

Creating Our Pasts Together:

A Cultural Rhetorics Approach to Memoir

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Back in 2009, during the first year of my Rhetoric and Composition Ph.D. at Purdue University, I took a course on Empirical Research with my mentor and future dissertation chair Patricia Sullivan. This was one of our five core courses and thus it was part of the dreaded 24-hour preliminary exam, which we took during our second summer in the program. At 9 a.m., we'd walk into the English Department and receive five questions. The following morning we'd return with five one-thousand-word answers. Needless to say, this is the stuff that grad student nightmares are made of. In order to prepare us for the experience (and to mitigate our fear) we did practice exams while taking the core courses.

The practice exam for Empirical Research asked us to propose a study and I proposed a memoir. When I got the essay back, Pat informed me that had I in fact submitted this answer for a real exam, I would have failed. She generously mentioned that the question she designed had set a trap for me and went on to explain that while we certainly could write a memoir through empirical research, we needed to provide actual evidence to back up our claims.

As I was working on this video essay, I returned to my failed answer and felt a

mix of embarrassment and amusement as I stared at my former self. My proposed empirical research study is basically 1,000 scattered words listing everything about my life that I thought was interesting and tying it, tangentially, to quotes. One wouldn't have guessed it from that exam, but I have gone on to publish well-received scholarship over the years about some of the many topics I proposed in my empirical essay. The secret to those pieces is that I've followed Pat's advice and used plenty of evidence. Although some of the evidence I used were documents, most of it consisted of bringing the perspectives of family and friends into my own story.

In this video essay I use Cultural Rhetorics to propose an approach to crafting memoirs that draw not only from our own experiences but also from the experiences of those featured alongside us. I argue that, even though such memoirs are at times thornier to create, they deliver more ethical and complex versions of what happened than those we write on our own.

Let's start by defining memoir.

Memoir and autobiography sometimes get blurred in the public imagination, but they are distinct genres. As Lynn C. Miller and Lisa Lenard-Cook explain,

“Autobiographies are usually written toward the end of a public figure’s life and recount that life chronologically . . . an autobiography is a record of a life, while a memoir is an exploration of a specific aspect of a life, using fictive techniques to create a dynamic story” (2013, pp. 6-7). In other words, memoir is narrowly focused and crafted and uses storytelling techniques to elicit interest from the audience, since unlike autobiographies, most memoirists don’t come with pre-existing audiences because they’re not public figures to begin with.

From the French word for “memory,” memoirs are our attempt to craft an engaging version of the past that’s also faithful to what transpired. As William Bradley explains, “Memoir, like the essay, has never claimed to present a definitive reality—it is, as the translated understanding of the word essay suggests, the attempt to do so” (2007, p. 210). To further complicate the genre, because our lives are so deeply shaped by our relationships with others, memoirs involve not only our own past but the past of our family, friends, coworkers, teachers, and so on.

Although when I say the word “memoir” most of you picture a book, memoirs take all sorts of shapes: book-length and short alphabetic writing texts, film and video, podcasts, webtexts, art exhibits, dance, and performance art, to name a few. Memoir has long had a place in Rhetoric and Composition classrooms and scholarship through literacy narratives and other writing assignments and publications that spring from the author’s

past. Furthermore, the digital era has turned memoir into a daily practice for many of us. Whether we’re blogging or microblogging through Instagram, Facebook, and other social media spaces, we’re often working within the memoir genre. Anyone who has spent time visiting these spaces knows that they are brimming with records of our personal lives.

Blogging and microblogging often takes place without much thought being given to how those we’re portraying alongside us will feel about the images and anecdotes we post, not just today but a decade from now. Besides applying to more traditional memoirs, the Cultural Rhetorics approach I am proposing here can help us craft a more ethical and communal blogging and microblogging presence. It can also provide new ways of envisioning literacy narratives and other personal genres in which students and scholars represent their lives. I don’t have time to address all those applications directly here but I invite those who watch this video essay to adapt the approach I’m presenting to their own memoir practices in the classroom, in their scholarship, and in their online presence.

My own experience with memoir—besides Facebook and Twitter—comes from publishing academic essays like this one and from my work as a documentary filmmaker. In both genres, I often draw from my family and professional lives. I am currently working on a book-length alphabetic-writing memoir and a feature documentary about my father, who disappeared in the Venezuelan Amazon when I was six years old. Because I’ve

been working on those projects for over 14 years and because they entail moving images and alphabetic writing, I will draw from them as I weave my own experiences with memoir into this narrative.

