“Letting the essay *essay*”: John D’Agata and Jim Fingal’s *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012)

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"Letting the essay *essay*": John D'Agata and Jim Fingal's *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012)

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Keywords

D'Agata, essay; reflexive and experimental writing; fact vs. fiction; truth; information; knowledge; paratext; genre

Cet article analyse le caractère metatextuel de The Lifespan of a Fact *afin de montrer comment D'Agata neutralise le préjugé selon lequel tout essai devrait se conformer à une vérité non-fictionnelle pour mettre en lumière le caractère hybride de l'essai et remettre en cause la question du genre.*

John D'Agata and Jim Fingal's *The Lifespan of a Fact* (2012) is one of a kind in the American literary landscape, or even *one of a genre* as it resolvedly questions genres. Composed of an essay and the conversational gloss on and around that same essay, *Lifespan* comprises the correspondence that took place between the writer and his fact-checker over a period of seven years (from the submission date in 2003 to its publication in the 2010 January issue of *The Believer*) about D'Agata's essay entitled "What Happens There." This essay, and D'Agata's persona "John" insists on calling it an "essay" (19) and not "an article," tells the story of 16-year-old Levi Presley who committed suicide in 2002 by jumping of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. Although *Harper's* had commissioned the text, it refused to publish it because it was filled with factual inaccuracies. But what was conceived of as errors by the magazine's fact-checkers were actually intentional alterations by the author. The publishing history of that piece of writing does not stop there as it was also included in his book-length essay *About a Mountain* in which his narrative double, also called John, helps his mother move to Las Vegas around the same time young Levi Presley died and Congress approved the project to make Yucca Mountain the nuclear waste repository for all of America.

Lifespan is an experimental literary object in three ways. It first takes part in D'Agata's comprehensive reflection on the essay which includes what he calls the "lyric essay."[1] Considered by James Wood as the "renovator-in-chief of the American essay" (Wood xxxii), D'Agata has published three considerable anthologies of essays[2], respectively *The Next American Essay* (2003), *The Lost Origins of the Essay* (2009), *The Making of the American Essay* (2016). The story goes that, in a book fair, D'Agata was introduced by a friend as "an experimental essayist" to Graywolf Press publisher Fiona McCrae who, it so happened, was "looking for a book of experimental essays." (von Arbin Ahlander) D'Agata's first book, *Hall of Fame*, was itself very experimental as it was characterized by fragmentation and poetic forms, recalling in some ways, the work of David Markson. *Lifespan* is also experimental formally speaking as this collaborative prose, in a very singular way, features a metatextual conversation inscribed all around the essay it purports to dissect. Broken into columns of irregular length symmetrically arranged around the text which is framed in the middle of the page, the funny, though sometimes vehement dialogues are displayed in two distinct colors: black to relay the fact-checking notes confirming D'Agata's statements, red to denote the fact-checker's disagreements. Bold font in both colors are used to quote the perused clause to be confirmed or rejected. This rather self-evident metatextual dimension is only one stratum of this literary parfait as will be seen. Let it suffice to say now that D'Agata, the writer, can neither be equated with the "I" narrating the story of young Levi Presley in "What Happens There," nor with the "John" that says "I" in *Lifespan*. That is the reason why, throughout this article, the character John will be distinguished from the author D'Agata (the same applies to Jim and Jim Fingal). Finally, it can also be deemed experimental insofar as the "publisher's peritext" (Genette, *Paratext* 41) on the back cover oriented readers—while irking some along the way (Deresiewicz and Silverman for instance)—towards nonfiction. Indeed, in addition to a blurb that

1. "The recent burgeoning of creative nonfiction and the personal essay has yielded a fascinating subgenre that straddles the essay and the lyric poem. These 'poetic essays' or 'essayistic poems' give primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information. They forsake narrative line, discursive logic, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation. The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form." (Tall & D'Agata, "New Terrain" 7)

