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The Betrayal Is Political: An Ethics of Exposure for Feminist Life Writing

In this contemporary moment, there is a need for women's stories. A recent United Nations analysis reported that gendered violence "persists at alarmingly high levels" around the world. More than one in three women endure physical violence in their lives; one in 10 girls are raped; 38% of murders of women are committed by their male partners; and government compliance with domestic violence laws remains fallible and sporadic. As one expert says, "Overall, as you look at the world, there have been no large victories in eradicating violence against women" (Sengupta). The extent of this violence – in particular private, often secret domestic partner abuse – highlights the need for women to tear down the walls between their private and public worlds, to lay bare the domestic violence that often orders their lives. Second wave feminists have been calling for this kind of exposure for 50 years, and many female writers have satisfied it with personal stories¹ at times searing in their intimate portrayals of lives spent alongside men.²

However, the decision to expose publicly one's intimate life – and, by extension, one's loved ones – does not come without its own host of ethical concerns. The memoir theorist Nancy K. Miller relays these anxieties by asking "if...every account of the self includes relations with others, how can an autobiographer tell a story without betraying the

¹ Though this would surely make some literary scholars cringe, here I use the terms "life writing," "autobiography," and "memoir" more or less interchangeably and all under the umbrella of "personal storytelling."

² This paper takes a particular interest in the experiences of heterosexual cis-gender women writers, as their domestic lives shared with men are frequently the sites of intimate partner violence. However, this focus is not to negate the reality of domestic violence in LGBTQ partnerships; that discussion simply falls outside the scope of this paper.

other...Can we imagine – would we want to – an ethics of betrayal? An ethical betrayal?" ("Ethics of Betrayal" 153). Implicated in her questions are others: Who can claim ownership over one's own story? Where lie the boundaries between my life and yours? When have I the right to compromise your reputation in my story? When have you the right to tell me not to? And how must life writers balance personal storytelling with concern for the privacy of loved ones?

It is here that I enter the conversation. I contend that there exists a worthy set of motivations for memoir writing that justifies and at times even requires the exposure of another person. Though it is always ethically dubious to write publicly about another person, there are circumstances in which the benefits of intimate storytelling trump the concern for an individual's privacy. In this paper I present a framework for these circumstances, building from a feminist lens and a particular focus on women's written work.³

I propose that female life writers may justify the use of another's story as subject material when their work expands the permitted space for women's voices; facilitates personal or collective recovery from trauma; seeks to catalyze political movements for women's rights; or subverts the conversation surrounding betrayal in autobiographical writing. Though one might think these qualifiers would allow for any story at all, I show that they create restrictive conditions to justify the use of another's life in writing. Further, I argue that writing strategies that help mitigate the damage of exposure bear consideration, particularly when the potential for harming others is high. I conclude that women's intimate

³ Though this argument focuses on women's stories, a parallel discussion could be had about the life writing of other marginalized communities – poor people, people of color, LGBTQ-identified people, undocumented immigrants, etc. The risks, benefits, and ethical considerations underlying their public stories would be relatively analogous to those of women.

life writing is not only justified under certain conditions, but also deeply necessary for our contemporary culture, even – and perhaps particularly – when it renders others vulnerable.

Ethical Considerations: The State of the Conversation

The current discussion surrounding ethical life writing is unresolved and thus largely unhelpful. Critics, literary scholars, and ethicists understand the risks at play when authors use other people's stories as subject material. But they also recognize that without intimate exposure life writing would not exist. Here the conversation has become stuck in ambivalence. There is no applicable framework to help memoirists chart an ethical way forward. Life writers are left without a set of guidelines to balance their interests in telling a story and protecting their loved ones.

Female memoirists are particularly criticized for telling personal stories and implicating others in their work. The critical response seems unequivocally informed by their gender. The message is that they have crossed a boundary of etiquette; shared too much of themselves; kept private too little. This opposition has lingered for decades. The backlash to Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvia Plath – the so-called confessional poets of the 1960s and 70s – was immediate.⁴ The publications of Sylvia Fraser, Kathryn Harrison, and Dorothy Allison, memoirists who recounted their experiences of childhood sexual abuse and

⁴ Critics complained that Sexton's work was "childish and selfish." "Her motives are wrong," they wrote, "she writes so absolutely selfishly, of herself, to bare and shock and confess"; "it would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience"; "the self-preoccupation comes to be simply damn boring" (Middlebrook 143). Similarly, reviewers found Rich to be "hectoring and hysterical," "bitter" and "strident." After her first released book of 'confessional' poems, Rich reported feeling "slapped over the wrist" by critics for writing so personally. "I didn't attempt that kind of thing again for a long time," she said (qtd. in O'Mahoney).

