



Lorraine Code, author of *Epistemic Responsibility*.
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Rereading Code: Representation, Verification, and a Case of Epistemic (Ir)responsibility

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Abstract: In 2001 James Aucoin published an article that contributed significantly to the scholarship of ethics and epistemology of literary journalism studies. Drawing on the work of Lorraine Code, Aucoin combined a “responsibilist” approach to epistemology with narrative theory to establish standards for judging literary journalism’s truth claims. This paper offers a re-reading of Code’s seminal text, *Epistemic Responsibility*, arguing that Code’s approach in fact upholds verifiability as a key criterion for epistemic responsibility in works of both fiction and nonfiction. Such a reading produces significantly different results when analyzing literary journalism’s truth claims. It is the aim of this paper to follow through the implications of rereading *Epistemic Responsibility* as advocating the discipline of verification. John D’Agata’s and Jim Fingal’s *The Lifespan of a Fact* is used as a case study to play out some of these implications in the second half of this paper. This playful case of epistemic irresponsibility highlights some of the key issues around truth claims in literary journalism. It is argued that such cases have an important role in keeping the issue of “knowing well” central to the epistemic community, thereby contributing to the flourishing discussion around the responsible representation of reality.

In 2001 James Aucoin published an influential article that contributed significantly to the scholarship of ethics and epistemology of literary journalism studies. In “Epistemic Responsibility and Narrative Theory” Aucoin identifies two scholarly approaches in a thirty-year critical debate over literary journalism. He names Zavarzadeh, Hellman, and Heyne as scholars who have defended literary journalism as a genre of literature, and Sims, Connery, and Kramer among those who “have attempted to legitimize literary journalism as a genre of journalism . . . [and] have hinged their classification scheme on

the criterion of verifiability.”¹

Verifiability is a problematic standard for the genre, Aucoin argues, owing to three key reasons: “the mounting evidence from science and philosophy that denies the existence of a verifiable reality that can be described through logical-positivist empiricism and affirms that reality is socially and culturally constructed”; “the voluminous evidence that journalism constructs a truth that is based on culturally accepted conventions”; and “dominant narrative theory, which holds that any imposition of narrative is a moral act that results to some extent in a fictionalization.”² Aucoin argues that literary journalism should not be subject to the discipline of verification, and therefore offers “a strategy of using narrative theory and epistemic ethics to judge literary journalism.”³

The framework for applying the imperatives of epistemic responsibility to literary journalism offered in this article differs from that in “Epistemic Responsibility and Narrative Theory” in a critical way. Aucoin’s position allows him to eschew the nonfiction/fiction distinction, argue against verification as a key characteristic of literary journalism, and read epistemologist Lorraine Code’s chapter “Literature, Truth and Understanding” in *Epistemic Responsibility* (1987) as applicable to literary journalism. He uses, for example, Code’s following statement to support his thesis:

Where actual, historical events or characters play central roles in a work, one expects that the research has been done accurately; but there is no outright obligation upon writers, given the long tradition of poetic license, to tell things as they were rather than as they might have been. The onus is thus upon the readers to be sure that any claims they make are responsible.⁴

Aucoin uses this passage to support his contention that Ryszard Kapuściński—as a model literary journalist—is “situated as an independent moral agent, responsible for what he writes, and readers, as independent moral agents, must independently decide whether to believe him.”⁵ While this is undoubtedly a salient point within the context Aucoin creates, this paper suggests that Aucoin’s reading of Code might be understood as incompatible with her overall thesis. If so, a rereading of Code’s work might produce significantly different results. It is the aim of this paper to follow through the implications of rereading *Epistemic Responsibility* in this way, thereby contributing to the flourishing discussion around the ethics of “knowing well” in literary journalism.

Code has been critical of some aspects of her early work since its publication in 1987. She writes: “Despite my conviction that the central idea of *Epistemic Responsibility* is important and *right*, there are problems with the book, and some of the criticisms it has produced are well taken.”⁶ The primary issues include a tacit—or perhaps uncritical—liberal humanism that informs the

approach, “where questions of power and epistemic privilege do not figure, and an honest, well-meaning, transparently self-conscious epistemic agent who can make of her or his circumstances what she or he will is taken for granted”; as well as its “ambiguous relation to the metaphysical requirements of the Anglo-American epistemological mainstream.”⁷ As such, the following analysis proceeds with the acknowledgement of the limitations imposed by an approach that lacks engagement with questions of power, culture, and affect. Code’s work has, however, been productively applied elsewhere to unpack issues arising from clashing epistemological traditions, epistemic privilege, and the role of affect in substantiating truth claims—all of which are central concerns for both scholars and practitioners.⁸ The value of *Epistemic Responsibility*, then, is in theorizing a “responsibilist” approach to literary journalism to highlight and address issues that face practitioners in the range of choice available when representing their subjects and their worlds.