It is hard to talk about memoir without discussing the reasons why many oppose the genre. Bradley describes what is perhaps the most prevalent complaint people have about memoir when he writes that “[m]any have dismissed [memoir] as a form for the narcissistic and self-involved” (p. 203). While that is certainly true of some memoirs, by collaborating with others as we portray our past, we can deviate some of the intense focus on our own experience and broaden the scope of the stories we tell.

Another complaint since the 1990s memoir boom is that now everyone thinks they have a story worth telling. Sharon O’Dair laments that memoirs “used to be written mainly by people who were in some way exceptional—path breakers and presidents . . . But as befits a demotic culture, in which, we are assured, even the everyday is exceptional, hot sellers on Amazon.com include *Trauma Junkie: Memoirs of an Emergency Flight Nurse* and *Every Day Was New Year’s Eve: Memoirs of a Saloon Keeper* (2002, p. 39). O’Dair, I would argue, is confusing memoir with autobiography. She is also forgetting that one of the key aspects of memoir is the craft with which it is told. Of course, everyone has a story, or many, worth telling. The question is whether or not they have the ability to tell them in an engaging, even transcendent fashion. The Cultural Rhetorics approach I’m

proposing should help us tell stories that are deep and complex, more accurately representing the fragmented way in which memory works.

Another complaint about memoir is the fact that sometimes, as was the case with Margaret Seltzer, memoirs turn out to be completely made up, or as with James Frey, partially false. While a Cultural Rhetorics approach cannot prevent memoirists from lying altogether, it can help keep partial lies in check by bringing more people into the creative process who can point out and work toward resolving misrepresentations.

Now I’m going to provide an overview of Cultural Rhetorics by walking you through some ideas portrayed in “Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics” (2014), an article written by Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny, and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson. They discuss four “pieces” of the story they’re telling about Cultural Rhetorics: “decolonial practice, story, relations, [and] constellations.” Let’s define them.

1. STORY:

As Powell et al explain, “[T]he practice of story is integral to doing cultural rhetorics. The way we say it—if you’re not practicing story, you’re doing it wrong.” The one thread that binds all variations of memoir together is that they’re all stories about the past. Moreover, following principles outlined by Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch, Cultural Rhetorics isn’t just concerned with story but with “how a

story is told, how a person's experience is honored" (Powell et al., italics in original). This is the sort of complex reflection that thoughtful memoirs are after. Powell et al also draw from Victor Villanueva's focus on story as a methodology. In particular, his constant reminder "that the practice of story doesn't always feel good, and the stories produced in that practice aren't always happy celebrations of our community's accomplishments" (Powell et al). Or in the case of memoir, of our own and our family and friends' life experiences. This acknowledgement of tension is key to making memoirists' expectations more realistic in terms of what the creative process will entail.

2. RELATIONS:

As Powell et al explain, "Cultural rhetorics scholarship is never a practice of individuals making knowledge on their own; it's always a part of a larger community, a larger conversation, a network of relations." Although memoir is indeed primarily seen as "individuals making knowledge on their own," that individual is in fact drawing from their history and relations in order to weave their story. In this video essay I argue that we need to turn toward those who have shaped us in order to tell our own stories. In her description of practicing a Cultural Rhetorics methodology while working with Odawa women to preserve their stories, Riley-Mukavetz writes that "[t]o practice relational accountability, I had to shift perspectives and listen to these women as not only research participants,

but as intellects who understood disciplinary conversations" ("Towards a Cultural Rhetoric"). Following Riley-Mukavetz's example, I argue that memoirists need to not only involve their relations in the storytelling process but to do so acknowledging that those relations are also experts in the past we share and that that expertise must be honored and respected.

3. CONSTELLATIONS:

Powell et al suggest constellations as a model for visualizing how relations engage with each other in Cultural Rhetorics. Powell explains that "[i]t allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses, among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding a subject captive." The authors discuss the way in which various cultures create different ways of connecting and naming stars, citing "Ursa Major, the Bear, the Big Dipper, [and] the pathway to Sagittarius" as examples of constellations that have emerged out of the same group of stars. Similarly, when it comes to our relations, configurations vary depending on who is telling a particular story. The way in which I understand my oldest son William is different from how his younger brother Santiago understands him. The connections that are drawn for and by each of us will alter the stories we tell about the past we've shared. Making room for those constellating stories results in richer memoirs.

