not informed about the philosophy of knowledge construction. It is no wonder that narrative is ignored at best and often maligned in scientific texts. There remains a disjunction between those who study the abstract ideas behind the collection and classification of “real-world” phenomena, and those who actually do the collecting and the classifying. Mending this disjunction is the entire point of *Ecological Understanding*. When the authors state: “scientific understanding is generated as a public process” (35), this is essentially the same point Fisher is making when he says: “The materials of the narrative paradigm are symbols, signs of consubstantiation, and good reasons, the communicative expressions of social reality” (383).

Because Fisher’s concept fits the ways that science is able to function in the wake of postmodern attacks on objectivity and “science” as a cultural construct, his ideas are in line with the practice of scientific inquiry. Narrative, as a really broad term describing a temporal organization of events, is being utilized in science. I’m not saying that scientific journal texts are written as conventional narratives. They’re not. What I’m saying is that

if we compare Fisher's idea of the narrative paradigm and contemporary philosophies of scientific understanding, we see that narrative is not the enemy of rationality. Scientific realism, aiming to create a "true story about what the world is like" (Pickett 25), matches exactly with Fisher's claim that "recounting and accounting for stories we tell ourselves and each other [is how we] establish a meaningful life-world" and "each mode of recounting and accounting for is but a way of relating a "truth" (381).

Scholars in general, and scientists in particular, are constantly oscillating between "concepts and phenomena" (Pickett 37). They are constructing connections between their mental models of how things work (concepts/narratives) and their observations and data (phenomena/experiences). The process of *all* academic inquiry is the dialogue between concept and phenomena in order to create models (narratives) of a social reality. Narrative texts are not inherently misleading or skewed any more than any other textual frame. If a text is misleading or false, that falsity cannot be blamed on the frame. Doing so would be like vilifying all Thai food after getting sick from eating one dish. The problem is tainted ingredients, not cultural cuisine.

The point of this chapter is to examine how we interpret experience and to try and make sense of our lives and the world we live in. Fisher is far from the only scholar to wrestle with that concept. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson present a comprehensive and very readable discussion of the centrality of narrative and metaphor in understanding human experience in *Metaphors We Live By*. "Metaphor [a sort of narrative] is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices and spiritual awareness. These

endeavors of the imagination are not devoid of rationality; since they use metaphor, they employ an imaginative reality” (193).

This book presents a discussion of how we construct systems of understanding and argues that metaphor is a central and very real tool we use to understand and communicate our internal experiences: our autobiographies. This text argues that metaphor is one of the primary tools that we have for making sense of our experiences, the ultimate goal of all inquiry, academic or otherwise.

Making Me Into a Text and That Text Into Me

I want to be writing about people as a way of writing about science and one of the people who gets pulled in to the story then sometimes for me is David Quammen– David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

Three years before I entered graduate school and began studying theories about autobiography I was huddled the middle of Katmai National Park on a rivershed of Bristol Bay, Alaska listening to the rain. I lived in that tent four months of the year—for three years.

When I wasn't listening to the rain bongo on my tent, I was working in it. As a guide at a remote sport-fishing lodge, I was partially responsible for maintaining a micro civilization in an utterly wild landscape. We worked twelve to eighteen hours a day shoring up the illusion of civility in this wilderness outpost for wealthy clients. They lived like 21st century, developed nation humans with hot showers, flush toilets, electricity, and salt-crusted prime rib. Of course, the showers were heated with propane flown in on unsteady float-planes necessitating precarious landings and take-offs (I saw

two planes crash in three seasons); the flush toilets “flushed” into deep holes in the ground that we dug with picks and shovels through permafrost and river rock; The electricity came from a gas generator whose rumblings carried miles out across the expanse of tundra and whose gas was driven nearly seventy miles by boat in sloshing plastic containers; and the prime-rib came from domestic cattle hundreds of miles away while moose and caribou crossed the river in front of the lodge almost daily.

In that tent listening to the rain—it was almost always raining—I began composing pages. On those pages I smeared the self that I was assembling daily. This self was wholly different from the suburban softness I had known much of my life. Across some pages I composed an idealized version of me. On others I criticized this creation: this mushfake Miles who pretended to know how to fix outboard engines and claimed to have no fear of brown bears. I was simultaneously a “new” person, assembled to fit my surroundings, and my previous understanding of myself. Those two Mileses didn’t always get along.

I filled pages: lots of them. It’s amazing how much you can get done without any access to media. I wrote as a way of cataloging my daily adventures.

No.

I wrote to explore the seams of my split self.

Maybe both?

No.

I wrote just to write; I don’t care what you think.

That’s a lie. I do care. I wrote for validation.

I became increasingly curious about who I was in a given moment. During the day I was an **Alaskan Fishing Guide**, confident, responsible for the wellbeing of powerful office-building men—it was almost always men—who thrust themselves into my care with a series of plane rides and bloated checks. I swallowed the expectations of that role; they scratched going down and sometimes made me nauseas. I carried a short-barreled shotgun with the plug removed.

Five shells and one in the hole (the hole? Who the fuck are you? Do you mean the chamber? Are you going to *shoot a bear!*?)

Birdshot, birdshot, buckshot, buckshot, slug, slug (pray I never get to buckshot.)

I also carried a bag full of flies, lures, lines, hooks, and a sense of aggressive purpose that resonated just a little too close to the archetype of the white male: There was a lot of manifest destiny over anadromous species and unscarred landscape.

But at night, I was still the liberal arts educated self-conscious intellectual. I could pontificate on the roots of neo-colonialism and the implications of the mentality of western expansionism. Though such conversations would not have gone over too well with my co-workers. Men—again they were all men—in whose hands I trusted my life on a regular basis but who often spoke in racial slurs and patched their lonely egos with misogyny. Until I took that job I had never even held a firearm, much less pointed one at a living creature. Now I had to carry a gun with sufficient ease to inspire confidence in grown men fishing fifty yards from feeding bruins. My mom wouldn't let me play high school football six years before.

In between the tension of differing projections of self, I hammered out a physical presence on my keyboard in the bright, Alaskan summer nights. In that tent, laying with slippery identity constructions, I wrote my first autobiography. Or, perhaps, it wrote me. It wasn't exactly intentional. I was just writing all the mess, wrestling with myself across pages while recounting my daily mishaps.

If asked at the time what I would like to be, what self I wished to inhabit, it would have been the self that I funneled into the keyboard. A self that resided somewhere between the two polarities of **Alaskan Fishing Guide** and liberal arts educated self-conscious intellectual. Those writings eventually became a book: *The Alaska Chronicles*. And that book, that autobiographical narrative, was both a recounted story of my life and a constructed identity that I came to inhabit. In writing that story I rewrote myself. The story was both representation and construction. It was simultaneously a "true" account of my life and a tactile artifact that allowed me to become who I had only imagined previously. I did become a fly fishing guide and an outdoor writer. I became both of those imagined selves. But first I wrote that person in an autobiographical narrative space.

The Centrality of "Rules"

Word gets out if you have a reputation for being sloppy and sensationalistic – David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

We need to talk about rules. Autobiographical narrative texts do not deal with truth any differently than other texts. In any construction of text, we need rules to

establish what counts as evidence or logic. As Keith Grant-Davie explained in *Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents*, we need constraints to make texts work.

If my anecdote about being a fishing guide in Alaska turned out to be total bullshit, how would that affect your reading of this text? If you stopped right now, Googled me, and discovered that I had never written any book about guiding in Alaska, would you believe anything else I said? I doubt it. Writers who publish non-fiction without adhering to narrative fidelity suffer steep consequences. Just ask James Frey, the author of *A Million Little Pieces*. He got publicly chastised on Oprah; that's the ultimate cultural condemnation.

Autobiographical narrative texts, just like academic texts, are governed by very specific expectations and rules. They do not allow for anarchy or a pure and total subjectivity in writing. I don't have to make these rules up; they already exist. We expect narratives that are "autobiographical" to be "true". This is why my distinction about *autobiographical narrative* as a frame for scholarship is so important. We expect narratives to be fictional; we expect autobiographical narratives to be true: to represent experiences that fit with agreeable evidence.

Eakin describes some of the rules associated with self-narratives (his term for autobiographies.) "Talking about ourselves is also a kind of genre, as it turns out, with rules and penalties . . . in self-narration, the culture's fundamental values are at stake" (22). Eakin's ideas about rules for autobiography fit with Fisher's statement that "narratives . . . must stand the tests of probability and fidelity" (385). These ideas are compatible with the contemporary philosophies of scientific study outlined previously.