2. D'Agata also founded "The Essay Prize" in 2006 "in response to literary awards that champion subject matter in nonfiction, rather than art." See the website http://www.essayprize.org/about/

stresses the book's potential affiliation to nonfiction, a question reads "How negotiable is a fact in nonfiction?". In spite of the fact that it is rooted in facts, *Lifespan* remains a dramatization of D'Agata's reflection on the essay as form and genre, and therefore incorporates a certain amount of fictionalization. The misnomer "nonfiction" tends to conceal the book's official category, namely "Literature/Essay." Insofar as Norton's website distinguishes "Fiction and Literature" from the heading "Nonfiction," *Lifespan* does not belong to the latter category. Thanks to this literary and publishing license, *Lifespan* endeavors to question the rigidity of genres by "walk[ing] the blurred line between fiction and nonfiction" (Gutkind 4) and by gesturing toward metatextual, and perhaps more decisively, metageneric levels of reading.

Lifespan is D'Agata's way of dramatizing his essayistic agenda and of denouncing the tenacious idea according to which all essays should abide by the faithful reproduction of facts, and that they should "be propelled by information" (D'Agata, *Lost* 4), that is to say by nonfictional, referential or historical truths. This article wishes to show how the self-reflexive dimension of that short experimental opus enables D'Agata to demonstrate his understanding of what the essay is and perhaps more significantly, but also more pedagogically, of what the essay should *not* be. Self-reflexivity and metatextuality in *Lifespan* are pivotal aspects for the writer to disseminate the idea of a potential reappraisal of the essay as a hybrid form and to reassess the question of genres.

This is Not a Nonfiction

Lifespan contains a text the genre of which does not coincide with the one it has been associated with, to wit *nonfiction*. D'Agata's work is associated with essays which are themselves traditionally categorized as nonfiction, notwithstanding the author's reluctance, not to say allergy, to being thus labelled, and when, on rare occasions, he endorses the generic label he always finds a way to dissociate himself from it: "I'm also not much of a nonfiction writer, at least not in the standard sense of nonfiction" (Lewiton). The term nonfiction—this "literature of reality" (Gutkind 4)—is only a "utilitarian" (D'Agata, "Name" 9) differentiation. As John puts it: "The only reason this is being labeled "nonfiction" by your editors is because that is one of the two binary categories that editors allow in prose." (108) How could fiction be reduced to that which is not factual? Genette avoided the term *nonfiction* and its "negative expressions (*nonfiction*, *nonfictional*)" preferring the word *factual* and he reminded us,

got that number by counting up the number of strip clubs that were listed in the local yellow pages at the time of Levi's death. However, since that issue of the phone book was long gone by the time I started writing this, I found that porn article that I gave the magazine so that they could check up on my estimate.

Jim: Thanks, John. Very helpful. Now, I guess that's where the discrepancy is, because the number that's mentioned in the article is different from the number you're using in your piece.

John: Well, I guess that's because the rhythm of "thirty-four" works better in that sentence than the rhythm of "thirty-one," so I changed it.

Jim: Ah. OK. Well thanks for your time, John, I'll probably be checking back with you later on.

. . .

So, do we accept that?

Editor: Not his "rhythm" explanation, but his procedure for estimating that number is fine. Just try to confirm in the yellow pages that thirty-four was accurate in 2002.

Jim: Well, unless you want me to fly back to Las Vegas in order to track down a 2002 copy of the yellow pages, all I can use is the current online directory, which can't really indicate one way or the other the status of strip clubs in 2002. The current edition says that there are now twenty-nine strip clubs in town, so unless the number rose and then dropped again, there's likely a factual discrepancy here.

Editor: OK, Jim. Then just note the discrepancy and move on.

". . . archaeologists unearthed parts of the world's oldest bottle of Tabasco-brand sauce from underneath a bar called Buckets of Blood . . ." Factual Dispute: This happened on June 28, 2002, fifteen days before Levi Presley killed himself, so it wasn't discovered the same day he died. In addition, the bottle was discovered in Virginia City, which is 20 miles southeast of Reno—about 450 miles away from Las Vegas. So the relevance of this bottle's discovery to Las Vegas is a little specious. Also, the bar it was found under is called the "Boston Saloon," which, as the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported, is "behind the Bucket of Blood Saloon." The point being that none of this corresponds in any way with Levi Presley's death. ("Hot Sauce Bottle Used in 1870s Found" by Scott Sonner, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 28, 2002.) What should I do here?

