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im W. Corder, writing over thirty years ago, explained that we all “creat[e] the narrative” that is our lives (16). The difficulty, Corder writes, comes in accommodating the divergent narratives of others. We all selectively invent, and we all have our own boundaries around what we choose to include in that narrative. As he puts it, we are all going through experience, hooking some version of it to ourselves, accumulating what we know as evidence and insight, ignoring what does not look like evidence and insight to us, finding some pieces of life that become life for us, failing to find others, or choosing not to look. (16)

“Each of us is an argument,” he writes (18). These “pieces of life,” and thus these narratives, are different, though. We can meet in the middle when we encounter these differences, certainly. But often, we do not:

What happens if the merest glimpse into another narrative sends us lurching, stunned by its differentness, either alarmed that such differentness could exist or astonished to see that our own narrative might have been or might yet be radically otherwise than it is? Do we hold our narratives? Keep telling the story we have been telling? At all costs? (19)

Corder writes that we may, at times, accommodate these differences. “[A]ll too seldom,” though. More often, and too often, we react negatively: We turn away, we ignore, “we go to war,” or “sink into madness” (19).

This article is about these differences, and the problems that arise when the nuance of our written worldviews goes unexamined. Writing, itself, is the
central focus here: It is the contention of this article that an examination of writing, and in particular of its complex capacity to render worldviews, can help us better understand how differences arise, why they linger, and why they can seem intractable. The key to all of this, this article proposes, is in understanding the complexity of writing itself.

On first glance, asserting that writing is complex might not seem to be putting forth a groundbreaking premise. In the past few years, writing studies scholarship has extensively explored writing’s complexity and exposed several significant and far-reaching ramifications of this idea. Sidney I. Dobrin goes as far as to say that the “complexities of writing . . . are so diverse and divergent that we may never be able to fully account for all of the facets and functions of writing,” although he does admit that “complex ecological approaches” have begun to map this complexity (Postcomposition 143). Such efforts at mapping have indeed done an admirable job of exposing, for instance, the way writing circulates in fluid rhetorical ecologies (Edbauer; Trimbur), or the way that even mundane works of writing can circulate widely (Rivers and Weber). These and many other articulations of the complexity of writing do an admirable job of revealing the expansiveness of its reach into domains that might seem far removed from the discursive.

As many have also noted, writing’s complexity also gives it a significant power to interact with and shape our world. In this sense, we can understand writing as complex in both its form and function, with subtle discursive constructions generating profound effects on the local reader and in the wider environment. Writing can evoke powerful thoughts and compel drastic actions, it can produce a powerful unity or kinship with an author, and it can create entirely new perceptions of the world; it may do all of this across an entire text or within a single sentence. Such power has helped writing ascend to a revered place in our cultural history and has helped give language—and rhetoric—a particular association with the mysterious and the magical (Burke, Rhetoric; Romilly).

Perhaps counterintuitively, the power exerted by writing often manifests in its ostensible simplicity. When at its most effective, writing can seem completely straightforward, and the truths it renders can seem obvious. As well, these effects often appear to be accomplished with little effort by writers, as if they were simply putting truths down on paper (or screen), straight from thought to page. This perception of simplicity encourages the idea that writing is best when it is least complicated, when a writer “just tells it like it is,” when she “cuts through the BS,” or writes in “plain language.”

As this article shows, however, the primary source of writing’s power is not its simplicity, but its ability to disguise its own incredible complexity. The powerful effects mentioned in the previous two paragraphs may seem effort-
less or uncomplicated; a writer may well be able to cut through the BS, and the writing may be effectively plain. But in every paragraph, and even in the most basic sentence, there is a great deal of hidden complexity.

To explain this idea, this article zeroes in on a controversy over “facts” that exposes the problems that arise when writing’s complexity is overlooked. To some extent, this is a recapturing of the root of the word fact itself—the Latin term facere: to make, or to do. The making of facts is exactly what is at issue here, as the aim is to explore the complex ways facts are made, rather than assuming them to be already finished building blocks of a universal and static reality.\(^1\)

More specifically, this article explores the debate over the fabrication of details in what Bronwyn T. Williams calls “the amorphous realm of ‘creative nonfiction’” (296). Of course, the degree to which writing can represent fact or truth has been subject to a variety of scholarly explications pertaining to social constructivism, to equivocations in political discourse, and perhaps most frequently to the well-publicized missteps of authors attempting to pass off works of fiction as works of fact. What this article proposes is that, given the complexity of the questions and debates involving fact, fiction, and truth in nonfiction writing, exposing the complex functioning of writing specifically in this genre advances our understanding of how all writing works on audiences and how writing genres—and facts overall—are divergently perceived.

The choice of creative nonfiction as a focus is quite intentional. This is a genre, according to Lee Gutkind—who has been called “the godfather behind creative nonfiction” (“What’s”)—that overtly bills itself as “factually accurate,” despite the artistry involved in the writing (Gutkind, “What Is”). This doesn’t mean that Gutkind and others like him are naïve about the subjectivity of facts—Gutkind himself admits that creative nonfiction “only present[s] one side of a complicated story” (“The Creative” xxii). However, despite this oft-acknowledged subtlety in the very conception of what a fact is, the actual shaping of facts as they are defined, deployed, and debated in this kind of writing is something often glossed over by writers in creative nonfiction, happening beneath the surface of the genre as it does. In other words, while many acknowledge subjectivity, few authors in the genre embrace it. As will be explored in what follows, the genre of creative nonfiction is uniquely complex in its constitution of meaning and of facts, as its authors typically work in the murky waters of subjective experience. Because of this, for observers and participants alike, creative nonfiction is often a site of intense confrontation over the facts its authors represent.

