

## BUT WHAT IS THE TRUTH IN CREATIVE NONFICTION?

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Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was a writer, anthropologist, and champion of Black heritage whose “books and folktales vibrate with tragedy, humor and the real music of Black American speech” (Angelou viii). *Dust Tracks on a Road* recounts Hurston’s climb from her impoverished childhood in the rural South to a place among the prominent artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. It begins with a description of her birth, her family, and her childhood. The middle section includes stories of her jobs and education, and the book ends with a revelation of the knowledge she acquired while studying in Africa.

“Ghosts of Children Past,” a piece I wrote after my second daughter was born, is about mothers and the sacrifices that they make for their children. This creative nonfiction essay discusses my decision to give my first child up for adoption and the healing process that followed. I also introduce my second child, my daughter Mazie, and the time we spend together exploring a path next to the Tulpehocken Creek near our home in Berks County, PA. The personal experiences I write about in the essay parallel in some ways those of Louisa Bissinger, who drowned herself and her three children in the Tulpehocken Creek on August 17, 1875. Now thought by many Berks Countians to be a ghost haunting the path my daughter and I walk, Bissinger is part of “Ghosts of Children Past” because she and her children join my daughter and me in spirit when we walk in the woods. In “Ghosts of Children Past,” I write down a conversation between Mazie and me and recall my past memories of pain as I compare my choices as a mother to those of Bissinger.

Hurston’s autobiography and my essay belong to the creative nonfiction genre. Lee Gutkind, editor and founder of *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, describes the various mechanisms that define creative nonfiction. To write thought-provoking, beautiful creative nonfiction, the writer reveals feelings to communicate compelling information and strike a universality that touches readers. Creative nonfiction writers “attempt, as writers, to show imagination, to demonstrate artistic and intellectual inventiveness and still remain true to the factual integrity of the piece [they are writing]” (Gutkind 3). Creative nonfiction informs, makes an impression, changes a life, or influences an attitude.

However, it remains crucial to consider whether recapturing or representing the facts of experiences and observations in creative nonfiction is possible. Do writers fill in the gaps? Do they shape or interpret the events at hand? In this article, I will examine these questions by discussing the facets and foundations of truth. Synthesizing the perspectives of several essayists as well as carefully examining *Dust Tracks on a Road* and “Ghosts of Children Past,” I propose standards for creative nonfiction writers to meet as they work within the convoluted space of truth. Writers of creative nonfiction, I suggest, must render, as truthfully as we can, how the feelings, thoughts, and words in our essays *felt to us* (Bloom).

## The Duality and Constructs of Truth

Lynn Z. Bloom captures the most important standard of representing the truth for creative non-fiction writers in her essay “Living to Tell the Tale: The Complicated Ethics of Creative Nonfiction.” She says, “writers of creative nonfiction live—and die—by a single ethical standard, to render faithfully, as Joan Didion says in ‘On Keeping a Notebook,’ *‘how it felt to me’*” (278, emphasis in original). What has to be rendered faithfully, according to Bloom, is the writer’s understanding of the literal and larger Truth.

Bloom views the literal and larger Truth as separate. The literal truth is the truth the essay tells, while the larger Truth is “the unauthorized version, tales of personal and public life that are very likely subversive of the records and thus of the authority of the sanctioned tellers” (278). Bloom explicates the larger Truth by recounting a time when she went to the hospital for excruciating stomach pain. When she checked in, the nurse asked her if she had ever been to that hospital before, and Bloom replied that she had been born there. When the nurse returns with Bloom’s birth file, she asks Bloom if she was born first or second. The nurse then says she must have been born first, because the second baby did not live. Bloom writes, “In my agony I can barely process this authentication of family rumors” (277). For years, she had heard whispers of a twin, but never a confirmation. In this example, the literal truth is the truth that she had grown up with—the truth her parents told her or led her to believe. The larger Truth is the unauthorized version, the one told by the nurse—the Truth Bloom felt as the rumors of her twin were finally substantiated.

