

Writing and Righting Trauma: Troubling the Autoethnographic Voice

Sophie Tamas

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Abstract: How do we speak meaningfully and ethically about loss and trauma? This piece grapples with the use of traumatic experiences as the basis of autoethnographic scholarship. It mulls over the impact of telling our messy, unreasonable stories in a tidy, reasonable voice, and the consequences of becoming participant-observers in our own lives. Our testimonial practices are bound by discursive norms that limit our ability to tell performative stories which produce both knowledge and empathy. The scholarly authorial voice insulates us from the experiences we purport to describe and limits the impact of our work. This piece asks how we might write ourselves differently.

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I have been taught that the right thing to do when confronted with trauma and loss is to recover. Doing so often involves using our painful experiences as a source of learning, growth, or activist survivor mission. Our losses thus appear personally and socially useful and meaningful. If I am a scholar, my own trauma may offer ideal grist for the mill, a chance to get up close and personal with the gritty and abject without having to get clearance from an institutional ethics review board, while redeeming my losses by reframing them as sites of knowledge production. As a feminist postmodern researcher, I am committed to such passionate, reflexive scholarship. I find it exciting to read and frightening to produce. I am worried, however, by its ethical trespass. While our obligation to the other has been much discussed, there are also important ethical problems in how we present and represent ourselves. I am not worried about what we are saying, but rather by how we speak. The discursive and testimonial norms girding qualitative research have broadened considerably, but I do not know how to speak about loss within them without doing myself harm. I am thus grappling with the ethics of the autoethnographic voice. Let me explain by telling you a story. [1]

In the summer of 2003 I went on a weekend road trip to Massachusetts, where Peter—my only sibling—was somewhere in the middle of his interminable PhD. He and his wife lived with their massive dog on the ground floor of a decrepit farmhouse just outside Amherst. As we stood in his kitchen, chopping sun-warm vegetables from his sprawling garden—I believe he was making pasta—we started to talk about a play I was writing. [2]

The year before, I had worked with a group of women in my small town to pull together a community festival for International Women's Day. I had adapted and directed *The Vagina Monologues*, and raised a whack of cash for the local shelter. Now, my dad was an adult educator, into community development. I knew

that participatory methods were righteous. So, when the group was looking around for something to do after the success of *The Vagina Monologues*, I suggested we create our own play. I was and am organized, bossy, and a little insane, so I ended up writing and directing a play for and with this group, which had about 20 members by then. I arranged a meeting for us to brainstorm themes that seemed important, issues that mattered that we wanted to speak to. Then we had another meeting where we combined and prioritized themes, and told anecdotes and stories to show what we were talking about. I asked them all what they wanted to do. Sixteen of them wanted to be on-stage. So I went home and tried to write a play, in which they could all shine—with a part for the little old lady and a part for the manic depressive whose meds made her seem half drunk all the time, and a part for the disgruntled housewife who wanted to vamp it up, and one for the computer engineer who thought he could act. I could not humiliate these people in front of the whole town. They each needed a role that showed their strengths, and somehow, in one play, they all needed to tell their own stories. [3]

I couldn't do it. I couldn't figure out how to make it work, how to tell a story that let you hear all their voices. Understand, the only thing I'd been reading for a few years was parenting books and mystery novels. I did not know that what I was attempting was arts-based action research or maybe ethnodrama. I had no idea that there was a discourse brimming with researchers caught on the horns of the same representational dilemmas. However, my clever brother knew. So when I explained where I was stuck in writing this play, he said, why don't you think of them as subjectivities rather than subjects? [4]