The first seven chapters of Code’s book *Epistemic Responsibility* emphasize that the nature of the world and limitations on human cognitive capacity impose constraints on possible forms and content of knowledge. Code acknowledges that “there is considerable scope for freedom in making sense of the world,” but that there are limits to “what kind of sense can *responsibly* be made of the world.”⁹ In the chapter entitled “Literature, Truth and Understanding,” Code discusses the “truth value”¹⁰ of a literary work. Code’s remarks on historical novels (quoted above) cite the work of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Leo Tolstoy as examples, which, Code notes, conform to the generic limitations of literary realism. The argument here is that when read in the context of the previous chapters, Code makes a distinction between the knowledge claims of fictional and nonfictional texts. The criteria she applies to “literary works” are verisimilitude, plausibility, and narrative coherence,¹¹ but, interestingly, where novels are historically situated, she is clear that verifiability is an epistemic imperative. In a discussion of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, Code cautions that “the significance of actual events is a source of knowledge and is verifiable.”¹² She argues:

[W]e can check and compare accounts of the state of medicine at the time, of the machinations that led to the passing of the Reform Bill, of the development of the new journalism. . . . We can only *responsibly* claim to know either about the factual events or about the fictitious characters and the intentionally fabricated juxtaposition of the two if we have good reason to believe that the writer’s treatment of both of the real events and of the unreal characters is a responsible treatment.¹³

While the onus to “know well” is on the reader here, when read in the context of a fiction/nonfiction divide, this passage casts novelists’ and jour-

nalists' responsibility to truth-telling in a similar light. The key here is verifiability. While Aucoin's reading of Code is consistent with his epistemic stance toward the nature of literary journalism, this paper argues that there is value in maintaining the discipline of verification for the genre. Acknowledging this standard produces a significantly different reading of Code's work—and its subsequent application to literary journalism.

Foundationalism, Coherentism, and Responsibilism

Code's "responsibilist" approach differs from established epistemological traditions: foundationalist and coherentist. Foundationalists hold that there is "knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man [sic] could doubt it,"¹⁴ and that this knowledge forms a foundation for all other types and systems of knowledge. For coherentists, on the other hand, the "source of evaluation and justification of a belief or knowledge claim lies in its relations with other beliefs or 'knowns' within a system; explanatory relations or relations of probability or logic might be taken into account."¹⁵ The foundationalist and coherentist traditions are analogous to the traditions of literary journalism scholarship. Again, following Aucoin, scholars broadly fall into two categories when attempting to articulate standards for the genre: those who primarily employ narrative theory to articulate standards, such as narrative coherence and verisimilitude, and those who advocate the application of journalistic standards, such as accuracy and verifiable content, to works of literary journalism. Examples of those who perform literary readings include Hollowell, Weber, and Anderson, while scholars such as Lounsbury and Kerrane and Yagoda employ verifiability as a standard. Standards of verification can thus be understood as part of the foundationalist tradition, while narrative theory has a correlation with coherentist theories of epistemology.

These distinctions are important in light of Code's project. She acknowledges that foundationalism and coherentism "represent the best efforts of epistemology so far to approach 'the problem of knowledge,'" but also contends that enquiry is limited by the range of possible questions these approaches allow.¹⁶ A complementary approach is necessary, Code argues, to widen the scope of epistemological investigation:

[T]here are genuine choices about how to know the world and its inhabitants, choices that become apparent only in more complex epistemic circumstances—for example, in knowing other cultures, negotiating an environmental policy, assessing the significance of certain actions and policies, or predicting the implications of tests and experiments. Such circumstances, and others like them, occasion questions about epistemic responsibility. In doing so they broaden the scope of epistemology to include considerations of credibility and trust, of epistemic obligations and the legitimate scope of enquiry.¹⁷

In this passage, “choice” is a key term in relation to literary journalism. The range of possibilities available to practitioners in researching and reporting on other cultures, assessing significance of particular events and representing these in narrative form indeed necessitates considerations of credibility and trust. But in the same way Code argues for a multi-perspective approach to epistemology, an additional—complementary—mode of analysis is needed to those offered by literary theory and the discipline of verification for literary journalism.