“[S]cientific understanding is generated as a public process” (Pickett 35). In fact this idea of “rules” or socially established norms to which we adhere in order to present our ideas (our narratives, our very *selves*) is what allows academic discourse to exist. Though the specifics of the constraints are different, this basic idea is true in all scholarly discourse. While we have to figure out different rules for different disciplines, all communication has rules. We learn this early on. There are significant penalties for individuals whose self-narratives don’t conform to the rules. We call these people insane.

Eakin aims to explore the rules that govern autobiography as both a literary genre and a method of self-construction. His argument is that, contrary to some opinion, self-narration is not entirely at the whim, desire, or perspective of the author. “[O]ur sense of autonomy, of total control, is something of an illusion when it comes to talking about ourselves. The source of our narrative identities . . . is other people” (25). But if we are willing to accept Eakin’s idea of autobiography as consciousness, we see that, though our self is our autobiography, we need other people to validate those selves as “real”. This is how we construct an approximation of objectivity through social compact, and it’s just like the rules that dictate rationality in all academic discourse. The specific rules are different, we accept different evidence in autobiographies than we do in academic journals, but the basic premise the same.

Objectivity, as used by scientific philosophy, history, literary theory, and narrative paradigm, has a place in the interpretation of autobiography. Autobiography refers not only to a literary form but an essential construction of self (Damasio, Eakin, Fisher, Pickett, Smith and Watson). My point is that we maintain our subjective selves

(autobiographies, I-narratives, self-narratives) according to agreed upon norms or “truths”. This is also how we go about establishing rules for rational discourse in every academic discipline. So self-narrative is the primary source of our habit of constructing socially agreed upon rationality. If we believe Damasio, this habit is not learned but biological. It is possibly rooted in our evolutionary structures. Autobiography can help non-scholars understand and connect to scholarship. The challenge for the author is to establish and follow rules.

This is also explained in *Metaphors We Live By*. Lakoff and Johnson propose the concept of the experientialist synthesis, which nicely sums up this idea of constructed rationality—they call it “*imaginative rationality*”—that exists at the heart of all these rule systems. These constructed rationalities (paradigms) give us firm ground from which to approach topics of inquiry but recognize that subjective experience exists as a real limitation that prevents our attainment of pure objective “Truth”. Their claim is that metaphors “unite reason and imagination” (193). In this case metaphor is being used broadly as conceptual representation of experience. This fits with narrative paradigm, scientific philosophy, historical scholarship, literary studies, and the conception of autobiography established by Eakin.

An experientialist approach also allows us to bridge the gap between the objectivist and subjectivist myths about impartiality and the possibility of being fair and objective . . . We have seen that truth is relative to understanding . . . This does not mean that there are no truths; it means that truth is relative to our conceptual system, which is grounded in, and constantly tested by, our experiences and those of other members of our culture in our daily interactions with other people and with our physical and cultural environments” (Lakoff 193).

All texts represent the experiences of authors. This is just as true of texts in the sciences as it is in the humanities. The reason these texts appear so different is that they represent ideas using different paradigms. But make no mistake, all effective texts follow rules. Scholarship itself is just a distillation of the I-narratives of the researcher(s). These I-narratives have been shaped to fit into the agreed upon norms that scaffold the rationality of their intended audiences. I argue that the more universal I-narrative construction, that of the narrative autobiographical format, has unique value because any reader is already familiar with the structures of rationality. Almost any reader can access it and recognize if and how it resonates as “truthful” or “rational”. It is this universality, along with the agency it gives readers to decide if it fits for them as “true”, that makes narrative autobiography so attractive to me.

Autobiographical narratives are a subset of narrative. This distinction is important because autobiography is already held to a rational standard. These narratives are often engaging to read. Even though I’ve just used a bunch of space trying to convince you that autobiography is not so different from exposition, it really does all come back to the enjoyment of reading for me. Autobiographies (so long as they’re well-written) are usually fun to read.

Intermission (Feel Free to Skip this if You
Don’t Need It. I Need It, As the Writer)

While I was writing that last part, I took regular breaks and read from Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. If you don’t have an English degree, you’ve likely never encountered Barthes’s fantastic little book. I won’t stray too far into his literary

criticism here but I'll give you a few gems and hopefully they will act as a nice break for you as they did for me. Barthes says:

I am offered a text. This text bores me. It might be said to *prattle*. The prattle of the text is merely that foam of language which forms by the effect of a simple need of writing. Here we are not dealing with perversion but demand. The writer of this text employs an unweaned language: Imperative, automatic, unaffectionate, a minor disaster of static (those milky phonemes which the remarkable Jesuit, van Ginnekin, posited between writing and language): these are the motions of ungratified sucking of undifferentiated orality, intersecting the orality which produces the pleasures of gastrosophy and of language. You address yourself to me so that I may read you, but I am nothing to you except this address; in your eyes, I am the substitute for nothing, for no figure (hardly that of the mother); for you I am neither a body nor even an object (and I couldn't care less: I am not the one whose soul demands recognition), but merely a field, a vessel for expansion, It can be said that after all you have written this text quite apart from bliss; and this prattling text is then a frigid text, as any demand is frigid until desire, until neurosis forms in it (5 emphasis in original).

I've tried to avoid frigid prattling here; I hope this text has equal pleasure in its grain. Prattling is after all "the effect of a simple need of writing". If you think I prattled here it was in order to advocate the importance of pleasure and information together. The heart of this paper is the value and necessity of bliss in reading, even if that reading has a wider purpose than bliss alone.

This is a call to recognize writers. (*Writers!*) Authors who are finding ways to turn topics that are often treated as "a minor disaster of static" and mold them into objects that engender bliss in readers. Don't get lost in prattle and forget about those writers (or this writer), who advocate for bliss, for pleasure. I am, after all, piecing together all of this "foam of language" as a logical imposition on a subjective experience. When I read Vowell and Quammen, I experience joy. I also happen to find myself immersed in

academic topics, so I know these are not mutually exclusive. That experience resides at the center of this paper; it is the motivation for utterance; it begs not to be lost or forgotten.

You may be asking yourself about this intermission as an authorial choice. Why is he doing this? It seems odd, inappropriate. I am doing this partly for me and partly for you, my imagined reader who is, really, just my own projection of myself as a reader. We all write for the readers we assume exist, the readers who approach and appreciate texts in the same ways we do. I needed to bring myself back to the heart of the matter, back to the narrative center, back to the author as a character. That's all I can hope to be for you, a character who is worth experiencing.

Actually, I hope to be a character who is interesting enough to keep you moving through the shoreline "foam of language" and theory, into the arc and heave of narrative swells. If you've ever surfed or just played in the waves, you should know what I'm talking about. In order to get out to the gliding bliss of pitching and heaving walls of surface tension, you have to push, dive, struggle, and sometimes gasp through the foam of broken waves. It's work. It's exhausting. But once you get there, you can take a moment and bob just outside of the voracious grip of tide and breaker. You can rest there; look out at the finely stitched seam of ocean and sky. You can ponder the arc of the earth or just enjoy the briny embrace. And then, when you are ready and you see your wave building toward you, you can turn and paddle, push all your strength and energy forward until you are picked up and carried back into the weightless crush of foam. You can do it all over again.

So take a moment. Bob. Think. Do whatever you wish. Remember that I am exposing as much of myself as I can here so that you, the reader, can get a sense of my perspective, my character, my biases, my strengths and flaws. You already know that my process for choosing this topic of study was anything but scientific or objective. Perhaps that negates my findings for you. If so, that's fine. You're probably long gone by now anyway.

You also know that I have spent much of my adult life feeling like an outsider to the world of academia, trying to peer over the fence of dense, lifeless prose and see what cool things are going on in there. I have investment, *interest*, in this topic. Particularly as I see us slide further into a culture of partisanship reinforcing divisions: republican vs. democrat, liberal vs. conservative, academic vs. layman, scientist vs. humanist, theist vs. atheist, blue collar vs. white collar. This text is my own tiny little rebellion against that trend.

I will finish the section as I began it: with Barthes. "The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*. This proof exists: it is writing. Writing is: the science of the various blisses of language (6 emphasis in original). I hope this text can prove that it desires you, despite its necessary functionality.