4. DECOLONIAL PRACTICE:

I've left decolonial practice for last because it is not as clearly tied to memoir as the other pieces. Moreover, Powell et al "acknowledge that not all cultural rhetorics scholarship is decolonial." And yet, they "understand decolonial practice as the guiding principle to our work in cultural rhetorics." For them, decolonial work addresses "stories from the perspective of colonized cultures and communities that are working to delink from the mechanisms of colonialism." While not everyone writing memoir comes from a colonized culture, our methods can still be inspired by the spirit of decolonialism. Powell et al. cite Emma Perez's discussion of "the decolonial imaginary [which] becomes a tool for remaking and rewriting, a practice that not only deconstructs, but reconstructs." That aspect of decolonial work fits well with memoir since we often find ourselves revisiting and reimagining the past as we tell it. Doing this work in an ethical fashion that questions inequality at the personal and/or social level can lead to memoirs that have social justice resonance and contribute to the overall decolonial project posed by Cultural Rhetorics.

Now that we have a sense of how Cultural Rhetorics works, let's look at how we can apply those ideas to memoir. I have divided the approach into three levels. Let's start with:

LEVEL 1: REMEMBERING TOGETHER

Remembering Together happens before the official crafting of the memoir begins. What in alphabetic writing we call

research and in filmmaking is known as preproduction. Most documentary filmmakers and journalists use this approach on a regular basis. It entails reaching out to others as we prepare to craft our memoirs and getting a sense of their perspectives through formal and informal interviews, as well as through perusing of family archival materials such as letters, diaries, photos, home footage, newspaper clippings, and objects.

William Bradley wrote his dissertation about surviving Hodgkin's Lymphoma and he didn't show it to his mother until it was completed. He writes that he "was very nervous about how she would react" (p. 202). She liked it except for the moment right after his diagnosis, which she remembered differently than he did. Upon reflection, he realized that her version was the correct one. However, he decided not to change it because "[f]or better or worse, my memoir is a record of my own unreliable and occasionally fractured mind at work. To have my memoir reflect my mother's memory of the event rather than my own would be an act of invention on my part" (p. 210). The fact that they both remember it differently, however, makes the story more nuanced. If he'd interviewed his mother in advance, he'd have known that his memory contradicted hers and may have written a different version, maybe one that had both memories in it. If what we're seeking is truth, more accounts are better than one, even if those accounts differ from each other.

Remembering Together leads to richer stories because we're able to feature more

perspectives in our memoir. Even those perspectives that don't make it into the final version will influence our own perspective of particular events. Moreover, if we remember together, we don't need to be as nervous about showing our work to those featured in it because they have provided us with part of its content.

Remembering Together also has its disadvantages. Some of the relations who remembered with us may decide that they don't want us to include something after we've built our story around it. Moreover, relations who remembered with us may be dissatisfied with how much or how little of their version of the story we ended up featuring in the final piece. This might be the case even if we don't choose to involve them, but being invited to provide their memories and archival materials may give them a stronger sense of ownership over the project.

LEVEL 2: CREATING TOGETHER

Creating Together is a rarer practice than Remembering Together. In alphabetic writing, this level represents the actual writing of the piece. In filmmaking it's when the project is in production. In the documentary about my father, I have not only interviewed a number of his and my relations, but my husband, who is also a character in the story, is the film's cinematographer, someone whose vision literally shapes the film. My mother and my aunt Rima selected where they wanted to be interviewed and chose which stories they wanted to share on camera and which they didn't. We also see them interacting with

each other and with other members of the family over the years, each relationship creating a different constellation on screen.

I am beginning the discussion of *Creating Together* by addressing my documentary because filmmaking is by definition a group activity and the parts of interviews that are used in a documentary traditionally feature sentences and ideas as they were uttered by the interviewees. The same can apply to other genres that rely on recorded voices and images, like podcasts and webtexts. A written memoir, however, requires a bigger jump in order to create together.

We can add other perspectives to our own accounts by directly quoting from interviews, letters, diaries, and other pre-existing writing by our relations, as I'm doing with my aunt's written accounts of her past and with published novels by my father and grandmother for the book version of my project. In an even more adventurous move, we can sit side by side and write about the past together.

The advantages of *Creating Together* are as substantial as the risks. Memoirist Leila Philip mentions that her sister, who isn't listed by name and plays a small role in Philip's family memoir, was upset by the published result. Philip writes, "[I]t was as if by writing the book I had dragged her along on a journey that she had never taken. Her resistance to the book shocked me, but the fact remains: the truth is usually both messy and disruptive" (2011, p. 155). Because memoirs rely on story and stories thrive on conflict, Philip is right to point out that memoirs have a

tendency to unearth some of the least flattering aspects of our past. It is in part that act that makes the memoir process so powerful for the memoirist. Philip goes on, “When I was done shaping my narrative, I experienced a sense of catharsis and relief... Perhaps because memoir is always a journey of self-understanding, it involves epiphanies that can’t be easily shared” (p. 155). That is, unless we Create Together. Even if our relations are only participating in sections of our memoir, they can have epiphanies of their own. My aunt, who has been included in my documentary filmmaking and memoir writing processes for over a decade has developed a much deeper understanding of her brother and mother through our collaboration.