Hurston’s autobiography likewise conveys both the literal and larger Truth. When she describes her actions and feelings as her mother dies, she does so with literal truth: “That day, September 18<sup>th</sup>, she had called me and given me certain instructions” (62). Hurston then reveals these instructions—not to allow her mother’s pillow to be removed until she was dead, not to cover the clock, and not to cover the mirror. She then reveals a conversation between Death and his maker she had heard about as a child:

But Death had no home and he knew it at once.

“And where shall I dwell in my dwelling?” Old Death asked, for he was already old when he was made.

“You shall build you a place close to the living, yet far out of the sight of eyes.

Wherever there is a building, there you have your platform that comprehends the four roads of the winds. For your hunger, I give you the first and last taste of all things.”

We had been born, so Death had had his first taste of us. We had built things, so he had his platform in our yard.

And now, Death stirred from his platform in his secret place in our yard, and came inside the house. (63)

This conversation exposes a larger Truth, the dependency of life and death on each other. Throughout her autobiography, Hurston uses feelings and memories to establish the foundations of truth.

The literal and larger truths thread through my essay as well. The literal truths are the conversations between my daughter and me, the scenery of the path we walk, the history of Louisa Bissinger, and demonstrations of motherhood in nature. The larger Truths of the essay are associated with pain,

nurturing, accomplishment, and sacrifice. Although I do not know Bissinger's thoughts when she killed herself and her children, I wrote the following excerpt:

Louisa walks to the edge of the lock and tries to throw herself and her children into the deep water below. She is not strong enough, and she stumbles and falls. Perhaps Mollie and Lillie feel a sense of relief that their mother's insane plan has faltered. She picks herself and her panic-stricken children up off the ground. Louisa pulls her children close to her and makes a final attempt at freedom, and the four plummet to their watery graves.

I cannot say for certain that it happened this way, but by reading newspaper articles with witness accounts, this is my truth. I associate Bissinger's feelings with my own feelings of motherhood to render, as truthfully as I can, a larger Truth.

The essential job of creative nonfiction writers is to describe "how it felt to me." Everyone's feelings and memories, exclusive elements of their lives, are experienced but not shared. However, in the context of creative nonfiction, readers can identify with the feelings and memories expressed by the writer, even if they don't feel them. The writer—in this case Bloom, Hurston, and me—constructs a multiplicity of truths by unraveling the complicated layers of her own experience.

### **Maintaining Integrity**

Once a writer understands the duality and constructs of truth, composing creative nonfiction can begin. But what occurs when the lines between what actually happened and what the writer thinks actually happened begin to blur? Commitment to memories, language, feelings, and the adage "time changes everything" provides writers with a set of standards to determine what to include in their writing.

### **Memories**

Bronwyn T. Williams identifies a need for fidelity to memories. He writes that truth is based on our recollections: "it is simply that we all construct our perceptions and memories based on our experiences, our desires, and our cultural expectations" (298). Throughout his essay, Williams reiterates a line from his father, "Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story" (290). At the end of the essay, he reveals his father never actually said this line, but *could have*. Williams manufactured the quotation at his father's funeral as a way to turn his father's charismatic storytelling into an endearing trait. Williams remembered his father as a storyteller, and his memory determines his truth—the larger Truth—about his father.

In the following excerpt from "Ghosts of Children Past," my memories of running not long after the adoption was finalized construct the larger Truth. I have many memories of running on the bike path, and I remember many reasons why.

I am running as fast as I can. I can feel my heart and lungs about to explode under my rib cage. The sweat is running down my back and chest and I pretend that it is fat. This makes me run faster. The fat is from someone I don't know. Someone I don't see. Someone that I love. The fat is a reminder that she exists. She is out there. I have to get rid of it. The sun shines through the leaves like a camera's flash in my face. I can't see. The stones crunch beneath my feet. The geese pull their beaks up out of the ground to watch me pass. I reach

the bridge over the path and creek. I turn around. I run to the big tree on the bend. Then I start to sprint. *This is my last chance for today. My final attempt to make the fat go away, make the hurt go away. My last battle to fight. My last battle to win.* I collapse onto the bench at the end of the path. Victory!