This approach is particularly timely to theorize what is arguably a dominant feature of contemporary literary journalism. Historically, key literary journalists in the tradition of Kapuściński produced important texts that did not appear to place emphasis on journalistic standards of verification or attribution despite asserting their nonfiction status. But a new generation of practitioners—those producing their first works of book-length literary journalism between 2000 and 2010—appear to aspire to the highest standards of both correspondence and coherence. Critical reception has been mixed, but contemporary literary journalists such as Adrian Nicole LeBlanc (*Random Family*), Daniel Bergner (*Soldiers of Light*), Suketu Mehta (*Maximum City*), John Vaillant (*The Golden Spruce*), Rajiv Chandrasekaran (*Imperial Life in the Emerald City*), Andrew Westoll (*The Riverbones*), Dave Cullen (*Columbine*), and Rebecca Skloot (*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*) demonstrate deep commitment to both literary aims and “traditional” journalistic standards such as verifiability, balance, and accuracy. In spite of increasingly blurred notions of truth and reality, these practitioners arguably operate under a *modus* that holds reality to be discoverable, and whose texts represent their best effort to accurately capture it. According to William Langewiesche this is a “new form of clean classicism”¹⁸ and is quite distinct from New Journalists’ emphasis on the apocalyptic zeitgeist of the 1960s and attendant “hysteria” of life in that era.¹⁹

In keeping with Code’s rationale, an epistemological “responsibilist” approach opens the range of questions that can be asked of literary journalistic practice. It can also illuminate literary readings of texts where meaning and truth are as important as the events from which they proceed. Reorienting epistemic focus from end points to processes, Code encourages would-be knowers to engage in “Socratic dialogue” over their knowledge claims.²⁰ Cooper gives examples of epistemic questioning that could inform literary journalistic practice, such as: “Do I really know what I think I know?”; “Do I know enough to act as I do?”; “What don’t I know?”; “What are the moral consequences of my knowing/ignorance?”; “Should I know more or acknowledge incomplete knowledge?”²¹ Such questioning informs not just the practice but also the criticism of literary journalism. It emphasizes the choices

available to—and limitations imposed upon—practitioners in the way they represent reality, as well as their responsibility to “know well.” Likewise, critics and scholars may ask these questions of practitioners to illuminate analyses, but they similarly have an obligation to know their subject well—well enough to judge as they do—as they also engage in a process of representing reality. This represents both challenge and opportunity when exposing literary journalism to an assessment of epistemic responsibility.

Although Code does not specifically discuss journalism, her philosophical approach is particularly apposite for this field. When differentiating her “responsibilist” position from a “reliabilist” approach, she acknowledges that for a person or their knowledge to be reliable establishes “a closer connection with truth and warrantability than responsibility can establish.”²² However, in her view, “a ‘reliable’ knower could simply be an accurate, and relatively passive, recorder of experience,”²³ whereas a responsibilist approach accounts for the degrees of choice with regard to modes of cognitive structuring, and the accountability that attends such choice. Here a parallel can be made with mainstream and literary journalism: the degree of choice available to a daily journalist when reporting an event is considerably less than that afforded a literary journalist. A daily journalist is more likely to be judged on her reliability according to established norms such as objectivity, whereas a literary journalist is not bound by the same rules of cognitive and narrative structuring, and arguably is more accountable to being epistemically responsible. As Code writes: “A person can be judged responsible or irresponsible only if she/he is clearly regarded as an agent (in this case a cognitive agent) in the circumstances in question. An evaluation of human knowledge-seeking in terms of responsibility is instructive precisely because of the active, creative nature of the endeavour.”²⁴ Clearly, in an epistemic sense, responsibilism is just as binding on a daily journalist as reliability is on a literary journalist. The point here is that the range of practices open to literary journalists highlights their mandate to be responsible, whereas the regulatory effects imposed by objectivity standards emphasizes reliability.