Editor: Go ahead and ask him about this, too.

. . .

Jim: John, I discovered that the bar you mention in the beginning of your piece where they found that Tabasco sauce bottle is actually called the "Boston Saloon." Do you want to change it?

John: No, why would I change it? "Bucket of Blood" is more interesting than the "Boston Saloon," and since they found it near the Bucket of Blood, I think the claim is OK as it stands. From what I understand, you are fact-checking this, right, not editing it?

. . .

Jim: Any suggestion on what to do here?

Editor: Just note it and move on, Jim. We'll deal with the discrepancies later.

". . . and a woman from Mississippi beat a chicken named Ginger in a thirty-five-minute-long game of tic-tac-toe." Factual Dispute: According to the press release John provided from the hotel where this took place, this tic-tac-toe game actually happened on August 13, 2002, a full month after Levi Presley's death. Plus, while the woman who won the match was originally from Mississippi, she was actually a resident of Las Vegas when the game happened. So . . . ?

Editor: All right, ask him.

. . .

Jim: Hey, John . . . again =). I was wondering if you could weigh in on this tic-tac-toe game with the chicken. It looks like it happened quite a bit after Levi Presley died, but also that the woman who won it wasn't really from Mississippi. I think she was a local resident. Does this matter?

John: I realize that, but I need her to be from a place other than Las Vegas in order to underscore the transient nature of the city—that nearly everyone in Vegas is from someplace else. And since she did in fact

licensed strip clubs in Vegas, archaeologists unearthed parts of the world's oldest bottle of Tabasco-brand sauce from underneath a bar called Buckets of Blood, and a woman from Mississippi beat a chicken named Ginger in a thirty-five-minute-long game of tic-tac-toe.

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Figure 1. D'Agata, John and Jim Fingal. *The Lifespan of a Fact*. New York (NY): W.W. Norton, 2012, p. 16, courtesy of John d'Agata.

in passing, that "fiction, too, consists in sequences of *facts*." (Genette, *Diction* 55)

D'Agata embraces the essayistic label in contradistinction to that of nonfiction because the latter is both inadequate and too "baggy"[3] a term. One of his arguments to dismiss the term "nonfiction" begins with its etymology[4] as the word seems to negate the very possibility of craft in writing:

> a number of readers insist on calling this genre "nonfiction," which I think strips the form of its chance to be art. "Nonfiction" essentially means "not art," since the word fiction is derived from the Latin *fictio*, which itself means "to form, to shape, to arrange"—a pretty fundamental activity in art.
>
> (von Arbin Ahlander)

D'Agata is also concerned with the fact that the word nonfiction harks back to a notion that seems to be deprived of any link whatsoever with art and creativity as he explains: "What we all have is a world […] but what we do with it is create. […] The world provides nonfiction, and human provide the rest […]. The world we all know, is already a nonfiction. Let the essay be what we make of it. (D'Agata, *Making* 3-4). Being essentially a sort of transparent and redundant version of the world, nonfiction is reduced to a mere uncreative reproduction of what is already there. The same idea comes up to the fore in *Lifespan*: "My job is not to re-create a world that already exists, holding up a mirror to the reader's experience in hopes that it rings true. If a mirror were a sufficient means of handling human experience, I doubt that our species would have invented literature." (22) D'Agata refuses to restrain the scope of the essay and strives to render justice to the rich multifariousness of that label. It is also a way for him to enhance a freedom of writing thwarted by the nomenclatural codes inherited from the past: "Please don't hold me to parameters for making essays that I've no say in establishing, that I wholly disagree with, and that I believe misrepresent the true purpose of this genre." (108)

This is Not Journalism

The fact that Jim uses the word "article" instead of "essay" turns John into a journalist. Although the canonical expression of discord is the "factual dispute," (15) Jim resorts to a wide range of terms—running