PART 4: HOW TEXTS CAN INFORM AND ENTERTAIN

Kicking and Screaming

There is a tension between presenting scientific information, technical information, accurately and being artistic, being lively, being funny, being autobiographical– David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

I enrolled in graduate school prepared to be defensive. I showed up heavy on confidence and light on knowledge. Not the best way to begin a period of apprenticeship. I knew that I was a good writer; I had published a book. Thousands of people (okay maybe more like hundreds) were willing to pay money to read what I had to say. The problem was, in the arena of professional scholars, I didn't know what I was talking about. I moved into my florescent cubicle ready to advocate for readable scholarship, and expected praise for doing so. Like no one had ever thought of this before and they were all just waiting around for me to arrive and show them the light.

I should have read the texts I was assigned and tried understand their intellectual value. I didn't. I couldn't get over being annoyed because I thought the writing was unnecessarily convoluted. This was partially because I am stubborn and seek intellectual conflict. (Strangely I avoid emotional conflict at all costs.) I was also unpracticed at reading academic prose, so I felt insulted by the reading experience. I felt like the authors were trying to make *me* feel stupid, that this exclusion was intentional and unnecessary, even personal. These academics were all out to get people like me. They thought they were so smart; I was going to show them.

During the second week I came to class armed with a quote that I felt validated

my perspective perfectly. The quote defines rhetorical situations as: “a complex of persons, events, objects and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (Bitzer 382).

Pause.

Go back and re-read that quote aloud, to yourself. What happens for you? I feel wonkish every time I say it, and I have read that quote to four different groups of undergraduate students. What’s worse is that I now *understand* the function of that quote because I have come to recognize that rhetorical situations are *really* complicated. Not like quantum physics complicated, more like internal combustion complicated. Most of us ride in automobiles but couldn’t explain how the little parts and pieces release and direct energy to push metal boxes at 80 miles an hour. Similarly, we’re surrounded by the complexities of human interaction, but few of us know how to pick apart what’s really going on. My point is that my walking into class that day prepared to argue over the language in the article was kind of like a poet walking into a mechanic’s shop and complaining that the service manual is for his car is lacking engaging imagery.

My professor responded by challenging me to do it myself. If I was so confident that there was a simpler and more direct way of articulating these ideas, then I should write it. Explaining rhetorical situations in simple terms turned out to be much more difficult than I imagined. I *did* write a much shorter and more user-friendly interpretation of “Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents” but failed to capture the nuance and depth of the original. I wrote and re-wrote that exercise throughout the semester. Each

time I would triumphantly lay it on my professor, and each time he would compose an eloquent explanation of all that my version was missing.

I never did succeed in that attempt, but it was not a failure. From that experience I was able to work toward this paper. I was forced (begrudgingly) to see that academics aren't being intentionally obtuse in their writing (at least not always). They're not *trying* to exclude a general readership (at least most aren't.) That exclusion just happens. There is no organization of devious scholars plotting to keep the lowly masses away from their valuable information. It's not that Bond movie nefarious. The truth of the matter is that most academics would love to include more readers in their work, the difficulty is figuring out how.

The ideas behind this paper started wicking into my head that semester. I knew that I had read texts that engaged me (a non-academic) in thoroughly researched topics. And I also knew that there was a world of stylistic difference between those texts and the ones I was encountering as a graduate student. Through reading about composition studies, I learned that the keys to understanding these texts were audience and constraints (Grant-Davie). These two types of documents (research for academics vs. research for non-academics), while similar in their intent, (both work to inform their audiences about rigorous research) were drastically different in their constructions (constraints) because they were targeting different audiences. If I couldn't single-handedly change the conventions of academic discourse, (and really didn't want to) then I could study these writers who are bridging these two worlds and try to learn more about what they do.

I've already told you how I came to the work of Sarah Vowell. I discovered David Quammen at nearly the same point in my life. It was during the early, swooning, trying to be impressive, stages of a romantic relationship. We were exchanging books and writers, an undertaking so subtly important that it is my contemporary version of making a mix-tape. You can't just grab any books off your shelf and hand them over; this requires thought, calculation. The drive to appear well read without being bookish; the desire to impress with lesser known authors without being random or desperate, these are important. I gave her Justin Cronin; she gave me David Quammen. I'm a writer with a keen interest in salmonids; she's a fisheries ecologist with a passion for prose.

I'm not sure what role the narcotic thrill of hormones played in my first impression of that book but, as I was falling for her, I was developing a serious literary crush on Quammen. Upon reading the first essay, I was hooked (and since it was an essay loosely focused around trout fishing, this pun is appropriate). I should also mention that I was in the process of performing self-image cosmetic surgery at that point in my life, the same reconstruction of self that I undertook in writing *The Alaska Chronicles*. I had moved to Montana in search of mountains, rivers, and trout, shaking off the shackles of the predetermined future I felt extrinsically compelled to pursue after graduating from college. I found exactly what I was looking for, and in doing so, nipped and tucked a new, paler, hairier version of myself. I explored the backcountry, often alone, fished most days of the year (even in winter when only an idiot goes fishing), got a dog, slept in the dirt, harvested most of my own meat, and figured that allowed me a legitimate sense of rugged individualism, just like everyone else in Bozeman. So when I came upon this

passage in “Synecdoche and the Trout”, the first chapter in *Wild Thoughts from Wild Places*, I was immediately enthralled.

Montana was the one place on Earth, as I thought of it, farthest in miles and spirit from Oxford University, yet where you could still get by with the English language, and the sun didn’t disappear below the horizon for days in a row during midwinter . . . I looked at a map and saw jagged blue lines, denoting mountain rivers. All I knew was that, in Montana, there would be more trout. Trout were the indicator species for a place and a life I was seeking. I went. Six years later, rather to my surprise, I was a professional fishing guide under license from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, My job was to smear blood on other young faces. *I slew you. My bearing must not shame your quitting life.* Sometimes it was actually like that, though quite often it was not (22).

That was me. That was *my* story. I had just finished my second season working as a professional fishing guide six years after moving to Montana. Before reading this particular essay, I had no idea what an “indicator species” was (or what synecdoche meant for that matter) but Quammen taught me.

A Biologist would use the term *indicator species*. Because I have the biases of a literary journalist, working that great gray zone between newspaper reporting and fiction, engaged every day in trying to make facts not just talk but yodel, I speak instead of synecdoche. We both mean that a trout represents more than itself—but that, importantly, it does also represent itself (20).

And for me, that was it. This man was making facts yodel, and those warbling words enthralled, enchanted, and educated me. This is the value of narrative autobiography in giving context for investment to the reader. I fell into his narratives, and because of that I became interested in the information that he had to offer. Narrative autobiography can have this effect, so it makes sense that this would be an effective tool for bringing in readers.

The New Journalism

Magazines, and especially the “slick” magazines that safely tenured academics and high minded literati sometimes scorn offer a vast richness of opportunity to imaginative nonfiction writers—and therefore also to imaginative nonfiction readers. . . The world is big and wondrous, full of odd sights and strange beasts and weird noises and charmingly demented people with great stories to tell and (despite their increasing scarcity) more than a few wild places— David Quammen.

I studied “creative non-fiction” extensively as an undergraduate, and have published in that genre successfully. So I too have the biases of a literary journalist. I am not alone. Since the genre emerged in the mid-sixties, it became arguably *the* dominant literary form of the latter half of the twentieth century. It unseated The Novel as the unchallenged iconic form, at least, that’s the story Tom Wolfe tells in *The New Journalism*. According to Wolfe, before new journalism, the novelists “were regarded as the only “creative” writers, the only literary artists . . . The lower class were the journalists . . . They were regarded chiefly as day laborers who dug up slags of raw information for writers of higher “sensibility” to make better use of” (25). Wolfe’s imagery here is particularly attractive to me. I also see this genre as egalitarian, though for more reasons than Wolfe describes in *The New Journalism*.

Wolfe is talking about the hierarchy of writers and literati that existed in the mid nineteen sixties, and claiming that new journalism saved literature from its own elitism, much like the novel had rescued literature a century before (28). Newspapers were the workaday publications of the time. Novels were the realm of professors and “serious writers”. New journalism threatened those well-defined boundaries.

