

Event Title: THE SUBTLE ETHICS OF WRITING ABOUT OTHERS

Event Description: Nonfiction writers often grapple with how to write ethically about others. Memoirists, biographers, essayists, journalists: all worry about hurting loved ones, misrepresenting those of differing cultures, or disrespecting non-human nature in their work. This panel explores the various ways writers navigate these tricky issues. Panelists and audience will share their experiences of developing moral standards in this area, with the aim of expanding our vision of the challenges and possibilities.

Event Category: Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

Event Organizer and Moderator

Helena de Bres: Helena de Bres is an associate professor of philosophy at Wellesley College, where she teaches ethics and philosophy of literature. Her creative writing has appeared in *The Point*, *Colorado Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *Aeon/Psyche*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and *The Rumpus*. Her book *Artful Truths: The Philosophy of Memoir* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2021. Her essay collection on the philosophy of twins, *How To Be Multiple*, will come out with Bloomsbury in 2023.

Event Participants

Courtney Kersten: Courtney Kersten is the author of *Daughter in Retrograde* (University of Wisconsin Press 2018). She teaches Creative Writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is at work on a hybrid biography about the American astrologer Linda Goodman.

Gina Arnold: Gina Arnold is a writer and professor of rhetoric and creative non-fiction. She holds a Ph.D from Stanford and is the author of four books, including *Route 666: On the Road to Nirvana* (1993) and *Half a Million Strong* (2018). She recently co-edited the *Oxford Handbook of Punk*.

Elizabeth Miki Brina: Elizabeth Miki Brina is the author of *Speak, Okinawa: A Memoir*, which was published by Knopf last year. Her work has appeared in *The Sun*, *Riverteeth*, *Lit Hub*, *Gulf Coast*, and *Hyphen*, among others. She lives in New Orleans and teaches at the University of New Orleans.

Helena de Bres: see above.

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements

Good afternoon, and welcome to “The Subtle Ethics of Writing About Others.”

Before we get started, a note about the line-up for the panel. We initially had two other writers planning to join us, but they decided they weren’t comfortable attending the in-person conference. We’re very grateful to Elizabeth here for accepting our last-minute invitation to join us instead, and are truly delighted to have her expertise represented on our panel. If you’re confused by any mismatch between the panelists you saw listed and those present here, that explains it.

Thank you all for being here. We’re honored you chose to attend our event, given all the other exciting options available this week, and we look forward to getting to know some of you later in the discussion.

I had the idea for this panel a year ago, as I was preparing to publish my book on the philosophy of memoir. That book engages in a lot of theorizing about what memoir is, why it’s valuable, and what ethical obligations, to readers and subjects, arise out of it. I do try to connect the theorizing directly to particular memoirs that I know and love, but I liked the idea of doing that in a more direct way still: by talking in person with a bunch of memoirists who have engaged deeply with these questions in their own work.

I didn’t personally know many nonfiction writers who were planning to attend AWP—that’s the pandemic for you!—so I made an announcement on a Facebook group for women and non-binary writers of creative nonfiction that I’m a member of. Pretty much immediately, I heard back from the talented people you see in front of you, and this panel was born. Let me introduce them to you briefly:

[Read bios provided earlier in this document]

There are many ethical questions you can ask about memoir, but we decided to narrow in on one particular set: a set that’s of urgent interest not just to memoirists, but to writers in many other nonfiction genres too: biographers, essayists, journalists and others. How can we write ethically about others, in the course of writing about our own lives, and the lives of friends, family or strangers?

This event gives this much worried over set of questions a new spin, by bringing together aspects of it that aren't usually discussed together: namely, the ethics of representing non-human animals, celebrities, and members of marginalized cultures, alongside loved ones. We also hope that our eclectic set of speakers—a graduate student in literature, a former rock critic, a philosophy professor, and a celebrated memoirist writing on bi-racial family and identity—will deliver some interesting connections you haven't delved into before.

We'd like this event to mainly take the form of an open conversation with you, our attendees, but we thought we'd start it off with each of our panelists talking for five minutes or so about an ethical quandary about representing others that has come up for them in their own writing. After that, we'll open up the floor for questions, comments and further sharing from members of the audience.

Participant Initial Remarks:

Courtney Kersten: In my five minutes, I will talk about some of the ethical concerns that authors can consider when writing about the non-human world. These questions include how to approach writing about another creature's subjectivity, consciousness, and choices in style (such as whether or not to embrace anthropomorphism). I will use specific examples from my work about orcas and sea otters to trace the questions I asked myself in writing about them.

Gina Arnold: My book *Route 666*, part memoir, part music journalism, was published in 1993, one year before the central subject of the book, Kurt Cobain, committed suicide. During the writing of it, I was constantly faced with ethical dilemmas regarding scenes of drug use that I witnessed, as well as a certain amount of cajoling about the contents of the book from some of its main characters. I remember swearing after I wrote it that, in the future, I would only write about people who were already dead. In my five minutes, I will talk about the constraints put on journalists regarding such issues and the possible consequences of self censorship, both on author and reader. In retrospect, my question is, would a more gritty portrayal of my subject have served anyone - particularly him - any better? Do we owe the truth to our readers? And how much should we kowtow to the wishes of those we write about?

Elizabeth Miki Brina: My memoir, *Speak, Okinawa*, focuses on the complicated marriage between my mother, a native of Okinawa, and my

father, a U.S. soldier who was stationed on the island after he fought in Vietnam. The memoir also incorporates the history of Okinawa, the history that brought my parents together, written in first-person plural point-of-view. I reveal intimate details about my mother's alcoholism and my father's PTSD, as well as gruesome portrayals of what people of Okinawa endured during the colonization and devastation of their home as the site for one of the most horrific battles of WWII and subsequently a massive complex of military bases. In my five minutes, I will talk about my anxieties and concerns with recounting stories that certainly impacted me a great deal but weren't just mine to share. I considered many questions in the process. What goes beyond attempting accuracy toward the risk of becoming gratuitous? What renditions should I be allowed to tell as a writer who is trying to speak my truth and what restraint should I offer those who are being explained by me? What needs to be divulged in order to best serve the narrative and what is best left off the page not only as a gesture of discretion but a choice of concision? Does what I omit unfavorably alter the representation? How do I represent others in a way that is humanizing, sympathetic, and fair? How can I expect them to trust me? How can I trust myself? How can I earn the trust of the reader?

Helena de Bres: I plan to talk about the relationship of consent to the ethics of writing about others. It's tempting to think that, if a friend or family member consents to our publishing writing about them, we should consider that act morally fine. It's also tempting to think that if a person *doesn't* consent to our writing about them, we should consider the act of doing it anyway morally questionable. But, on further reflection, both of those common views seem doubtful. I'll discuss this issue in relation to my memoir-in-progress, *Unreasonable*, which tracks my troubled path to becoming a philosophy professor, intertwining theory about the nature and value of philosophy with personal narrative about a set of key figures in my romantic life. I'm pretty certain that my ex-husband would not consent to being written about at all in this book, but how should I respond to that fact? I'll refer to some points I raised about this dilemma in my book *Artful Truths*, and then talk about the doubts that that theoretical discussion hasn't really settled for me in my own case.

Questions and Comments from Attendees