3. John D'Agata, "Some Lyric Observations: Short Essays that Watch and Sing," craft lecture, 2015.

4. Etymology is also used to repudiate the word "fact." (D'Agata, *Next* 1-2)

pretending that nonfiction writers have a mystically different relationship with "The Truth" than any other kind of writer. Because we don't. What we do have, like every other artist, is a compulsion for meanings, and so, just as any other artist would, we arrange things and we alter details and we influence interpretations as we pursue ideas. I know that most hard-core nonfiction writers won't agree with this, and that's fine. I know that I'm in the minority. But I also suspect that those are the kinds of writers who still have faith in genre, who have faith in the idea that by calling themselves "nonfiction" writers they automatically are, or that by calling their texts "nonfiction" they automatically are. And bless their hearts for having that kind of faith, really, because somebody's got to keep up the struggle to try to nail down the facts of the world, to construct the sorts of histories you mentioned earlier. But that doesn't mean that I think that they're going to find those facts, just as I don't think that my mom is going to find the God that she's been looking for all her life. But neither does it mean that I think her effort is pointless. It's just not my effort. Those who embrace the idea of "nonfiction" are very welcome to it, and I wish them every joy in the world in that pursuit—genuinely. But please don't hold me to parameters for making essays that I've had no say in establishing, that I wholly disagree with, and that I believe misrepresent the true purpose of this genre. An essay is an attempt, Jim. Nothing else. And fundamentally, for centuries, that's all it's been. Even etymologically, "essay" means "an attempt." And so, as a writer of essays, my interpretation of that charge is that I try—that I *try*—to take control of something before it is lost entirely to chaos. That's what I want to be held accountable for as a writer; it's how I want to be judged. Others can request to be judged by how strenuously they have tried to get their facts right, but for me, personally, that's not exciting work. And neither does it seem like it would result in particularly consequential art.

Jim: I don't know . . . I hear you, I really do, but I'm just having a visceral reaction to this, and I know it's making me sound like I'm not hip to the last hundred years of artistic experimentation, but I'm still uneasy with the ramifications of what you're saying. I am with you in that I don't necessarily believe that a "nonfiction" essay has to strive for an objective account of an occurrence as its primary project, or that the writer is ethically obligated to secure the reality of an event in cultural memory. And I'm all for the PoMo-historiographic-metafictional appropriation of events and personages. But there still seems to be something strange about doing this sort of thing with someone like Levi, who was just a teenager, after all, just a kid in Las Vegas—not a cultural figure or an icon whose life is for the taking and can be radically manipulated and reinterpreted. I mean, clearly it's not like you're defiling his grave by propagating these inaccuracies, but it's kind of like you're being dishonest about where that grave is.

John: Why on earth would we care about where his grave is? I swear to god that's the least interesting thing this essay could concern itself with. And it's definitely not where this essay is trying to locate itself. This isn't a profile about a boy's suicide and the particular inner demons that brought that death about. This essay is about an idea, and Levi represents that idea. Now, is it crass to call a dead boy whom I never knew an "idea"? Probably. But would it be better to call him a "subject"? A "character"? He's going to be "used"—or "defiled," as you put it—the moment he's written about. So maybe the most ethically appropriate thing for me to have done is to have completely made up a suicide victim so that I could use him however I wished. But I have a feeling that we'd still be having this argument even if I'd done that. I understand your concerns, Jim—I completely do. I don't know for certain whether it's right for an essay to do this kind of work. But what I believe is that unless the imagination can do this, then I don't know what it's for. What writing isn't fueled by the imagination? Would we even want to read a work of literature that wasn't engaged with the imagination?

can television shows—I DREAM OF JEANNIE, WHEEL OF FORTUNE, HOGAN'S HEROES—and some of

Jim: Great, so now if I have reservations about what you're doing, then I'm against imaginative writing? That's obviously not what I'm saying, John. I'm not saying that you need to have—or even pretend to have—some hallowed relationship to "The Truth" in your writing, but it does seem like there's a line that you should be wary of crossing in a work that you're calling "nonfiction." And no, I don't think that it's crass to call Levi an idea or a subject or a character, because all of those things describe how he's being used in this essay. I'm just saying that there is something that feels strange about labeling your narrative "nonfiction" while you're willfully manipulating facts. While I may

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Figure 2. D'Agata, John and Jim Fingal. *The Lifespan of a Fact*. New York (NY): W. W. Norton, 2012, p. 108, courtesy of John D'Agata.