incest, were met with disgust and disapproval.⁵ And contemporary young women writers Sheila Heti and Emily Gould have frequently been accused of oversharing.⁶ Each has confronted a particular brand of hostility and incredulity, especially but not exclusively from male reviewers. Though one could claim that in some instances the critique is justified, the complaint seems unambiguously filed against female autobiographers and not their male counterparts.⁷ Given the trend toward disapproval, it is almost possible to predict the critical reception of women's intimate life writing today. Few feminist critics were surprised that Lena Dunham's work, for example, was met with such a negative public backlash.⁸

However, distaste for women's life writing does not constitute a viable ethical argument. To the contrary, the widespread disapproval of women's stories indicates the ongoing need for their experiences to be made public and visible. The *New York Times*

⁵ For example, critics accused Harrison, who published an account of her incestuous relationship with her father, of "selling her suffering for personal gain," "opportunism," and "elitism." They claimed that she could have written this memoir only out of "a desire for vengeance" against her father, even after she denied any such motivation and explained that she in fact wrote the story for herself alone (Eakin, *Lives* 151).

⁶ In fact, the *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani claimed that "no one overshared more [in 2008] than the blogger Emily Gould," described a magazine piece of hers as "very long" and "often irritating," and noted "her almost biological impulse to post her thoughts and experiences online." *The Guardian* reviewed a recent Heti collaboration as "stunningly self-important" and "simply an exercise in narcissism" (Carroll).

⁷ Examples of this double-standard abound: The same poet who grumbled about Sexton's work, "I feel I know too much about her," described the poetry of Robert Lowell – frequent subscriber to the confessional genre – as "intensely interesting, and painfully applicable to every reader" (qtd. in Middlebrook 125). At the same time that female memoirists were accused of "opportunism" for writing their personal stories in the 1980s and 90s, Philip Roth and John Updike were celebrated for their intimate psychological portrayals of white middle class men (both have won the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award, and many others). And the same publication that described Emily Gould's magazine piece as "long" and "irritating" recently called Karl Ove Knausgaard's seven-volume autobiography – nothing if not an exercise in self-absorption – "groundbreaking," "magical," "wonderful" as an experimental novel, and "flawless[ly]" paced (Eugenides). For more on the contrast in critical responses to contemporary male and female 'oversharers,' see Donnelly and Roiphe.

⁸ For one take on the gendered nature of this Dunham criticism, see Bennett. For more on Dunham, see Patricia Wadsley's contribution to this anthology.

columnist Maureen Dowd may describe Kathryn Harrison's incest memoir *The Kiss* as "creepy people talking about creepy people" (qtd. in Eakin, *Lives* 154), but her disgust with the subject matter does not discount the reality of this kind of sexual violence. What is more, her attempt to silence Harrison only further marginalizes the experiences of those who have survived sexual trauma. And surely a personal account of gendered violence does not reenact that violence. The filmmaker turned memoirist/cultural critic Chris Kraus says this best when she asks, "Why does everybody think that women are debasing themselves when we expose the conditions of our debasement? Why do women always have to come off clean?...Isn't the greatest freedom in the world the freedom to be wrong?" (211). Though there are still ethical parameters to consider, it is not enough to discount a written work solely because it renders some critics uncomfortable.

Neither has it been useful to discount life writing on claims of legality or privacy. In the United States at least, the First Amendment protection of writers is strong, and as of 2004 the life writing scholar Paul John Eakin could not find an example of anyone successfully suing a biographer or autobiographer for violations of privacy (*Ethics* 7). After all, the notion of an individual's privacy in life writing is too ill defined to dictate through law.

Where critics have been damaging in their backlash to women life writers, and the law has proven inadequate, literary scholars and ethicists have remained mired in ambivalence. Many have acknowledged the threat to privacy contained in intimate life writing. Eakin notes that a memoirist has the power to disclose exactly that detail, anecdote, or secret that a loved (or hated) one might most want concealed (*Ethics* 9). Mills calls this narrative move the "public betrayal of trust" ("Friendship" 104), and points out that what is

truly at stake in the loss of privacy is the loss of control – in this case, over the telling of one’s story (113).⁹

Yet these scholars also acknowledge that life writing hinges on the use of other people’s experiences for material. Lives exist in relation to others; privacies are shared; and thus it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify where one life ends and another begins – where one can set the limits of ownership and control. Miller notes, “without betrayal, memoirs would not exist” (*Bequest and Betrayal* 13). The writer and critic Claudia Mills determines that our chief concern should be not *whether* the lives of others are employed, but *how* (“Appropriating” 197). And the autobiography theorist Paul John Eakin describes the uselessness of the public/private binary when discussing memoir at all.¹⁰ Instead, he argues that the intertwined nature of our social lives requires a new ethical compass for life writing altogether (*Lives* 186).