After exploring the contours of creative nonfiction, the article will delve further into the mechanisms of the complexity of writing by examining a specific case study: the debate over fact and fabrication in the work of satirist David Sedaris. This controversy illustrates writing’s mysterious power well—what
seems like a simple debate over the truth of remembered details exposes the way that all writing is elaborately manufactured. The controversy also reveals that the seemingly straightforward genre categories we use to classify writing are, in fact, tools we use to pretend this complex manufacturing does not exist. Understanding how this manufacturing works is crucial if we are to have a more nuanced understanding of facts and if we are to sustain a means of engaging with others—and others’ writing—that is more informed, more productive, and more accommodating.

**Fifty Years of a Conflicted Genre**

Creative nonfiction as a genre would seem a perfect venue for discussions exposing the complexity of writing and of the problems that arise when factual controversies arise. After all, it is a genre that, as mentioned, proclaims its basis in fact despite the use of literary techniques to colorfully render that fact. This is a definition that seems primed for controversy, as artistry and factuality can be restless companions.

Indeed, debates over the term *creative nonfiction* have dogged the genre consistently. As Dinty W. Moore writes, the term can be traced to the late 1960s, and as one might expect, “as long as [it] has existed, people have questioned how well the expression captures what writers actually do in the genre.” This questioning has not only pertained to what creative nonfiction writers “actually do,” but also to whether the phrase itself is problematic. In addition to the obvious questions as to the appropriateness of the term *creative*, the term *nonfiction* is also controversial. Moore points out (following Philip Gerard), for example, that *nonfiction* seems to ignore that the genre is more than just a negation of fiction—it would be better off, he writes, being described in terms of what it is.

Intensifying this debate is the issue that, since the introduction of creative nonfiction, economic exigencies have raised the stakes considerably for authors working in the genre. As Gutkind writes, creative nonfiction “has become the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities. These days the biggest publishers . . . are seeking creative nonfiction titles more vigorously than literary fiction and poetry,” and in “the academic community generally, creative nonfiction has become the popular way to write” (“What Is”). This success of creative nonfiction, though, has highlighted the significantly large cracks in its definition. The James Frey scandal, for instance, prominently exposed one of these cracks to the wider public. Frey, in a memoir centered around his own drug addiction, was revealed to have invented key parts of his experience of addiction. In one of the more highly publicized moments of the controversy, Oprah
Winfrey dramatically declared to her significant television audience that Frey had “betrayed millions of readers” (“Oprah’s Questions for James”).

The Frey controversy—along with many other similar controversies—would seem to clearly illustrate the difficulty in drawing absolute conditions for the facticity of creative nonfiction. After all, the debates that raged in the wake of Frey’s memoir illustrated that not everyone agreed that his work was a fabrication. This debate followed a traditional divergence in the field regarding what constitutes nonfiction at all, let alone creative nonfiction. Authors from Mark Twain to David Foster-Wallace have asserted, for example, that it is some unspecifiable core of the story that matters for a work to be nonfiction and that the factual details are just there to help convey that core to the reader. For them, exact fidelity to these details in most cases is beside the point.

In any case, one might think the episode could have prompted the widespread adoption of a more fluid or subjective way of describing the genre, or indeed, of describing writing, accuracy, and facts themselves. This, however, did not happen. Instead, faced with this ostensible destabilization—or, at best, uncertainty—over the status of creative nonfiction, many of its proponents have remained steadfast in their insistence that the genre has clear boundaries. Gutkind, for example, writes:

> The word “creative” has been criticized . . . because some people have maintained that being creative means that you pretend or exaggerate or make up facts and embellish details. This is completely incorrect. It is possible to be honest and straightforward and brilliant and creative at the same time.
> “Creative” doesn’t mean inventing what didn’t happen, reporting and describing what wasn’t there. It doesn’t mean that the writer has a license to lie. The cardinal rule is clear—and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader—the maxim we live by, the anchor of creative nonfiction: “You can’t make this stuff up!” (“What Is”)

The certainty on display here is echoed often. Hannah Goldfield, for example, whose job it is to fact-check for The New Yorker (a magazine that, famously, fact-checks even its cartoons for accuracy), argues similarly that there should be no ambiguity in deciding what is nonfiction. Those who would say “all that matters are the broad strokes” are guilty of “a royal cop-out,” she writes. “The challenge, and the art,” Goldfield explains, “lies in confronting the facts—all of them, whether you like them or not—and shaping them into something beautiful” (emphasis added).

It is surely worthwhile to live by the maxim of not “making stuff up,” and confronting “all of the facts” seems on its face to be a workable goal for a genre that includes the word nonfiction in its name. However, as the rest of this article explores, the complex workings of writing often clash with the seemingly rigid
genre expectations of creative nonfiction. Such a clash lays bare what can be an important understanding of writing—one that does not take facts as absolute and, thus, one that foregrounds rather than minimizes a process in which creative is not so far away from invented as many would claim.

**Complicating Fact and Fabrication**

Moore writes that the term *literature of fact* has been proposed (by John McPhee) as an alternate to *creative nonfiction* but was dismissed by many because it “[fell] short of describing the breadth of the genre.” This term, though, hits on a bedrock commonplace about the genre: it is limited to facts. The *Wikipedia* page for the genre states outright that creative nonfiction is “a genre of writing that uses literary styles and techniques to create factually accurate narratives” (“Creative”). While there are writers of nonfiction and memoir who acknowledge the difficulty of pinning down what is “fact” in a text, and while rhetoric and composition scholars know well the decades of poststructuralist theory asserting the contingent nature of our claims to certainty, the claim that facts are important comes up again and again in writing about the genre, especially by authors working within the genre. To expose the intricacies of writing’s complexity, though, is to complicate this straightforward idea that creative nonfiction deals in facts.

