This is a story within a story—so slippery at the edges that one wonders when and where it started and whether it will ever end. By the middle of February 1836, the army of general Antonio López de Santa Anna had reached the crumbling walls of the old mission of San Antonio de Valero in the Mexican province of Tejas. Few traces of the Franciscan priests who had built the mission more than a century before had survived the combined assaults of time and of a succession of less religious residents. Intermittent squatters, Spanish and Mexican soldiers, had turned the place into something of a fort and nicknamed it "the Alamo," from the name of a Spanish cavalry unit that undertook one of the many transformations of the crude compound. Now, three years after Santa Anna first gained power in independent Mexico, a few English-speaking squatters occupied the place, refusing to surrender to his superior force. Luckily for Santa Anna, the squatters were outnumbered—at most 189 potential fighters—and the structure itself was weak. The conquest would be easy, or so thought Santa Anna.

The conquest was not easy: the siege persisted through twelve days of cannonade. On March 6, Santa Anna blew the horns that Mexicans traditionally used to announce an attack to the death.
Later on that same day, his forces finally broke through the fort, killing most of the defenders. But a few weeks later, on April 21, at San Jacinto, Santa Anna fell prisoner to Sam Houston, the freshly certified leader of the secessionist Republic of Texas.

Santa Anna recovered from that upset; he went on to be four more times the leader of a much reduced Mexico. But in important ways, he was doubly defeated at San Jacinto. He lost the battle of the day, but he also lost the battle he had won at the Alamo. Houston's men had punctuated their victorious attack on the Mexican army with repeated shouts of "Remember the Alamo! Remember the Alamo!" With that reference to the old mission, they doubly made history. As actors, they captured Santa Anna and neutralized his forces. As narrators, they gave the Alamo story a new meaning. The military loss of March was no longer the end point of the narrative but a necessary turn in the plot, the trial of the heroes, which, in turn, made final victory both inevitable and grandiose. With the battle cry of San Jacinto, Houston's men reversed for more than a century the victory Santa Anna thought he had gained in San Antonio.

Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators. The inherent ambivalence of the word "history" in many modern languages, including English, suggests this dual participation. In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts, both "what happened" and "that which is said to have happened." The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process or on a story about that process.

If I write "The history of the United States begins with the Mayflower," a statement many readers may find simplistic and controversial, there will be little doubt that I am suggesting that the first significant event in the process that eventuated in what we now call the United States is the landing of the Mayflower. Consider now a sentence grammatically identical to the preceding one and perhaps as controversial: "The history of France starts with Michelet." The meaning of the word "history" has unambiguously shifted from the sociohistorical process to our knowledge of that process. The sentence affirms that the first significant narrative about France was the one written by Jules Michelet.

Yet the distinction between what happened and that which is said to have happened is not always clear. Consider a second sentence: "The history of the United States is a history of migration." The reader may choose to understand both uses of the word history as emphasizing the sociohistorical process. Then, the sentence seems to suggest that the fact of migration is the central element in the evolution of the United States. But an equally valid interpretation of that sentence is that the best narrative about the United States is a story of migrations. That interpretation becomes privileged if I add a few qualifiers: "The true history of the United States is a history of migrations. That history remains to be written."

Yet a third interpretation may place the emphasis on the sociohistorical process for the first use of the word "history" and on knowledge and narrative for its second use in the same sentence, thus suggesting that the best narrative about the United States is one of which migration is the central theme. This third interpretation is possible only because we implicitly acknowledge an overlap between the sociohistorical process and our knowledge of it, an overlap significant enough to allow us to suggest, with varying degree of metaphorical intent, that the history of the United States is a story of migrations. Not only can history mean either the sociohistorical process or our knowledge of that process, but the boundary between the two meanings is often quite fluid.

The vernacular use of the word history thus offers us a semantic ambiguity: an irreducible distinction and yet an equally irreducible overlap between what happened and that which is said to have happened. Yet it suggests also the importance of context: the
overlap and the distance between the two sides of historicity may not be susceptible to a general formula. The ways in which what happened and that which is said to have happened are and are not the same may itself be historical.

Words are not concepts and concepts are not words: between the two are the layers of theory accumulated throughout the ages. But theories are built on words and with words. Thus it is not surprising that the ambiguity offered by the vernacular use of the word history has caught the attention of many thinkers since at least antiquity. What is surprising is the reluctance with which theories of history have dealt with this fundamental ambiguity. Indeed, as history became a distinguishable profession, theorists have followed two incompatible tendencies. Some, influenced by positivism, have emphasized the distinction between the historical world and what we say or write about it. Others, who adopt a "constructivist" viewpoint, have stressed the overlap between the historical process and narratives about that process. Most have treated the combination itself, the core of the ambiguity, as if it were a mere accident of vernacular parlance to be corrected by theory. What I hope to do is to show how much room there is to look at the production of history outside of the dichotomies that these positions suggest and reproduce.