from "intentionally inaccurate" (17) to "significantly unreliable" (122)—to refer to John's "liberties" (15) with facts. While Jim is wary of John's "'casual' interviewing strategy" (19), John honestly acknowledges the "nontraditional or even unprofessional" (22) condition of his interviews for he "never claimed to be a reporter" (19). Sorting out the details of John's methods, Jim reaches the seemingly satisfying conclusion in a note to himself: "John is not a journalist. Also not a nonfiction writer. He is, however, a writer of journalistic-ish texts that are not necessarily fiction. Got it." (22). Jim already hints at John's hybrid type of writing, a definition D'Agata embraces: "I don't consider myself a journalist. I never received training as a journalist. […] I like playing with the idea of journalism and our expectations of journalism, so I like making something feel journalistic" (Strainchamps).

In *About a Mountain* D'Agata abundantly played with the "six tenets of reporting," (Stuckey-French) which he used as chapter headers in order to testify to "the ceaseless shapeless clattering of the *who-what-when-where-why.*" (D'Agata, *Lost* 3). What mattered was not so much verifiability, as veracity and the "search for meaning" (107): "Something that's verifiable can be fact-checked beyond the world of the text. But veracity—or truthfulness—speaks to the believability of what's on the page and what's going on in the world that has been created by the author" (Steinberg). Even if he reproduced the writing codes generally associated, almost unconsciously, with nonfiction and subverted them, in a final section entitled "Note," he provided an introductory paragraph which reads like a disclaimer of some sort before listing his almost two hundred endnotes to the reader. This warning is exactly the kind of paratext D'Agata wished he could avoid. That is precisely the reason why the metatextual dimension of John and Jim's heated debate in *Lifespan* is twice ironical. If we perceive John and Jim's metatext as footnotes, the latter mimic the codes of nonfiction insofar as they function as an index of truth. This is the first irony for the footnotes work here so as to highlight discrepancies with the truth. When John speaks of "venturing into terrain that can't be footnoted" (22), the terrain is that of imagination. And yet, what is interesting, and this constitutes the second irony, is that it is as if footnotes were cruelly required in order to reveal that readers can, nay, must do without them. The commentaries seen as informational paratext are to be seen as a hyperbolic footnoting process whereby footnoting cancels itself.

This is Not John D'Agata

When asked by Jared Levy if the transcript came from the messages the two men exchanged, D'Agata answered: "It's almost impossible that

an argument would naturally form the kind of arch that it does in *Lifespan*. So, the conversation is constructed." (Levy) John is "a written construct, a fabricated thing, a character of some sorts." (Klaus, *Made-Up* 1) Such narrative technique is part and parcel of the history of the essay which is a history of "personas, and of writers using those slanted versions of themselves to tell bigger stories than themselves so that they can explore bigger themes." (Steinberg) D'Agata reminds us "that a lot of writers have struggled with the contradiction of writing through themselves but not really of themselves." (Steinberg) D'Agata's double—that is to say John in the epistolary bout—but also to a certain extent, his double's double—that is to say D'Agata's persona, John, writing about his other persona who is himself also called John—has not been perceived as his double but as D'Agata himself. Readers, but also reviewers, were shocked by "D'Agata"'s arrogant personality as D'Agata, not John, explains:

> When [*Lifespan*] came out, we gave lots of interviews in which we talked openly about the *fabricated nature of the book*, and yet some people still insisted on reading those characters as real. Reviewers did it too. I was called a "jerk" by a few very famous publications because the assumption was that I was the "I" that appeared on that page. What this taught me is that even when we're told otherwise, and even when we know otherwise, *we still let the stranglehold of the term "nonfiction" dictate how we read something. We still insist on reading that "I" as a mirror of the author.* And so now, in many people's minds, I *am* that "jerk" that they read in *[Lifespan]*. I'd say this frustrated me if I didn't find it so fascinating and baffling.
>
> (Steinberg, my emphasis)

The opening epigraph—a sort of "Foreword" where the Editor invites a fact-checker to "comb through" John's new piece—should have alerted readers as to the playful quality of the literary conversation about literariness they were about to read. By playing the discriminative game that consists in sorting out what is true from what is not, the Editor explicitly points to the debate about the hosted text in *Lifespan*. Yet, the debate implicitly entails a reflection on *Lifespan* as a blurred genre in want of correction, or rather as a genre feigning to be in need of red marks on its pages. The Editor signals the problematic fixture of the codes of writing expected by readers as regards essays *if or when* they are understood as nonfiction. This metacritical dimension of *Lifespan* vis-à-vis the question of genre is best summarized by Jim Fingal, not Jim:

