

Scholarship on the Blurry Borders Between Academia, Nonfiction, And Other Ways of Writing Life

Fall 2016 CDTLI Workshop

Aaron Bobrow-Strain (Organizer)
Sharon Alker
Scott Elliott
Michelle Janning
Bruce Magnusson
Lydia McDermott
Suzanne Morrissey
Lynn Sharp

Introduction

Hands are wringing and tongues are tsking: academic writing is stuffy, inaccessible, and unread. Academics, we often hear, have forsaken their duty to speak publically on important matters in favor of the cheap rewards of status in closed, clubby in-groups. Prominent newspapers and magazines pose scolding questions: “Why is academic writing so bad?” “Why are there no more public intellectuals?”

Sadly, much of this anguish channels conservative anti-intellectualism and smug anti-scholastic instrumentalism more than it reflects a genuine desire to transform academic discourse. Nostalgia for the “good old days” when academics wrote beautifully for the masses caricatures the present and celebrates a past that never existed.

And yet the critics have a point: the business of academic writing is corrupt, dominated by corporate monopolies extracting free labor and mountains of cash from dependent scholars and institutions; tenure systems incentivize a narrow range of acceptable writing products; and “popular” still means “inferior” or “simplistic” at many colleges and universities.

Where does this leave faculty who want to combine scholarly rigor and non-normative forms of writing?

This faculty workshop explored debates, controversies, and experiments around non-normative scholarly writing form by academics and non-academics.

The collaboratively-developed syllabus included works of journalistic nonfiction, experimental essays, fiction, academic memoir, and texts that defied easy categorization. We met eight times for two- to three-hour sessions during Fall 2016.

As a testament to the workshop’s success, a core group of participants has continued to meet informally after the CDTLI’s official end date.

Syllabus

Participants took turns facilitating the following sessions:

- Sept 2 Introductory meeting: themes, goal-setting, and collaborative syllabus design.
- Sept 23 Jim Fingal (author) and John D'Agata (fact-checker), *The Lifespan of a Fact*.
- Oct 3 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.
- Oct 21 Catherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*.
- Nov 11 Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Politics of Exile*.
- Dec 2 Eula Biss, *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*
- Dec 14 Selections of short fiction.
- Jan 20 Final Reflection and Discussion.

Reflections and Outcomes

This workshop challenged each participant in myriad ways. As participants' individual assessments indicate, the workshop pushed each of us to re-think assumptions about genre, discipline, and borders between academic and non-academic writing that impact our writing and teaching. As Michelle Janning reflected,

“Our Fall 2016 CDLTI met its goals of encouraging creative cross-disciplinary inquiry by allowing for concerted dialogue across disciplines based in a concrete set of diverse readings in order to share ideas about voice, epistemology, and even the contested definitions of fiction and non-fiction to get at ‘truth’ in our writing. In this dialogue, we each found ways to seek both overlap and distinction in how we frame our own writing and teaching lenses (e.g., how much attention to pay to footnotes; what a ‘proper truth’ of an essay should be; what differences there may be in telling stories about data or just telling stories).”

Impact on Teaching

Each participant noted ways that the workshop will impact (or has already impacted) his or her teaching, including:

- Redesigning a course syllabus to include online blog posts and op-eds by writers and researchers in the field (complementing and contrasting more traditional academic articles by those same authors).
- Creating new lesson plans designed to teach students about “the myriad voices that academics can take in order to tell the story of the topic at hand, to compare and contrast

how the message about the research can come across differently depending on the tone of the writing and the venue, and to play with questions surrounding the concepts of truth, fake news, data, and the presentation of ‘fact’ within social science research and writing.”