One way to reveal this complexity of writing, especially in categories assigned basic labels like *fiction*, *nonfiction*, or *creative nonfiction*, is to use the lens of genre theory. Among other things, this body of scholarship illuminates the hidden complexity of what are seemingly simple and straightforward genres, which reveals how our understandings of writing shift as its contexts do. Carolyn R. Miller’s influential work on genre, for example, in detailing these complex workings of genre and writing, highlights the interaction between writing’s “substance” and its “form.” Specifically, the form of the writing “shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret; this guidance disposes the audience to anticipate, to be gratified, to respond in a certain way” (159). Going even further, Miller then argues that within a genre, a “complex hierarchy” of form and context is “necessary for constructing meaning” (160). Synthesizing these points, we can define a genre as a regularized set of cues that tells us how to understand the writing within it. Moreover, we can say that a complex web of these cues controls the meaning we make out of writing. Thus, when the genre and its attendant cues change, the way we make meaning from writing changes.

As many genre scholars point out, however, genres are inherently unstable and so are *always* changing. Catherine F. Schryer’s rhetorical explication of genre theory shows us that genres are not transcendent or stable categories,
but rather are “complex, evolving discourse practices” (208). As well, Anis Bawarshi argues that rather than “fixate on genres as relatively static objects,” we should approach genres as “performances” that can significantly change as they move across “temporal, spatial, and material boundaries” (244–5). This is a crucial point in thinking of how we make meaning in writing (and, how we make meaning overall). What can seem stable in and about writing is really just “stabilized-for-now,” as Schryer puts it. She explains, while genres do predate their audience, they are also “constantly” being remade and reshaped by “their users and their discourse communities” (208). Putting all of this together reveals that the genre, and thus the meaning, of the same piece of writing may change as a variety of contextual factors change. That is, because writing is complex (in the way just described), it is both generative of and structured by fluid and contingent genres that can be constituted differently by different audiences or in different contexts.

That genre and meaning(s) are constantly shifting is even more important when we consider that writing is part of what serves as a foundation of our knowledge about the world. Facts, which are a part of the meaning we create from writing, are thus themselves continually being made and remade in the ongoing, context-dependent process that is writing. As the specific cases discussed later will illustrate, we understand facts differently in different situations and in different genres. In addition, what are considered factual details will drastically differ depending on what genre the writing is perceived to exist in. In short, facts emerge out of genres, and how the boundary lines of fact and fiction are drawn is dependent on the genres in which one is observing the facts.

At this point, it should be emphasized that this argument does not seek to dismiss the value nor the existence of facts altogether. The explanation here goes in a different direction than notions of social constructivism that suggest facts, or any kinds of boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, are arbitrary or, perhaps, illusory. The account of writing presented here does not do away with stability, nor with facts, but rather exposes the complexity of their creation and argues that this complexity itself produces an illusion of stability and of simplicity.

A good deal of contemporary scholarship on writing complexity hits on this important caveat of epistemic instability: There are practical reasons why clear demarcations of fact and fabrication exist. Williams, writing about this thorniness in creative nonfiction, agrees that reality is fluid but points out that there is, nevertheless, value in fixity:

As well versed in postmodern theory as I try to be, I know that when I read the work of a good creative nonfiction writer, I find myself swept up in a story upon which I confer the power of accuracy, the power of the truth. If I had to question every fact or observation I encountered, what would be the point of reading nonfiction? (300)
Williams hits on an important consideration when thinking of writing’s complexity. We need stability to function, and in writing, as in our everyday interactions, we need there to be a set of bedrock principles—facts—that we can take for granted. The commonplace that facts exist independent of our human interpretation is ingrained into almost every aspect of our social and discursive existence, and this is for good reason. Boundaries need to be drawn, facts established, in order for us to function collectively. If no one agrees on what a fact is, interaction grinds to a standstill. Legitimizing the unlimited individual interpretation of facts would, in a worst-case scenario, lead to chaos. In addition, as Williams points out, writers can have an immense impact on those they write about, and free invention of facts about the lives of others often has significant negative consequences for those subjects.

However, these points can potentially gloss over the extent to which differences in assessments of what facts are go unnoticed and so can hide the negative consequences of these disparities. That is, those cogent arguments in nonfiction scholarship about the ethical and practical consequences of playing fast and loose with the facts in creative nonfiction, while important to consider, effectively shift the focus away from the complex mechanism by which all facts are created and maintained. And, it should be noted, many facts are created and maintained differently by different people.

This divergence in facts is hidden by the very mechanism through which facts and meaning are constituted: genre. Genre looks stable to observers because it functions to provide stability—it organizes writing into recognizable forms. As Charles Bazerman explains, writing genres function as “way[s] of creating order in the ever-fluid symbolic world” (Shaping 319). To create this order, writing needs to be “typified.” As he puts it: “By using these typified texts we are able to advance our own interests and shape our meanings in relation to complex social systems, and we are able to grant value and consequence to the statements of others” (“Systems” 79). Writing genres seem stable, and as such they yield stable facts, values, consequences, and meanings amid the dizzying complexity of the world. But, when we perceive stability in writing via stable genres, we see the stability and miss the flux. In this sense, the stability that genres temporarily create can mask the instability of the contexts of writing. Schryer’s “stabilized-for-now” (208) characterization emphasizes this, as she writes that this idea helps highlight the “complexity” and “creative contradiction” of genres (210).