And so all of a sudden, in the mid-Sixties, here comes a bunch of these . . .

writers with no literary credentials whatsoever in most cases—only they’re using all the techniques of the novelists, even the most sophisticated ones—and on top of that they’re helping themselves to the insights of the men of letters while they’re at it—and at the same time they’re still doing their low-life legwork, their “digging,” their hustling, their damnable Locker Room Genre reporting—they’re taking on *all* of these roles at the same time—in other words, they’re ignoring the literary class lines that have been almost a century in the making (25).

This was scary stuff for some elements in the hierarchy of literary criticism. The power to define literary taste seemed in danger of shifting from scholars to readers. New journalism presented the experience of “being there” to the reader rather than recounting events through an intermediary narrator. “The voice of the narrator, in fact, was one of the great problems in non-fiction writing . . . Readers were bored to tears without knowing why . . . it began to signal to them, unconsciously, that a well-known bore was here again, ‘the journalist,’ a pedestrian mind, a phlegmatic spirit, a faded personality, and there was no way to get rid of the pallid little troll, short of ceasing to read” (19). The *experience* element sparks interest in readers. They are interested in “real life” but they want to have it framed so that they can react to it—be excited, afraid, aroused, disgusted, enamored—rather than be told how to react to it. “It seemed all important to *be there* when dramatic scenes took place, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something the readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely the subjective or emotional life of the characters” (21).

This is precisely what Quammen and Vowell do for research and scholarship, “give the full objective description, plus something the readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for.” Their work is descended from that of Wolfe and his

contemporaries— Capote, Didion, Mailer, Talese, Thomson—it is part of the literary lineage of new journalism. And like the work of the new journalists, Vowell and Quammen give “emotional life” to “the characters.”

By characters, I do not simply mean the agents in the story. Part of what makes creative non-fiction (a more contemporary umbrella term for the genre) engaging is its characterizations. There are no flat subjects or objects in creative non-fiction. Everything from the setting to the participants to the author is textured and lively. The texts are imbued with descriptive depth that is absent from traditional narration, present only in fiction. For example in *Monster of God*, Quammen describes the scene of the Gir forest preserve on the Kathiawar Peninsula in India where the last of the Indian lions still exist. “The teak trees are bare of leaves and powdered with tawny dust. The acacias and banyans are dusted too. The whole forest is flocked like broccoli tempura, parched with heat and drought, thirsty for monsoon” (19).

The whole forest is not “thirsty for monsoon”. It has no conception of monsoon. This is Quammen using the techniques of fiction to make the scene more emotionally connective for the reader. This is where New Journalism is most criticized, and, arguably, most dangerous. If authors take “real” events and paint them with the charged linguistic brush of fiction, they are altering those events. They are no longer objectively “real”. According to early critics of new journalism, this represents both a danger to literature as a whole and our very conceptions and representations of reality.

Critics charged that new journalism was aiming to do no less than destroy the sensibilities of its readers. “[T]he New Journalists themselves, are hip hucksters pushing

opiates for the people. In the meantime, they are getting rich off us, while our minds and bodies rot from too much consumption”(Van Dellen 225). New journalism was not just compared to opiates but methods of totalitarian control. Some critics saw new journalism as a threat equivalent to heroin and Nazism. “New Journalism leaves us confused about the nature of reality, while it promises to be giving us real reality. This confusion is an inherent and necessary device for totalitarian control. Studies of totalitarian systems, from Hitler to our present technocracy, point out how such a confusion preserves the state of tyranny” (Van Dellen 230).

Van Dellen is, quite obviously, hyperbolic. And his is the most melodramatic criticism of new journalism that I could find. But it is representative of the scorn that new journalism begat. The critic Dwight McDonald coined the term “parajournalism” as more preferable to new journalism. His intent was to be pejorative. “[Parajournalism] is a bastard form, having it both ways, exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction. Entertainment rather than information is the aim of its producers, and the hope of its consumers” (223). The central threads that run through all the criticism of new journalism revolve around conceptions that the form is: 1) threatening the sanctity of literature; 2) claiming to be “real” but failing to be objective. And the overarching theme in much of this criticism seems to be an elitist conception that critics need to save readers from their desires.

No one argues that new journalism and subsequently creative non-fiction are not popular. If that were the case there would be no cause for such scathing defensiveness. The message however, seems to be clear. Readers don’t know what’s best for them and

so we need to rescue them from what they want to read. “But□as a matter of fact, the value of the novel is being minimized by the quick, easy, glib accessibility of New Journalism. The college students I teach much prefer reading Hunter Thompson and Tom Wolfe to Thomas Pynchon and Doris Lessing” (Van Dellen 226).

The assumption that the “high-minded literati” should bestow upon the reading public texts that are truly worthy and shelter them from texts that are not, connects to my earlier claims about the traditional role of the public intellectual. Creative non-fiction is an appropriate genre for public intellectualism *because* it is popular. If reading, through the exchange of information, is a form of empowerment, then the public does get to choose their genre(s). If readers wish to heed the critics and use that criticism to frame their understandings, then criticism is performing a useful function. But to regulate the public’s reading, to decide what they should and should not appreciate, *that’s* totalitarianism.

Though the claim that new journalism was going to “ruin literature” seems outdated and overblown, the second criticism, the concern about objectivity, is the primary question this paper addresses. A central theme in the criticism of new journalism as a way of portraying “facts,” is that new journalism is meant to entertain rather than inform. “Entertainment rather than information is the aim of [new journalism’s] producers, and the hope of its consumers” (Macdonald 223). The implicit message here is that entertainment and information are at odds and cannot exist in the same space. This is essentially a claim that entertaining texts are inherently subjective and informative texts inherently objective.

Journalism, like academic writing, is supposedly an objective affair. Journalists are supposed to be detached from the scene about which they report, absent from the work they produce. This is, of course, impossible. So instead they conform to the conventions of a genre that give the impression of objectivity when read. The format of these conventions is designed with the rhetorical intention of informing and explicitly *not* entertaining. The form of flat, depersonalized information signals to the writers and the readers that the text is objective (informative) rather than subjective (entertaining). This is another example of paradigm as a genre.

The journalistic genre is comprised of socially agreed upon constraints that create rationality. “[N]ews is, in principle, a form and not content . . . News becomes news by reporters portraying it as such” (Hanson 386). The same principles I noted in the chapter about autobiography apply to the construction of objectivity in a traditional “news” story. “[T]he form of objectivity for a journalist is a manner of presentation, a storytelling technique, based on factual information attributed to official or institutional sources . . . An objective report is not necessarily one that corresponds closely with reality; it is one that accurately reflects what official sources have to say about the topic (Hanson 387). Once again we’re back to the idea that there has to be an official source, like the public intellectual, that vouches for the reality or validity of a text. In journalism, that official source is necessary to create rationality.

The heart of the concerns about using autobiographical narrative to frame an informative text is dualistic thinking. The problem is this assumption that texts must be either subjective or objective, informative or entertaining. This is unnecessarily limiting

and inaccurate. We know that this dualism is not sufficient. An informed public does not need a parent figure vetting their information for them. Nor do we need to cling to a construction of objectivity as a pure representation of reality. We don't have to have our entertainment in one venue and our information in another.

But remember the danger of narrative. To assume the validity of any account that claims to be "real" is naïve. There are too many instances of authors sensationalizing information for their own intentions, both in entertaining and informative textual situations. So how do we move beyond this problem? We know that all texts are subjective as all experience is subjective. We know that objectivity is a series of agreed upon constraints applied to subjective experience. And we also know that we operate according to particular forms in order to establish what is credible and what is not. Here is where narrative autobiography offers a unique mode of communication that does not project the traditional power dynamics of textual representation. If authors choose to use narrative autobiography as a way of exposing themselves and their subjective experience openly to readers, then those readers are empowered to make their own judgments about the validity of the authors and their claims.

The popularity of new journalism or creative non-fiction is indisputable. People want to read this style. We know that this autobiographical frame gives us an answer to the issue of interest, the most difficult barrier between academic texts and the general public. New journalism demonstrates that autobiographical framing and narrative language techniques can engage the interest of a wide audience. I would extend this argument to suggest that part of the reason this is true is because this construction taps the

universally comfortable, and biologically ingrained I-narrative. Remember also that interest has multiple definitions: grabbing and holding attention as well as giving context for personal investment. Autobiographical narrative can actualize all these types of interest in its readers. Additionally, a truly “transparent” narrative can avoid many of the very significant criticisms that have been leveled against scholarship in general and narrative scholarship in particular. Accurate transparency in autobiographical narrative asks readers to follow the same paradigm for evaluating information that they use every day. This paradigm is the same one that they have been developing, by evaluating their own I-narratives, since birth.