Nonetheless, Eakin lands on the ambiguous and unhelpful note that the establishment of a new ethical framework “is easier said than done, for in questioning the boundaries that secure the rights of individual subjects we may place in jeopardy the boundaries that define the moral responsibilities of those who write about them” (186). Mills and Miller are equally indeterminate in their conclusions. A reader comes away from their texts with an understanding of the ethical complications of life writing, but with no greater clarity for how to write one’s life ethically.

⁹ It is worth noting that a subject can experience this loss of privacy even when happy stories are told. The poet Sharon Olds, the playwright Kathryn Grody, and the memoirist Catherine Millet all have recounted loving anecdotes of their husbands and lovers – and yet their stories are still fundamentally exposing of these men.

¹⁰ For example, Eakin rejects the claim of Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath’s husband, that her work violated his privacy insofar as she wrote a public account of *his* story. It was not his alone, Eakin says (*Lives* 186).

Though the discussion is uncertain, it is at least clear that memoirists do not benefit from an ethical *carte blanche*, for the potential to harm others is significant even beyond the loss of privacy. Naturally there is the risk to one's reputation and psychological self. But there is also the risk of damage to the relationship. The decision to expose one's loved ones raises the uneasy question of priorities. What becomes more important: the family or the work?¹¹¹²

Given this potential for harm, I do not agree with memoirist Kathryn Harrison's flip response to an inquiry about ethical writing that "all's fair in love and war, in this case" (qtd. in Eakin, *Lives* 152).¹³ Nor am I convinced by the seeming simplicity of Sexton's assertion when she claimed, "I can invade my own [privacy]...That's my right" (qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* 329). And yet I also resist the other extreme ironically described by Nancy K. Miller: That the most ethically sound course would be to never speak or write at all ("Ethics of Betrayal" 157). After all, we need women's voices and stories, at times for our own survival.

Instead, I argue for a path forward for autobiographers – women autobiographers in particular – to tell their stories and others' in ethically sound ways. I present a framework to

¹¹ In some cases, the answer to this question becomes discomfitingly clear. The poet Anne Sexton, for example, wrote about her daughter in a letter to her therapist, "I strongly resent the fact that you feel I am using Linda...You so winningly said, 'People come first' meaning before the writing. You forced me to say the truth. The writing comes first" (qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* 349). This choice – and its consequences – was not lost on Linda Gray Sexton, Anne Sexton's daughter. She wrote about appearing in her mother's writing, "I was very proud that I was a subject for her, but it was terrible to be written about" (qtd. in Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal* 156).

¹² Of course this question becomes particularly charged for women, who have long juggled the competing demands of work and family, and who have struggled against a cultural expectation to be daughters, wives, and mothers first. For an analysis of these concerns for women writers, see Olsen.

¹³ Though, it seems, neither did she. After all, Harrison did go to lengths to protect her father's privacy, and asserted multiple times that she wrote the book for her own benefit – not to cause damage to him (Eakin, *Lives* 154).

help writers measure the costs and benefits, and balance the good and the harm. I agree with Mills that the intimate account must not exist solely for the sake of harming another, and that there must be some greater purpose to the act of publishing the story. She argues, “the writer, like the journalist, has no license to commit harms of this sort, unless her writing is serving the larger purpose of political commentary” (“Appropriating” 199). I concur, but expand these parameters to include a broader set of feminist conditions that permit the use of others’ stories for life writing.¹⁴ Each of these conditions is discussed below.

Life Writing to Create Room for Women’s Voices

As demonstrated above, women writers face significant risks when they choose to recount personal stories. There is a strong cultural trend that prefers that women remain quiet and private about their domestic tragedies. Those women that do insist on writing about their experiences find themselves and their work discounted, discouraged, and disparaged.¹⁵ As such, it is all too easy for women to be dissuaded from writing about their most private and truthful selves. And yet, for these same reasons, it is all the more important for female autobiographers to use writing to expand the public space for women’s voices and to insist on the authority and legitimacy of their words. When they do, it may be a necessary but justifiable cost that their loved ones are implicated in the retelling.

¹⁴ One could react to this argument with the desire to protect women’s privacy first, which has long been a feminist concern. I respond with the belief that women’s life stories are necessary enough for women’s lives and feminist movement-building that some permission for intimate storytelling must be granted. Further, I will demonstrate that these conditions are in fact restrictive, and I will argue that writers should implement strategies to respect each person’s privacy and protect their subjects, especially when the risks of harm are high.

¹⁵ For another contemporary example, look to the experience of blogger Lindy West, whose online articles about rape culture have been met with a deluge of commenters claiming that she should be raped and murdered – simply for being a woman who writes publicly about a critical gender issue.

