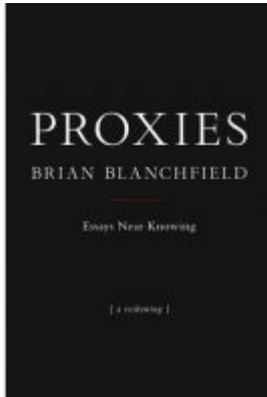


[Proxies: Essays Near Knowing by Brian Blanchfield](#)

written by Guest Contributor | July 12, 2016



Proxies: Essays Near Knowing by Brian Blanchfield

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I have not read Brian Blanchfield's new collection of essays, *Proxies: Essays Near Knowing*. The book, which came out March 1st, has been in my hand only once, and even then just briefly. In truth, the extent of my exposure to Blanchfield (the man, the writer, the poet) remains confined to his reading at Elliot Bay Book Company on April 7th, 2016. Nothing more, and nothing less.

What, then, am I doing here?

I'd like to step behind Blanchfield to begin answering this question. It is not just *Proxies* that I am considering, after all, but an entire theory of nonfiction espoused by the book and (more importantly) by Blanchfield's relationship to the work itself.

But let's start on April 7th. It is 7 PM and Blanchfield begins by outlining his approach to the 24 essays comprising *Proxies*. They are single-subject, he says, and cover such topics as *frottage*, man roulette, and housesitting. More significantly, though, is that they refuse to go outside of Blanchfield's most immediate mind. That is, each essay confines itself to the memory, thinking, and assumptions Blanchfield himself has, unable to turn toward any external authority. At the end of the book, there is a section of "correction" that addresses the missteps in an elegiac parade of facts caught outside of context.

(An early aside: ever since reading some of the vitriolic dialogue between John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, I have been fascinated by the notion of "fact-checking" in a nonfiction setting that is definitively creative, too. When Blanchfield announces this compromise, I know that he is onto something interesting: the facts are there, after all, but they remain apart from the

essays, distinct and disembodied.)

Before reading "On Housesitting" and "On Foot Washing," Blanchfield recites the corrected facts that belong to each. It is an odd experience, as the manner in which one fact leads to the next is simultaneously lawless and logical. Imagine being given a set of material—dates, names, definitions—and being told that in a certain order, the lot makes sense.

In the Q&A after, Blanchfield describes his process of writing as "heat-seeking": his subjects interest him intuitively, yet he has to write into them until their relevance becomes known. This movement is quickly seen in both pieces. "On Foot Washing" begins with a consideration of the cultural history of foot washing. Religious ceremonies are discussed, as is Odysseus's return to Ithaca. In each case, the sense that Blanchfield is writing *toward* is palpable: consider this string of knowledge that constructs foot washing as a significant gesture between two people, he seems to claim, and then watch where it leads.

The important component to all of this is that Blanchfield's evidence does not feel contrived to some affective end. Instead, we are placed alongside Blanchfield's own process of analysis and discovery, witnessing the material assemble for him in real time. By the end of "On Foot Washing," Blanchfield gives a stark portrait of his mother and stepfather's misbalanced relationship. His stepfather has a permanent wound on his foot that his mother cleans each night; during this ritual, he usually watches TV.

"On Housesitting" has a similar movement but different shape. In this case, Blanchfield shifts between his own experience of housesitting (the odd sense of "play-acting" while in someone else's space) and the long history of queer writers housesitting for heterosexual friends. The piece's broader sweeps interrogate the idea of queerness in a heteronormative context: are spaces capable of being "queered"? are certain practices or dynamics inherently "straight?" Blanchfield sustains this unresolved tension by recounting an interaction between a homeowner who returned earlier than expected. The man, who did not know Blanchfield was housesitting for him and his wife, was unsettled to find Blanchfield and a male lover in his home. He gave them an hour to vacate the premises.

During his reading of both essays, the misstated facts shine by virtue of the aforementioned corrections. The result is not jarring, but rather fascinating: it shows the way in which knowledge moves Blanchfield forward, imperfection notwithstanding. The facts do not flag themselves as erroneous; they become conduits, pathways toward something more important than sheer data. It does not matter that the original purpose of foyers was not to wash feet but to prevent drafts. What matters is that the thought in Blanchfield's mind brought him to understanding foot washing as a sort of giving, an offering that could be taken with no reciprocity or mutual caregiving.

This, essentially, is what struck me most about Blanchfield's approach to the essay. His subjects come alive to him by virtue of their constraint: these are his facts, his trajectories, and, as such, they move him to his own revelations. Nonfiction—a genre shackled by words like "true" and

“factual”—rarely succeeds on the data’s terms alone. We read to see a mind at work, to let an assemblage of raw evidence become something artful. Blanchfield argues, whether implicitly or explicitly, for a nonfiction narrative that trusts the mind to get where it needs to go without carrying other authorities along with it. There is a reason that the corrected facts do not make it into the essays; their precision was never a part of Blanchfield’s movement.

I have not read Brian Blanchfield’s new collection of essays, *Proxies*. What I know is that the man has a smooth voice, an active mind, and a subtle humor that straddles life’s harshest moments. He has written on 24 distinct subjects—including foot washing and housesitting—that have been brought together into a slim paperback. I know that he has won the Whiting Award for nonfiction, that Claudia Rankine and Maggie Nelson both admire his work. I know that I know very little, that in the scheme of our lives, Blanchfield has occupied a fleeting moment. Indeed, he has said so little to me, and yet a near knowledge is no small thing.

Scott Broker is a writer originally from Colorado living now in Seattle, WA. His work has appeared or is soon forthcoming in *Sonora Review*, *American Chordata*, *Barrelhouse Blog*, *Driftwood Press*, and *Literary Orphans*, among others. He holds a BA in English and Philosophy from Seattle University, where he was the editor of the annual literary journal *Fragments*. He can be found at <http://www.scottjbroker.com>