“Transparency”

One of the things that is tricky sometimes is to make [research] come alive, turning it into a story of an actor as opposed to this sort of disembodied process. That’s tricky and hard to do but it’s necessary in order to make it work for the general public– David Quammen, personal interview November 17th, 2010.

Both Vowell and Quammen employ a technique that I am referring to as “transparency” in their writing. They both expose themselves as author/characters. This is a technique directly taken from new journalism where the journalist inserts herself into the narrative as a participating character. For writers like Quammen and Vowell who are using the narrative autobiographical format to present scholarly work, this has several benefits. This transparency facilitates all types of interest that I claim are essential for bringing non-specialized readers into topics based on scholarly research. When authors tell the stories of how they came to spend so much of their time studying a particular

topic, the audience has insight into the writer's experience of coming to care about this topic. The audience gets a narrative of how this author came to see this work, and this topic, as engaging. The result is that readers get the context for investment. When the author explains why this particular area of research is important, the audience gets the backstory is so often scrubbed away from academic journal articles. Additionally, when the authors expose their motivations for research, the personal subjective biases they hold, and give specific narrative accounts of their research methods, readers are empowered to make critical judgments themselves. They don't need critics or official sources or public intellectuals to tell them what is valid. They can make those decisions independently.

Transparent Motivation

I personally think it's more honest to 'fess up to my own biases— Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

Vowell is particularly outspoken about her personal views on the material she is covering. Much of her motivation for doing research in the first place is the result of her conflicted personal and national identities. She pulls no punches when readers why she is interested in her topics of research and writing.

America is supposed to be better than that. No: best. I hate to admit it, but I still believe that, too. Because even though my head tells me that the idea that America was chosen by God as His righteous city on a hill is ridiculous, my heart still buys into it. And I don't even believe in God! And I have heard the screams! Why is America the last best hope of Earth? What if it's Liechtenstein? Or, worse, Canada? (*The Wordy Shipmates*, Vowell 71).

Here Vowell articulates a central thread in her writing: That the American identity represents a functioning democratic society superior to any other in history, and the reality of our society often fails to live up to her expectations. Her primary motivation in *The Wordy Shipmates* is to trace the history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony of Pilgrims. But she does so only after she has situated the importance of this overlooked influence in the political and cultural history of the United States. The audience has the opportunity to recognize this importance for themselves. Her reference to “His righteous city on a hill” is a reference to a quote that John Winthrop, the spiritual and political head of the colony, first uttered in his sermon “A Model of Christian Charity.” This sermon was a rallying cry for the pilgrims as they left port in England and set out for the “New World”. Vowell uses that sermon and its subsequent influence two centuries later as the jumping off point for her struggle with *actual* U.S. political identity and her own conception of *ideal* U.S. political identity. That speech became the favorite of a political figure that was highly influential in the formation of Vowell’s political consciousness.

Talking about Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” without discussing Ronald Reagan would be like mentioning Dolly Parton’s “I will Always Love you” and pretending Whitney Houston doesn’t exist. Whitney and Reagan’s covers were way more famous than the original versions ever were . . . Like a hostess dusting off her gravy boat come Thanksgiving, Ronald Reagan would trot out Winthrop’s image of a city on a hill on special occasions throughout his political career (59).

It is not a stretch to say that Vowell is highly critical of Reagan. “I confess that became my Reagan fantasy too [jumping up and down on his grave]. Until his ghastly, slow death from Alzheimer’s disease deprived any detractor with half a heart of even that petty, dirt-tramping thrill” (66). She tells her readers that Reagan represented all things

evil while she was young and developing a fascination with politics. She goes on to situate Reagan's influence and importance in contemporary American politics in order to recognize the huge influence that Winthrop and his flock's ideas are *still* affecting. Winthrop's sermon continues to resonate with the country in which she resides, the country she loves desperately (except when she hates it).

Vowell thinks this historical period is currently important. She gives us contemporary examples of how Winthrop's ideals and actions have shaped (for better and worse) the country we live in right now. She explains why understanding the history of this colony is important for twenty first century readers if we are invested in our national identity. We as readers are particularly motivated to be invested because Vowell is outspokenly so.

Aside from their function of demonstrating why the history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony is currently pertinent and interesting to her, two of the previous passages are laugh-out-loud funny (not the one about Reagan's slow death, the other two). Humor is an important device for Vowell and it is one of the ways that she engages reader interest with her personal voice. Vowell also makes her perspective, her motivations, and her intent explicit here. This is not an objective or disinterested examination of history and it makes no claim to be such. Instead Vowell makes it blatantly clear why she chose this topic, why it is personally important to her, and how her personal conflicts motivate her research and writing.

The most important reason I am concentrating on Winthrop and his shipmates in the 1630's is that the country I live in is haunted by the Puritan's vision of themselves as God's chosen people, as a beacon of righteousness that all others are to admire. The most obvious and

influential example of that mind-set is John Winthrop's sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," in which he calls on New England to be "as a city upon a hill" (24).

Taken together, these quotes demonstrate an element of Vowell's writing that is essential to my claim. This prose shows the technique that I have termed "transparency". We know objectivity is, as David Quammen put it, "kind of a false god". Vowell is *not* objective but she is transparent. This transparency allows readers to interpret her texts with information that is absent from other constructions, especially texts that attempt to *seem* objective. Aside from avoiding the pitfall of objectivity, this transparency also greatly facilitates reader interest in topics they may not think they care about. I certainly never cared about Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay Colony before discovering this text. I didn't even know they existed.

Quammen does the same thing, though in a completely different style. In Quammen's *Monster of God*, he investigates the relationship of "man-eating predators" to humanity. He looks at the ecosystems they share, and how our relationship to these animals has shaped our understanding and management of wild spaces. Mainly he focuses on the ways that humans, outside the constraints of scientific classification, have defined these creatures, and the huge influence they have had on us culturally. Quammen explicitly tells us that he is interested in studying these animals because of the immense impacts they have had, and continue to have on human psyche, not because they fit into an objective scientific category. "There is no scientific name, no formal category for the animals I'm talking about. . . They belong to a select but diverse group that transcends zoological boundaries. . . In purely scientific terms, the grouping is artificial; it has no

taxonomic or ecological basis. Its reality is psychological, as registered in the human mind” (MOG 5). He admits that his interest is sparked by a cultural fascination with “the experience in which. . . members of our species are relegated to the status of edible meat. It is a reminder of where we have stood, for tens of thousands of years, on the food chain of power and glory”(MOG 4-5).

We know Quammen’s motivations for writing. It is also likely that many readers can relate to this fascination. We’re willing to follow him when he asks us “to contemplate. . . the psychological, mythic, and spiritual dimensions (as well as the ecological implications) of a particular sort of relationship: the predator-prey showdown between one dangerous, flesh-eating animal and one human victim” (MOG 5). Quammen has laid out his intent and his bias very concretely. He explains his personal and emotional connection to what these beasts represent. He is not claiming to approach this study in a detached or classically objective way, but we do know exactly how and why he is going about this classification. He is also inviting readers to make the same sort of personal connection to the material. He is saying, ‘these animals are important, if for no other reason than we’re fascinated by their ability to eat us’. Once the reader is hooked into that idea, she is then willing to learn about the ecological consequences of human encroachment on large predator habitat. The reader, if she is excited by the idea of the book, will learn about three different threatened large predator species and the researchers working to understand and preserve them.

In the preface to *Assassination Vacation*, Vowell shows that her transparent narrative style is consistent throughout all of her work. She gives us a confessional of her motivations for *AV*.

I embarked on the project of touring historic sites and monuments having to do with the assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley right around the time my country iffily went to war, which is to say right around the time my resentment of the current president cranked up into contempt. Not that I want the current president killed . . . my simmering rage with the current president scares me. I am a more or less peaceful happy person whose lone act of violence as an adult was shoving a guy who spilled beer on me at a Sleater-Kinney concert. So if I can summon this much bitterness toward a presidential human being, I can sort of, kind of see how this amount of bile or more, teaming up with disappointment, unemployment, delusions of grandeur and mental illness, could prompt a crazier narcissistic creep to buy one of this country's widely available handguns. Not that I, I repeat, condone that. Like Lincoln, I would like to believe that the ballot is stronger than the bullet. Then again, he said that before he got shot. (AV 6-7).

