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Give Name to the Nameless So It Can Be Thought

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Lalini Shanela Ranaraja

Give Name To The Nameless So It Can Be Thought

RELG 203 - Christian Ethics

Professor Michelle Wolff

Spring 2019

Categorical: Short Analytical Essay

Give Name To The Nameless So It Can Be Thought

How womanist ethics justify testimonies of sexual assault in nonfiction writing

"Here I am showing you the ferocity of my hunger. Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terrified. Here I am, reveling in that freedom." - Roxane Gay.[1]

When I first began writing about my experience with sexual assault, my mother was concerned. She could not understand why I would pick at the wound of trauma I had experienced over a decade ago and was only just learning to confront. Unspoken between us was the second question of what would happen after I published the piece, after the identity of my abuser was out there in the world, after people we knew read about what had happened to me. I did not have the words then to tell her that I was employing countermemory. I did not know how to tell her that I was fighting the fantastic hegemonic imagination. All I knew was that the truth would out.

I am not alone in this. In the era of the #MeToo movement, survivors of sexual assault have taken to the most public platforms to denounce their abusers, from celebrities wielding a Twitter hashtag to Christine Blasey Ford testifying against Brett Kavanaugh before the Senate Judiciary Committee.[2] The original "me too" movement began in 2006 with the critically engaged Tarana Burke, who wanted to "help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing."[3] Nonetheless, the ethics of talking about such personal abuse in creative nonfiction remain contested, because the genre is saddled with the expectation that writers will tell defendable, provable truths. Anything else can be called slander, and writers can be, and have been, prosecuted for it. But creative nonfiction is also *creative.* It is also art. And art is an alternative space where truth-telling can happen.

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[1] Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body,* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 304.
[2] Christen A. Johnson and KT Hawbaker, "#MeToo: A Timeline Of Events". *Chicaho Tribune, May 2, 2019.* https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline-20171208-htmlstory.html
[3] History and Vision, *MeToo Movement.* https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history

In this essay, therefore, I argue that according to the womanist strategies for truth-telling pioneered by Alice Walker, Emilie Townes and other womanist scholars, writers of creative nonfiction are justified in revealing the identities and stories of their oppressors and abusers in order to dismantle the cultural production of evil. Evil, in this case, is the widespread, ongoing violence of sexual assault, victim blaming, and victim suppression. The works of poets and writers like Audre Lourde, Roxane Gay and Alice Walker herself are proof that creative nonfiction can be used by writers not only to engage in countermemory and reclaim their own narrative, but also to hold oppressors accountable and enable writers to process their pain through art. I will engage with selected writings from black women writers, an interview with poet and Augustana College associate professor of English Rebecca Wee and my own experiences to further explore this issue.

Writers of creative nonfiction tell the truth in a way that moves the reader. Through their craft, they invite the reader into the world of the memory/event/issue/abuse they are exploring. Womanists are no stranger to the genre: Alice Walker's first collection of nonfiction essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: A Womanist Prose* would have "earthshaking consequences for black women in all kinds of communities."[4] In 1982, Audre Lorde created the concept of biomythography with her novel *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name,* combining fact and fiction to allow for "the transformation of something that is initially crippling to become something empowering."[5] The technique was powerful enough that Stacy Flyod-Thomas called black women writers who employed biomythography "truth-tellers" because they gave "flesh and form to real-lived experiences"[6]. In using their writings to bring not only racial violence but abuse within the black communities to light, these writers were deploying elements of Alica Walker's approach to ethical issues: they were uncovering their own experiences and stories and they were validating these experiences, adding them to the canon of black women's/survivors literature.[7]

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[4] Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker and Womanist Ethics*, (Palgrave McMillan 2010) 43.
[5] Stacy Floyd-Thomas, *Mining The Motherlode: Methods In Womanist Ethics* (The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 2006) 22.
[6] Ibid, 23
[7] Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker and Womanist Ethics*, (Palgrave McMillan 2010) 90.