The rationale behind Code’s project in *Epistemic Responsibility* is summarized in the following passage:

Different cognitive capacities and epistemic circumstances create situations where experience is structured, and hence the world is known, quite differently from one cognitive agent to another. Each time a moral judgment is made, then, two parts of a situation must be assessed: the way it is apprehended and the action that is performed as a result. The former, the apprehension, is a matter for epistemological assessment, and the moral dimension of the situation is crucially dependent upon this epistemic component.²⁵

Conflating epistemology and ethics arguably has significant ramifications for the theory and practice of literary journalism. To the extent that they can be held apart for analytical purposes, ethics and epistemology should be evaluated separately to illuminate how ethical practice is dependent on a sound epistemic foundation. In the rest of this paper I use this rationale to (re-)examine some issues pertinent to the practice of literary journalism, before applying some epistemic principles to a particularly contentious example of epistemic *irresponsibility*.

“Knowing Well”

A starting point when assessing epistemic responsibility is to examine the conditions in which an individual can “know well.” Code draws on Kantian philosophy when she asserts that the manner of an individual’s structuring of reality “is dependent upon a knower’s interaction with the world and will vary accordingly.”²⁶ The epistemic responsibility of a literary journalist can then be characterized as a responsibility to interact with the world in a way that enables a practitioner to anchor the coherence of meaning to the correspondence of empirically verifiable reality. According to Code, it is not contradictory to claim that knowledge is created through active exploration, perception, thinking, and imagining, and that knowledge is objective.²⁷ She writes:

Although there are many ways of knowing legitimately so-called, evidence strongly favors the claim that these are ways of knowing one real world. The patterns that can be selected are limited in practice by the necessity that they conform, to some degree, to this objective reality. To this extent, objects dictate the nature of the synthesis.²⁸

Arguably, the idea that objective knowledge is discoverable by individuals underpins much contemporary literary journalism practice. Both anecdotal evidence from practitioners and current scholarship support such a contention. Literary journalist and scholar Mark Kramer, for example, reflects on evidence from his discussions with literary journalists suggesting that current practitioners share a tacit understanding with readers. This understanding is “so strong that it amounts to a contract: that the writers do what they appear to do, which is to get reality as straight as they can manage, and not make it up.”²⁹ Such comments reflect a belief that reality is “discoverable,” and that literary journalists are part of a shared reality that can be objectively known. Importantly, Kramer also differentiates between the New Journalists’ project and contemporary literary journalism. He relates the expectations set by the dust jacket of Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* (1979), which “bore the odd description ‘A True Life Novel.’ Although such truth-in-labeling doesn’t

explicitly demarcate what parts are actual, it's a good-faith proclamation to readers that they've entered a zone in which a nonfiction writer's covenant with readers may be a tease, a device, but doesn't quite apply." He asserts that this category of expectations "[falls] outside the modern understanding of what literary journalism is."³⁰

More recently, Keeble and Tulloch write that contemporary literary journalists "claim the real," a phrase that signifies "an assertion about truthfulness to verifiable experience, an adherence to accuracy and sincerity which practitioners assert are the crucial features that distinguish their narratives from 'fiction.'"³¹ Keeble and Tulloch also acknowledge that this is problematic:

A demand for realism can be represented as an essentially conservative concept, aimed at repulsing the twentieth-century postmodernist project in writing. . . . In these terms, literary journalism can be presented as a throwback to the idea of a stable text and stable reality that can be narrativised, a refutation of the pretensions of modernism in which eager journalists penetrate to "the quick of what's happening." But many writers would now claim, with David Shields: "Story seems to say everything happens for a reason, and I want to say, *No, it doesn't.*"³²

It might be concluded that a "demand for realism" takes on different meanings for different practitioners. "Claiming the real" for some may mean representing "a phenomenal world that is fundamentally indeterminate."³³ But for others, a common reality is discoverable, and narrative form is alive to the possibilities of (re)presenting their discoveries.

"Responsibilism" and the Epistemic Community

An analysis of epistemic responsibility should take into account the extent of reporting, and assess the rhetorical situation of a practitioner according to knowledge potentially accessible at the time of writing. Code makes the point that beliefs are grounded because of what happens in the world: "the practical consequences of holding certain beliefs have considerable bearing upon the reasonableness [for an individual at a particular point in time], of holding the belief."³⁴ An associated point here is that literary journalists are not alone subject to the requirements of epistemic responsibility. The wider epistemic community also has a mandate to approach and analyze literary journalism in an epistemically responsible way. Literary journalists' immediate epistemic community may include, but is not confined to: their subject(s), their subjects' communities, fellow practitioners (past and present), critics, scholars, editors, publishers, policymakers, grant committee members, and, of course, readers. Given that such a community is likely to elicit a wide range of cultural, ideological, political, and institutional perspectives, Code again

stresses the need for a “responsibilist” approach that considers alternate epistemologies and ethical imperatives.