We know Vowell's intent. While discontent with the presidential administration of 2005 was her motivator for writing, it is not the subject of the book. The book is honestly interested in exploring the circumstances surrounding the assassinations of those three presidents, and Vowell goes to great length to get as much information as possible, including visiting all the important sites associated with those presidents, their administrations, and their assassins. This is true in all of her books. Her research stands on its own. Because we, as readers, are immediately able to recognize her political and personal biases, we are able to make our own choices. We are empowered to know her motivations for creating the text in the first place, and that allows us to read as responsible consumers of text.

We are also treated to this psychological question of what it takes for a person to be motivated to attempt to kill the president of the United States. Regardless of my own perspectives on the 2005 administration, I can still be curious about the narrative circumstances that have moved men (they're all men) to kill their commander in chief. Through this device, readers then learn the details and circumstances that lead to, and surrounded, some of the more dramatic and formative moments in our nation's history. Though I learned a fair bit about the assassination of Lincoln as a high school student and participant in contemporary American culture, I never knew a thing about McKinley or Garfield.

For another example of this technique in Quammen, we must only look to the introduction to *The Flight of the Iguana*. This book is a collection of essays that all focus on animals that we would consider odd, or sensational. "The chambered nautilus . . . a snail-like critter with octopus arms . . . The scorpion, armed and dangerous, glowing luminescent blue-green. The rogue bedbug . . . with its almost unspeakable (though we will speak of them) sexual practices" (ix). These "garish living shapes" are fascinating. They are fascinating to Quammen and he knows that they are fascinating to us. Such oddities are the stuff of freakshows. But Quammen is quick to point out that his intent is not to be exploitative. "Two primary subjects tangle their ways throughout this book: first, the surprising intricacies of the natural world, and second, human attitudes toward those intricacies. I've been intrigued for a long time not only by the sinister beauty of the black widow but also my own—and your—reactions to it" (xi). He knows that we all share his fascination and he will use that fascination to his own purpose. "[A]lmost nothing

bears more crucially upon the future of this planet than the seemingly simple matter of attitudes toward nature” (xi).

It does not take a rhetorician to disentangle the rhetorical situation here.

Quammen is telling you exactly what he hopes to achieve. He goes on to say that he hopes to encourage readers to think about their relationship to animals and perhaps adjust their behaviors and habits to recognize that relationship. He’s painting these portraits as a way of getting you to rethink how you affect wildlife and vice versa. “If [this book] doesn’t . . . make you angry . . . make you laugh, and . . . make you sad or worried or vaguely inclined to rethink some matter of attitude, I will be disappointed” (xiii-xiv). As with the other examples, Quammen is making his intentions clear. He wants you to change your thinking so that your daily decisions include thoughts about species other than humans. The bias here is that of an environmentalist. We know that going in, so his intentions are not manipulative. They are rhetorical, he is hoping that you will agree with him, but because readers understand the intentions of Quammen, readers are in a position of power. Quammen focuses on these quirky beasts because people will enjoy reading about them. Their very oddity is the stuff of interest. His hope is that, if you read this book and think differently about these really cool critters, you will think differently about all critters.

Transparent Research

One thing that separates me from regular historians is that I do a lot of what art historians call "exposing the process." Which is to say that instead of simply quoting from materials I unearth in an archive I will describe the archive itself or the people I meet there. How I do research is

part of my story—where I'm staying, what I see from a bus window, etc—
Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012

The other device that these particular authors employ is describing the narratives of the research that they conduct. Instead of just getting the methods and results, we get the stories of the research, complete with characters, mishaps, epiphanies, and lunch breaks. Having this insight further equips the reader to be active and critical. By providing a clear picture of both why a researcher decided to embark on an investigation and how she went about doing so, the author is giving the reader tools to aid in the interpretation of that research. If I know that a researcher chose to base her argument off limited sources without triangulating different points of view, I will be more skeptical of the conclusions.

Traditional scholarly research is meticulous about documenting source material and providing a list of sources. Vowell and Quammen's work is also. The difference is in how that research and those materials appear in the document. Academic texts usually reference source material in ways that are not intuitive. In order to really understand where a researcher gets her ideas, the reader has to understand the conventions of citation in that particular discipline. This is another example of traditional scholarship using learned paradigms of communication that are efficient for experts but inherently exclusive. Vowell and Quammen, on the other hand, incorporate their research processes into their narratives. They tell the stories of the research that they did; anyone can understand and evaluate that.

One of the criticisms that some scholars (especially historians) have with many “truthful” narrative texts is that the narrative obscures the research process. These texts

often provide “master narratives” which omit perspectives that would cloud the story.

Through the use of their own autobiographical narratives of research, Vowell and Quammen write engaging prose without hoodwinking the audience.

This is another situation where I am applying my own ideas to these authors. I don’t think that these writers set out to create egalitarian research texts by being transparent. They are just writing strong prose and that includes details. Because readers get the story of the research process, they become invested in what the authors discover. This works for the authors because it helps them sell books. This also allows readers access to the process so that they can better evaluate it for themselves.

This book is about those puritans who fall between the cracks of 1620 Plymouth and 1692 Salem, the ones who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony and then Rhode Island during what came to be called the Great Migration . . . I am concentrating primarily on the words written or spoken during the Great Migration era by the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (mostly John Winthrop and Jon Cotton) and those of two exiles, Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, who went on to found settlements in Rhode Island after Winthrop and his fellow magistrates kicked them out of Massachusetts (Vowell, *Wordy Shipmates*, 23-4).

Vowell is corn-liquor transparent in that paragraph. We know that she is interested in this group because they “fall between the cracks” of general US history. Most everyone knows at least something about the Plymouth Puritans and the Salem Puritans, if only that they invented Thanksgiving and burned witches. But few of us know anything about the Massachusetts Bay Puritans.

Beyond giving us some context, Vowell also provides some very pertinent research information in this section. We know that much of this research is based off the writings of four highly verbose members of the colony: John Winthrop and John Cotton

were powerful leaders in the Colony itself and Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were cast out of Massachusetts Bay and went on to settle Rhode Island. Having these divergent voices is important; these people do *not* agree. Winthrop and Cotton berate, condemn, and exile both Williams and Hutchinson throughout the period that *Wordy Shipmates* details. Winthrop actually puts Hutchinson on trial for witchcraft. By presenting these four perspectives, Vowell has voices that are pro-Massachusetts, pro-Rhode Island, and vice versa. She continues this through the book, presenting differing accounts of events from these primary sources, as well as other secondary ones (including several contemporary books of scholarship on the New England puritans and the Native Americans with whom the puritans regularly dealt.) In a non-narrative academic text this would be expected but in a narrative academic text this background is often obscured. Telling the autobiographical narrative of the research is a tool with particular appeal and possibility. Though I use an example from *Wordy Shipmates*, Vowell utilizes this same transparency in all of her work.

Quammen's approach is stylistically different, but that makes sense considering that he and Vowell focus on completely different areas of interest and study. Despite their stylistic differences, they both provide a clear story of their research through narrative in the text. Returning to the Gir lions in *Monster of God*, Quammen focuses on Dr Ravi Chellam. Chellam is the one of the researchers informing management decisions about the lions in Gir, and he is Quammen's primary source. The first 125 pages of *Monster of God* are dedicated to the diminishing Indian lion population and use the story of Quammen's time in the field with Chellam to create the central narrative. The audience

gets to know Chellam's story pretty well. "It was almost by accident that Ravi Chellam came to the study of Gir's lions. Born in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, he grew up in Madras with hopes of becoming a physician" (79). Quammen goes on to provide a thorough summary of Chellam's professional life history. The climax of this background is the story of Chellam as a young graduate student with no resources and little support wandering more or less aimlessly around the Gir national park trying to find lions. Quammen provides a gripping tale of Chellam, in his very early days of research, staking out a lion kill site in order to record observations about feeding behavior.

On that second night he lay awake until two A.M., cozily zipped into his sleeping bag, his backpack propped against a *Syzygium* tree as he made notes. Then he dozed off. Several hours later he woke with a shock of realization—that he was sleeping in the forest with lions all around. Oops, a reckless lapse; gotta be more careful, Then he felt a weight on his legs. He looked down into the face of a lion cub that had curled itself onto him for a congenial snooze. Ravi's first thought was, *Where's your mother* (83)?

