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# Unreliable Narrators

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**UNRELIABLE NARRATORS**

by

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***SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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## *Theory*

*Unreliable Narrators* is a mixed media installation about childhood trauma misremembered due to placement in foster care. The installation will tell three different perspectives of the same story on two side-by-side projections and an audio track. The “official” story will be told through archival document slides, the family histories will be told through audio interviews, and the personally remembered story will be told through Performative documentary. Although the covered topics will overlap, the installation will use the major narrative differences to highlight the positionality of each of the narrators. Following the lead of contemporary Performative documentaries, this project will seek to be honest with the subjectivity of its own content. Part documentary and part detective search, this project will have viewers following the subject as she pieces together her story and will ultimately have them deciding for themselves what to believe.

My interest in this piece is personal. The story is my story: the story of my life before and during my placement in foster care. Although recalling early memories is always subjective, it is distinctly difficult in cases that deal with foster care. There are two main reasons for disparities: Dissociative Amnesia and personal subjectivities. Dissociative Amnesia is a condition that causes children going through traumatic stress to mentally block out or forget those moments (“Dissociative”). It is common among current and former foster youth because they are exposed to high levels of chronic or traumatic stress (Hulette). Personal subjectivities exist because of all the people involved in foster care cases. Persons involved in a case can include the youths, the parent(s), any siblings or other relatives, the foster parent(s), case workers, guardian ad litem (GALs), and everyone’s attorneys, just to start with (“Who”). Each person associated with a case has a different perspective on what is happening based on their own personal biases and their

personal agendas or goals. The combination of these two factors make for a story more muddled than an average childhood remembrance.

I've chosen this as a subject because it's important. The current realities of foster care and its effects have very little public attention. Despite the fact that there are roughly 400,000 children in foster care in the U.S. at any given moment, the public remains relatively silent on their wellbeing (United). On top of this, there are not many media creators who have a background in foster care, which may be because only about 6% of former foster youths ever receive an associate's or bachelor's degree ([Dworsky](#)). If I don't tackle this subject, it may well be that no one ever will. This subject also lends particularly well to a problem that we have with modern media: unreliable and reliable narrators. In our growing world, most people have access to view and create media at will. Because of this, we as an audience have to be more diligent about discerning truth. I have chosen the installation format purposefully to encourage discernment. The goal of the competing narratives is to force the audience to sort through material in a similar way to my process of sorting. After all, discerning truth should be a critical and reflective process, not an easy search.

To root my capstone firmly in media history, I have been exploring media dealing with memory and narrative storytelling as well as the concept of documentaries in the Performative Mode and video in the Home Mode. According to Bill Nichols, the Performative Mode is a style of documentary that features the filmmaker as the participant and embraces the subsequent subjectivity. In the Performative Mode, a documentary is consumed by feeling. Ideally, a documentary in this mode should demonstrate how a personal experience relates to larger societal issues. Similarly, according to James M. Moran in "There's No Place Like Home Video," Video in the Home Mode offers "opportunities for self-determination" but it also

connects autobiographical material to a larger “allegory of the life cycle.” Video in the Home Mode also allows filmmakers to “explore and negotiate the competing demands of their public, communal, and private, personal identities.” *Unreliable Narrators* will be a deeply personal experience and should have some of the characteristics of video in the Home Mode and Performative Mode. Despite the fact that my installation is rooted in these two modes, it is also incorporating the critiques of these modes by Stella Bruzzi. In *Contemporary Documentary: A Critical Introduction*, Bruzzi argues that modern Performative documentary strays from the traditional documentary canon in that it does not “seek to hide the modes of production” or “represent an uncomplicated descriptive relationship between subject and text (Bruzzi 155).” I am engaging with the more contemporary history of Performative documenters, such as Nick Broomfield, Sarah Polley, and Nicholas Barker in producing a documentary that “admit[s] the defeat of the utopian aim and elect[s] instead to present an alternative ‘honesty’ that does not seek to mask the inherent instability (Bruzzi 155).” So it is with *Unreliable Narrators*: As the documentarian and performer, I am not seeking to hide the messiness of the film, but rather, I seek to engage with it.