Code invokes the notion of a contract to explicate the function of an epistemic community. She writes:

I do not conceive of an epistemic contract as an event which *creates* obligations but rather as a model for understanding the structure and workings of epistemic interdependence. . . . This model is useful in explaining the outrage that occurs when trust is violated. It helps account for the conviction that something tangible was violated and that the violator is thereby accountable. . . . Legislation preventing false advertising shows that, in the public domain, it is not enough for such agreements to remain tacit. Our sense that it is reasonable to assume that people will provide accurate information, to the general agreement to do so, even where the law is not involved.³⁵

Narrative theorist Gerard Genette similarly uses the term “contractual force” to argue that paratexts can be dynamic sites of negotiation for the truth claims of a text. Genette emphasizes that a reader is not bound to enter into an agreement about how to approach a text, but maintains “only that, knowing it, he cannot completely disregard it, and if he wants to contradict it he must first assimilate it.”³⁶ Genette concludes that whether a reader accepts or rejects the negotiation offered, “one is better off perceiving it fully and clearly.”³⁷ This is in fact a matter of epistemic responsibility. A reader may be “better off” for perceiving an author’s intention, methodology and aims. But readers, and critics in particular, are also responsible for understanding the epistemic foundation of a work of literary journalism as they approach it and offer criticism or praise. Questions such as: “Do I really know what I think I know?”; “Do I know enough to write as I do?”; “What don’t I know?”; and “Should I know more or acknowledge incomplete knowledge?” are equally applicable to the criticism as to the practice of literary journalism.

The question arises: Can literary journalists push boundaries in an epistemically responsible way? Code’s responsibilist approach suggests that individuals not only can but also should eschew caution and conservatism at times in order to explore new possibilities. “There must be room,” she argues, “within the larger sphere where good knowers *live*, for the Socratic gadfly and for those who take outrageous stances to keep the epistemic community on its toes, to prevent it from settling into complacency or inertia. . . . Catalysts of cognitive change play as vital a role in communities of knowers as do conservers of established practice.”³⁸ While the New Journalism movement as a whole has been characterized as carrying out this role,³⁹ there are individuals in this comparatively conservative era who keep the epistemic community on its toes.

A Case of Epistemic (Ir)responsibility?

One example of two people playing out this role can be found in John D'Agata's and Jim Fingal's *The Lifespan of a Fact*. Published in 2012, the book's generic classification is "Literature/Essays," leading almost all reviewers to treat it as a work of nonfiction.⁴⁰ The publisher's website promotes the book as a reproduction of an essay by John D'Agata, accompanied by the correspondence between him and his fact checker, Jim Fingal. The dustcover of the book states: "[W]hat emerges is a brilliant and eye-opening meditation on the relationship between 'truth' and 'accuracy' and a penetrating conversation."⁴¹ After publication, it emerged in an interview with the authors that the initial correspondence between D'Agata and Fingal took between six months and year, after which the idea of publishing a book was formed. *The Lifespan of a Fact* is thus not the original correspondence between Fingal and D'Agata, but a planned and constructed exchange based on their experience of the initial fact-checking process.

Silverman notes that one of the four reviewers he contacted regarding the book was aware that the exchange was created to attain and fulfil a book contract—that it is "by definition not a reproduction, since the book is primarily made up of text that did not exist prior to the authors embarking on a book project."⁴² Interestingly, the one reviewer who "knew the book was not always factual" explained that one signal of its constructed nature was that "D'Agata has a real history of these sort of literary tricks."⁴³ This echoes Lawrence Weschler's injunction that readers need to be "intelligent" and "[follow] a person over years. Then you begin to get a sense of that writer, their voice. And you approach it as an adult encountering another adult in the world."⁴⁴ But this case highlights a problem in Weschler's position: D'Agata's other three reviewers have no less apparent claim to intelligence, and as none were familiar with his work, they read the publisher's blurb as a claim to nonfiction status. The hybrid nature of the genre assignment appeared to have been clarified by the blurb and publisher's website in this case, whereas both in fact misled their expectations. Is this a case of epistemic irresponsibility on the part of the authors (and/or publishers)? Or does it point out the epistemic responsibility of reviewers to know their subject—and practitioners—well? Are these two positions mutually exclusive?