This is certainly an engaging anecdote that draws in the reader but it has another purpose. This story sets up one of the foci of Chellam's research. He discovered that Indian lions, unlike their African cousins, see humans as neither a threat, nor a food source. The lion mother found Chellam with her cub and did not attack him. The researcher has spent his career trying to understand why this is true and to use the evidence that he has to support his theory to convince wildlife and governmental officials, as well as local residents, that these mythically frightening beasts pose little threat to humans. Quammen does not rely simply on Chellam for his information, though he does use Chellam as *the* central character. Quammen cites twelve different researchers in this section of the book, and provides accounts of interviews with four different

residents of the preserve who share their lives with the lions. Chellam's initial observation, and continual claim, that Indian lions are generally not dangerous to humans, is challenged by the other sources.

The arc of the narrative of this section is dictated by Quammen's research. He begins with a brief literature review of the role of predatory animals in central theories of modern ecology (Paul Colinvaux, Charles Darwin, Charles Elton, G. Evelyn Hutchinson) to give readers an understanding of how large predators fit into the "web of life". Quammen then provides an overview of research about the history of population trends and feeding habits of the lions in Gir (Steve Berwick, Marianne Berwick, S.J.T. Joshnsign, Vasant Saberwal). Quammen overviews a long and precipitous decline in lion populations, the origin of conservation of the cats in India, the advent of the Gir preserve that caused a rebound in numbers, and then the subsequent and startling resumption of decline.

Quammen's next move is to explain the doctoral research of Shishir Raval who studied "perceptions of resource management and landscape quality" (105) within Gir. He does this to set up his ultimate conclusion, that the primary difficulty in preserving large predators is not a top-down solution but rather one that comes from the bottom up. Quammen cites personal interviews with three different tribal residents of Gir, all Maldahari herdsmen with differing opinions on the Gir lions (Khima Bhai, Lal, Bhai, Amara Bhai—note here that a shared surname denotes tribal membership not direct familial lineage). Quammen also cites an interview with Ismail Bapu, one of the few Gir residents who is not Maldahari. The perceptions of these Gir residents about lions, in

contrast to those of researchers, are striking. While none have ever been attacked by a lion, all have stories about people being attacked. And all dislike lions to some degree because they kill cattle and buffalo (the main source of income and a primary source of food for residents of Gir). The residents who can afford to build enclosures for their domestic beasts are less overt in their distain of the predators because they lose fewer livestock, but none seem particularly keen on an increase in lion populations. The sentiments of these individuals are supported by the research of Vasant Saberwal who found that “more than sixty percent of the villagers interviewed were hostile to lions—and arguably they had reason” (119).

Quammen finishes his argument with an interesting shift. In order to make his point about interactions between poor humans and threatened lions, he discusses the research of Paul Errington, an American biologist who began his career in the 1920’s. Errington studied minks in the mid-western US. The mink’s primary food source is the muskrat, so Errington also studied muskrats. He discovered that minks do not prey on healthy muskrats that have optimal territory but rather on “wastage parts” of the population.

Well-situated muskrats are effectively unavailable, Errington explained; they have good den sites, adequate food nearby, and routes of travel between den and food that don’t expose them to attack. The “wastage parts” of the population, lacking those advantages, suffer most of the predation by minks. Errington figured that seventy percent of the muskrat flesh eaten by minks in central Iowa came from scavenging animals left dead or near-dead by disease or climactic emergencies, such as a drought or an especially severe freeze. Another sizable increment came from individuals, especially male muskrats dispersing from winter dens into unfamiliar terrain in springtime, seeking new summer territories in which to breed. Still another increment was what Errington called “overproduced

young.” The weak, the homeless, the unsupportable offspring—these are the victim classes” (123).

Quammen’s final move is to sew up this comparison between the muskrats in 1930’s Iowa, and the tribal herdsman of the Kathiawar Peninsula in 2003.

Territoriality is what separates the haves from the have-nots. Holding a territory within good habitat strongly affects the life expectancy of an individual, as the total supply of such territories limits the size of a population in the presence of predators . . . Consideration of that factor also helps illuminate why the poorest villagers around the perimeter of the Gir forest have little appreciation of lions. No one wants to be among the “wastage parts” of the human population (123-4).

In this comparison, Quammen is not referring to lions actually preying on the local people. Still, the lions’ predation on livestock does have a similar effect on the human inhabitants. They may not be killed in such a gruesome manner as being eaten, but if they cannot propagate their resources, they cannot survive.

Quammen finishes by asking a couple of questions. His thesis here is that answering these questions is essential to any successful management plan of predatory animals where their habitat overlaps with humans. “Is it inevitable that the costs exacted by alpha predators be borne disproportionately by poor people . . . while the spiritual and aesthetic benefits of those magnificent beasts are enjoyed from afar? If not, then how should society redistribute those costs? How might we also redistribute the (material, as well as spiritual and aesthetic) benefits” (124)?

This assertion, which Quammen will reference to differing degree as he moves through African Crocodiles, Romanian Brown Bears, and Siberian Tigers, *is* the sort of issue raised by scholars in ecology. The obvious difference (and one that Quammen himself expressly recognizes) between his work and that of ecological researchers is that

he does not do research himself. Despite that distinction, his writing still remains grounded in research done by scholars in the field and he prods the same areas of inquiry that would motivate ecologists and biologists, particularly those who focus on species conservation. The research on which he bases his ideas is overtly present in the narrative. Quammen expressly discusses all of the studies and interviews cited *in* the narrative that he constructs. They are also present in the “Source Notes” section at the back of the book. But readers need not take the extra effort to search the end notes in order to find the research that supports Quammen’s ideas. That research is apparent to anyone who reads the text.

The transparency that autobiographical narrative frames provides for research based texts are extremely beneficial, especially for texts directed at a general audience. This technique may be of use in scholar to scholar texts as well. Though that exploration is not within the scope or focus of this paper, it may be an area of interest for further composition scholarship. Where transparency does seem immediately beneficial to me is in constructing texts for non-academic audiences that provide context and interest that allow readers to engage research with excitement and intrigue. This transparency also allows authors to construct open research narratives that are ethical and empowering.

Carrots and Sticks

Well, my subject is the United States. Naturally, I have mixed feelings about this country and my writing reflects that. But basically it comes down to the fact that I'm still a sucker for all that "all men are created equal" stuff. That ideal of fairness and equality really animates how I write about the country's history—Sarah Vowell, personal interview January 27th, 2012.

The most basic—I think also most important—function of autobiographical narrative as a frame for scholarly topics, is entertainment. It’s okay to be entertaining regardless of the dualism that critics of new journalism wished to impose. Narrative is inviting and it makes us want to keep reading. That interest (as I have described it previously) can compel us to engage and understand conversations that are taking place among scholars. The end result is that more people become engaged in scholarly conversations. I’ve already responded to the criticisms of this framing. I will use the last section of this paper to remember why I started in the first place. Lively, well-crafted narrative is fun to read. If I learn something in the process, all the better. As any student of creative non-fiction will tell you, engaging narrative requires compelling and immediate storyline as well as good characters. Vowell and Quammen are masters of both. Through their engaging prose, we get a staggering amount of information.

Quammen’s essay “Karl’s Sense of Snow” elaborately describes the “arcana of snow science—that is, crystal formation, temperature-gradient metamorphism, slab analysis, fracture mechanics, and suchlike” through the vehicle of roaring, ravenous avalanches and two scientists who study them. I’ve been in an avalanche and as I tumbled those six hundred or so vertical feet in a mass of churning crystals, snow science was not my primary concern. In an article for *Powder* magazine, I described the experience this way: “The fracture itself seemed to move in slow motion. I was mesmerized watching it spread laterally across the pitch until I realized that I was no longer standing on a stable surface. The snow had become a moving, breathing, morphing entity.” I survived without major injury and was only buried chest-deep. Quammen was luckier (and smarter) than

myself. In his essay, he is not caught in an avalanche but observes a very large one from a close proximity.

The whole slope, except for our tree-anchored part of it, has fractured and run. All the neat crystal laminations have collapsed into chaos. The traveling front stretches eighty yards wide, encompassing God knows how many tons of snow. I've never seen such a large avalanche at such close range. It foams. It smokes. It moves like a wave crashing onto the beach at Waimea Bay. It's scary, mesmeric, quite big enough to have snatched all three of us down in a homicidal hug, and almost utterly silent. It tears into the trees below, culminating like the last howling chords of a Beethoven symphony, and then it sends up a high exhalation of powder (WTFWP 164, 1999).