Life writers Audre Lorde and Dorothy Allison have demonstrated that mastery over the fear of exposure results in powerful benefits to themselves and their communities. In sharing their personal lives publicly, they established the authority of their voices, insisted on their right to claim their own self-image, and resisted the narratives pushed on them by the culture at large. In 1980 Audre Lorde published *The Cancer Journals*, a meditation on women and truth telling that she wrote concurrently with her biomythographical life story *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Here she writes of her process to overcome fear in order to raise her voice in both texts:

I realize that if I wait until I am no longer afraid to act, write, speak, be, I'll be sending messages on a Ouija board, cryptic complaints from the other side. When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less important whether or not I am afraid...I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood (*Cancer Journals* 13-17).

This commitment to one's public voice is especially important when considering the damaging impact of silence on women's lives. We need to tell stories – both for the good it does the reader when discovering a shared experience, and for the benefit to the writer that comes with the act of sharing (Mills, "Friendship" 107). The revelation of secrets allows a storyteller to begin to unwrap the shame and taboo that feed from silence. Dorothy Allison, who writes explicitly about her experiences with childhood sexual abuse and incest, explains this thought this way:

I've always been clear that I don't have any choice. I love my family, but it's clear from looking at my life and observing my sisters and cousins, the moment we begin to hesitate, hide, lie, we're damned...There's too much shame involved in the issues of domestic violence and incest, so I don't get a choice about whether to be public and frank on the subject (qtd. in Olander).

Women's life writing can also serve to expand the voices and stories that are most commonly heard. The feminist critic bell hooks, for example, has written about her experience as a college student in the 1970s, when she found no black women authors on

the syllabi of her women's studies classes. There was no discussion among her feminist peers about the lives of black women. Their stories had not been published, and thus they were rendered invisible in these conversations. In response, hooks wrote her own account of black women's experiences – the scholarly *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) – followed by personal memoirs like *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (1997). In many of her texts – and she has published many – she is explicit about her intention to publish personal and critical work as a way to create room for more black women's stories.

It is important to note here the critical role of publication in establishing this kind of voice. Any person can write in their diary any revealing or damaging thing. That act is both ethically sound and culturally irrelevant. It is the choice of publication – of literally making one's words and stories public – that, yes, can damage, but can also catalyze cultural change. Kraus writes, “I think the sheer fact of women talking, being, paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else *public* is the most revolutionary thing in the world” (210).

In the act of talking publicly, female writers not only expand the kinds of stories allowed to be told; they also insist on the authority and legitimacy of female narration through the example of their own authorship. As the feminist literary scholar Carolyn Heilbrun wrote, “There will be narratives of women's lives only when women no longer live their lives isolated in the houses and stories of men” (qtd. in Miller, *Bequest* 3). The 1950s housewives-turned-poets Plath, Rich, and Sexton insisted on the legitimacy of their experiences by writing down the frustrations, tedium, and dissatisfaction of domestic life. These were stories that had not previously been told by people that had never before claimed a public forum (Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* 364; O'Mahoney). Dorothy Allison not only broke open the taboos surrounding child sexual abuse, but also introduced an entirely

original female voice that proudly asserted its own outrageousness (Jetter).¹⁶ And hooks insisted on the value and distinctiveness of black women's experiences, thereby paving the way for other black female writers. At times these authors' stories involve, or even revolve around, those people that live alongside them. But as the examples above show, there is a public good that comes with women expanding their intimate narrative space. And so the occasional use of another's life becomes a necessary and warranted cost.

Life Writing to Heal from Trauma

Life writing holds the possibility of an additional personal and public good: The potential to help someone survive and recover from painful lived experiences. It has been well documented, for instance, that Anne Sexton used poetry to manage her mental illness and emotional instability. Though she did ultimately succumb to suicide, both her biographer and closest friend believe that she would not have lived as long as she did without the salvation of poetry (Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* xx; Kumin xxiii). Sexton was not alone in responding to the healing properties of her creative work. She frequently received letters from readers relating to the element of suffering in her poems (Orne xvi), and mental health professionals even began prescribing her books to patients in droves (Kumin xxvi).

Therapists and writers have also noted the usefulness of writing one's own autobiography for a healing end, especially to recover from a past trauma. The feminist literary scholar Suzette Henke calls this process "scriptotherapy". Henke charts the ways that life writing can help integrate a past traumatic experience into a person's new narrative of

¹⁶ Said Allison about her son, "I'm going to show him that you can enjoy your life while making other people uncomfortable. Just by virtue of who he is, the turkey-baster-bastard son of a writer and a trombone player, he's going to make a lot of people uncomfortable. And I'm going to raise him to take pride in it" (qtd. in Jetter).

herself. By writing the experience, the author establishes “a new sense of agency to the hitherto fragmented self”; a self that was once rendered secondary by trauma is rewritten as a principal character (xvi). When this step is taken on a public stage, it further positions the writer as witness, survivor, and even hero (xviii) – a complete reversal from her prior status as victim. Allison describes her personal experience with this transformation:

I had to learn how to say it, to say ‘rape,’ say ‘child,’ say ‘unending,’ ‘awful,’ and ‘relentless,’ and say it the way I do—adamant, unafraid, unashamed, every time, all over again—to speak my words as a sacrament, a blessing, a prayer. Not a curse. Getting past the anger, getting to the release, I become someone else, and the story changes. I am no longer a grown-up outraged child but a woman letting go of her outrage, showing what I know...(44).