- Adding workshop texts to future course syllabi (multiple participants reported this outcome). For example, Suzanne Morrissey reflected, “At times when I was skeptical about being able to use a text in the classroom, I left our meetings emboldened to do so. In fact, as I redesigned a syllabus for my course, *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of Cities* (a course that represents my specialty within my discipline, a course that is quite dear to me), I chose to begin the semester with Boo’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* to introduce students to the richness of narrative and personal account of the life in the slums of Mumbai.”
- Generally feeling more confident about teaching non-academic or non-traditional academic texts. After every session, we went around the room and talked about how we might teach the week’s text in a class.
- Developing writing assignments designed to get students themselves experimenting with some of the questions of genre, format, and venue we explored in the workshop.
- Developing assignments that ask students to write about course themes and theoretical material in formats accessible to larger audiences. For example: Aaron Bobrow-Strain reworked the final project in his Political Ecology course this spring as a result of the workshop. The new assignment asks students to write a short creative essay that engages with theoretical material from the course but is “polished and engaging enough for publication in a venue like Grist.org, Edge Effects, or *High Country News*.” While this is a type of assignment that has interested him for a long time, the CDTLI provided the final push (and pedagogical tools that will help him help students succeed with the challenging assignment).

Impact on Scholarship/Professional Activity

Each of us was at very different places in our engagement with non-traditional academic writing and/or public scholarship. Some have been blurring boundaries with their writing for a long time. These participants reflected that the workshop encouraged and honed their efforts. Others joined the group wanting to take their writing in new directions, but not sure how to do it. Those participants reflected that the workshop gave them confidence, tools, and inspiration that will help them in the future.

Suzanne Morrissey, captured the overall impact well:

“For some time, I have been stalled in making progress on these works, in part because they involve transforming my scholarship and writing in ways that challenge my skills and knowledge. The opportunity to read from scholars who have ‘gone down the path’ of taking different approaches to writing *and* to discuss those approaches with my peers, came in the form of the workshop... In my own writing,

stories that reflect sensory experience are the centerpiece and, yet, I often find my writing stilted and lacking in rich description. My colleagues chose readings that capture the experiential in dramatic and realistic ways without being fluffy and cliché in their presentation. I am grateful to have examples under my belt that will help me in my own writing. And, rather than having any concerns about how we ran the workshop, I only wish it didn't end."

Perhaps most importantly, the workshop created a community of people committed to ongoing exploration of the "blurry boundaries" between academic writing, non-fiction, and other non-traditional forms of public scholarship. As Michelle Janning noted, the workshop "provided a new network of colleagues with whom I can talk more about teaching and writing in the future." Scott Elliott expanded on this idea: "The CDTLI...built a community of fellow writers genuinely interested in finding ways to write within their fields but in new ways that would allow them to make moves and reach audiences beyond the strictures of traditional scholarship."

Aaron Bobrow-Strain, who is in the middle of book project that's grounded in academic theory and research but written in narrative nonfiction form, reflected that the workshop provided "a crucial sounding board." "It was a supportive venue where I could test out ideas, grapple with doubts, and hash out problems with a group of colleagues who really understood the challenges of writing for a larger audience."

The creation of this network (or community) is a particularly important outcome because, despite much lip service, there is little support and few incentives for non-traditional writing within academic, generally. At Whitman, we are lucky to see the beginnings of support for public scholarship and non-traditional writing, but there is still a long way to go. One indicator of this need is the fact that members of the CDTLI are continuing to meet even after the workshop's official end-date.

"The Beautiful Mongrels," as this group calls itself (repurposing a phrase from a text by Flannery O'Connor we read during one of our sessions), has taken the leap from discussing texts by outside authors to discussing writing by workshop participants. Its goal is to nurture and provide feedback for faculty at different places in their exploration of non-traditional academic writing. With some investment of time and energy, this group could expand to include new colleagues and provide a more formal venue for discussions of non-traditional academic writing.

Other Outcomes

Aaron Bobrow-Strain will talk about the workshop experience in a session of the annual meetings of the Association of American Geographers focused on public scholarship this spring.