Using genre theory to better understand this complexity and contradiction can help us better navigate divergent and competing understandings of writing that produce drastically differing sets of facts simply by making us aware of the unstable process of these facts’ formation and maintenance. This awareness might also help us grasp how we might better recognize—and deal with productively
and civilly—our tendency to perceive writing in ostensibly stable configurations and then argue over which configuration is more correct.

**The Fact(s) of David Sedaris**

As previously mentioned, writing’s apparent simplicity obscures its complexity, so we often do not perceive any fluidity in genre at all. In assessing creative nonfiction, for example, observers create seemingly rigid boundaries on what is “honest” or “factual.” Comparing these diverse and sometimes contradictory appraisals, however, illustrates that there are many ways of distinguishing fact and fabrication.

David Sedaris’s stories serve as a prominent illustration of these genre arguments about creative nonfiction. Sedaris bases his work on his own life, and his recounts resonate with a wide variety of readers who not only identify with Sedaris’s outlook on and experience of the world, but also appreciate the wit and candor with which he infuses his narratives. While not everyone is a fan, Sedaris has a significant and varied audience, and is a *New York Times*–bestselling author many times over.

Sedaris ran into a backlash, however, when another writer, Alex Heard, decided to fact-check the details of a few of Sedaris’s stories, beginning with one in which the narrator recounts his experiences working in a mental institution twenty-seven years earlier, when he was thirteen years old. As it turns out, according to the source Heard found who had also worked at the institution during that time, several of the details of the story—that one of the patients had bitten Sedaris on the hand, that the grounds of the institution featured “a bleak colony of Gothic buildings,” and other various descriptive and narrative details—were inaccurate. Soon to follow Heard’s story were a cascade of diverse and spirited retellings of the revelations, appearing in a variety of print and online venues.

On the one hand, given that Sedaris is a storyteller, one might think that such inaccuracies would be discounted as the natural product of redescribing an event that had happened nearly thirty years earlier. And sure enough, this reaction is easily found. Out of the 567 online comments attached to a story about the incident in *The Washington Post*, the one “most liked” was a concise, almost annoyed dismissal of Heard’s exposé of Sedaris:

I just assumed some of his stuff was embellished and the people more likely than not composite. Frankly, I don’t think it matters. I spent Mother’s Day listening to my Grandmother tell stories about her family. She repeated entire conversations. Now I think we can safely assume after 70 years the “conversations” have changed but the story remains essentially true. Leave him alone. He’s a writer. He’s funny. We enjoy his work. (bethinaliquo)
On the other hand, there is no shortage of those whose opinion on the matter is significantly more negative and who feel that the centrality of the inaccurate details means that Sedaris is well-deserving of reprobation. In an online comment on an article that mentions the Sedaris episode alongside a discussion of other authors whose narrative claims have been disputed, author Tom Scocca succinctly encapsulates this opinion:

Seriously, all you Sedaris apologists, put a sock in it. He didn’t lie about “his responsibilities (less dangerous than those he described)” [as the commented-on article puts it]. He lied about whether or not his experiences on the job—that is, the entire subject of the essay—includes GETTING BITTEN BY A CRAZY PERSON. How in the world is this “low-stakes”? It’s the whole fucking stack of chips. (Tom Scocca@Twitter)

What is notable about the Sedaris controversy is both the diversity and the intensity of the reactions. In the wide variety of the descriptions of the incident, different standards seem to be applied to judge the scope and magnitude (and, at times, the existence) of Sedaris’s transgression.

Within the comments on the original Post story, while the forgiving sentiment of the “most liked” comment quoted above predominates, it is by no means the only disposition expressed. Sedaris is variously excused or excoriated, and his exposed inaccuracies either shrugged off or condemned—considered either earnest recollections, slight exaggerations, and composite truths, or willful misrepresentations, semi-fabrications, and outright lies. Some of the commenters seem to echo the terms earlier used by Goldfield: Sedaris is taking a “lazy shortcut,” his technique is a “cop-out,” and so on (JackieIrish). Moreover, while these views pertain to what might seem a minor issue, many are extremely passionate. As commenter sircraig puts it: “The world pivots on the distinction between fact and fiction. We all benefit when that’s clear and we all lose when we can’t tell the difference.”

The point of showing these divergent reactions is not to illustrate that differences of opinion exist but to put into relief the way that, to most, the situation is black and white and, no matter the opinion, that dissent is largely inconceivable. Observers often just do not perceive that there are different ways of drawing genre boundaries and intensely defend the singularity of their views. That is, those for whom Sedaris’s work can be considered sufficiently truthful just do not understand the outrage and seriousness of those who see him as having committed a serious transgression and vice versa.

This insularity exposes the problem with creative nonfiction specifically. More than other genres, creative nonfiction is a site of extreme nuance and complexity in the way facts are constituted. To use Schryer’s terms, the contradictions
and complexity of this genre are even more pronounced than in other genres. But for many observers, this complexity is still hidden by seemingly straightforward genre rules—which, as Bazerman reminds us, exist as mechanisms of stability in an unstable world. For these observers, that such sharp disagreements about creative nonfiction even exist is borderline unbelievable. As the debate over Sedaris’s writing illustrates, if one perceives creative nonfiction as stable from one’s own vantage point, then the idea that there is disagreement about the meaning (and the facts and the rules) of the writing in this genre might seem so clearly misguided as to be infuriating.

Comparing these diverse and sometimes contradictory appraisals illustrates that when we apprehend a genre in one particular way, we often fail to notice that it’s actually moving and that there are other ways it can be apprehended—ways that to other people are just as inarguable and obvious. Facts emerge from writing, but they can emerge quite divergently, and the process that creates this divergence is often impossible to see. In this sense, fact and fabrication, highly complex concepts, are always on the move. Moreover, we can say that the very act of writing creates a contingent and unstable context, carved out of a reality that is always exceeding our capacity to fully know it or even to pin it down for too long.