The truthfulness of intimate stories in turn attracts communities of readers and fellow survivors. In a positive feedback loop, women’s trauma narratives serve both to create and fulfill the need for community (Plummer 35). For evidence one need look no further than the 1997 edition of *The Cancer Journals*. In this text Lorde writes achingly and beautifully of her suffering and survival, not only as a breast cancer patient but also as a half-blind black feminist lesbian in an ableist, racist, sexist, and homophobic world. “My silences had not protected me,” she wrote. “Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed” (18). Sure enough, readers of all backgrounds responded to Lorde’s words. In the appendix to her book, they write passionately of her ability to speak to their inner lives, to help them find strength, and to bring them into networks of like-minded women (79 – 99). Lorde’s example proves that memoirists that write their emotional and social truths may attract the very readers that most need their words.

Given the potential for individual and communal healing intrinsic to autobiography, it is particularly important that women write intimately, explicitly, and publicly about their

most private lives – in particular about their experiences with mental illness and trauma. Insofar as these experiences often deal explicitly with others – particularly with perpetrators of trauma who may be family members – it is occasionally necessary for writers to expose these others in service to their process of healing through writing.

Life Writing to Build Political Movements

As personal stories serve to heal wounded subjects and draw communities together, so too do they help generate momentum for political change. Cultural critic and memoirist bell hooks insists that storytelling is itself a political act: “Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, *telling their story*” (qtd. in Plummer 30). This resistance becomes especially powerful when personal stories serve both to heal the writer and activate a call to political action. “Often harbored within [the storyteller] is an epiphany, a crucial turning point marked by a radical consciousness raising. The narrative plot is driven by an acute suffering, a need to break a silence, a ‘coming out’ and a ‘coming to terms’” (Plummer 50). Personal accounts help the public understand the emotional status of a subject; they offer the fuel to propel forward a movement for social change; and they stand as a measure of how far we have come politically and how far we have to go (Miller, *But Enough* 67).¹⁷

As an example, sociologist Ken Plummer traces the success of women storytellers in changing marital rape policies in the United States and England. Until the 1970s these countries had no legal framework to consider rape within marriage. Because feminists organized, advocated and, in particular, wrote and told truly personal stories – including

¹⁷ Here it is also important to recognize the volume of stories that continue to be silenced. In noting the voices that we still do not read or hear, we also start to see how far we have to go to eliminate social gaps in visibility, legitimacy, authority, and voice.

stories that at times implicated their husbands – they won changes to marital rape laws throughout the 1980s and 90s (62-80).

The example of marital rape reform is just one of many that demonstrates the utility of storytelling for political change. We can trace similar social gains from the writings of Plath, Sexton, and Rich – poets who did not begin their creative careers with political intentions but whose writing nonetheless came to claim and fuel the second wave feminist movement.¹⁸ In order to expose the hypocrisies of married suburban life in the 1960s, they each wrote exposing accounts of their husbands' inadequacies, betrayals, and bouts of violence. They raised consciousness about the myth of female domestic fulfillment – a reality that needed to be revealed in order to expand the economic choices available to some women.¹⁹ The same could be said for the memoirs of Allison, Harrison, and Fraser, who have made visible and undeniable the worlds of incest and childhood sexual abuse. These writers exposed their fathers and stepfathers to tell their stories, and their texts helped to spark a public conversation about the protection of children.²⁰ In choosing to reveal the dirty secrets of their male family members, each of these feminist writers intended to broaden the cultural conversation and help change the political landscape. And so they did.

¹⁸ Indeed, it was this movement that led Sexton to write to her closest female friend in a copy of her book, “Dear Max – From now on it’s OUR world” (qtd. in Kumin xxx).

¹⁹ It is well documented that the economic and social changes brought about by the second wave feminist movement have benefited white middle-class women far more than poor women and women of color; these discrepancies are ongoing. For a recent report on the impact of race on the gender pay gap, for example, see Leber.

²⁰ There is an important distinction between life writing that exposes others as a necessary act of storytelling and public revelation that operates as political tactic. The former, discussed here, is rooted in craft and does not seek exposure as its primary purpose, though exposure may occur necessarily. The latter deliberately reveals crimes or names of perpetrators when other political or legal processes have proven inadequate. For example, college students at Columbia University recently posted the names of alleged campus rapists when the university’s administration failed to adjudicate complaints of sexual assault (George and Swaine). This kind of political revelation also deserves ethical and feminist discussion, yet falls outside the scope of this paper.