Quammen's dramatic description of this avalanche is the climax of the essay. It is the payoff of his account of a day spent in the mountains with two snow science experts, and his investigation of the processes that can cause large segments of snow to break free their bonds and roar down a mountain. The specifics of his topic are not, independent of his narrative, inherently fascinating. Without accounting for the very real and dramatic consequences they may have, I'm not that interested in the variety, scope, and shape of crystals that form on the surface of snowpack (surface hoar) in varying temperatures and weather conditions. They become interesting to me, as a reader, through two different devices that Quammen employs. First, he makes these arid facts lush with importance by communicating the implications of this research. Those miniature ice daggers were nearly responsible for ending my own life Every time I play in my alpine backyard, those crystalline formations are literally holding the ground beneath my feet. Quammen caused me to incorporate his narrative into my own autobiography, the ultimate measure of success.

The second device he uses is achieved through the characters that are central to this essay. In “Karl’s Sense of Snow”, Quammen introduces us to Karl Birkeland and Ron Johnson, two snow science experts working in concert with Montana State University and the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center to accomplish two tasks. First, they are responsible for gathering current data on snowpacks in the surrounding ranges in order to provide the public with up-to-date information so that they can (theoretically) make informed decisions about backcountry travel and recreation. Additionally, they are studying snowpack conditions in order to inform the study of variations in snow stability and how that affects avalanche conditions. This forces them to be both practically and theoretically savvy. They have to know the laboratory concepts behind what causes snow stability and slab fractures and also have the practical know how to understand the feel of sketchy snow conditions so as to avoid being killed in their field research. As Quammen puts it they need to have, “the two fundamental requisites for an avalanche forecaster: a nerd brain and patroller’s feet.” He expands on his glowing appraisal of these two field researchers saying, “It also helps to have a runner’s legs and a mountaineer’s lungs. Put all that together with a jeweler’s eye for crystal morphology, and you begin to possess what might be called a sense of snow” (158).

These two characters are compelling. These guys blur the line between work and play. They’re like the Indiana Joneses of alpine exploration. Only, instead of adventuring in pursuit of archeological treasures, and one-dimensional female characters, they’re looking for formations of frozen water. Half their time is spent trekking deep into the Montana mountains to dig snow pits, intentionally trigger avalanches, collect samples,

and ski back out (just part of the job). The other half of their time is spent in a lab trying to differentiate between “needles, bundled needles, sheaths, bundled sheaths, scrolls, cups, pyramids, hollow bullets, solid bullets, stellar crystals with sector-like ends, hexagonal graupel, cone graupel, rimed needles, rimed columns, and let’s not worry about what-all-else” (159) in order to see how these formations bond together, and what causes those bonds to release.

As a reader, I am enthralled with these guys and, as characters, they embody Quammen’s writing. They are half science-nerd half ski-bum. They are the intersection of the science and the narrative. They are incarnations of precisely what I hope to show with this section, that the stories, the adventures, the experiences, and especially the characters are the center of what makes intellectual work both important and interesting. Moreover, it takes a writer like David Quammen, one who is interested in understanding and portraying that intersection, to make the connection of the intellectual and the visceral apparent to readers. Quammen puts himself at the center of the narrative. The audience sees these characters, their experiences, and their research through his eyes. We care about this narrative, and about the science that drives it, because of Quammen’s perspective. It is his consciousness that brings subjective importance into the abstraction of objective research. His mind sketched out on the page not only gives the reader a reason to care about dense theoretical concepts, it makes it very difficult not to care. His narrative, like that of the new journalists, brings *immediacy* to the situation that is being presented. In other words, he provides *interest*, in all the ways that I have suggested. Vowell does the same, though with different stylistic construction.

With Vowell, it is usually about connecting historical events to situations in contemporary America. She does this by exposing her internal experience of how these events connect. Her internal experience provides an autobiographical narrative that exposes connective similarities between the past and the present. The reader gets a sense of immediacy and importance about a distant past. This experience is filtered through Vowell's perspective and her interpretations are often box-cutter sharp. Part of her narrative is her sarcasm and wit and this is generally put to full use when Vowell compares events in U.S. history with her caustic assessment of contemporary American policy.

As with the work of Quammen, the readers becomes invested in her research because we are engaged in the journey that Vowell undertakes. Her journey oscillates between history and the present. We follow her, in part, to see what irreverent interpretation she's going to intone next about the sacred events of American history (the ones we were all taught to silently revere but never question), but also because she makes history current by interpreting it through a contemporary lens. Because her thoughts center the narrative, and her insights are at the heart of the writing, she intentionally connects her historical research to her impressions of modern America.

In 2003 and 2004, as I was traveling around in the footsteps of McKinley, thinking about his interventionist wars in Cuba and the Philippines, the United States started up an interventionist war in Iraq. It was supposed to be a "preemptive war" whose purpose was to disarm Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, weapons which, as I write this, have yet to be found and which, like the non-existent evidence of wrongdoing on the *Maine* [the battleship that exploded due to unexplained circumstances in Havana harbor and was used as the justification for invading Cuba], most likely never will be. At the outset of the war, President Bush proclaimed that "our nation enters this conflict reluctantly, yet our purpose is sure", just as

President McKinley stated, regarding Cuba, ‘it is not a trust we sought; it is a trust from which we will not flinch’ . . . I walked home through Washington Square Park, where Mark Twain used to hang out on the benches in his white flannel suit when he lived around the corner, and sat down in my living room to reread Twain’s accusation that McKinley’s deadly Philippines policy has “debauched America’s honor and blackened her face before the world.” (AV 206-7).

In this passage Vowell demonstrates all her articulate verve. I did not live through the Spanish-American War. I did, however, live through both of the Iraq wars. I read a lot of Twain, but I never read his accusation of McKinley. Without the context of Vowell’s narrative, I probably never would have gotten to that connection. I certainly would not have the sort of perspective on the Spanish-American war that I have when comparing it to the second Iraq war. The problem with studying history, for many non-scholars, is that we have 20/20 hindsight. With contemporary events, we don’t know how it all works out; the outcome is still uncertain, and so there is drama. When we learn about history, it sits under the weight of all the events that happened subsequently. We get the outcomes but little of the drama. What Vowell does is take this bygone history and rejuvenate it by drawing comparisons and connections to the important dramas of today. The events have characters and tension that we understand because they are framed by characters and tension that we are living. You don’t have to agree with her to be drawn in. You will be just as involved if you hate her politics. This is just like Quammen bringing us into the minutiae of snow science through the dramatic characters of the nerd/ski-bums.

I use limited examples from Quammen and Vowell to demonstrate their narrative skill because my space is limited. These examples are representative of the vast majority of the writing that both authors produce. Go pick up a couple of their books for yourself.

In fact, you don't even have to invest any money to see what I'm so excited about; go get them from the library. Think about where you put your keys and wallet. This paper is just about over.

My Point:

If we want to involve lay readers in topics of academic discussion, we need to make them care. The autobiographical narrative frames that these two authors use make people care. If you get nothing else from this paper, I hope that you get this last section. I hope that you read the excerpts of these authors and recognize the incredible work that they are doing. For me, that's the most important point. Not because I want you to support them financially (though I have no problem with that) but because I want you to support what they accomplish culturally. I hope also that scholars will recognize that this sort of writing is congruent with the work that they do, that the work of these authors is not adversarial but complementary to their own. It's not that *all* texts based on scholarship should be written in a certain way, either as informative or entertaining. That's reductive and dualistic thinking. It is born of insecurity and has no place in constructive inquiry. This is not an either/or situation. Different frames of writing have different audiences and different purposes. This is true across different disciplines. It is also true when trying to engage public intellectualism through texts.

In writing this, I also hope to encourage interested writers to act in this translational capacity. If you are like me and you find the work of scholars important but

find the necessary format limiting, don't do what I initially did. Don't believe the limitations that we've been taught. Write the prose you wish you could read.

Finally, all of this is an imposition of my own ideas on the work of other people. Neither Vowell nor Quammen set out to do what I am suggesting that they accomplish. Just as I didn't set out to find this translational middle ground when I began graduate school. We start with what we experience. We turn that into what we know. It is only afterwards, in the connective meta-cognition phase, that we make all of this into linear structures. It all comes from autobiography.

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