This hidden complexity of writing therefore leads to one of the central conflicts in our appraisals of it in creative nonfiction: There isn’t anything close to absolute consistency in the assessment of whether a work is fact or fiction. Sedaris’s fans and detractors illustrate this point perfectly. One of Heard’s sources argued that Sedaris was “lying through his teeth!” Heard is similarly blunt—though not quite as caustic—in his own assessment: The stories “contain outright fabrications, and the fabrications matter.” For Heard, what causes Sedaris’s work to cross the boundary of a “mattering” fabrication is that the smaller details of Sedaris’s stories have been changed enough to create “a distortion.” As Heard explains:

[I]t’s one thing for a humorist to recreate dialogue that captures the general spirit of how a conversation unfolded. It’s another to manufacture lines like a playwright, a technique that lets you sidestep a problem that hobbles nonfiction writers all the time: Often, nothing interesting happens when you report a story. But that’s exactly what Sedaris does. When reality sags, he opens the funny-dialogue nozzle. Sometimes in [the Sedaris book] *Naked*, these rants aren’t just the glue holding his stories together; they are the story.

In Heard’s articulation, it is not just that the smaller details of Sedaris’s stories have been exaggerated or are simply wrong, but rather that Sedaris shirks the labor demanded by the category of nonfiction, which, as Heard writes, has one “simple rule: . . . Don’t make things up.” Put another way, Sedaris’s clear (to
Heard's transgression, and what caused his work to cross a line, was him gaining a tactical advantage over other authors in the genre by making his stories more humorous than "real."

This is Heard’s way of organizing the complex world of fact and fiction that he is dealing with. His classification scheme involves typified genre conventions—for example, conventions that allow more general retellings that capture the “spirit of how a conversation unfolded” or conventions that stipulate a specific idea of what constitutes an unimpeachable “reality”—the adherence to which conveys certain economic benefits. Because of the order derived from the particular genre contours Heard uses to stabilize this complex situation, he is able to draw clear boundaries for what counts for him as the “simple rule” of nonfiction. For Heard, specific facts—and the boundary lines that constitute them—emerge within the particular genre that he uses to read and to organize Sedaris’s complex situation.

**Community Influence on Genre**

As genre theory emphasizes, there is an overwhelming diversity of elements that can influence the way any individual perceives writing in specific genres. Such shaping elements can exist beyond the level of the individual, however. As Bazerman writes, genre theory highlights how “our discursive activity is bound to the symbolic and non-symbolic environment” ("Systems" 99), a point that reminds us that even material or cultural contextual factors may have a profound effect on shaping our interpretations of writing in a genre. These elements may exist in a community. For instance, a community of authors may be more intimately familiar with the labor-saving or economic benefits of Sedaris’s potential misuse of details, and this knowledge may act to shape that community’s perception of genre, resulting in an emphasis on economic gain as one criterion for what causes unacceptable behavior for a nonfiction writer. In this example, the fact that Sedaris is a *New York Times*—bestselling author and may have gotten to be so without suffering the rigors entailed by the requirements of the nonfiction label might have particularly resonated with certain communities whose members were acutely aware of the ways authors can take advantage of the genre label. Heard, for example, asserts that the designation “nonfiction” carries specific rewards that are limited by “ethical requirements”: “[I]n our time,” he writes, “nonfiction is bankable in ways that fiction is not. What bugs me is that [Sedaris’s editors and publicists] milked the term for all its value, while laughing off any of the ethical requirements it entails.”

Thus, Heard’s shared experience of the difficulties of publishing as a nonfiction author might also influence other members of his authorial community,
who may also hold as important the idea that authors in creative nonfiction in particular should not “manufacture” details to augment a “sagging” reality (to use Heard’s terms). This suggests that many members of a community may have overlapping perceptions of genre—which itself is an example of the interconnectedness of genre and community highlighted by several genre theory scholars.\(^3\)

In this sense, an individual’s perception of writing in a genre can indeed be influenced by conditions that exist in a particular community. The commenters on *The Washington Post* story who agreed about Sedaris may have been responding to similar communal pressures that encouraged them to conceive of the situation in a particular way. However, the diversity of a person’s influences can still lead to significantly differing ways of drawing boundaries, even among members of the same broader community. For example, Scocca and Heard—both members of the community of authors who work in the nonfiction genre—have significantly different takes on Sedaris. Heard, despite his condemnation of Sedaris’s sidestepping, ultimately takes a somewhat forgiving approach in his article, calling Sedaris an “outstanding comic stylist” and “a real pro,” writing, “I was a fan when I started my odd little project, and I still am—mostly.” On the other hand, while Scocca’s way of appraising Sedaris may overlap somewhat with Heard’s, Scocca places much more importance on one element—the way that the altered details of a nonfiction work may harm the subjects, a concern shared by Williams. This difference results in a radically different outcome in Scocca’s assessment of Sedaris. Writing about the instance where Sedaris “invented” details about his experience working in a mental institution, for example, Scocca derisively addresses Sedaris’s defenders: “Bounce [that defense] off an advocate for the mentally ill and see what you get” (Tom Scocca@Twitter).

