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Triptych

Ethical quandaries in personal storytelling for teaching and research

Wendy K. Mages

"Triptych," a reflection in poetic form, does not provide or ponder easy solutions to ethical dilemmas in personal storytelling (true personal stories shared in classrooms and/or performed in public forums), but illuminates a few issues tellers, teachers, and researchers may encounter as they strive to nurture and develop true stories that give voice to a diversity of lived experiences.

1 The Price of Art?

Your protégés stand before you,
bearing stories,
their stories.
Excavated buried treasures told for their own delight,
plump juicy truths they have lived and laughed,
these they offer to you like colorful candies filled with brandy.

Yet, you do not partake.
You disdain sweets.
You want something else,
something more savory perhaps,
or, better yet, something unsavory.

You crave the untold,
the wretched they have wailed and writhed until no tears remained.
"Telling your pain heals," you promise your disciples.
So, they strip their souls bare to gratify your appetite.

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Standing naked before you,
they see in your gaze, it is not enough,
they are not enough.
You want more.

So, wounding themselves for your delight,
there they stand,
gutted, bleeding, and exposed.
You are pleased,
but they, they are shattered.

2 The Name That Never Taints Her Tongue

Her love for him lingers
like the pain of a phantom limb.
He with a name she will not speak.

Betrayed and disfigured,
ashamed and unworthy,
she hides what she knows to be true
even from herself.

"You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories" (Lamott, 2012).

Slowly she begins to know.
Sharing her truths,
she tells of pleasure and pain,
of love and loss,
exposing lust and lechery, illuminating
a trail of broken promises and unfulfilled dreams.

"If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should've behaved better" (Lamott, 2012).

Yet she will not say his name,
too aware of wounds her words might inflict on the fragile,
of collateral damage,
too afraid of hurting the innocent in his orbit,
those who had caused her no harm.

So, his name never taints her tongue,
as she re-utters his lies,
and proclaims her truth.

3 Uncensored Aria

Hanging stained undergarments on a clothesline,
strung from his apartment for all to see,
he summons his audience to witness the spectacle,
as prelude for the opus yet to come.

Eyes peering from behind neighbors' window curtains,
peeking through the slats of their wooden blinds,
his airing underclothes expose him to the inquisitive.
Yet, these oft-concealed vestiges are his to share,
his requiem to trauma, triumph, and tribulation,
his need to let sunlight disinfect, cleanse, enlighten.

But what of those who play supporting characters,
comprimarios in the opera where he sings the title role?
Appearing in less-than-flattering featured parts (not of their choosing),
blemishes, flaws, and failings
spotlighted in the glare his laundry libretto casts upon them.
What choice do they have as he warbles, trills, and bellows
personal details of their private existence?

Reckless, he croons the aria's final flourishes,
intermingling others' soiled garments with his own.
Intimate apparel hobnobbing together,
brandishing in the breeze indiscriminate secrets,
flaunted for scrutiny.

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