> I must clarify that you should consider the "Jim" and "John" of the essay to be characters enacting a parallel process / discussion from the one John and I actually had during the factchecking process. What we did—taking the relatively dry factchecking document and dramatizing it a bit—might be seen as a parallel

> gesture to what John does in his original essay, albeit one that (at least from Jim's point of view) is ambivalent about its own form.
>
> (Cutter)

This is Not a Fact-Checker

While everything is thoroughly verified by Jim, not everything ends up being either validated—as the abundant use of the words "confirmed" or "ditto" formally certifies—or invalidated. Indeed, Jim's task should, in principle, be circumscribed to those two options. Yet, in many instances, he proves unable to decide. His undecidability stems from the problematic knowledgeability of facts themselves which intrinsically refuse to comply to a language based on a clear-cut dichotomy. Despite a scrupulousness at fact-checking—a "nitpicking" (105) that, for John, verges on absurdity when he is asked to provide "evidence of a rumor" (83)—Jim is confronted with the resistance of the real which leads him to contradict the very task he was appointed for. Facing certain facts, and their restitution by John, Jim betrays the signs of casualness he so firmly vociferated against and becomes indulgent, tolerating approximations such as "Confirmed, sort of." (30), "Most of this is right" (3), "I guess that's acceptable" (40), "I can kind of confirm" (42), "almost confirmed" (66, 97).

His thoroughness is not only curtailed by the real and by terminological dissent—John and Jim cannot even agree on the definition of "misquoting" (57) or "accuracy" (60)—he also lets his mind roam when he consciously digresses from a topic—thus mirroring John's writing process—and becomes anecdotal (55, 115). What further curbs his credibility is his tendency to posit himself as a writer, a position that John loses no time in criticizing: "And please don't offer to do any more writing for me, thank you" (22). John's warning is not enough to deter Jim from attempting to author some segments of John's essay and "correct [a] passage" (67).

While Jim encroaches upon the role of the author and is being "out of [his] league" (78) as if he were the spokesperson of the real—at the expense of "art" (92)—John doesn't hesitate to question Jim's so-called thoroughness when he thinks the latter is being vague: "A ceiling that is 'attached to the roof of something'? This is your idea of rigorous fact-checking?" (91). He even suggests that Jim may be in need of a meta-fact-checker[5]: "Jim, if

5. As Gutkind bluntly remarked "the book about the anatomy of the process of fact-checking has itself not been fact-checked!" For John of course neither texts need fact-checking. Lee Gutkind, "Doing A D'Agata," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 19, 2012, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/doing-a-dagata/

Hickey were around to fact-check *you*" (79). Jim loses his patience twice, and therefore, credibility when he refuses to do his job arguing that one fact "seems too ludicrous to investigate" (50) while for the other, he acknowledges that he hasn't "bothered trying to confirm whether this was in fact the size of the headline, but we can allow for some artistic license here, especially since it seems to be more effort than it's worth, given the unlikeliness that John will budge on this" (58).

But perhaps the moment Jim steps out of line in the most significant way happens at a metatextual level. We may sense a tinge of metatextual allusion when he recuperates John's most sacred terms, those defining the essay, namely "try" and "attempt." (108, 111) Suspicious of John's vague mention of an "eyewitness to Levi's death" (54), Jim wants to contact "the guy" but John cuts him short. Faithful to his holy quest for factual truth, Jim insists: "OK, but my job is at least *try*. What's this guy's real name so I can make the *attempt*?" (55 my emphasis). Jim's attempt at verifying John's unverified claims mimics John's attempt at trying.