Illustrating yet another generic lens for creative nonfiction works is memoirist William Bradley. While not discussing Sedaris specifically, Bradley’s view nevertheless is relevant to that situation, as the view represents a set of genre conventions about creative nonfiction that are different than those represented by Scocca or Heard. Bradley writes that the “essential purpose” of the entire genre of creative nonfiction, including memoir, “is to reveal some type of truth,” even if that truth is “a personal, subjective truth” (204). For Bradley, specific elements influence the boundaries of these different kinds of truths, including the unavoidable flaws of memory, the “point of view” of the author (205), a consideration of the well-being of the subjects of the writing (206), and the “self-aggrandize[ment],” as he puts it, of the author (209). All of these elements Bradley either names specifically or describes in detail as mattering to the question of how to judge the veracity and factual legitimacy of a memoirist’s work. What matters to Bradley we could say is a product of the genre rules that he puts together and draws upon, which organize the myriad elements in the writing
situation and determine his judgments as to when authors cross the line from nonfiction to fabrication.

**Invisible Contradictions**

While many scholars of creative nonfiction make the argument that in all nonfiction writing gray areas exist between fact and fabrication, there is always some point for most readers (and critics) at which writing can become clearly dishonest—a point where the boundary between harmless embellishment and deleterious fabrication becomes, if not absolute, then at least clear. What is interesting, however, is that for different people, such a line is drawn very differently. Moreover, it is often difficult for individuals to reconcile their own boundaries with the divergent ones of others, and it often goes unnoticed that seemingly clear standards are often applied very differently in different situations.

It’s not just that everyone sees fact, fabrication, and even creative nonfiction differently—that different views exist on these issues is somewhat unremarkable. But, by looking at these issues in terms of genre and complexity, we can see how the very complexity of the act of writing hides the way that all writing is conflicted, as the variation of the boundary lines by which we classify writing means that the same writing might be turned into either fact or fabrication, either creative nonfiction or creative fiction.

N. Katherine Hayles explains this paradox from the perspective of complexity theory, in her articulation of the way observers behave when confronted with any complex situation. As she writes, when a person organizes a complex situation, the boundaries they draw to do so seem transcendent. That is, any person inside a complex situation is unable to perceive what she has relegated to the outside of her own organizational scheme (10–11). Following this logic, we can say that the boundaries of creative nonfiction will always seem apparent to the person who has drawn them, just as the delineation of facts or fabrications will seem clear. Despite this apparent clarity, however, the genre rules that govern the perception of facts and fabrications are in fact fluid and malleable, changing as contexts change.

In the abstract, it is easy (or easier) to simply assert the point that facts do not exist prior to, nor outside of, the genres from which they emerge. However, as creative nonfiction scholarship shows, this is not so easy in practice, as there are many difficulties in actually implementing a workable view that admits that facts are malleable. The subjects of writing can be harmed, for instance, when lax standards for facts create an anything-goes environment, which can also degrade public discourse and allow pernicious ideas to go unchallenged, as when fringe political group representatives attempt to intentionally spread misinformation.
What creative nonfiction advocates such as Gutkind—as well as many other critics of this facts-as-a-free-for-all scenario—often do not touch on, however, are the problems on the other side of the equation. Drawing strict boundaries for what is factual discourse ignores the problems entailed by the existence of differing genre configurations. As genre theory shows, genres organize our interpretations of writing in ways that shut out alternative organizing schemes, and so the production of facts in a genre will preclude the legitimacy of other ways of constituting the facts. In short, it is very difficult for a person to draw or demarcate facts in multiple ways, since the very acceptance of one set of facts reifies boundaries that are a product of one version of a genre instead of another.

Seeing through the lens of complexity and genre theory does allow us to better grasp the mechanisms of this exclusionary epistemic practice. Facts, by their very nature, seem to speak for themselves, but this becomes true only after they have been produced within a genre. To ignore the mechanisms of how this production works—and to ignore that genres, and facts, can vary—is to ignore a major complication of saying that facts simply speak for themselves. Jane Bennett, following Theodor Adorno in another discussion of complexity, argues that we need to at least recognize that these other divergent configurations exist, even if we cannot perceive them. This recognition, she writes, is an ethical necessity, crucial if we ever hope to “stop raging against a world that refuses to offer us . . . ‘reconcilement’” (14). To imagine that facts are absolute and undebatable is not only misguided then; it is harmful to those around us.

**All Writing Is Dishonest (and Honest)**

This actual messiness in our seemingly unambiguous appraisals of writerly fabrication is on display as well in the more recent example of satirist Mike Daisey. Daisey’s solo show, *The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, about the manufacturing practices of the technology giant Apple—specifically about the inhumane working conditions in its factories in China—was re-presented in abbreviated form on the National Public Radio program *This American Life*. The broadcast drew huge ratings, becoming the single most popular podcast in the radio show’s history. *The New York Times*, following the airing, ran an in-depth investigative series about Apple’s manufacturing practices, resulting in several significant changes in Apple’s policy regarding these practices (“Retracting”).

The aftermath of the broadcast, however, also revealed that Daisey had fabricated or embellished—depending on whom you ask—several supposed first-hand details of those overseas manufacturing conditions. He referenced factories with guards at the gates carrying guns, pre-teen workers, specific encounters with older workers who had never even seen the finished product
they helped assemble—all of which turned out to be false or, at best, impossible to substantiate. Following these revelations, This American Life went so far as to issue a retraction, pull the audio of the episode, and air a follow-up show completely devoted to exposing and discussing the inaccuracies (Isherwood). The host of the show, Ira Glass, issued a statement in which he proclaimed that he was “horrified to have let something like this onto public radio” (“Retracting”). Daisey defended his actions in a statement on his blog, writing that his show “uses a combination of fact, memoir, and dramatic license to tell its story, and I believe it does so with integrity.” As he explains, the genre in which he works determines the methods. Here again, in Daisey’s explanation, the rules governing the genre in which he works are clear: “The tools of the theater are not the same as the tools of journalism.” In this case, however, what exact genre Daisey’s show was, and thus what constituted acceptable “tools,” clearly are the subject of disagreement.