One-sided Historicity

Summaries of intellectual trends and subdisciplines always short-change the various authors they somewhat compulsively regroup. I do not even attempt such a regrouping here. I hope that the following sketch is sufficient to show the limitations that I question.¹

Positivism has a bad name today, but at least some of that scorn is well deserved. As history solidified as a profession in the nine-

teenth century, scholars significantly influenced by positivist views tried to theorize the distinction between historical process and historical knowledge. Indeed, the professionalization of the discipline is partly premised on that distinction: the more distant the sociohistorical process is from its knowledge, the easier the claim to a "scientific" professionalism. Thus, historians and, more particularly, philosophers of history were proud to discover or reiterate instances where the distinction was supposedly indisputable because it was marked not only by semantic context, but by morphology or by the lexicon itself. The Latin distinction between res gesta and (historia) rerum gestarum, or the German distinction between Geschichte and Geschichteschreibung, helped to inscribe a fundamental difference, sometimes ontological, sometimes epistemological, between what happened and what was said to have happened. These philosophical boundaries, in turn, reinforced the chronological boundary between past and present inherited from antiquity.

The positivist position dominated Western scholarship enough to influence the vision of history among historians and philosophers who did not necessarily see themselves as positivists. Tenets of that vision still inform the public's sense of history in most of Europe and North America: the role of the historian is to reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate the truth. Within that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative as such. At best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won.

The proposition that history is another form of fiction is almost as old as history itself, and the arguments used to defend it have varied greatly. As Tzvetan Todorov suggests, there is nothing new even in the claim that everything is an interpretation, except the euphoria that now surrounds the claim.² What I call the constructivist view of history is a particular version of these two
propositions that has gained visibility in academe since the 1970s. It builds upon recent advances in critical theory, in the theory of the narrative and analytic philosophy. In its dominant version, it contends that the historical narrative bypasses the issue of truth by virtue of its form. Narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. Thus they necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct. Within that viewpoint, history becomes one among many types of narratives with no particular distinction except for its pretense of truth. Whereas the positivist view hides the tropes of power behind a naive epistemology, the constructivist one denies the autonomy of the sociohistorical process. Taken to its logical end point, constructivism views the historical narrative as one fiction among others.

But what makes some narratives rather than others powerful enough to pass as accepted history if not historicity itself? If history is merely the story told by those who won, how did they win in the first place? And why don’t all winners tell the same story?

Between Truth and Fiction

Each historical narrative renews a claim to truth. If I write a story describing how U.S. troops entering a German prison at the end of World War II massacred five hundred Gypsies; if I claim this story is based on documents recently found in Soviet archives and corroborated by German sources, and if I fabricate such sources and publish my story as such, I have not written fiction, I have produced a fake. I have violated the rules that govern claims to historical truth. That such rules are not the same in all times and all places has led many scholars to suggest that some societies (non-Western, of course) do not differentiate between fiction and history. That assertion reminds us of past debates among some Western observers about the languages of the peoples they colonized. Because these observers did not find grammar books or dictionaries among the so-called savages, because they could not understand or apply the grammatical rules that governed these languages, they promptly concluded that such rules did not exist.

As befits comparisons between the West and the many subaltern others it created for itself, the field was uneven from the start; the objects contrasted were eminently incomparable. The comparison unfairly juxtaposed a discourse about language and linguistic practice: the metalanguage of grammarians proved the existence of grammar in European languages; spontaneous speech proved its absence elsewhere. Some Europeans and their colonized students saw in this alleged absence of rules the infantile freedom that they came to associate with savagery, while others saw in it one more proof of the inferiority of non-whites. We now know that both sides were wrong; grammar functions in all languages. Could the same be said about history, or is history so infinitely malleable in some societies that it loses its differential claim to truth?

The classification of all non-Westerners as fundamentally non-historical is tied also to the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity. Yet Ibn Khaldun fruitfully applied a cyclical view of time to the study of history. Further, the exclusive adherence to linear time by Western historians themselves, and the ensuing rejection of the people left “without history” both date from the nineteenth century. Did the West have a history before 1800?

The pernicious belief that epistemic validity matters only to Western-educated populations, either because others lack the proper sense of time or the proper sense of evidence, is belied by the use of evidentials in a number of non-European languages. An English approximation would be a rule forcing historians to
distinguish grammatically between “I heard that it happened,” “I saw it happen,” or “I have obtained evidence that it happened” every time they use the verb “to happen.” English, of course, has no such grammatical rule for assessing evidence. Does the fact that Tucuya has an elaborate system of evidentials predispose its Amazonian speakers to be better historians than most Englishmen?