The disadvantages of Creating Together are as considerable as the advantages. It’s the riskiest of the three levels because it means relinquishing a substantial amount of control. Creating Together may lead to arguments over what goes into the piece, and in particular for alphabetic writing, there may be questions about authorship and royalties—if there are any—depending on how much we feature the writing of others. Working with relations with whom we have a deep level of trust and discussing the terms of collaboration in advance can help assuage these potential problems, but the possibility of discord remains.

LEVEL 3: EDITING TOGETHER

This level happens during what we call revision in alphabetic writing and postproduction in filmmaking. Whether

or not we have remembered together and created together, sending drafts of our work to those featured in it and seeking their feedback can help us avoid having our relations feel misrepresented after our memoir is made public in whatever platform it uses, all the way from microblogging to award-winning book.

Unlike Creating Together, the risks taken are not as formidable as the advantages. From basic fact-checking, as Philip’s mother did when she pointed out that her daughter had wrongly identified the disease that attacked the trees in their family farm (p. 152), to adding missing parts to stories we’ve told, as my mother has done over the years, Editing Together helps us come up with a version that more accurately and ethically reflects the past. Moreover, it can result in us having a less complicated relationship with the final product. Philip explains that “[w]hen people write to tell me that my book has touched their lives I am of course deeply gratified. But ... there was also a sharp wave of family aftershock that has taken years to calm down” (p. 155). It is unclear how much editing we would need in order to prevent these kinds of situations, but we may be able to negotiate minor changes to satisfy those who feel wounded or at least explain our need to tell the story a particular way before it is made public. Seeing and commenting on a representation of their past before strangers have access to it can tame some—if not all—of the aftershock Philip describes.

As with the previous levels, there are disadvantages to Editing Together. As

author Anne Lamott reminds us, “[a]ll good writers write [shitty first drafts]. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts” (1995, p. 21). When crafting personal stories, showing our relations who are featured in them our first attempts can be terrifying and unproductive. This disadvantage can be addressed by first showing our drafts to others not involved in the story and developing a more solid version before sharing it with our relations.

Memoirist Bob Cowser Jr. warns that we may not even get to those shitty first drafts if we’re worried about sharing them with our relations. He writes, “Just imagine the loss to literature if nobody dared name names, break silences, broach impoliteness. All any writer needs is another reason (and an ethical one, for Pete’s sake) not to sit down and begin writing” (2011, p. 156). And yet, the fact remains that unless they are dead, those we feature in our work are likely to find it if we make it publicly available. They may be less alarmed by what we’ve revealed if they get the chance to provide input before others have access to it.

The biggest worry with *Editing Together* is that our relations may ask for changes that we may not be ready to make.

Memoirist Natalie Rachel Singer writes about working on a story about a gang rape, where the victim and her family became involved in the editing process. “Draft after draft they picked through everything until what I had was completely bland, until the story had no center, no energy, no voice” (2011, p.

147). If we’re going to let relations look over drafts, we must also negotiate how much control they will have and allow ourselves the possibility of pushing back if their feedback becomes detrimental to what we’re hoping to accomplish.

In my own work telling my father’s story I have engaged in versions of each of these levels, but I haven’t done so with every relation I feature in the documentary and book. Nor have I stuck to each one of the levels through every step of the way over the years I’ve been working on the projects. Still, what I’ve done fits within the Cultural Rhetorics approach to memoir I am proposing. This is not an all or nothing practice. How much of the three levels we implement will depend, not only on the project, but on the strength and nature of the bond we share with the relations featured in that particular memoir. It may not hurt to test the waters by *Remembering Together* with one or two relations and seeing how the stories and the storytellers constellate and evolve through that first step of the process. If it is manageable, the doors are open for attempting the other levels and for bringing in more relations.

Hopefully, as we become more adept at telling the stories of our past alongside others, we can begin to shift away from the traditional image of someone telling their story in isolation and replace it with one of communal, constellated storytelling. Easier? Certainly not. Closer to the fragmented and subjective way in which we all experience reality? Definitely. Worth it? I, at least, cannot

imagine telling my story and that of my relations in any other way.

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