So I did. I went home and wrote a play about a typical small-town Canadian married couple, with parents and kids and in-laws and playdates and frustrations. But I had three actors play each partner—three Marges and three Genes. Each one played a subjectivity—a voice or persona. Sometimes they comforted or bickered with each other. Often they interrupted one another, competing for what I'd now call the dominant narrative. Each had their own characteristics and priorities, and as the plot moved along—as we followed them through their lives—each partner worked toward greater internal unity. It was a simple device but it worked. The audience got it. They chuckled when the two more well-adjusted Marges eventually decided to stop speaking to the hostile Marge, and she suddenly became mute. They laughed uproariously when the two "good" Genes accepted and embraced their "bad" subjectivity, who then melodramatically died on stage. It was especially funny because I'd cast my husband Corey as the "bad" Gene. Bad Gene had anger management, maturity, and fidelity issues. He was charismatic, manipulative, narcissistic, and passive-aggressive. Corey played him perfectly. We were a great pair. He was the first person I thanked after the standing ovations. I couldn't have done it without his support. Twelve years and two beautiful daughters. What a great couple we were. [5]

Except we weren't, and I didn't know it. [6]

Helene CIXOUS has said, "the only book that is worth writing is the one we don't have the courage or strength to write. The book that hurts us ... Writing is writing what you cannot know before you have written it ... a book stronger than the author" (1993, cited in LATHER, 2007, p.4). In this play, I had written what I could not know. Within a month of the show I had left him. [7]

When I ran out of money for therapy, I went back to school. I needed—I still need—to make sense of what happened. I studied trauma, intimate partner violence, feminist theory, methodology and epistemology. I got a spiffy new identity as a bright young scholar to wear on top of my traumatized soccer mom. I read about the use of the arts in research, the call for reflexive, vulnerable scholarship, the turn to open, messy, emotional texts, and the loss of certainties in practices of stammering knowing. It all sounded great. It described what I was already doing, just in bigger words. [8]

So now I am a researcher. I am doing a PhD asking about the necessity and impossibility of making sense of traumatic experience and representing it truthfully. I am both scholar and subject in an experiment in recovery through testimony. But when I think about the space between what has happened to me and the stories I can tell about it, I get worried. [9]

I am worried that there is a silence in the representational discourse that threatens to falsify it. When I tell the story I have just told, or Ruth BEHAR (1996) says anthropology that doesn't break your heart is not worth doing, or Carol RAMBO (1996, 2005) describes in excruciating detail the hellish circumstances of her childhood, or Roewan CROWE (2004) writes about her sexual abuse, we are talking about being broken and undone. But our voices as we speak do not sound broken. We sound okay, in fact. What we're talking about sure is awful but our narrative voice seems to have it all worked out. We know what happened and we can talk about it in full sentences that make sense. We can tell others, even strangers, the truth about our experiences. We seem to have found a way to perform an internal god trick, standing outside and above ourselves in order to speak dispassionately about passion. That's how we turn trauma into knowledge. [10]

But let's remember Donna HARAWAY (2003) saying that "only the god-trick is forbidden" (p.34). Why is it forbidden? Because the god-trick positions the other as a colonized object. In this case, the other is inside us. We know that erasing the alterity and diversity of the voices of others emaciates our stories. It produces scholarship that sustains hegemonies. Erasing our inner voices does the same thing. It is a lie of omission. We participate in this lie because we like to see ourselves as coherent, knowledgeable and safe, just like our scholarly voices sound. We can't just barf our mess onto the page. In order to communicate effectively and look smart, or at least not pathetic and crazy, what we say has to be deftly written and make sense. We have to seem okay even as we describe how far from okay we have been. If I talk about disorder and danger in an orderly, safe voice, I protect both myself and my reader from actually dealing with it. We are insulated by discursive norms, observing the storms on the other side of the glass. Our losses and undoings are rendered as illustrative anecdotes and

substantiating war stories. This may be all that we can or should do, but it makes me feel deceived and deceptive. I know that trauma leaves me lost and speechless, and that my memory is invested in safety, not remembering. What breaks my heart also breaks my tongue. [11]

This is why, in therapy literatures, trauma testimony is described as performative. Shoshana FELMAN defines testimony as

"composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (1995, p.16). [12]