It is when writers truly "name the nameless", however, that the ethics of this issue turn complicated. Despite Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* being a work of fiction, she was attacked by African American literary critics for having been honest about violence abuse within the African American community.[8] And critiques of confessional writing are not limited to the African American community. Pulitzer Prize winner Sharon Olds was criticised for writing about the sexual abuse inflicted on her sister and herself by their father, at a time when writing about both family history and women's bodies was still unusual in the discipline. Her poem "I Go Back To May 1937" ends with the line, detailing her awareness of the abuse her parents would later inflict, reads "Do what you are going to do and I will tell about it."[9]

"You did what you did and I'm going to do now what I'm going to do," says Rebecca Wee in an interview, summing up her take on Sharon Olds' philosophy towards narrative poetry. "That has seemed to me, for a long time, both a defense and an explanation of what confessional writing is. It's kind of like, okay, you did it, but this is my story and my subject matter, and if you didn't want me to write about it you shouldn't have done it." Wee herself has faced the personal struggle that confessional nonfiction brings, describing writing to which she devoted months which eventually had to be left unpublished to protect the relationships of people close to her. She describes the perception of such revelations in the creative nonfiction field twenty years ago as being more of a moral question. "It wasn't a legal thing, it was more a question of 'How can you live with yourself if you do this?' I think that's such a different answer for every person, so it probably just comes down to what the artist thinks might come at them if they do this. There's a long history of waiting until the person dies, or saying 'No, this is worth ruffling feathers about.'"

And yet despite the stakes it might still seem that this level of confessional writing is a privilege. Some might question the need to argue over telling stories of survival in writing when survivors are still unable to get justice after naming their abusers before the law or are punished for it in

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[8] Ibid, 111.
[9] Sharon Olds, "I Go Back to May 1937" from *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems 1980-2002.* Copyright © 2004 by Sharon Olds. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47057/i-go-back-to-may-1937

brutal ways. In April 2019, Bangladeshi student Nusrat Jahan Rafi was burned to death after police recorded her statement reporting her headmaster for sexual assault and leaked it to social media.[10] Although this might seem like an extreme example, in the United States only 230 out of 1000 rapes are reported, and only 4.6 were actually incarcerated. 20% of victims who did not report sexual violence said they feared retaliation and 13% believed the police would not do anything to help.[11] Even Christine Blasey Ford, a white female academic, didn't get the results for which she had hoped - Brett Kavanaugh was made Supreme Court Justice weeks after her testimony, and when she made the 2019 Times 100 list, he was also on it.

Why persist, then? The answer lies with Emilie M. Townes, and the fact that the fantastic hegemonic imagination, "that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place"[12] exists too in the world of sexual violence and everything that follows it. Elements of the "ordinariness of evil" that that Townes describes are present in the ways that sexual assault survivors are doubted, dismissed, betrayed by the police, penalized by the law, and ultimately failed by the societies in which they live. But Townes also writes that countermemory "can open up subversive spaces within dominant discourses that expand our sense of who we are and, possibly, create a more whole and just society in defiance of structural evil."[13] And what Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Sharon Olds and other writers of nonfiction have done is engage in countermemory. They begin with their experiences of abuse and violence, their survivor stories, and then move outwards to make much-needed analyses of the worlds they inhabit, in ways that are accessible to the other people inhabiting those worlds. "It's not an accident that the male establishment didn't want anything to do with confessional female poets writing about their bodies," says Rebecca Wee. "I think we're sort of on this brink of 'Who knows what's going to happen?' and if it will ultimately be important in a game-changing way, if men will just be terrified into behaving."

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[10] Mir Sabbir. "Burned to death for reporting sexual harassment."*BBC News, 1*8 April 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47947117

[11] Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network. "The Criminal Justic System: Statistics." https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system

[12] Emilie M. Townes. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil.* (New York,Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 21

[13] Ibid, 23.

Beyond adding their experiences to black women's canon, beyond fighting the fantastic hegemonic imagination in its different manifestations, survivors employing creative nonfiction need the freedom and the liberation that their testimonies bring them. At the end of her memoir *Hunger,* Roxane Gay wrote, "To face myself and what living in my body has been like has not been an easy thing but I wrote this book because it felt necessary. In writing this memoir about my body, in telling you these truths about my body, I am sharing my truth and mine alone." [14] Audre Lorde told us, that "poetry is not a luxury", but a way "to give name to the nameless so it can be thought."[15] For these women and many others, their nonfiction writings were ways of giving voice to the injustice that had been done to them, of reckoning with the damage that had been done to them, in order to one day rally against it.

How else do I know this is true? I submitted the essay that named my abuser and the details of what he had done to a college-wide competition this year (2019). It won honorable mention - and I made 25 dollars. In the currency of my home country at the present exchange rate, 25 dollars translated to roughly 4406 rupees. It was more than he would have earned doing a week of hard labour. I believe that Alice Walker, Roxane Gay and Emilie Townes would have approved. I might never bring him to justice, I might never name him in court, but naming him in that piece of creative nonfiction had validated my experience in front of an academic institution, had made me part of canon. It was my right to do it. The truth would out.

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[14] Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body,* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017) 305

[15] Audre Lorde. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984. 36-39. http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/lorde/activism.htm

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