Arjun Appadurai argues convincingly that rules about what he calls “the debatability of the past” operate in all societies. Although these rules exhibit substantive variations in time and space, they all aim to guarantee a minimal crediblity in history. Appadurai suggests a number of formal constraints that universally enforce that credibility and limit the character of historical debates: authority, continuity, depth, and interdependence. Nowhere is history infinitely susceptible to invention.

The need for a different kind of credibility sets the historical narrative apart from fiction. This need is both contingent and necessary. It is contingent inasmuch as some narratives go back and forth over the line between fiction and history, while others occupy an undefined position that seems to deny the very existence of a line. It is necessary inasmuch as, at some point, historically specific groups of humans must decide if a particular narrative belongs to history or to fiction. In other words, the epistemological break between history and fiction is always expressed concretely through the historically situated evaluation of specific narratives.

Is island cannibalism fact or fiction? Scholars have long tried to confirm or discredit some early Spanish colonizers’ contention that Native Americans of the Antilles committed cannibalism. Is the semantic association between Caribs, Cannibals, and Caliban based on more than European phantasms? Some scholars claim that the fantasy has reached such significance for the West that it matters little whether it is based on facts. Does this mean that the line between history and fiction is useless? As long as the conversation involves Europeans talking about dead Indians, the debate is merely academic.

Yet even dead Indians can return to haunt professional and amateur historians. The Inter-Tribal council of American Indians affirms that the remains of more than a thousand individuals, mostly Native American Catholics, are buried in grounds adjacent to the Alamo, in an old cemetery once linked to the Franciscan mission, but of which the most visible traces have disappeared. The council’s efforts to have the sacredness of the grounds recognized by the state of Texas and the city of San Antonio have met only partial success. Still, they are impressive enough to threaten the control the organization that has custody of the Alamo, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, holds over a historical site entrusted to them by the state since 1905.

The debate over the grounds fits within a larger war that some observers have dubbed “the second battle of the Alamo.” That larger controversy surrounds the 1836 siege of the compound by Santa Anna’s forces. Is that battle a moment of glory during which freedom-loving Anglos, outnumbered but undaunted, spontaneously chose to fight until death rather than surrender to a corrupt Mexican dictator? Or is it a brutal example of U.S. expansionism, the story of a few white predators taking over what was sacred territory and half-willingly providing, with their death, the alibi for a well-planned annexation? So phrased the debate evokes issues that have divided a few historians and inhabitants of Texas over the last twenty years. But with San Antonio’s population now composed of 56 percent nominal Hispanics, many of whom also acknowledge some Native American ancestry, “the second battle of the Alamo” has literally reached the streets. Demonstrations, parades, editorials, and demands for
various municipal or court orders—including one blocking the streets now leading to the Alamo—punctuate the debate between increasingly angry parties.

In the heated context of this debate, advocates on both sides are questioning factual statements, the accuracy of which mattered to few half a century ago. "Facts," both trivial or prominent in relative isolation, are questioned or heralded by each camp.

Historians had long questioned the veracity of some of the events in Alamo narratives, most notably the story of the line on the ground. According to that story, when it became clear that the choice for the 189 Alamo occupants was between escape and certain death at the Mexicans' hands, commandant William Barret Travis drew a line on the ground. He then asked all those willing to fight to the death to cross it. Supposedly, everyone crossed—except of course the man who conveniently escaped to tell the story. Texas historians, and especially Texas-based authors of textbooks and popular history, long concurred that this particular narrative was only "a good story," and that "it doesn't really matter whether it is true or not." Such remarks were made before the current constructivist wave by people who otherwise believed that facts are facts and nothing but facts. But in a context where the courage of the men who stayed at the Alamo is openly questioned, the line on the ground is suddenly among the many "facts" now submitted to a test of credibility.

The list is endless. Where exactly was the cemetery, and are the remains still there? Are tourist visits to the Alamo violating the religious rights of the dead and should the state of Texas intervene? Did the state itself ever pay the Roman Catholic Church the agreed-upon price for the chapel of the Alamo and, if not, are not the custodians usurpers of a historical landmark? Did James Bowie, one of the white American leaders, bury a stolen treasure in the site? If so, is that the real reason why the occupants chose to fight or, conversely, did Bowie try to negotiate in order to save both his life and the treasure? In short, how much was greed, rather than patriotism, central to the Alamo battle? Did the besieged mistakenly believe that reinforcement was on its way and, if so, how much can we believe in their courage? Did Davy Crockett die during the battle or after the battle? Did he try to surrender? Did he really wear a coonskin cap?

That last question may sound the most trivial of a rather bizarre list; but it appears less trifling and not at all bizarre when we note that the Alamo shrine is Texas's main tourist attraction, drawing some three million visitors a year. Now that local voices have become loud enough to question the innocence of a little gringo wearing a Davy cap, mom and dad may think twice about buying one, and the custodians of history shiver, afraid that the past is catching up too fast with the present. In the context of that controversy, it suddenly matters how real Davy was.