Testimony is important because of what it does, its impact, rather than its truthfulness. Traumatized people operate in a different empirical world. As Sophie LEVY (2002) explains, their "trust of memory and language has been so impaired by trauma that the very act that they are trying to bring to justice renders them unable to do so" (p.874). You can't just tell the truth because the testifying agent has come unglued. If we don't testify, according to Dori LAUB (1995), our bodies and compulsions, the lives we choose become the vehicles by which the struggle to tell continues. If we do testify, we open the possibility of carrying our burdens while in relationship with others and the othered aspects of ourselves. The purpose of testimony is to produce empathic connection, not knowledge. [13]

When we talk about loss and trauma in scholarly discourses, even when we describe our own suffering, what we are generally doing is not, in these terms, testimony. Testimony is affective and embodied, and often doesn't make sense. It *is* that messy text that we talk about in our tidy ways. As scholars, we generally get the gold stars for producing knowledge. However, testimony appeals to us because, particularly in these postmodern times, producing truthful knowledge seems increasingly impossible or unethical. Since we can't credibly valorize our work by claiming to authoritatively represent external realities, we throw in empathy as the reader's gift-with-purchase, and design research methods as tools for cultivating and extracting it. [14]

In so doing, we may presume that the pursuit of knowledge and empathy is mutually reinforcing, but I am not convinced that they are entirely compatible. Knowing more about, say, my partner, does not automatically increase my empathy for him. It may, in fact, decrease it: do I actually want to know how much time he spends downloading movies, or how messy his car is, or whether he stuck to his diet today, or what he's really thinking when he's angry? Whether or not it is true, what is the impact of that knowledge? My empathy comes from feeling with and for him, loving him, and arbitrarily deciding that what I like about him matters more than what I dislike. It is based on belief, on a choice to appreciate, which may be only tenuously associated with the facts. [15]

In therapeutic contexts, testimony without affect doesn't get us anywhere. Indeed, it can be a sign of melancholic attachment to the lost object, a refusal of

mourning. In academic contexts, I can sell it as autoethnography. The process of sociological introspection that Carolyn ELLIS (1991) describes seems to depend on studying and presenting your own emotional experiences as knowable and meaningful events. But I cannot be beside myself, standing there with a notepad, and inside myself at the same time, without some sort of splitting. If I am, for example, at a birthday party, participant observation seems like a viable subject position, but as soon as the experience becomes more intensely emotional or demanding—if I am fighting or making love—the position becomes unsustainable. I cannot be both fully present and fully observing. Switching into observational mode may let me produce knowledge and avoid uncomfortable feelings but what it costs is that I never really experience my experience. I'm not where I am. This can be a useful or even life-saving strategy, but it can also become habitual. The feelings I observe and analyze don't go away, they get deferred, maybe even disassociated from the events that caused them, leaving me with a repressed senseless swirl of unmanageable affect. When we do this with big feelings like trauma, we get repetition compulsion and the gradual breakdown of our ability to function in the world. [16]

This is what I am afraid that I am seeing when I read tidy stories of loss used instrumentally as the basis of an academic career. This is how I am afraid of writing myself. I am quite likely to intellectualize my dirty secrets, dishing them out as thrillingly abject pseudo-intimacies supporting a pseudo-recovery and pseudo-insights, performed cleverly on the page for my scholarly audience. I am that vain, that desperate to make some use of loss rather than just being with it. [17]

It may not be either/or; perhaps we can testify properly, in safe places of trust, and write up our lives as case studies. Our non-testimonial, non-performative stories can still be very interesting and, in their own way, socially and politically useful. But I worry that they position the reader and the writer as voyeurs. If we are sitting in the gore and confusion of our own suffering, my sane, readable account of loss may reinforce the expectation that our trauma ought to make sense, and if it doesn't we must be somehow inadequate or failing. It implies that the order of the universe is, in fact, intact, and the traumatized who have lost faith in reason, language, and human decency are mistaken. I do not think realizing that we are utterly lost and broken necessarily causes despair. What breaks us is the impression that everyone else isn't. Clean and reasonable scholarship about messy, unreasonable experiences is an exercise in alienation. [18]

