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Unsettling the World: Memoir as Sociopolitical Intervention

In her introduction to *Best American Essays 2017*, Leslie Jamison explicitly resists the notion that memoir or the personal essay is inward-looking and apolitical, calling the essay not “a retreat from the world but a way of encountering it.....The essay inherently stages an encounter between an ‘I’ and the world in which that ‘I’ resides” (xix, xx). What’s more, she continues, “the essay doesn’t just describe these relations. It unsettles them” (xx). As we’re now seeing with the culture-shifting groundswells of the #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #NeverAgain movements, even micro-narratives of personal violation can intervene in long-standing hierarchies of sociopolitical power and wealth, such as what Cornell philosopher Kate Manne calls “the logic of misogyny” in her excellent new book *Down Girl* from Oxford UP. By choosing to make their private stories public, deploying their singular authority as survivors and eyewitnesses—*I was there, I experienced this, it happened to me*—those whose social positions render them most vulnerable in the calculus of privilege can destabilize hegemonic power structures, making room for new ways of being.

Just as parables and fables are employed by the world’s oldest wisdom traditions, we can use the narrative capacity of memoir and personal essay to develop political points that—precisely because they come in the form of story, rather than sermon or diatribe—can hook and influence readers more readily than didactic approaches.

This personal, invitational, imagination-provoking, empathy-inducing mode endows memoir with the capacity to intervene. Many writers turn to memoir precisely because we have been wounded in some way, and if we can link up that hurt to broader systemic forces—racial, socioeconomic, gender, religious, national, environmental, and so on—our work can gain an analytic power, and it can function as a lever to create political change. My own work, for example, which is highly personal and formally experimental, deals with parental suicide, poverty, child abuse, and domestic violence in a context of American religious fundamentalism, Latinidad, and the politics of adoption.

As Leigh Gilmore argues in her 2017 scholarly book *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*, while courts and the media historically rejected women's testimonies of sexual and political violence, memoir, along with autobiographical fiction, has the advantage of being able to circulate in the public sphere long enough to acquire what she calls an audience of “adequate witness[es],” that is, readers who believe, comprehend, and embrace the narrative, incorporating its insights into their own sociopolitical understandings of the world (5).

In addition to attending to the political content in our own memoir, we can invite and encourage our students to consider, explore, and amplify the latent sociopolitical content in their life-writing work. When we read a student manuscript that feels exclusively private in its focus, we can be alert to which larger structural issues may be surrounding and influencing the personal narrative—immigration policies, class, gender politics, institutional racism, poverty, environmental degradation, the institutional treatment of physical and mental illness—and encourage the writer to consider subtly surfacing those systemic issues in the text.

The prompts that we use in class can also give students psychic permission to explore politics. A generative exercise that I do with undergraduate and graduate students is to ask them to quickly list six of their political views. Then pick one. Then write a scene or a series of scenes that

illustrate why they hold that view—without ever explicitly stating the viewpoint itself. This has led to elegant, probing student work that resembles in some ways the gentle provocations of my University of Nebraska colleague Jennine Capó Crucet, now a regular columnist for the *New York Times*, who approaches the varied sociopolitical landscapes of Cuban Miami, an Ivy League university, and rural and urban Nebraska through the lens of personal narrative, questioning our received understandings of these places and their values. An award-winning short story writer and novelist, Jennine had never planned to become a political commentator; I share her work and her career arc with my students so they can imagine similar prospects for themselves.

And students want to intervene. The evening before I drafted this paper, my undergraduate class at Vanderbilt had workshopped essays about [specifics have been omitted to protect the students' privacy; the topics were extreme]—and these were privileged students. They want to explore, understand, and improve the things about the world that have struck them as unjust.

To help our students do so effectively and safely, I'd suggest that we do three things. First, we must create a safe and encouraging environment where students can trust one another and trust us to catch and hold their stories while they're still inchoate and raw, so that students feel emboldened to take big political risks, as well as personal risks, on the page.

Second, we can encourage writers to fact-check. While writers and teachers of memoir differ on whether it's acceptable to substitute invention for memory, my own stance aligns with that of Philip Gerard and others who practice a strict allegiance to the facts insofar as they can be known. On my part, this is more pragmatic and strategic than philosophical: Those who hold power—at micro or macro levels, in family structures or corporations or governments—don't relinquish it easily, and one way of muting memoir's power-to-disrupt is to destroy its credibility by finding factual errors, even tiny, inconsequential ones. So if your memoir stakes a sociopolitical

claim, and your hope is that it can gain enough traction to accomplish actual work in the world, then it's wise to make the text unimpeachably accurate, and to acknowledge those places where information is unobtainable or memory is uncertain. Make your memoir as aesthetically groundbreaking and experimental as you like, but practice a journalist's fidelity to the facts, corroborate your assertions with others' recollections when you can, check maps and historical records, and be transparent on the page about the gaps in your memory, about the things you don't know and perhaps never knew. Fact-checking, together with the acknowledgement of incomplete information and personal fallibility, builds reader trust and enhances your own ethos as a credible narrator. It can give your memoir political legs.

Last, we can give students low-stakes practice at public engagement that includes personal narrative, so that they can gain a comfort level with exposure, so that having a public voice becomes more and more plausible an option. There are probably many ways to do this, but because social media is a familiar forum for most of our students now, I do it by requiring students in my creative writing courses to tweet twice weekly in response to the published texts we're reading or concepts we're discussing in class. In this way, they put a toe in the water of public discourse, engaging with each other and a potentially vast audience of strangers, as artists, critics, and intellectuals. Sometimes their tweets include micro-memoir regarding issues a published author has raised. They add the narrative of their own experience to nuance, amplify, or correct what someone else has said.

These three strategies can encourage students, even undergraduates, to imagine their literary work in the genre of memoir as sociopolitical intervention.

We live in a damaged and damaging culture, on a damaged planet, and I won't overrate the power of memoir to change that. But I'll contend that it can function as a healing force on the

macro as well as the micro level. Our deep nature as human beings is to heal: to heal ourselves, to heal each other, to heal the world. Memoir can serve as a vehicle for that healing, as narrative psychologists have amply shown, and it can invite others to say, “Me, too.” In the midst of our increasingly polarized society, the invitational and infectious power of personal narrative may have a chance of persuading readers when nothing else can.

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