The latter remark betrays Jim's sarcastic tone. He doesn't simply oppose the author, he also shows some moments of distance with John's assertions. This attitude plays a major part in fueling the humorous dimension of the exchange. When John gets his figures wrong—purposefully—Jim ironizes that they are "the result of creative math on someone's part" (40). He teases him when he intimates that John "could put his crack forensic skills to use as a '(very) creative consultant.'" (71) Yet, it becomes funnier when Jim manages to intersperse metacommentaries. For instance, when the text about Levi (in bold characters) is commented as follows:

> **"[…] I received no comment in response to my request for his insights about the effect of suicide on his school."** There is no record of any such comment in John's notes, which means that there is technically no record of a "no comment" comment—so it's possible that there was no comment and John didn't see the need to comment on that in his notes. (No comment.)
>
> (55)

It is also the case when the text-within-the-text seems to speak directly to Jim as if the text being surveyed and surveilled were actually the commenting one and not the other way around:

> **"Clear that if I point to something seeming like significance there is the possibility that nothing real is there."** Hey, That's my line.
>
> **"Sometimes we misplace knowledge in pursuit of information. Sometimes our wisdom, too, in pursuit of what's called knowledge."** Touché
>
> (99)

In other words, D'Agata's persona in "What Happens There" addresses Jim, thus superseding D'Agata's "John" in *Lifespan*. The way the two texts crisscross in such manner proves how D'Agata's scrutinized essay already reflected upon the issues overtly debated in *Lifespan*.

This is not an Editor

If the verbal joust is indeed one, we may legitimately wonder whether or not an umpire might ensure that Jim and John reach an agreement, or at least, a form of compromise. The task of the umpire is performed by the unnamed "Editor" who plays an ambiguous role since he advocates an irreproachable rigor in fact-checking while conceding to Jim without the least explanation that "*John's a different kind of writer*" (18). He appears briefly at the opening pages in a paratextual note functioning both as a warning and an invitation to play a "Spot the difference" type of game:

> I've got a fun assignment for somebody. We just received a new piece from John D'Agata that needs to be fact-checked, thoroughly. Apparently he's taken some liberties, which he's admitted to, but I want to know to what extent. So whoever's up for it will need to comb through this, marking anything and everything that you can confirm as true, as well as whatever you think is questionable. I'll buy you a pack of red pens if necessary. Thanks!
>
> (11)

Placed in an untenable position as he espouses contradictory stances, the Editor wants Jim to be both rigorous and negligent. Although the task of drawing the line between what is acceptable and what is not falls to him, he gets irritated by Jim's incessant queries up to a point where he jeopardizes, ironically, his very status as referee. For instance, when Jim has a hard time accepting one of John's clauses, the Editor literally nullifies his arbitral authority: "*Jim, just note it. Move on. We'll deal with it. I can't referee every problem you have with [John's] piece*" (18). Canceling his intermediary function, the Editor corroborates avowedly that John's writing is one of a kind indeed and perhaps, incidentally, that facts are problematic. How can Jim perform a task that implies that he be concurrently punctilious and neglectful? How can he implement a narrow and strict factuality which is at the core of what he does and perform his task "*with the irregularities of this piece with an open mind"* (18)? Combing through the minutest detail, to end up being told by the Editor that the latter will "*figure out in the end which inaccuracies are acceptable*" (17). In other words, the Editor fact-checks the fact-checker, and becomes a sort of *meta-fact-checker* conspiring against accuracy. We may infer from what he says that a looser relationship to facts

will be tolerated. This is where the debate between nonfiction and fiction crystallizes. Does the Editor thus imply that inaccurate facts still deserve to be treated as facts? Perhaps but it is more likely that to him John's work completely subverts the rigid nomenclature regulating the ins and outs of nonfiction. The problem *with* John—a problem which is also a solution *for* John—is that he abolishes the need, or even the legitimacy of a referee to officially prescribe what is deemed factual and what is not.