Individual Reflections

Sharon Alker

I benefited so much from the group Aaron organized on non-fiction and scholarly writing that significant number of core members are going to continue to meet as they work on their own

writing. This course exposed me to a range of writing that I would never otherwise have read. Each work we read helped me to rethink my own writing - to imagine ways to write that would reach a popular audience. The first book we read, *Lifespan of a Fact*, was a superb way to begin, asking us to navigate the tension between creativity and accuracy, and we then moved to assess a series of books that tried to do just that, albeit in widely variant ways. This has caused me to rethink my own writing (for example, to consider the role of the narrational voice in my own scholarship) and to re-assess my audience. As we continue to meet over the Spring, I plan to keep a journal that I hope will eventually become a scholarly blog of sorts, that will try to reshape the questions I ask and will try to answer in a way that will stay true to the historical resonance of my interests as well as reveal their relevance to current questions and concerns. This will also help me in the classroom; I have been working over the past few years to rethink assignments, to have supplementary assignments over and above analytical papers. This experience has led me to reconsider what I am doing, and what sort of writing will best serve the needs of my students.

Aaron Bobrow-Strain

I'm in the middle of a book project that's grounded in academic theory and research, but written as narrative nonfiction. The workshop idea grew out of this project, and the months I spent grappling by myself with difficult questions about method, evidence, ethics, and form. I hoped that the workshop would provide both a venue for discussing those types of questions, and a supportive community. It achieved both personal goals. It was a crucial sounding board for me. It was a supportive venue where I could test out ideas, grapple with doubts, and hash out problems with a group of colleagues who really understood the challenges of writing for a larger audience. I came out of each discussion inspired and ready to push my writing to new places. The workshop has also impacted my teaching. Most immediately, I reworked the final project in his Political Ecology course this spring as a result of the workshop. The new assignment asks students to write a short creative essay that engages with theoretical material from the course but is "polished and engaging enough for publication in a venue like *Grist.org*, *Edge Effects*, or *High Country News*." I've been interested in giving students opportunities like this for a long time, but the CDTLI provided the final push. It also gave me pedagogical tools that will help me help students succeed with the challenging assignment.

Scott Elliot

A) The CDTLI met its goal. It built a community of fellow writers genuinely interested in finding ways to write within their fields but in new ways that would allow them to make moves and reach audiences beyond the strictures of traditional scholarship. Everyone participating was genuinely interested in pushing at the boundaries of traditional scholarship to find new and hybrid avenues of expression and of seeing how these new modes might find a place in classes. The texts were well-chosen (collaboratively from a good initial list) to help us engage persistent epistemological, writerly, political, and pedagogical questions. Conversations were free-ranging, good-humored, and revelatory of how each of us defines the purposes of good writing; the usefulness and limits of categories; and differences between angles of approach dictated, for better or worse, by our individual disciplines.

B) This CDTLI was positioned "close to where I live." Especially in the multi-genre introductory creative writing courses I teach, students are asked to consider what they've learned by writing in several genres the best uses of these genres as vehicles for communicating information about

their lives and the world, in addition to the limits and blurring points of these genres. The texts we read in this CDTLI refreshed my orientation and tested some of my convictions about the blurry boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. These texts have given me new ways to approach the blurred boundaries I engage in the multi-genre class, especially, but also possibilities for my own nonfiction and fiction. For me, the group also operated something like a global studies symposium in that many of the texts, mirroring the global and border interests of some of its participants, had an international focus. One of the texts, *Slow Violence*, attempted to explain a gap I've noticed but never attempted to explain between nature-writing-- (and especially American nature-writing)—and international post-colonial scholarship, in some ways suggesting ways to repair, or at least to better-understand this gap. The awareness gained in this text may find its way into my own work—it certainly prompted me to re-assess my work to date - if not my teaching. Other texts did a good job of framing questions of fiction vs. non-fiction, constructed personae, the usefulness and burdens of genre categories, and tensions between being a writer and being an activist. The texts we read tested our convictions about the relationship between facts and the truth and the license to blur, and demonstrated the power of immersion, openness to serendipitous gifts in research, and artful juxtaposition.

C) The colloquium was well-framed and led. It came together well and organically. It is an index of its success that several members of the group, which came to be called “the beautiful mongrels” (recasting a line from a Flannery O'Connor essay), are planning to share new writing in the coming term.