Life Writing to Problematize Life Writing

The last category of writing that I believe justifies the public exposure of others is the most opaque; of these qualifiers, it is the most rooted in considerations of artistry and technique. When writers deliberately and artfully embark on a project that questions the very role of betrayal in art, I believe that they justify the use of another's story. This type of metacognitive discussion demands the involvement of a loved one for material and, when done well, leads us to think differently about the very social and ethical boundaries discussed at length here.

For instance, the contemporary writer Sheila Heti describes her book *How Should a Person Be?* (2012) as a “novel from life”. In this novel – what some would call fictionalized memoir – Heti draws characters from real friends, uses their true names, and transcribes edited versions of conversations that actually occurred. Though some readers might object to Heti's use of her friends for written material, the text itself becomes a meditation on the relationship between friendship, boundaries, art, and exploitation.

In the story, the character (and author?) Sheila records her conversations with her closest friend Margaux, a painter, to help her work on material for a play. This theater piece is supposed to show her what kind of person to be in the world, but her creative use of their lives produces a point of tension and misunderstanding between the women. Not only must they navigate the boundaries of their own personhood in relation to each other, they must establish their relationship to art and truth, fiction and life – as individuals and as friends. Though Sheila considers throwing out the project altogether, Margaux ultimately asks her to complete it, not in sacrifice of their friendship, but in fact to save it. “I want you to finish your play,” Margaux tells her.

‘And I want it to answer your question – about how a person should be – so that you never have to think about it anymore. So that whatever you do from that point on

isn't about that question, and so our friendship won't be either. And you can use anything you need from me to answer that question – my words, whatever, just answer it' (262).

In the end, Heti the author does finish the work – as a book, not a play, and with real life conversations, names, and all. In so doing, she forces the reader to examine our assumptions about ownership, privacy, truth, and memoir. The exposure of others is not only justified, it becomes necessary to pursue these fundamental themes of the text.

Heti's novel is in direct conversation with Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick* (2006), another novel – or memoir? long critical essay? – that bleeds the boundaries between fact and fiction to present a fiercely compelling argument about gender, truth telling, and art. Kraus's text follows the trajectory of her sexual obsession with Dick, an academic and cultural critic who exists in real life. Kraus quickly turns the table on the reader, however, by using the familiar plotline of the desperate woman plagued with desire for an unavailable, mostly disinterested, and more successful man to interrogate the ways that women's stories are circumscribed by the culture at large. "To be female still means being trapped within the purely psychological," she writes to Dick. "No matter how dispassionate or large a vision of the world a woman formulates, whenever it includes her own experience and emotion, the telescope's turned back on her. Because emotion's just so terrifying the world refuses to believe that it can be pursued as discipline, as form" (196).

And so Kraus forces the world to see her emotion as form. She uses her actual emotional life to advance a philosophy that interrogates the world of women's life writing. In both text and reality, Dick does not consent to the publication of their (her) story. Instead, in the book he bypasses Kraus and writes to her husband instead:

'I still...believe, as you do, that Kris has talent as a writer. I can only reiterate what I have said before whenever the topic has been raised in conversation with you or

Chris: that I do not share your conviction that my right to privacy has to be sacrificed for the sake of that talent' (260).

Dick sends Chris a photocopy of this letter with no further note to her. All of these elements of Dick's character are part of Kraus's point: his lack of permission; his disregard for her talent; his failure to understand her feelings towards him or share her belief in the importance of women's storytelling; his treatment of her as her husband's wife rather than as the artist, writer, or person that she is in her own right; and even his misspelling of her name. As this kind of man, he was never going to understand her experience.

In publishing her text anyway, Kraus materializes her belief that women must be allowed to tell their stories publicly, to use their emotional lives as textually relevant and deeply revealing sources not just of women's lives, but of our culture at large. And when these stories involve the lives of others, well, she says, so be it. Even when the subjects do not understand why the stories need to exist, there are times when they must be told nonetheless. The act of publishing – and the philosophy of female public revelation – matters more.

When the Betrayal is Betrayal

Though one might think these conditions are broad enough to justify the publication of any personal narrative, the reality is that they are sufficiently restrictive – and difficult enough to fulfill artistically – that not all memoirs fall within this ethical framework. To demonstrate, I look to biographer Diane Middlebrook's consideration of Emma Tennant's fictionalized account of the marriage between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, *Sylvia and Ted: A Novel* (2001). Tennant was a temporary lover of Hughes and took advantage of her insider knowledge to write a searing account of their domestic life. In the text she leaves ambiguous the distinctions between the real and the imaginary, and she indicates no greater purpose for

the book than her own self advancement through the wink-wink of social gossip. In this novel, Middlebrook writes, “a personal ethical failure jams the signals by which a reader navigates the reality-effect of the nonfiction novel. If we dig here, Tennant assures us, we get not a fiction but the real thing: dirt” (“Misremembering” 49). Tennant does not publish her book to expand the realm of narrative possibility for women, but instead to capitalize on the notoriety and suffering of another. In so doing she trespasses against her subjects and violates these ethical boundaries.

