DECONSTRUCTING REALISM: NARRATIVE AUTHORITY, STRADDLING LIMINALITY, AND THE (NON)FANTASTICAL IN RESTORATIVE POETICS

Alysa Levi-D'Ancona

ABSTRACT: As authors, poets, and artists, we are both inclined and encouraged to dive into the wellspring of our personal lives. Yet, no one confronts the blank page after growing in a vacuum, and thus, we will inevitably incorporate real life experiences and people into our works. Journalist and academic Janene Carey poses the question of who gets to tell these stories, as well as whether or not these stories need to hold veracity and consent by all who are represented. Are these experiences ethically responsible to publish when we might heal from letting them live and die in a private journal, removing all potential harm to others the stories may cause?

These questions, while important to consider, ignore the obvious quandaries that surround them. Both the writer and the subject are not impervious to the influence of bias, and often, the artist uses art to heal. Should we censor the restorative process—where a person must unpack their traumas to confront and move past them—in favor of an abuser, simply because their victim never asked for consent to write their own story? Is it possible to even write an objective poem, story, or article; and who decides what reality merits existence?

This essay will explore objectivity (the extent to which we can present facts without bias), subjectivity (the extent to which our understanding of the world is influenced by our bias), and authorship (who owns a story)—using thought pieces such as the ones present in artist and editor Katherine Behar's Object-Oriented Feminism—as well as the interconnectivity of these concepts in respect to genres like magical realism, absurdity, and fantasy in order to consider an author's moral obligation to others during their own restorative and artistic journey.

> *This world in itself is not unreasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world… It is because humans demand meaning in an unresponsive world that the absurd exists, and concrete human problems arise in our acute awareness of this dichotomy. (Baker, 8-9)*

Richard Baker debunks the commonly-accepted definition of absurdity in the above quote, excerpted from his article "The dynamics of the absurd in the existentialist novel." While most would argue that certain literature, behavior, or events would commonly be described as "absurd," the assignment of such a label relies wholly on the person declaring something irrational.

For instance, a person may argue that violence is "absurd" or "irrational" in many scenarios: their child hitting their sibling, castration for adultery, murder for theft, etc. Yet, in the next breath, they may wish karmatic violence on someone who has done harm in a story they love, or they may applaud a drone strike on enemy territory in a war.

Our morals are rarely universally applied. How, then, can absurdity, rationality, and narrative truths subsequently hold universality? How is one story more representative of an event than another, especially when humans are so fallible in their biases, perspectives, and recall?

To our understanding, humans don't even have the capacity to store all memories they experience, and those memories are often crafted from skeletoned details. Thus when we start the process of creative nonfiction and poetry, who is the final authority on what we deem "nonfiction," and how much is fantastical?

In "The Process of Making Poetry," Amy Lowell deduces that "[s]ometimes the consciousness has no record of the initial impulse, which has either been forgotten or springs from a deep, unrealized memory. But whatever it is, emotion, apprehended or hidden, is a part of it, for only emotion can rouse the subconscious into action" (Lowell, 1). Often, in the act of writing poetry, we may start with simply a feeling, an image, a phrase, or a concept—the work will grow much larger and complex than that seedling, but it can stem from an idea that is small and obscure.

My own inspiration for poetry often stems, as Lowell describes, from an impulse: a nearly convulsive desire to scribe an overwhelming emotion or idea. And yet, the most complex poetry contains layers more than just that of impulse. The poet holds an almost otherworldly connection to their understanding of the human experience, akin to the shiver of another spirit in the room. Most may ascribe the shiver to the cool temperature, nerves, or simply some unimportant bodily reflex. But the poet learns to lean into the impulse, for underneath that shiver lies a story, memory, or emotion that begs discovering. And in that discovery rests the opportunity of elevated self-awareness and self-actualization, which is why some writers not only have an affinity for creative nonfiction and poetry: they need it.

Yet, this unearthing of the self unavoidably results in the subsequent pain of discovering unprocessed traumas and events. The below words feature as the turning point in my poem, "Shrapnel Warrior."

Shrapnel Warrior

So long as I pause,

I

discern the cave's

shadows

as separate

from mine,

as serpentine

foreword that cannot kill

the

pages that follow,

as the breaking

before the conversion.

There is always a "breaking / before the conversion" with any sort of healing (poetic, physical, or emotional) we must suffer before we can turn toward recovery. The piece delves into the ensnarement of my own "shell" after birth as I long to separate from monstrous foundations of my personal narrative. I compare the reclamation of my own story as discerning "[Plato's] caves shadows / as separate / from mine." In the "Allegory of the Cave," Plato illustrates that reality is easily fabricated by the illusions presented to us (presented as shadows on a wall within a cave), and we must make an effort to see past these illusions to understand a full picture of our reality. No matter where deception lies in our foundations—from birth, an unhealthy relationship, or societally-reinforced norms—these stories we hear and relay of ourselves can outlive the lie so long as we make sure they do not "kill / the / pages that follow."