The paratext enacts the issues raised by the content of the book in this way. The "character" in the exchange, D'Agata, is striving to create an essay that delivers a genuine experience with art. D'Agata's fact checker, Fingal, protests against replacing numerous verifiable facts with inaccuracies, such as "four" for "eight," "pink" for "purple," wind direction, the phase of the moon, and statistics on suicide. The latter is particularly pertinent, as the original

article recreates the last day of Levi Presley, a sixteen-year-old whose suicide is its subject. “D’Agata” here embodies the intellectually virtuous (knowledgeable) practitioner without displaying moral virtue. He argues that nonfiction is an inadequate term for what he is doing—creating a work of art—and not one that he would apply to his essay. D’Agata’s refusal to capitulate to the expectations set by the term “essay” and the (verifiable) subject matter of his text is based on his intention to produce an experience for the reader that he claims is not dependent on factual accuracy:

John: What the term “essay” describes is not a negation of genre—as “non-fiction” does—but rather an activity, “an attempt, a trial, an experiment.” . . . An essay is not a vehicle for facts, in other words, nor for information, nor verifiable experience. An essay *is* an experience, and a very human one at that. It’s an enactment of the experience of trying to find meaning—an emotional meaning, an intellectual meaning, a political meaning, a scientific one, or whatever goal that artist has set for the text.⁴⁵

When Fingal suggests that D’Agata give readers “a wink or a nod”—or disclosure transparency—to signal his intentions, D’Agata responds: “I’ve been giving readers winks and nods for my entire career, Jim. I’ve edited anthologies, I’ve written essays, I’ve given lectures, I’ve taught courses . . . all about this issue. As some point the reader needs to stop demanding that they be spoon-fed like infants and start figuring out on their own how to deal with art that they disagree with.”⁴⁶ This is clearly intentionally provocative, but it summarizes D’Agata’s position: that nonfiction is a constructed category with which he fundamentally disagrees as it limits the possibility of creating a meaningful experience for the reader. Consequently, he does not feel bound to disclose factual inaccuracies to the reader, as he does not identify his work as nonfiction.

The exchange is entertaining, but the original article contains a twist as D’Agata acknowledges that he has replaced facts for rhetorical effect in order to imbue them with significance they do not inherently hold. After building a theme around the number nine, based on the (inaccurate) fact that Levi Presley fell for nine seconds to his death, the article finally reveals: “I think we knew, however, that he really fell for eight. . . . Sometimes we misplace knowledge in pursuit of information. Sometimes our wisdom, too, in pursuit of what’s called knowledge.”⁴⁷ D’Agata is not, here, reversing his position and demonstrating that accuracy is important after all. He is underscoring the point that whether facts are distorted or not, it is part of the human condition to imbue details with meaning, which, he believes, is ultimately a work of imagination. Facts, by this reasoning, become negligible, and D’Agata’s commitment to his reader is to provide a greater truth than facts alone.

Underlying the arguments made by “D’Agata” in the exchange with his fact checker is a belief that is not explicitly dealt with by either the character or the author outside the book: that accurate facts cannot be artful. Interestingly, however, the epigraph of *The Lifespan of a Fact* is split over two pages that inform the text: “True words are not beautiful” and “Beautiful words are not true.”⁴⁸ These two quotations can be read as opinion or factual statements, but it soon becomes apparent that these lines form the underlying premise of the book. Throughout the exchange, “D’Agata” makes it clear that the facts are not aesthetically pleasing to his sensibility; thus, he changes them to provide his prose with rhythm and style. It might be ventured, however, that while he felt the accurate facts limited his style, it could equally be the case that “D’Agata’s” style might have changed to accommodate the facts. The premise that stylish prose cannot arise from verifiable fact is subject to opinion—or, perhaps, skill. As one practitioner writes,

Like other literary journalists, I’ve found that, in fact, annoying, inconsistent details that threaten to wreck a scene I’m writing are often signals that my working theories about events need more work, and don’t quite explain what happened yet. Not tweaking deepens understanding. And getting a slice of life down authentically takes flexibility and hard labor.⁴⁹

The term “authentically” here might be replaced with “verifiably” in the context of epistemic responsibility. “D’Agata” also reminds “Fingal” a number of times that he is not a journalist, thereby excusing his lack of notes, attribution of sources, and gaps in his research. However, that he made an effort to base his essay on the phenomenal reality of Levi Presley’s life and death, rather than making up an entirely fictional character, suggests that he is aware of the rhetorical power of nonfiction and that he intends to trade on it, regardless of the label applied.