This passage collages memories of running on the trail, compressing all those memories into one single event. Some days, there were no geese. Other days, I had to run with pebbles in my hand so I could throw them toward the geese to keep them from charging at me. Sometimes I ran listening to music; stones faded into the background on those days. On some days, at the big tree in the bend at the end of the path, I was already sprinting. Other days, I was too tired to sprint at all. And, not every day was a victory. But the flashes of recollection build on top of each other to construct the memory.

## Language

An allegiance to language should also be honored when writing creative nonfiction. Philip Gerard constructs a set of governing ethics of creative nonfiction. “Truth,” he says, “lives in precise, right words” (qtd. in Bloom 278). Gerard further explains that writers cannot make the story turn out the way it ought to have. The writer’s obligation is to record the story the way it turned out, without fudging the facts.

Thoughts, feelings, emotions, and dialogues cannot be falsified. While they can be compiled and represented singularly, as in my memory of running on the trail, they have to be true. They have to be as close to the truth, based on reasonableness, as they can be. To fill in the gaps with conversation, a writer has to be sure to follow the precise words of what the people in the conversations have said or would say, to the best of their knowledge.

“Ghosts of Children Past” illustrates this point in conversations between me and Mazie, as the following exchange illustrates:

“Look, over there, Maze, is that a monkey?” I say as a squirrel darts, with its bushy tail following, across the path.

“No, silly, that’s a squirrel. Look, Mommy, a blue jay,” Mazie says, pointing up to the high branches above us. I squint, looking up toward the sun, and spot the blue jay. Pretty good for a three-year-old.

“Maze, is that a monkey?” I ask her again, trying to trick her as a chipmunk runs out from underneath a fallen log on the side of the path.

“No, Mommy, it’s a chipmunk.” Mazie giggles at my inability to tell the difference between a monkey and a chipmunk.

“Maze, is that a monkey?” This time I just point to the canopy above us to see what will happen.

“I think so,” she decides.

Maybe we are finally going to spot the elusive Berks County Monkey we have dedicated so much time to capturing a glimpse of.

I am unsure as to whether this exact conversation occurred, but I chose these words to accurately represent, to the extent my memory allows, the dialogue between us as we walk along the bike path.

Hurston also exhibits a fidelity to language. The reader can see, in a dialogue with her father about her desired Christmas present, the dedication to replicate the precise words spoken.

“I want a fine black riding horse with white leather saddle and bridles,” I told Papa happily.

“You, what?” Papa gasped. “What was dat you said?”

“I said, I want a black sale horse with . . .

“A saddle horse!” Papa exploded. “It’s a sin and a shame! Lemme tell you something right now, young lady; you ain’t white. Riding horse! Always trying to wear de big hat! I don’t know how you got in this family nohow. You ain’t like none de rest of my young ‘uns” (29). If Hurston had written her father’s side of the dialogue differently—for example, in the style her side is written in—it would be a violation of fidelity to language. The words she has given to her father’s side of the conversation closely replicate what he would have said.

## Feelings

A commitment to feelings, both past and evolving, should be conveyed when writing creative nonfiction. Bloom acknowledges the truth of a story can change. The adoption written about in “Ghosts of Children Past” happened five years ago, when I was twenty-three. I was twenty-eight years old when I wrote it. If I sat down to write this memoir right after it happened, would the truth I knew then be the same truth I convey in the essay? Bloom says, “although the facts of the story, any story, remain the same, its truth—like the impressions in time-lapse photography—can change. And does” (286). In Bloom’s view, as one’s world changes and time progresses, the writer will come to understand events, circumstances, and people differently.