This is a Meta-Essay

Oftentimes, D'Agata explains his literary background by referring to the dilemma he had to face in graduate school. Although he enrolled in two writing programs, one in poetry—an art John likes to believe Jim hates (79, 84)—and the other in nonfiction, he could never feel totally comfortable in either for none of them managed to provide a "literary home." (D'Agata, *Lyric* 6) If *Lifespan* is not literally about the home the author searches for, it gives an inkling as to which sorts of home D'Agata wishes *not* to inhabit. The dialogue between John and Jim orchestrated by D'Agata reads as an *attempt* to display the inner workings of a literary genre whose fundamental process is *attempting*. The metatextual references we have noted are therefore not so much at the service of a text calling attention to its fictitiousness but instead it seems more apposite to say that metatextuality serves a purpose that pertains to meta-genre or, in Genette's words, to "architextuality" (Genette, *Architext* 82). The very hybrid nature of *Lifespan* is indicative of D'Agata's penchant for hybridity in general, especially that of the lyric essay: "I liked the challenge of writing in-between the two worlds of poetry and essay, and as these things go when you're fully immersed in a new and exciting passion, I started to see everything through the lens of that hybridity." (D'Agata, *Lyric* 6) Jim sums up John's ethics and aesthetics in a deprecative manner—"The rules are: There are no rules, just as long as you make it pretty." (53) while D'Agata stresses the freedom of the writer to create. In that, he is faithful to "the ultimate yearning of essayists [which is] to be free from any systematized form of thinking or writing" (Klaus & Stuckey-French xxi).

The Lifespan of a Fact finishes in a disconcerting way that puts an abrupt end to the dialogue. John announces his withdrawal from the conversation:

> Jim, you feel misled by essay. I accept that. You feel it's inappropriate for me to have done this. While I feel that it's a necessary part of my job to do this; that what I'm doing by taking these liberties is in fact making a better work of

> art—and thus a better and truer experience for the reader—than I could have if I'd stuck to the facts. I'm OK with that. I'm also not sure where else to go.
>
> (112)

Henceforth, and until the end, the remaining ten pages or so, Jim is on his own. Where has John gone to? John's words tend to suggest that he believes he has *essayed* the best way he could to explain what his essayistic art was and that he acknowledges that they have reached a dead end. He has then done what Jim expressed clearly: "This is getting nowhere. We seem to be talking past each other" (112). Were we to consider *Lifespan* as a fiction, another reading would be to contend that John has departed from the world of fiction once he felt that his literary agenda regarding the essay was sufficiently established. John has basically vanished from the experimental exercise which consisted in unveiling the theoretical principles guiding his conception of the essay by choosing a process of fictionalization. Such reading would intimate that *Lifespan* is a fiction but the raging battle between John and Jim was, at least for John, or rather for D'Agata, to legitimate a piece of writing that can neither be called fictional nor nonfictional. Ben Marcus is right when he states that the "lyrical essayist seems to enjoy all of the liberties of the fiction writer, with none of a fiction writer's burden of unreality" (Marcus). The essayistic form enables D'Agata to subvert and problematize the rigid writing codes running along the spectrum arching between historical nonfiction and fiction:

> Jim, have you ever stopped to consider that [fiction or history] aren't the only options available? Maybe there is a third (or even a fourth or fifth or sixth) alternative? That our understanding of the world can't be categorized into either "fictional" or "historical" slots—with nothing in between.
>
> (93)

"Fabrication is fiction," (Gutkind 25) as *creative nonfiction*[6] advocate Lee Gutkind suggests, adding that "'nonfiction' is an absolute. You can't be half dead. And a story described as half true is false—and is therefore categorized as fiction." (Gutkind 28) It is this absolute along with the notion that "because nonfiction is a construct, it is a fiction" (Lopate 77-78) that essayists such as D'Agata aim at challenging.

Without the presence of his interlocutor, Jim is left, seemingly, to converse with himself. Yet, within that solitude two distinct experiences seem to emerge. Maintaining the layout on the page, Jim soliloquizes with a silent text and what cannot but visually strike the reader is that Jim's commentary surpasses in length the text he is commenting upon. By the

6. See http://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/what-creative-nonfiction

final two pages, his commentary, or rather soliloquy frames an absent text, a text that, just as John, has vanished. The absent text underlines the fact that the debate over factuality and fact-checking goes on and that neither a fact-checker nor an experimental writer will bring an end to that debate. While Jim struggles and "butt[s] up against the wall of unverifiability" (Strainchamps), John (or is it D'Agata?) is elsewhere probably busy doing what he does best, writing "this unnameable literary form" (D'Agata, *Lyric* 9-10), the essay, "letting it grow and explore and change as a genre […] letting the essay *essay.*" (Steinberg)

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