Michelle Janning

A. Our Fall 2016 CDLTI met its goals of encouraging creative cross-disciplinary inquiry by allowing for concerted dialogue across disciplines based in a concrete set of diverse readings in order to share ideas about voice, epistemology, and even the contested definitions of fiction and non-fiction to get at "truth" in our writing. In this dialogue, we each found ways to seek both overlap and distinction in how we frame our own writing and teaching lenses (e.g., how much attention to pay to footnotes; what a "proper truth" of an essay should be; what differences there may be in telling stories about data or just telling stories). The fact that the conversations will still be going for a majority of the members into the spring semester is testament to its use and success. I also thought it provided a new network of colleagues with whom I can talk more about teaching and writing in the future.

B. For me, I have redesigned a course syllabus to include online blog posts and op-eds from writers and researchers in my field whose peer-reviewed academic work I used to exclusively assign as primary readings. What I plan to do is teach students about the myriad voices that academics can take in order to tell the story of the topic at hand, to compare and contrast how the message about the research can come across differently depending on the tone of the writing and the venue, and to play with questions surrounding the concepts of truth, fake news, data, and the presentation of "fact" within social science research and writing. I have even gained some confidence to (perhaps) assign some of my own general interest writing to students to show them how I do it, and see if there are ways I could assign such a writing piece for them. I plan to use my sabbatical next year to draft concrete ways I can try this in Principles of Sociology.

C. I have no concerns about how it was led. I think you provided a wonderful backbone to offer a bit of structure and start us off in a good direction by initiating early conversations about our

individual and collective goals. Decisions about texts and paths of our conversations (and even the leadership of discussion) were conducted collectively. The only thing I'd add to make it more awesome would be a game of laser tag.

Bruce Magnusson

I found this CDTLI workshop to be extremely helpful for me as I think about how I have incorporated multiple kinds of texts across disciplines into my teaching, and as I incorporate different styles, approaches, and disciplines into current research and writing. I am presently exploring the interplay of imagination and “hard cold facts” (data?) in the development of American security strategy toward Africa. Understanding the overlapping and just plain blurry roles of imagination and truth has been a particular challenge for me, but one that I have tried to highlight in my classes in a variety of ways. For example, one of our readings was a fictional memoir that I have used in International Politics, that explores the violence of war, its living devastation, personal and academic responsibility, and the melting of objective truth. The readings in this workshop and our discussions about those readings have been helpful to my thinking about basic things like the nature of facts and truth, and how facts shape both fictional and non-fictional worlds (and vice-versa). In addition, the consideration of multiple kinds of writing – essays, experimental novel/memoir, ethnographic journalism, creative nonfiction, and writing about writing – has helped me to clarify decisions I need to make in my own writing regarding those “blurry borders” with more deliberation. The multi-disciplinary group discussions helped me understand the different stakes of different writing decisions. The group sequenced the variety of readings well, and each of us took charge of leading a discussion that was fluid, wide-ranging, and stimulating. I am looking forward to meeting with several of the group next semester to continue our discussions focused on some of our own writing. This was an excellent workshop. Thank you, Aaron, for designing this workshop and for bringing us all together.

Lydia McDermott

I found the variety of texts really engaging. They pushed me to consider new avenues for writing and publishing scholarly inquiries. I especially appreciated, however, the discussions of these texts in our group. I learned a lot from every member of the CDTLI about how they approach their own scholarship and teaching, and the constraints they face in their particular disciplines. I plan to use some selections from the books we read in my Rhetorical Bodies course, and may consider using some entire texts for future courses on writing. Perhaps more importantly, I feel invigorated in my own writing and scholarship and very much look forward to continuing to meet with some members of this group to share writing and get feedback.

Suzanne Morrissey

My interest in joining *Writing on the Borders* centered on the workshop goal of exploring “non-normative scholarly writing.” In particular, I am involved in three writing projects that cross traditional academic boundaries: an autoethnographic illness narrative; medical anthropology “shorts” for posting to the Peoples Organization for Community Acupuncture website; and, a community-based agency co-authored journal article and policy report. For some time I have been stalled in making progress on these works, in part because they involve transforming my scholarship and writing in ways that challenge my skills and knowledge. The opportunity to read from scholars who have “gone down the path” of taking different approaches to writing *and* to