In a more contemporary example, the recent blogger-turned-autobiographer Emily Gould also fails to meet these ethical requirements in her memoir *And The Heart Says Whatever* (2010). Gould writes revealingly of her relationship with her former boyfriend, including an intimate portrayal of their shared life, their recreational drug use, and their prolonged breakup. She describes the conversation in which the ex-boyfriend Joseph recants his permission for her to write about him:

A few days later Joseph called...He wanted me to delete any mention of him from the story, he said. His mother, a recent law school graduate who'd never been one of my biggest fans, seemed to have prepared a lecture for him to give me – the words sounded like her quasi-legalistic jargon, not like anything he would say. I realized that I'd been wrong to show him the article in the first place, wrong to go see him, wrong to trust him, wrong to allow him to trust me. What he was saying now was crazy, and he sounded like a crazy person saying it. I haven't spoken to or heard from him since (176).

Given the risks to privacy, especially in this digital age, Joseph's request seems reasonable, not crazy, and Gould leaves the reader wondering why she chose to disregard it so completely. What broader purpose does the memoir offer to justify this kind of exposure? No answer is given.²¹ Within the ethical guidelines described above, it is unjust to publish so

²¹ This conversation – of a loved-one asking for privacy – arises as a recurring motif in memoir. Philip Roth and Art Spiegelman each describe similar dialogues with their respective fathers, but situate these exchanges in a broader discussion of memory, forgetting,

intimate a portrayal of another for solely misanthropic or opportunistic reasons. Because Gould offers neither explicit nor implicit rationale for her text – other than her own self-promotion – I am not convinced that she was right to disregard Joseph’s straightforward appeal for privacy.

Minimizing the Damage

Though I assert that certain artistic motivations occasionally justify and even necessitate the use of another person’s story in life writing, I also agree with Mills’ belief that one should minimize the costs of storytelling when possible (“Friendship” 114). Below I outline a series of strategies that autobiographers may employ to curtail the damage of their public revelations. I believe that the use of these strategies should be proportional to the potential for harm done by a memoir – with greater effort to protect the subject when the possibility to hurt them is greater. But of course the artistic decision whether to use these strategies, and to what extent, lies in the hands of the writer.

As would be expected, the safest way to use another person’s life story would be to obtain their permission. Though not necessarily ethically required,²² the subject’s consent may prove critical if the writer is invested in maintaining the relationship. Permission does, however, raise questions about authorship – about when a writer may decide to change or eliminate content out of respect for another, and when they may not. Though the impulse to obtain permission may be well intentioned, the subject’s involvement in the editing process can become messy indeed.

and betrayal. Dorothy Allison writes a similar conversation with a lover (whose name she keeps private) as a commentary on silence, sex, shame, and queer identity. Unlike these autobiographers, Gould offers no comparable justification or motivation.

²² See the above conversation about property and ownership.

Of course autobiographers can also protect their subjects by changing names. Kathryn Harrison, Dorothy Allison, and Sylvia Fraser all employ this strategy in their memoirs of child abuse and incest (Eakin, *Lives* 154; Henke 122). This tactic may prove particularly useful if the person described has any kind of public presence or has committed a crime. On the other hand, Chris Kraus rejects this approach. She insists on the value of real names, both for truth telling and for expanding the narrative possibilities available to women:

The 'serious' contemporary hetero-male novel is a thinly veiled Story of Me, as voraciously consumptive as all of patriarchy. While the hero/anti-hero explicitly *is* the author, everybody else is reduced to 'characters'...When women try to pierce this false conceit by naming names because our 'I's' are changing as we meet other 'I's,' we're called bitches, libelers, pornographers and amateurs (71).

Recognizing that both positions hold merit, I can only state that the choice – and its requisite consideration of costs and benefits – remains with the author.

The third strategy requires an element of narrative artfulness and metacognition: Authors can render obvious the distinctions between what is fact and what is memoir in their texts. They can make explicit the subjectivity of their narratives. In this way they indicate to the reader that their account of events is just that – their account alone – and that not every sentence should be taken as objective truth. As a result, the writer reminds us that their subjects likely have their own perspective on events – perhaps vastly different, and perhaps still true.