In a later interview, (the real) John D’Agata reflected on the fact-checking process of the original article and writing the book, stating:

I think I’m a little more willing to acknowledge that there is a line somewhere that one shouldn’t cross, but at the same time, I would still insist that it’s a line that only we as individual writers can draw, only we can determine where it is, but that we should look for it. We should be on the lookout for moments when we might be overstepping what’s appropriate.⁵⁰

D’Agata’s words here reflect Code’s injunction that “there is considerable scope for freedom in making sense of the world,” but that there are limits to “what kind of sense can *responsibly* be made of the world.”⁵¹ Should those limits be acknowledged in works of nonfiction? The “D’Agata” of the text would argue not. *The Lifespan of a Fact* plays with questions such as these, but

particularly examines the following: “What are the moral consequences of my knowing and *not* telling?” Each “character” represents various viewpoints throughout the book, but “D’Agata’s” main thrust is that moral consequences are negligible in art, and that epistemic defence and attempts at transparency belie the intention of the nonfiction narrator. One actual consequence of the ambiguous generic status of the book was that many reviewers incorrectly reviewed it as nonfiction. Interestingly, this is a point the real D’Agata was more willing to concede than his publishers. A wider consequence may be to discredit the genre, and, by extension, practitioners who carefully consider and negotiate their epistemic responsibility. This example also highlights that some practitioners may set out to intentionally provide their readers with false or misleading expectations. This may be to make a point—as D’Agata and Fingal do here—or in order to garner authority for their text that they have not earned through the research process. But finally, *The Lifespan of a Fact* does challenge boundaries. It has opened a discussion—not least among those who reviewed it as nonfiction—that amounts to an investigation of both practitioners’ and critics’ epistemic responsibility. D’Agata’s approach exemplifies that of “the Socratic gadfly.” Code observes that:

[I]t is hard to accommodate this kind of thinker within a responsibility-based theory. No one is inclined to doubt their interest in *knowing well*; rather, the conceptual problem arises because such projects invite the paradoxical conclusion that it could sometimes be necessary to be epistemically *irresponsible*, at least in the eyes of the community, to be responsible. Epistemic rebellion, and seemingly outrageous thought experiments subversive of “received” discourse, cannot, therefore, simply be condemned as treacherous or dismissed as irrational by knowers who are responsibly and openly committed to making the best sense of the world (particularly if “best” can be aligned, to some extent, with “creativity” and “inventiveness”).⁵²

While this text has been used as an illustrative example, the intention has not been to hold up “D’Agata’s” approach as an epistemically responsible one. It does, however, perform an important role in literary journalism’s epistemic community. *The Lifespan of a Fact* illustrates several points central to this discussion: that literary journalists need to be epistemically responsible toward their epistemic communities; that epistemic communities must also maintain a “responsibilist” approach to practitioners (and works) of literary journalism; and that a “contract” arguably exists between members that can define the terms by which epistemic responsibility may be judged.

Conclusion

The “inevitable lag of the critic behind the artist”⁵³ has been a factor in the controversy surrounding literary journalism during the past five de-

cedes—a state that is equally true of scholarship. The epistemic community has, at times, lapsed in its own epistemic responsibility, but more often the struggle has been to understand epistemological foundations on which pioneering practitioners base their texts. For Code, this struggle is vital for maintaining epistemic competence. Healthy epistemic communities are those that are self-critical, reflexive, and avoid “any easy calculus for assessing knowledge and belief claims.” They cannot “provide a decision-making scale against which specific knowledge claims can be measured for validity . . . [o]ne could not responsibly write ‘a guide for the recognition of responsible knowledge claims’.”⁵⁴ As such, the value of Aucoin’s application of Code’s work to literary journalism is significant. This paper recognizes Aucoin’s contribution to scholarship and practice while endeavouring to (re)articulate Code’s approach to epistemology, redirecting the discussion to a responsibility approach. As Code writes, “[s]hifting the focus of epistemological enquiry to a study of intellectual virtue and epistemic responsibility will enhance the confidence that can be lent to knowledge claims, even when absolute certainty is taken to be impossible.”⁵⁵ Code’s approach is arguably an important branch of scholarship for literary journalism studies—a branch that has the potential to enhance confidence in the genre’s claims to represent reality both reliably and responsibly.