Alongside my theoretical influences, I have been greatly impacted by a few key works. First, the podcast “Serial” by Sarah Koenig, started my interest in this topic. In her podcast, Sarah presents a variety of perspectives on a criminal case and although she admits that she is biased, she gives the audience enough information to let them make up their own minds. Second, I have been fascinated by the musical album "Carrie and Lowell" by Sufjan Stevens. In "Carrie and Lowell," Sufjan uses very specific lyrics that refer to his childhood, but he constructs his songs with such sincerity that they engage the listener in his quiet nostalgia. Similar to Moran’s view of video in the Home Mode, Stevens recognizes the balance between public and private and

has said of his album: “At worst, these songs probably seem really indulgent. At their best, they should act as a testament to an experience that's universal ([Dombal](#)).” Finally, I have been inspired by the Performative documentary "Stories We Tell" by Sarah Polley. In "Stories We Tell," Polley plays with the concept of multiple narratives. Like in my own story, in Sarah's “there are these huge gaps between these stories we were telling, both in terms of the fact of them, but also in terms of the perspective and what we decided were the most important elements of it (Lussier).” Aside from being generally inspired by her handling of these gaps, I also would like to emulate the way her film is detective work. Over the course of the film, the audience gets to discover her history alongside her. This ties the viewer and the filmmaker together in a journey for understanding. In giving the audience multiple truths, Polley said that she “wanted people to constantly question what they were seeing and if it was real or if it wasn't, because that was [her] experience (Lussier).” Each of these influences has had an impact on the way that I am producing this work and the way that I will show it. Overall, they are encouraging me to use the specific to make statements about the general and to acknowledge and embrace my own subjectivity.

*Unreliable Narrators* will be a difficult piece. Not only will it be a deeply personal exploration, but it also needs to be grounded to a larger body of media in order to obtain a status of more than personal. The challenge is to create a work that makes sense ideologically but challenges the audience about its own content. The goal is to encourage critical discernment of media narrators and to inform a public audience about some of the lasting effects of foster care and childhood trauma.

## *Process*

My production is already under way. I have already filmed the documentary portion and am now in the editing stage. I plan to have one third of the rough edits done by November 2<sup>nd</sup>. I intend to have the complete rough edits done by Thanksgiving Break. I will be recording the audio narrative over Thanksgiving break and plan to have my edits done by December 3<sup>rd</sup>. I will have the documents annotated by November 20<sup>th</sup> and mounted by December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Once all three elements are done, I will work with them as a whole and refine which stories will be the final ones. I intend to do an installation mock up with my incomplete materials on November 30<sup>th</sup>, and then a mock up with the edited materials on December 4<sup>th</sup>. The installation show will be on December 10<sup>th</sup>.

There are a few important changes I have made since the first imaginings of this project. Instead of a dual screen installation, I will only be projecting one screen, while the documents will be printed and mounted as physical objects. The third story, the audio story, will be told separately through an iPod with attached headphones, rather than played out loud and overlapping. Although I still want the information to be somewhat overwhelming, I also want the audience to be able to engage with each individual medium and decipher its truth independently of the others before comparing them all together.

For the documentary, I filmed on a Canon Rebel T5i with a Rode shotgun microphone and am editing using the Adobe Creative Suite. This documentary will be projected on the gallery wall and will not have sound, but rather subtitles. For the audio narrative, I will be recording on a Zoom H4n Recorder and again editing with the Adobe Creative Suite. These narrative audio clips will be uploaded to an iPod Touch, or similar, which will be mounted on the gallery wall. A headphone splitter will be attached, allowing for two listeners at once. The

documents are original, and so first I will be making photocopies to annotate before I decide on the final story threads. Once I decide the final threads, I will mount the original copies on thick paper matting and use the extra space to annotate and comment on the documents. These mounted documents will be hung on the walls of the installation.

The mode of delivery is directly related to the theory supporting the piece. I am attempting to use the mediums to emphasize the ways our storytelling is influenced by bias. I am encouraging the audience to take the presentation into consideration while discerning what they believe to be the truth. The “official” text is the only story that is written. Because audiences often take documents for truth over and above other forms of media, it lends the state’s story a sort of credibility that is withheld from the other two mediums. In the case of the documentary, it’s credibility is being questioned through the removal of sound. I am invoking the age old adage: “Children are to be seen and not heard.” The “narrator” in fact, is suggested to be the familial audio story. By using audio alone as the medium, I am suggesting a “voice of god” function to their story. Each of these mediums has their own second-order information. Second-order information, as coined by Indiana University professor of communication and author Ilana Gershon, is “not what is actually said but rather the background knowledge of a situation and expectations of communication that allows one to interpret the words (123).” In *Unreliable Narrators*, the medium of each story holds its own second-order information about the biases and positionality held by the storytellers.