By now literary theorists have well documented the fallacy of truth in autobiography. There is no complete, objective written story. The act of remembering always demands a process of omission and distortion; a narrative is doubly fabricated when it is remembered and subsequently crafted into text (Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal* 17; Eakin, *Lives* ix; Smith and Watson 25). Miller writes, "Secrets and betrayal, telling and not telling, the truth of the

autobiographical project is always vulnerable to the selection of emotional facts, and these so-called facts themselves are hostage to the unreliable convictions of memory" (*Bequest and Betrayal* 159). It becomes useful then to understand life writing as an act of performance rather than the dispatch of historical truth (Smith and Watson 47).

Writers make obvious this subjective-objective distinction in different ways. Sexton responded bluntly to interview questions on the subject. "Facts are very unimportant things, there to make you believe in the emotional content in a poem...I can feel any feeling and write about it. I don't have to be autobiographical" (qtd. in Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton* 279). Allison begins her memoir by alerting readers to the blurriness of fact and fiction therein. "I'm a storyteller," she tells us. "I'll work to make you believe me. Throw in some real stuff, change a few details, add the certainty of outrage. I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth" (3). Fraser distinguishes between moments of certainty and more subjective ruminations by formatting the latter in italics; these, she tells us, signify her "thoughts, feelings and experiences pieced together from recently recovered memories," as well as the content of her dreams (qtd. in Henke 122). Similarly, hooks switches from first to third person to differentiate between remembered experience and "critical reflection" (*Wounds* xxii). And Kraus adds unreliable details to her story that indicate the fictionalization of the narrative. For example, she attributes a published book to the character Dick, though in reality the title belongs to a work of hers. In each case, the writer makes it clear: This is her story, yes, but it is true only insofar as it speaks to a deeper emotional or political truth. Other subjective truths too exist, even within the world of their memoirs.

Lastly, authors can seek to protect their subjects by avoiding the impulse to depict them superficially, as two-dimensional shadows of their true selves. Instead, they can choose

to portray these people in their full humanity, as three-dimensionally as possible and with as much nuance and complexity as their artistic craft allows. This approach balances the often contradictory motives of “staying angry, being fair,” and proves particularly important for writers still in relationship with their subjects (Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal* 104). To do this well, both author and subject must sustain a trust in the other. Equally important are the beloved’s trust that the writer will portray them fairly, and the writer’s trust in the other’s goodness. The latter is critical for the writer to be able to see the other in their best – or at least fullest – light. The philosopher Trudy Govier explains that this trust “entails a disposition to see the other as one of sound character and integrity – and to interpret what the other says and does in this light... The caring person needs, it seems, a kind of will to believe the best of the other” (28). Insofar as patriarchy strips each person of this character and integrity – by depicting women as objects for men’s sexual consumption and men as animals with uncontrollable sexual impulses – trust also restores each person’s humanity outside of the prescriptions of their genders, while also encouraging them to be their best selves. As Mills quotes the words of author Brenda Ueland, “I have come to think that the only way to become a better writer is to become a better person” (qtd. in Mills, “Appropriating” 205).

It is understandable that a writer might seek to portray a loved one fully, but what if the other is hated, and justly so? What happens in scriptotherapy when the writing helps the author to recover from past trauma? Is it fair to ask writers – women writers in particular – to portray the full personhood of their subjects when those same people have stripped them of their humanity? Literary scholar Paul John Eakin says no (*Lives* 156); memoirist Dorothy Allison says yes. “I write about sons of bitches, people in dire trouble and people who f-up

completely, and what continues to astonish me is that those of us that f-up completely can still sometimes have a moment of perfect grace” (qtd. in Olander).

I agree with Allison, but not because I believe this degree of magnanimity is owed to a perpetrator of trauma as it might be owed to a loved one. Instead, I would argue that we have a cultural stake in the portrayal of perpetrators of violence and sexual abuse as real people who commit real acts of horror. As one survivor of incest and childhood sexual abuse writes, to depict this kind of violence “as nothing more than the work of a monster, to cast it out of the village, is to senselessly re-affirm the same basic strategy of denial and dehumanization that, ultimately, allows abuse to continue” (Warwick). Insofar as memoirists portray their abusers as somehow different – shadows of a person, fictively grotesque, or more animalistic than human – they allow us to dismiss the reality that these crimes are committed and it is people who commit them. But when life writers represent the humaneness of their subject-characters – good, evil, nuanced, and complex – they help fulfill an ethical obligation both to those individuals and to their community of readers.

Conclusion

Though writers maintain the ultimate authority to decide how to craft their own work – as they should – I have argued that there exists a set of parameters and strategies for the ethical betrayal of another in life writing. This act is not without risks public and private, but, as the memoirist and cultural critic Kate Zambreno writes, “we do need to be brave. We do need to write *despite* it all” (293). In agreement with Zambreno, the hope is that this framework encourages rather than dissuades the public sharing of intimate stories. After all, these stories can do such good when they are read, and such good when they are written.

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