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Notes

1. James Aucoin, "Epistemic Responsibility and Narrative Theory," *Journalism* 2, no. 1 (2001): 6–7.
2. *Ibid.*, 8.
3. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
4. Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (London: Brown University Press, 1987), 214.
5. Aucoin, "Epistemic Responsibility and Narrative Theory," 15.
6. Code, "Responsibility and Rhetoric," *Hypatia* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 5; emphasis in original.
7. *Ibid.*, 6.
8. See Lindsay Morton, "Evaluating the Effects of Epistemic Location in Advocatory Literary," *Journalism*, October 31, 2014, 1464884914554178, doi:10.1177/1464884914554178; Lindsay Morton, "Not My People," *Journalism Studies* 15, no. 6 (November 2, 2014): 774–88, doi:10.1080/1461670X.2013.857481; Lindsay Morton, "Where Are You Coming From?," *Journalism Practice* 9, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 168–83, doi:10.1080/17512786.2014.906931.
9. Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 9; emphasis in original.
10. *Ibid.*, 202.
11. *Ibid.*, 201.
12. *Ibid.*, 212.
13. *Ibid.*, 212–213; emphasis in original.
14. *Ibid.*, 3.
15. *Ibid.*, 4.
16. *Ibid.*, 7.
17. Code, "Responsibility and Rhetoric," 3.
18. Bill Reynolds, "A Metaphor for the World: William Langewiesche, John Vaillant and Looking for the Story in Long-Form," *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 1, no. 18 (December 2007): 66.
19. See Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); John Hellmann, *Fables of Fact: New Journalism as New Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981); John Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).
20. Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 28–29.
21. Thomas Cooper, "Review Essay: Lorraine Code's Epistemic Responsibility, Journalism, and the Charles Stuart Case," *Business & Professional Ethics Journal* 12, no. 3 (1993): 86.
22. Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 51, in footnote.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 69.
26. *Ibid.*, 105.
27. *Ibid.*, 107.
28. *Ibid.*

29. Mark Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," in *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, eds. Norman Sims and Mark Kramer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 25.
30. Kramer, "Breakable Rules," 24.
31. Richard Keeble and John Tulloch, eds., *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012), 7.
32. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
33. John Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 51.
34. Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 41.
35. *Ibid.*, 179.
36. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 408–9.
37. *Ibid.*, 409.
38. Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 56; emphasis in original.
39. See John J. Pauly, "The Politics of The New Journalism," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman Sims (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 110–29.
40. Craig Silverman, "The Lifespan of a Fact Blends Fiction with Nonfiction to Explore Nature of Truth," Poynter.org, March 5, 2012, <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/regret-the-error/164447/the-lifespan-of-a-fact-blends-fiction-with-nonfiction-to-explore-nature-of-truth/>.
41. John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).
42. Silverman, "The Lifespan."
43. *Ibid.*
44. Bob Garfield, "Lawrence Weschler on the Fiction of Non-Fiction: Transcript," *On the Media*, December 24, 2010, http://www.onthemedialife.org/2010/dec/24/lawrence-weschler-on-the-fiction-of-non-fiction/transcript/?utm_source=sharedUrl&utm_medium=metatag&utm_campaign=sharedUrl.
45. D'Agata and Fingal, *Lifespan*, 111.
46. *Ibid.*, 110.
47. *Ibid.*, 99.
48. *Ibid.*, 7, 9.
49. Kramer, "Breakable Rules," 25.
50. Anne Strainchamps, "Transcript for John D'Agata and Jim Fingal on *The Lifespan of a Fact*," Wisconsin Public Radio, *To the Best of Our Knowledge* (2012), <http://ttbook.org/book/transcript/transcript-john-dagata-and-jim-fingal-lifespan-fact>.
51. Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 9.
52. *Ibid.*, 56.
53. Barbara Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), xi.
54. Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 63–4.
55. *Ibid.*, 67.