Perhaps writing is a lucrative outlet for processing these feelings; perhaps it takes time rather than any poem or article. Regardless, while some may attribute poets to losing themselves in their feelings, the catalyst and processing of poetry is human to the core. It tunes into our instincts instead of casting them aside. To write is to honor our impulses, both present and forgotten, in order to grow as individuals.

That said, which version of ourselves is the true version if we are growing? If I described myself as a married woman at age ten, that claim would be preposterous. Yet, ascribing the label to my thirty-year-old self is appropriate. While that example seems obviously absurd, could we apply the same logic to a descriptor of someone's personality? Of their intelligence? Of their morals and perspectives? If I am a dramatic individual at age ten, am I necessarily that same person at age thirty? And who is determining "dramatic" behavior, for does it not stand as a synonym for "absurd" behavior? And we have already come to understand that what is absurd or fantastical lies in the eye of the very flawed individual.

In my own writing, I find I am so reliant on the subjectivity of human relationships that I struggle divorcing myself from the world in both my art and my mind: I am constantly considering myself as a relational object. I am defined and narrated based on my relationship to the storyteller.

This notion is no surprise when reading Katherine Behar's "An Introduction to Object-Oriented Feminism," where she argues that it is both possible and necessary to separate objects (and those who have historically been reduced to objects) from their owners in order to call attention to agency, power structures, and existence outside of ourselves. Behar notes that "object-oriented ontology (OOO) theorizes that the world consists exclusively of objects and treats humans as objects like any other, rather than privileged subjects" and later explains that women and others who have been subjected to dehumanization find themselves represented as objects within art, academia, and society (Behar, 1, 3).

This ideology ties into Deborah Tannen's article, "There is No Unmarked Woman," where Tannen discusses that while men have the privilege of choosing to be marked in their clothing and life choices, any choice that women make in their presentation and habits (including no choice) is marked as an indicator of her worth (Tannen, 1-2). Tannen's categorizing of people into "marked" (willingly or by default) and "unmarked" highlights the notion of privilege among all groups of the nondominant culture within any society. Thus, anyone who is "marked" is already cognizant of the perpetual subjectivity of their place in the world. It is only the un-objectified and unmarked who are granted the option of neutrality and gifted humanization, which means that the unmarked are better able to divorce themselves—and subsequently their art—from subjectivity altogether. This makes the unmarkeds' art not only at risk for objectification, but also at the risk of dehumanizing and blindly causing harm, for they have never had to consider the question of whether or not their definition of objectivity (and subsequently realism and absurdity) is what everyone else considers objective as well.

Tannen and Behar's analyses beg the question: where do we lose our humanity, power, and ability to tell our own story when we have been objectified? At what point do our own tales become fantastical, absurd, magically-real, and downright fictional when we have been removed from authorial power? As such, in order to avoid objectifying others within our own stories, do we have a moral obligation to exclude others from our nonfiction stories without their consent?

Frenchy Lunning's "Allure and Abjection" argues that "Abjection generates a phantom object—to use another term from the OOO lexicon—an ever-present shadow of 'dark agents' dogging the subject's every move

and disturbing its identity, system, and order, without respect for borders, positions, or rules” (Lunning, 86). She alludes to the separation of knowledge between the artist and the subject, where the artist holds their power of depiction and boundary-violation over the subject. In essence, Lunning renders the artist as an absolute authority with the power to depict their message of reality with mercy or malice. The artist, as a god, is separate from the subject, with the art characterized as the weapon and simultaneous shield. They are omniscient and all-powerful. Although we are fallible and biased in our own navigation of the world, we flip to omnipotence in our crafting of stories, ergo implying the burden of telling the story justly.

But Timothy Morton emphasizes the limited nature of our understanding of any story, even our own, in “All Objects Are Deviant.” He states:

> It is not correct to say that reality is outside the cave, waiting for me up there, waiting for me to see correctly. Reality is literally all over me— in the sweat from the fire’s heat, in the dancing shadows. Reality is already here. Plato seems to want us to struggle away from this reality to see the truth that must reside somewhere outside it. But what is more interesting is that there is a kind of ‘beyond’ within things, not outside them— I feel my way along, totally shrink- wrapped in reality, unable to get arm purchase outside it from which to see perfectly. (Morton, 68)

Morton challenges the widely-accepted “Allegory of the Cave” in his breakdown of reality. In his claim, he argues that Plato limits his notion of objects—and objectivity itself—by claiming that reality is outside of the cave, free from our interpretation. To assume that reality is outside human perception is futile, for it is impossible to divorce ourselves from our (albeit flawed) eyes. Even our understanding of philosophical terms like reality is constrained by our defining them, much like our understanding of gods and the universe. How can a mortal ever hope to fully categorize and explain that which will outlive them, that which preceded them, and that which they have no language to begin to understand?