discuss those approaches with my peers, came in the form of the workshop. Participation in the group was productive on many levels for me. First, it forced me to carve out time to read non-normative works and assess/discuss the ways in which they did (or did not) strike a balance between the creative and the scholarly. In the end, my understanding of that balance challenged the very notion of “creative” and “scholarly” as discrete. Second, I benefited from conversations with my colleagues around narrative form, persuasion, inserting new forms of writing in syllabi (and, specifically, how to teach from these forms), and how to push myself toward project completion. Third, by listening across the disciplines rather than processing workshop readings from a strictly anthropological perspective, meant that I could give new language to my interpretation and appreciation of them – new knowledge that will allow me to teach different works with greater confidence. I was especially inspired by the descriptive works of Eula Biss, Elizabeth Dauphinee, and Katherine Boo and my colleagues’ assessment of their quality. At times when I was skeptical about being able to use a text in the classroom, I left our meetings emboldened to do so. In fact, as I redesigned a syllabus for my course, *Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of Cities* (a course that represents my specialty within my discipline, a course that is quite dear to me), I chose to begin the semester with Boo’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* to introduce students to the richness of narrative and personal account of the life in the slums of Mumbai. In my own writing, stories that reflect sensory experience are the centerpiece and, yet, I often find my writing stilted and lacking in rich description. My colleagues chose readings that capture the experiential in dramatic and realistic ways without being fluffy and cliché in their presentation. I am grateful to have examples under my belt that will help me in my own writing. And, rather than having any concerns about how we ran the workshop, I only wish it didn’t end. For that reason, I plan to continue the conversation with members of the group in a writing network this semester.

Lynn Sharp

I leapt at the chance to join this CDTLI -- my first one. I had been invited to a couple of others but while they seem interesting, they didn’t compel me to spare the time. This was different. Aaron Bobrow-Strain asked the question we all knew needed answering. Where does this leave faculty who want to combine scholarly rigor and non-normative forms of writing? (“This” being the current state of academic writing and publishing.) We read a variety of non-fiction written like fiction, and fiction written like non-fiction and some things whose genre remained a mystery. We questioned the genres. We questioned the means by which we create the truths we teach our students and how our disciplines demand certain forms of truth.

I walked away from this amazing set of meetings unsteady on my facts. Facts that had seemed so deeply bedrock now seemed still firm, but less immobile, more easily lifted to reach an audience not ready for heavy lifting themselves. I recognized that, contrary to what I had been trying to do in my writing, proof (of truth) is painting, not piling up, and that truth must struggle to include the human. I have a freer hand to build truth than I had thought. Not to change it, but to shape its colours and to make people feel it.

Aaron Bobrow-Strain convened the group and set the tone; for the most part he found the readings from which we chose. After that we collaborated; each of us leading one meeting; all of

us openly sharing, arguing, discussing, challenging. We crammed five books and some 180 pages of fiction into our already over-scheduled lives. We had fun doing it, even when we banged our heads against the walls of our disciplines. The group worked even better than we had imagined it would.

For my courses, my new view of facts and truth means that I have to revisit the hard boundary wall my graduate training placed between fluffy narrative historical writing and real, analytical historical writing. (This seems a larger and more dangerous leap into the unknown than others might imagine.) It means that I will turn more frequently to anthropology, and to historical literary works as means to classroom truths. I will also encourage my students to ask their historical questions differently.

As for my scholarly writing (and in this lay our main focus) I hope to look back and say this CDTLI transformed it. Too soon to tell, of course, but I think that I can write something that will return my lost adjectives to my writing world and that I can still see as history. That I can write pieces that my mother might want to read, and yet that a particular mother-in-law mentioned in the group, averse to scholarly writing, might even learn something from. A smaller sub-set of the group will continue to meet to exchange writing and share ideas from the works we each pick up to help us continue our thoughts about this process. We held our first meeting yesterday and set a schedule for the Spring semester.

To bend rules (in order to better present facts) in many ways creates freedom to reach greater truth. That, I think, is my take-away from this CDTLI, in which we closely considered writing as the means to convey the truths that grow from our research, both to our students and to our larger audiences.