True to the spirit of his defense, instead of shutting down The Agony and Ecstasy of Steve Jobs, Daisey reworked it, eliminating the offending details yet continuing to perform a similar version, still adhering to what he considered the genre of “theater” while, it seems, bending a bit to the standards of “journalism.” The Times, in its take, argued that Daisey’s new show proved the controversy was largely immaterial, with their reviewer Charles Isherwood writing, “The new material in the [reworked] show bears out the idea that while Mr. Daisey may well have misled audiences in describing the show as nonfiction, the larger truths about the treatment of [the Apple manufacturing plant] workers are indisputable.”

In direct contrast to the Times’ more charitable take on the show, many online commenters were less forgiving. Notable here is the tone of these comments, which stands in direct contrast to the tone of the comments left about Sedaris on many of these same websites. While many commenters were forgiving of Sedaris, far fewer were so magnanimous about Daisey. The most popular reader comment sums up the way many readers found Daisey’s misdeeds to invalidate the worth of his work:

The play’s key dramatic elements, the gun toting security guards, the 11 year old workers, the old man who was crippled by the work, all were total lies. You want to say to the guy, “Mike you aren’t a fabulist, you are a liar.” He had a chance to speak truth to power and he lied to hype his play. . . . Daisey probably doesn’t mention that Apple pushed [the owners of the factory in question] and [because of this] their workers [became] some of the highest paid in China. And he doesn’t mention that the workers get less overtime now—and that makes them angry. Mike Daisey is still pushing half truth and dishonesty. (TimT)

While these were not the same commenters as those on the Sedaris story (at least as far as can be determined given the ambiguous commenter names), there was a
noticeable and significant difference between the majority of these comments and the majority of the comments on the Sedaris episode, with many even explicitly contrasting the two cases in their condemnation of Daisey.

Both Daisey’s work and Sedaris’s work could be considered examples of creative nonfiction, even though there may be disagreements as to whether the work was closer to journalism or theater (for Daisey), or humor writing or autobiography (for Sedaris). In Daisey’s case, we can see that the genre contours drawn by commenters were influenced by different pressures, took place in different contexts, and so made use of different boundaries of fact and fabrication than did the commenter appraisals of Sedaris’s work. In addition, in these comments, the similarities between the two cases were rarely mentioned—while the differences in the two cases were often explicitly emphasized. However, Daisey’s critics were now arguing against the position that Sedaris’s defenders had taken in those same comments sections. These critiques targeted Isherwood’s point that Daisey’s accurate depiction of the subject’s “larger truths” could justify his looseness with the details. Just as those broad strokes of Sedaris’s life were considered by many to be the valuable larger truths that really mattered, Isherwood’s argument here was that the broad injustices perpetrated by Apple, which Daisey’s work helped illuminate, were larger truths that really mattered. Yet the readers for the most part vehemently disagreed that the larger truths justified the inaccuracies, unlike their dominant position on Sedaris.

Again, the point here is not simply to highlight the contradictions—there is a diversity of opinions on both Sedaris and Daisey. Rather, the point is to illustrate the fundamental paradox of writing: as authors, both Sedaris and Daisey wrote, and the moment they did, they created complexity. The boundaries drawn to make sense of this complexity, to make sense of their writing, were drawn out of contingently constituted genres with an apparently static—but actually unstable—network of rules. This means that the process of genre creation and maintenance entails the creation of discernible categories of fact and fabrication that are always subject to redrawing, even as they appear not to be. This revise-ability is fundamental to the essence of what writing is and, thus, to the essence of what facts are and, by extension, the essence of what genres like creative nonfiction are. It would make sense, then, that an awareness of this should inflect all our understandings of, and judgments about, both facts and writing.

Where Writing Facts Matter(s)

Debates over the degree to which an author’s work is judged to be factual or to contain fabrications that “matter” (as Heard, Goldfield, and many others put it) resonate in many other locations, outside of creative nonfiction, where writing’s
complexity presents itself. These dilemmas often show up in pedagogical settings in particular. In these cases, a rhetorical genre theory highlights that drawing rigid boundaries on facts and fabrications serves to repress the complexity of the issues involved. In this sense, this methodological lens can be used to illustrate that such situations may not be as simple as they first seem.

For example, the oft-made demand for a focus on plain facts in first-year writing (FYW) presents an opportunity for genre theory to serve as a useful tool. This demand, which opposes the purportedly political and so-called postmodern turn in FYW, is a consistent point of contention for many inside and outside of the discipline. Recently, writing scholar Donald Lazere has critiqued what he calls “the divorce of writing instruction from factual knowledge” (69), arguing in particular that “American scholars in English” display a major failing when they “work themselves up into excesses of . . . self-hatred in their phobia of [this] factual knowledge” (109). Lazere’s critiques represent a significant contingent of the discipline and echo a familiar refrain of those who would condemn writers for fabrication: facts matter. While there is nothing flawed with Lazere’s critique in itself, and it certainly deserves consideration by the field, the debate it inspires often does not account for those complexities of facts that have been explored in this article. Thus the debate may be one that cannot be resolved with any satisfaction for either side.

All of these debates illustrate the strong and continued demand for absolutes in writing, which stands as just one among many stark reminders of our culture’s typically ossified public discourse both about facts and about absolute definitions. It is true, of course, that writers can fabricate deleteriously. However, to fail to recognize the way complexity problematizes fabrication itself is to set writers up for failure. That is, writers will never be able to fully control or stabilize what is truth, fact, or fabrication in their writing, and the boundaries that separate them will never be universally stable. Moreover, as the discussion in this article illustrates, the very delineation of these categories precludes the perception of other possible configurations of them. Alyce Miller argues that writing “hoaxes,” which often result in public denunciations of the writer, can “force us to consider exactly how we value, and what we value” (33). But what if our very commitment to these values is exactly what thwarts our ability to perceive the complexity of these values and to perceive the values of others?