While we can create worlds as writers of our own imaginings, our scope of the fantastical is limited by what we consider “realistic” as much as creative nonfiction. In any writing, we must be able to suspend belief. In fact, Morton later articulates that “what happens in the cave is a play of nothingness. Of nihilation. The shadows both are and are not translations of other entities, projections of puppets and fire. To be immersed in them is to experience a never-ending play of illusion” (Morton, 70), proving that illusion—or fiction—is just as much reality as non-illusion. For example, if we are pulled out of a play while watching it because it suspends our belief of reality—if we are hyper aware of the machinations that assemble it such as plot, forced character development—does the lack of suspension remove its categorization as a play? Does all art require a perfect balance between (potentially fictionalized) reality and the fantastical in order to qualify as valuable art? While Morton suggests that reality does not exist, this seems an obvious claim. Instead, perhaps, we should explore which realities and nonrealities are considered valuable in the realm of art, because art has never followed the rules of “reality” to begin with, and I’d argue that the most masterful artists are successful because they abandon the notion of achieving a mirror in favor of breaking the definition of an audience’s preconceived notion of a reality.

It is at this point that we must consider: if we have no true idea of reality and nonfiction, where do the divisions between genres begin and end? Xavier Luffin begins his article, “Sudanese Magical Realism: Another Kind of Resistance to the Colonial/Imperialist Power?” with a definition of magical realism. While the literary style is often used to refer to niche groups, particularly Latinx authors, the term has expanded to capture a vast array of storytelling. Luffin explains:

> Magical realism is basically characterized by "a literary mode in which equivalence is established between the code of the real and that of the magical" (Quayson 2009, 159) or by "two conflicting, but autonomously coherent, perspectives, one based on an 'enlightened' and rational view of reality, and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (Chanady 1985, 21). (Luffin, 244)

In one sense, this explanation ties into the traditional understanding of the genre. And yet, in another, it provides an opportunity for a reinterpretation of what we might classify as "magical" or fantastical. Luffin relays Chanady's articulation that there are "two conflicting… perspectives," one "rational" and the other one the acceptance of the "supernatural" as "reality." If we are to take this definition a step further than surface level, do we not include those who are in denial as partaking in an alternate reality, even a fantastical one? Does the person who fabricates lavish tales and lassos any listener into a web of deflections not hold the same potency as a spellcaster? And, if we are honest with ourselves, where do we separate witchcraft from the persecution of otherness?

Perhaps, then, magical realism is not at all supernatural, but rather the daily combattance of everyday lunacy, of trying to assure that, yes, our own reality, in fact, does exist. It is magical realism when the child of the abusive parent illustrates the battle between self-assigned and parent-assigned identity, between the lie of worthlessness and the desperate crawl toward self-compassion, between the agency of their own narrative and ascribing to the one written for them.

Is this not the classic tale of monsters and warlocks in daily life?

And yet, if the abusive parent does not appreciate their depiction in the autobiography authored by their child, where does the fiction start and the spellcasting stop? Who gets the final say in the tale?

In "Whose story is it, anyway? Ethics and interpretive authority in biographical creative nonfiction," Janene Carey argues:

> …biographers tend to wear their interpretive independence as a badge of honour… Like an explorer appropriating the territory by exercising naming rights, the biographer stakes his or her claim to the dominant authorial voice. To behave otherwise is to run the risk of being unduly influenced by the natives and ending up with a worthless hagiography. (Carey)

There exists a certain duty and authority in the "dominant authorial voice," as it is naïve to assume that one could ever relay events without the layered folds of bias. Like butter folded into the dough of a flaky pastry, events disintegrate into an individual's understanding beyond recognition. By the time we consume their accounts, the event itself has mixed in with preexisting ingredients—sugar, flour, salt, vanilla. Despite the recipes we may adopt to digest traumas, childhoods, and relationships, we become the bakers that deliver a manufactured product to others.

In the example of the abused child and their parent, the difference between the recipes may be as close as a chocolate croissant and a chocolate muffin, or maybe even as varied as a nutella donut and artichoke quiche. Which baker used the butter properly? Which has the authority over how it should be rationed, mixed in, and fed to the world?