The answer is not, I think, to produce texts that are so unreasonable that they defy comprehension. There may be some avant-garde point to communication that no audience can decode but it doesn't work for me. We write and speak in order to be understood. There is no need to impose artificial barriers to understanding in order to interrupt the easy consumption of the text. Our stories are disagreeable enough on their own. What we—what I—may need, is to write both what and how we actually feel. [19]

This sounds simple, but usually I write in order to understand, not feel. As T.S. ELIOT (1964) says, "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from

emotion" (p.10, cited in PELIAS, 2004, p.75). If I were interested in feeling these things, I would have to write as the person I am in my lover's arms or on my therapist's couch, not in this smooth public voice. Any knowledge produced would come slowly, obliquely, and well salted with tears. My words would not strike some gong of resonance that marked them as true but they could make you feel something. I might use creative methods, not in order to be clever, but because I myself don't know the story that is sliding around in me, looking for an opening. Art is not a tool that can pry out recalcitrant truths and put them on display like a tray of impacted teeth. At its best, it can show—not tell—us something about what it is to be human. These sorts of stories may be difficult to defend on grant applications. They would require us to take seriously and enact our theoretical commitment to unknowing and refusal of mastery. [20]

Like CIXOUS says, writing can reveal what we cannot know before we have written it. But sometimes we still can't know it even after we've written it. If there is one thing I have learned, it is not to underestimate the power of denial. When I decided to leave my marriage, all I knew was that things felt wrong, like a column of numbers that would never add up to the same sum, that my daughter had chronic stomach aches, my body would no longer sleep in the same bed as my husband, and I was not happy. I had systematically taught myself to forget why. The solution, I thought, was knowledge. I spent months obsessively collecting evidence: the computer records and papers and notes from conversations that could prove what had happened. I exhumed the corpse of that marriage and itemized every maggot in its skull. But the more I looked, the worse it got. I have already forgotten most of what I discovered about my marriage. I cannot bear witness to myself and let go of the beliefs that have proven false. This has left me profoundly skeptical about the possibility of knowledge. My representational, sense-making capacity seems so feeble, so unequal to the task, that my testimonial practices—my autoethnographies—seem utterly futile. [21]

And yet I persist. Why? The Holocaust survivor and French poet CELAN explains,

"Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language ... but it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing peech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening—but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, 'enriched' by all that.

In this language I have sought ... to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself. This, you see, was event, movement, a being underway, an attempt to gain direction ...

These are the efforts of someone coursed over by the stars of human handiwork, someone also shelterless in a sense undreamt-of till now and thus most uncannily out in the open, who goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality" (in FELMAN, 1995, p.34). [22]

I keep writing because words are my least dangerous way of speaking. But what I need is a language that both shows and tells, where I don't have to be a modernist subject to tell my postmodern tale. I called the play *The Everyday Impossible*, and that may be the sort of telling required. I need to make my voice match my words no matter how much my audience and I just want to be reassured and comforted. I need to speak from within that which I purport to describe. As Shoshana FELMAN (1995) explains, "It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible" (p.34). If I can find this voice and the courage to use it, my telling might produce its own kind of knowledge and empathy. It might one day be done. [23]

Perhaps those scholars who describe their dissolution in such collected tones do so because they have, in fact, recovered, and there is no gap now between how they sound and how they feel. If so, I'd like to know how. My work needs to be unsanitary, compromised, because otherwise it compounds my injuries. I do not know how to write this way, close to the bone. The cop in my head calls it melodramatic and embarrassing. But there are some stories I cannot tell any other way. [24]

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Author

Sophie TAMAS lives in small-town Canada with three kids, two cats and a dog. In between the laundry and the weeding, she is a PhD candidate at Carleton University. Her dissertation research uses arts-based, feminist, postmodern, collaborative methods to explore how (or if) survivors represent and recover from trauma.

Contact:

Sophie Tamas

Box 1495

Almonte, Ontario

Canada, K0A1A0

Tel.: 613 256 0452

Fax: 613 256 6768

E-mail: sophie@tamas.com

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