A better understanding of the complex processes through which genres are constituted shows them to be both unavoidably obfuscatory and powerfully divisive. So, while it is not necessarily harmful for authors to strive for accuracy and facticity, and there is ethical value in creative nonfiction authors’ attempts to recall details correctly, there is also ethical value in recognizing the quite variable processes by which details are crystallized into facts and in recognizing
the processes by which facts are judged—differently—through the prism of different genres.

Similarly, while there is merit in holding authors accountable for basic community standards for honesty or for fidelity to the subjects of their writing, it is also valuable to recognize that there can never be absolute accuracy in the complex world rendered by writing. Indeed, the act of writing itself is the creation of an unstable and malleable context in which absolute accuracy is impossible, even though writing also, paradoxically, creates the conditions—genres—in which such an absolute can be ostensibly assessed.

This is to say, writing is a multiplicity, one that often results in wildly inconsistent applications of the standards for accuracy and fact. This is not always easy to perceive because writing hides its multiplicity behind a reassuring sheen of coherent, lucid veracity. Sedaris famously argues that his work is “97 percent true,” and for him “that’s true enough” (Cruz). His point may have been tongue in cheek, but it nevertheless illustrates the persistence of the ideal quantification of facticity—100 percent accuracy—that is a product of our faith in the possibility of perfect writing and that continues to plague popular and academic discourse on creative nonfiction.

The Benefit of Theorizing—and Recognizing—Complexity

Corder’s proposed remedy to our tendency to turn away from narratives that contradict our own is to ask us to “make a commodious universe, to stretch words out beyond our private universe” (31). The unwritten difficulty here, though, is that the very process of creating our own narrative inhibits the creation of that commodious universe. The very existence of our narrative—and our facts—im pedes our recognition and legitimization of the facts and narratives of others. While this may not be an insuperable problem, it is almost certain that by failing to recognize all those aforementioned complex mechanisms of narrative creation, we render a commodious universe that much more difficult to make. It seems incumbent upon us, then, to consider ourselves caught up in the web of our own creation, and to consider—and confront—the details of those forces that would try to confine us to so many private universes.

Those who argue as Goldfield—the New Yorker fact-checker—does, that getting every detail right is the key, miss the point. Not that such fidelity isn’t a noble goal in creative nonfiction as well as in other fact-based genres, but the point is rather that the criteria for this fidelity is, ultimately, contextual. Anyone can argue convincingly for their own standards, but failure to recognize that these standards are but one possibility is to only see the obviousness of one’s own configuration. It is not a “royal cop-out,” to use Goldfield’s term, to
operate according to different genre rules. It is more of a cop-out to refuse to attempt to presume the validity of both your own rules and those of someone else simultaneously.

To fail to recognize that other standards in other contexts are just as valid in those contexts is not only to be dogmatic, it also undermines the valuable lessons that rhetoric and writing studies—and, more specifically, genre theory—can impart. Newspapers, for example, as we teach in rhetoric classes every day, are widely viewed as adherent to an impeccable standard for nonfiction, yet they routinely and unavoidably present only part of the story. Just as both rhetoric theory and genre theory explain, there is no way to present the entirety of a situation, nor to present a situation in a way that is understood identically by every reader. Authorial choices, and the genre rules used, entail a specific view of reality that is always and unavoidably partial. An overemphasis on unimpeachable facts thus elides this very important point and disguises the ways we make choices about our view of the world every minute of every day. It also can discredit writers engaged in the legitimate endeavor of writing about the world and so can distract us from the beneficial effects of these writers’ efforts.

The central point here is not that standards, categories, and facts are problematic in and of themselves. It is, instead, that the rhetoricity of these facts must also be acknowledged. Of course this particular point echoes what rhetoricians have been arguing as long as there has been the idea of rhetoric. Kenneth Burke, to take a somewhat recent example, famously explained that our choice of terms to describe a situation constitutes a “selectio[n] of reality” that must correspondingly entail “a deflection of reality.” Our very “selectivity,” he writes, “is a reduction” (Grammar 59). In Burke’s idea we have a core principle that many scholars of genre theory embrace and that should underlie our understanding of writing, genre, and facts: that our perception of the world is always and necessarily a contingent selection among an infinite excess of possibilities.

Notes

1. The defense of facts has acquired much more import in recent months in a sphere apart from that of creative nonfiction, as the current political moment has featured several debates over so-called alternative facts—easily disproven falsehoods stated as legitimate information. While the explication in this article is about facts in creative nonfiction and in writing more generally, there are clear applications of the methodology to other realms. For example, the political division of facts into categories of actual versus alternative runs the risk of simplifying the issue in much the same way as does the reductive literary division of writing into categories of nonfiction and fiction.

2. There is, in fact, a significant body of scholarship in rhetoric and writing studies that has productively complicated and broadened our understanding of what can be considered as a part of the act of writing. See Cooper; Dobrin and Weisser; Mara and Hawk; Prior and Shipka; and Syverson, for example.
3. Carolyn Miller, for example, writes that her understanding of rhetorical genre involves “conventions of discourse that a society establishes as ways of ‘acting together’” (163).

4. That facts are never separate from their “networks of interpretation” is widely regarded as a commonplace in rhetoric scholarship. For example, this argument is made in the very first chapter of the rhetoric textbook *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (Crowley and Hawhee 27).

**Works Cited**