The answer rests in Cassandra Pybus's "Dogs in the Graveyard." Pybus relays:

> …my writerly integrity is bound up in the veracity of the tale I am able to construct out of the vagaries of memory and the treacherous detritus left behind. Since we can never know the truth, it is fundamentally important that what I write makes psychological and moral sense of the material available to me and that my story does say something meaningful about the human condition. (Pybus)

Perhaps, then, it is the baker who creates not the prettiest or tastiest pastry, but the one that will serve the community's needs best: the one that needs to be baked for the sake of the baker and others like her.

Okay, maybe the pastry analogy has run its course. All flaky crusts aside, in the tale of abusive parent versus abused child, there is no world where the parent will honor, respect, or give permission to either the child or the creative work—unless the parent is in a place where they are able to see the reality they deem fantastical as neither magical realism or fantasy, but creative nonfiction. If the child waits for guidance and permission from the subject of their writing—the catalyst of the trauma in their creative nonfiction or poetry—the child will never develop a "dominant authorial voice," and the story will die in the hands of the person who has forced a singular narrative all along.

Thus, the lines blur around consent and genre in these cases, and maybe the only power left to gain for a child in such circumstances is that of the speculative variety, either perceived or real.

At some point, one may ask where the rationale exists in trying to tell stories at all, when they are so speculative in nature, when nothing and everything is absurd? Like the baker in the previous analogy, we write to heal and provide refuge for those who are lost within communities. To restore power where it was lost. To find a voice where there once was silence.

Maria Kaaren Takolander delves into the restorative power of not only storytelling, but utilizing magical realism and the fantastical, as well as the primary vehicle to do so:

> Irony is a common characteristic of magical realist texts which, as Anne Hegerfeldt argues in Lies that Tell the Truth, "insinuate that the reader might be having his or her leg pulled" (112). This is not to say that the magical realist novel, like the 'tall tale' with which Hegerfeldt compares it (112), is comic in intention. While the ironic depiction of the supernatural can generate humour… it also typically constitutes a pointed and provocative affront to complacency--something encapsulated in Hutcheon's notion of irony's edge. Indeed, I argue that the irony in a magical realist novel demands a critical reengagement with history as essential to reimagining futurity. (Takolander)

Although the surreal, unreal, absurd, fantastical, and more hold the power to detract from real life, Takolander argues that these genres instead generate more poignancy and meaning. The absurd and fantastical hold the power of challenging the past in order to imagine a future that does not yet exist. And thus, instead of wrapping oneself up in the technicalities of where truth lies, it is perhaps both safer from criticism (like in the case of the abused child) and more permissible to explore the possibilities of pain and healing in these genres. After all, Arthur Miller escapes the law by criticizing McCarthyism under the guise of a tale of (alleged) witchcraft in *The Crucible*. Orwell reflects upon the problematic history of coups and installations of communism with *Animal Farm*.

Though Takolander does not venture into other genres in her argument, her description of magical realism's powers in irony expand far beyond the singular genre. And if we combine this notion with the one we established earlier regarding the fantastical nature of reality (by Luffin), we understand that storytelling is necessary for multiple participants to envision a future and reconcile the past. The genre does not matter as much as "something meaningful about the human condition," as Pybus explains earlier. Yet, in cases where the story must be told and power dynamics complicate consent, the "fantastical" is where many authors find the most safety and freedom in conveying their story.

Of course, literature is not therapy, yet, there is some element—one might say even of

magical qualities—that heals and universalizes individual trauma. Krystyna Rybińska says it well in her article "The absurd as a representation: towards a hermeneutics of the inexplicable (the problematic case of Godot)":

> …we may formulate the assertion that the literary experience is in fact transfigured into an existential experience, not the other way around. Hence Butler's argument may appear partly accurate: 'If it is true that the meaning of being can only be experienced and not explained it is perhaps the case that literature can come closer to it than philosophy. Samuel Beckett may in fact offer us a purer insight into ultimate reality even than those philosophers most neatly attuned to it' (Butler 1984: 205). (Rybińska)

Although we may be able to discuss our problems and fears through abstraction, stories offer accessibility and tangibility where philosophy cannot. There's a reason why all philosophers turn to narrative elements in their musings and why psychologists ask to hear about their patients' memories: we define our existence through our experiences. To rob a person of a narrative is to rob them of their existence, which is why, in my opinion, it is one of the greatest moral crimes.

In my aforementioned poem, I illustrate that the "breaking" of oneself must occur "before the conversion" to reclamation. But once that separation and transformation takes hold, we, as tellers of our own stories, are able to "crack / the shelled womb into / narrative rebirth." We are "freed" by harnessing the "jagged shrapnel" of our shells we shattered to escape our trauma. With "demystifying" the monsters we face and telling our stories, we no longer wear this shrapnel as shackles. Instead, we become the titular phrase of my poem: "shrapnel warriors."

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