For my methodology, I am attempting to take a thorough detective approach to my media sorting. I have been purposeful in the order of which I am collecting the materials. I started with collecting my own story so that it would be less clouded by the influences of later revelations. Next, I will approach the familial stories, and I will end with the “official” story provided by the

state. In this way, I intend to attempt to avoid suggestibility, or, the tendency to mistake suggested memories for remembered ones. In each case, I am reviewing the entirety of the material and taking notes. For each piece of media I am noting the actual contents, as well as listing where it aligns and deviates from the others. When I have a story that is present in each medium, regardless of whether they match completely, I am putting it into a separate list. I am then choosing four to six stories from this list to show in my installation. The final step will be pulling these threads from their source material and re-editing them to sit alongside each other.

The methodology of this project is intensely important because it directly influences the content, and further, either validates or negates it. By its very nature, I have to engage with the themes and ethics of narration. In choosing which of the story threads I will tell to the installation audience, I am becoming yet another narrator. I view my responsibility in this process as admitting and engaging with this subjectivity. Again, this is drawing from my understanding of contemporary Performative documentary work that does not “seek to hide the modes of production” or “represent an uncomplicated descriptive relationship between subject and text (Bruzzi 155).” I want the most valuable threads to come forward, even if I don’t find them personally satisfying. To do this, I have been running story threads by colleagues and advisors and receiving feedback on which ones elicit the response I am looking for. I am searching for threads that retain interest, and incite further questions. Threads that I have discarded are ones where there is no real emotional response or the “true” story seems undisputable. I am relying on using this method to both acknowledge my biases and attempt to control them.

## *Reflection*

In completing this project, my theories have truly been tested. At the beginning of this process, I wanted to address the problem of unreliable narrators and explore the biases behind storytelling. Although I was prepared to face my own subjectivity, I was less prepared for how much I would have to fight. I opened this project with the theory that my project would not “seek to hide the modes of production” or “represent an uncomplicated descriptive relationship between subject and text (Bruzzi 155).” My main problem came not from an attempt to present my side of the story as truth, but rather a subtler bias. As I was deciding which story threads to feature, I was making judgment calls about what I found to be most interesting. It wasn't until I was reviewing the videos with friends that this was revealed to me as another site of bias. I had originally been interested in the facts that left me feeling speechless and betrayed. Facts like the truth of my brother's name or the accusation of my own behavioral problems. When reviewed by others, however, they were found less interesting. With guidance, I started straying towards the threads that were not just a contention of fact, but rather were stories that arose out of each narrator caring deeply about the story. I started featuring the story threads that gave insights into the hopes and desires of the narrators, rather than just the pieces that contradicted each other. I had not anticipated this being a subjectivity I would have to fight.

Apart from the theoretical struggle, I have also had to maintain a level of flexibility I had not expected. As new gallery information came to light, narrators dropped out, or documents were not surrendered, I had to rethink the presentation and focus. I had to change the physical layout of the installation when I learned I would have to be in a gallery space with other installations. I had to ask my adoptive mother to narrate the family threads when my sister decided she did not want to be interviewed. I had to work with just intake documents when the

Department of Social and Health Services denied my request for further court and case documents. Part of what excited me about this project was not having the ability to directly predict what would be in the final installation. Even at the time of the gallery showing, the piece remained flexible. The most accessible portions were the video and documents, while the audio was often drowned out by the other pieces in the room. I have been trying to keep the promise to make this installation an active search rather than passive acceptance of truth, which requires flexibility and improv at times.

Perhaps what surprised me most about this project was how the material became accessible to those that were interacting with it. People have been deeply engaging with the material. Friends, colleagues, and strangers who have no personal connection to foster care have told me that there are parts they connect with personally. Participants have expressed that they experience similar distrust when it comes to familial lore. For me, because I am so tenderly and intensely connected to the material, it was a whole additional process just presenting it. I found that in the gallery showing, people were drawn most strongly to the film of me speaking. This in itself is an interesting point of what we give credence to as an audience. Because I was the only pictured character, people stayed longest in front of that section of the installation. In general, however, most participants engaged with the installation for a good deal of time. I also believe if the showing had been less crowded, many participants would have engaged for even longer periods of time.

In the beginning of this project, I stated that my goal was to encourage critical discernment of media narrators and to inform a public audience about some of the lasting effects of foster care and childhood trauma. Audiences were forced to critically engage in this piece, even becoming the fourth narrator. I had several people talk to me about foster care because of

this project. The most rewarding part of this installation is that I feel I have been abandoning a personal search for truth. Instead, just as I've asked the audience, I'm coming to accept that every story is true in its own way and that often *why* we tell the story is more important than *what* the story is.

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