The memoir I would have written at the time of the adoption would have included feelings of nonstop pain and anguish. My arms ached to hold the child I had let go. I was unable to think about anything else. As time passed, my pain eased. Five years later, the way I felt then is still the truth—the truth for that time. However, the essay written five years later more accurately demonstrates how I feel now: “I was carrying a child that I could not raise. My child needed stability, money, a father, and a future. I knew these things were not in my future. I spent so much time trying to decide what I was going to do, 42 weeks to be exact. When I decided to give her up for adoption, I already knew who I wanted to raise her.”

My vision about the truth changed. As I learned more about my life, parenting, and my identity, I came to understand what I did differently. Although the fact I gave my daughter up for adoption will never change, the way I feel about it altered over time and will change many more times before my life ends. For the first year, I felt nothing but pain as I mourned the loss of my daughter. During the second year, the physical pain subsided, but the emotional pain lingered. It evolved, however, from devastating anguish to acceptance of the adoption. For the past three years, thoughts of my first child no longer violate other thoughts. I gained control over my pain and can see that giving up my daughter was the best of terrible, available options.

In the passage about her mother’s death, Hurston clearly outlines how her memories have changed. She writes, “I was to agonize over that moment for years to come” (64). Then she divulges the changes in her feelings from being “restrained physically from outraging the ceremonies established for the dying” to the new outlook that began to overcome her (64): “That hour began my wan-

derings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time, but as in spirit” (65). Hurston describes her feelings when her mother died, beginning with agony, moving to outrage, and ending up feeling misplaced as time passes. Her recorded evolution of feelings honors both her commitment to the knowledge that time changes feelings and her obligation to strike a universal chord in her writing.

### **Universality**

Gerard discusses the art of conveying a deeper subject, a universal chord. He writes, “long after the apparent subject ceases to be topical, the deeper subject and the art that expresses it remain vital” (8). The deeper subject, universality, touches readers most. Hurston gets to the deeper truth in *Dust Tracks* when she paints the picture of her discovery that “the world didn’t tilt under [her] footfalls” (27). She rejoiced the moon loving her so much when she played in its light that it followed her, no matter which way she ran. One day, she describes the moon’s love for her to a friend, only to find out her friend shared the same relationship with the moon. She writes, “We disputed the matter with hot jealousy, and nothing would do but we must run a race to prove which one the moon was loving” (26). Of the moon’s deception, she reveals, “The unfaithfulness of the moon hurt me deeply” (27). Although that incident has not happened to everyone reading her book, the childhood discovery of not being the center of the universe is applicable to everyone.

I struggled to attain a similar universality in “Ghosts of Children Past. In my excerpt, the universal thread is the sacrifices of motherhood:

A deer darts from the shrubbery that surrounds us and leaps across the path. Mazie and I both look up to watch her. Mazie watches quietly, somehow knowing that she has stolen a glimpse of the vulnerable side of the deer. I see a clear representation of what it means to be a mother. It is her instinct to go first, to give her life so that her young might live. She became the center of our attention to lure our eyes and thoughts away from her fawns hiding in the brush on the far side of the canal. My own mothering instincts have evolved from that of this deer.

By giving the reader something to identify with, this excerpt accommodates “Ghosts of Children Past.” I also give my readers another example of the essay’s theme by filling in the gaps. While the events depicted did not both happen on the day I describe in my essay, Mazie and I did watch a deer cross our path on the trail.

### **Conclusion**

After examining truth in the context of creative nonfiction, we now return to the questions first posed at the beginning of this paper. Do writers fill in the gaps, and do they shape or interpret the events at hand? While truth proves itself a thorny obstacle for every writer, we know it is malleable, flexible. Yes, writers do fill in gaps with their own constructs of truth. Further, as Gutkind acknowledges, “writers still remain true to the factual integrity of the piece” while systematically interpreting and thereby shaping the events they portray (3).

However, that is not to say that the writer alone possesses the burden of truth. The reader too defines and creates his own sense of it, shaped by his individual interpretation of the writing. Truth,

often a transient concept at best, ultimately belongs to both the writer and the reader. It can be imperceptible, yet concrete—an undeniable tenet of the creative nonfiction genre—a complexity we will perhaps never be able to completely understand.

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