

Reflection: The Process of Re/Creating

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Content warning: sexual violence

In her analysis of trauma theory, Aida Levy-Hussen (2016) explains that '[t]raumatic events interrupt the stories we tell about history and identity' (p. 20). As a result, 'the traumatized subject ... can no longer coherently narrate her life because the crisis event renders her life incoherent to her', because her 'self-story' has been interrupted by the 'cognitively inassimilable' (Levy-Hussen, 2016, p. 20). Although Levy-Hussen's work considers a much larger scale of traumatic events than what I will discuss here, her description of the disruptive incoherence generated by trauma effectively puts into words my inability to consistently narrate my life.

A professor once told me to stop opening my papers with quotations. She said that I should start my work with my own voice rather than the voices of others. Although I have done my best to follow her advice, the habit dies hard. Somehow, my voice always finds it difficult to speak at the start – to begin with itself, grounded on the page.

My time at the 2024 University of Leciester / University of the West Indies summer school on gender, violence, and conflict was very emotional for me. There were a few presentations in particular that forced me to confront my ruptured self-story. I had conversations with two of the presenters, thanking them for highlighting the specific incoherence of being an educated and intelligent feminist scholar and yet finding oneself in an unhealthy, toxic, or abusive relationship. My own self-story is framed by the contradictions of this binary. I should be fully capable of intellectualizing my experiences – and indeed I often do in other respects – but when it comes to romantic and sexual relationships, it seems I become a tired cliché, completely controlled by love. I narrate myself into impossible knots, contorting my pain into unconvincing reassurances of 'it's nothing' and 'I'm fine' that I am desperate to believe, uncomfortable with the idea that I have any right to claim even the possibility of trauma. After all, there are so many reasons and explanations and circumstances and complications and really if you think about it, if I am so smart and educated and autonomous and liberated, how could I let it happen to me? If it was really that bad, why didn't I stop it? Why didn't I leave? Why wouldn't I just assert myself like the strong independent woman I'm supposed to be?

There is a moment in my life that I only remember in pieces. I know that it happened at some point during my time as an undergraduate student. I know that there was a party. I know that I drank too much. I know that I blacked out. I think my then-boyfriend and I made out in the elevator on our way back to our apartment. We must have. I must have given him some sort of idea that I wanted it. He can't have known that he was hurting me.

There is a gap of nothing. I suddenly find myself in the middle of it. I push him off me, or maybe I push myself away from him. I think I was yelling “stop.” I run to the bathroom. I think I threw up. I know I cried. I think I spent the rest of the night in the bathroom with the door closed. I am unsure. There is a gap of nothing. It hid away in a forgotten corner of my brain for years. Unspoken.

I remember he told me to kill myself. I asked a friend for advice, but she minimized and dismissed me. My sister tells me there might have been an instance of physical abuse as well, but I remember nothing other than the vague fact that my mother drove three hours in the dead of night to come and get me. My relationship with him ended for unrelated reasons.

Years later, when the fragments of repressed memories resurfaced, I was asked if I was going to report my ex for raping me. I said no. It was too long ago, it’s pointless to hurt him for one mistake, I don’t know if I can call it rape, really. Maybe sexual assault. It wasn’t that bad. Others have experienced much worse.

Why, despite my education and knowledge, am I unable to name what happened to me?

There are other moments in my life that are fractured, albeit less so. They refuse to be repressed, and yet also refuse to make sense; perhaps that is why I am less numb to them. I know that when I could see my face in the mirror, I did not recognize her. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I know that my mind whispered to me that it would be over soon, that feeling of performance and dissociation. Just a little bit longer. Wasn’t it worth it, the love and the desire and the happiness? Wasn’t this what I wanted more than anything? After all, didn’t I have to earn it?

I decided to write this piece because one of the presenters I spoke with at the summer school, after I briefly explained my personal struggle with the feminist PhD candidate/controlled by love contradiction, told me that I am not a failure, that I am not alone, and that by sharing my story, I might be able to help others in similar positions. I have used the genre of found poetry¹ in an attempt to exemplify the ways in which I find myself stitching together my self-story from the bits and pieces of so many stories, none of which in isolation fit quite right. The words written directly in the document are my own. The words in images and text boxes, as well as the poem’s title, are taken from multiple sources that each contain moments, however brief, of my affective experiences. The curation of these sources began with an article from the reading list offered by one of the presenters I spoke with, Dr. Karene Nathaniel-DeCaires. Although that particular article is not directly used, it led me to Nicola Gavey’s *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*, which indirectly led me to Kate Abramson’s article on gaslighting, which quoted a section from Simone de Beauvoir’s reflection on conversing with Sartre, which finally led me to searching for literary texts and discovering Kate Elizabeth Russell’s *My Dark*

¹ ‘Found poetry’ involves taking words, phrases, and/or passages from other written works and reframing them in a way that creates new meaning, thus forming a new text. The genre falls under fair use/fair dealing laws.

Vanessa. As I was working on the piece, the second season of Netflix's *Arcane* was released, and a line from a song on the soundtrack, Stromae and Pomme's 'Ma Meilleure Ennemie', gave me my poem's title. As for Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Chappell Roan's 'Casual': the two phrases borrowed from them ('cool girl' and 'chill girl' respectively), or at least their underlying meanings, have echoed in my mind in various ways throughout my life. I am still trying to escape their pressures.

Thank-you to Dr. Karene Nathaniel-DeCaires and Dr. Sonjah N. Stanley Niaah for your brilliant intellectual work and for the kindness you showed me at the summer school. You inspire me.

References

Levy-Hussen, A. (2016). *How to read African American literature: Post-civil rights fiction and the task of interpretation*. New York University Press.