AWP 2022 • Panel S206

First-Person Journalism:
How Do You Make a Personal Voice Believable?

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL: Reading Excerpts, Q&A

From Moni Basu:

Q. What's the difference between first-person journalism and memoir?

MB: *Memoir, by definition, is about you. You are writing about your own life experiences that you think will be interesting to other people. But first-person journalism goes way beyond your experience. You are telling a story from a first-person standpoint but you have deeply reported this story. It centers on other people and the main focus of the story is not necessarily you.*

Q. Who are some of your favorite first-person nonfiction writers?

MB: *Joan Didion, Natasha Trethewey, Elizabeth Alexander, Ta-Nehisi Coates. These writers share stories about themselves but in a way that transports the reader to their world. You feel you are right there by their side. They write about important experiences that readers can relate to and never make their work sound like "me, me, me."*

Moni's reading

From "The Girl Whose Rape Changed a Country," published by CNN Digital in 2013.

> She was 14, maybe 16, when they raped her. It was 1972, and I was 9. The India of her youth was the India of mine -- except she lived in utter poverty.
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> She was an orphaned adivasi, a tribal girl, and she performed the most menial of jobs to put bread in her belly. She collected cow dung with her bare hands, shaped it into patties, slapped them on walls to dry and then sold them as fuel. It's a sight and smell familiar to me. I used to watch women in my Kolkata neighborhood do the same thing, using the back wall of my grandfather's house. I couldn't imagine plunging my hand into piles of animal waste.
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> But rape knows no boundaries of class or culture.
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> After it happened, she might as well have worn a scarlet letter on her chest. Such was the stigma of rape in India then. She was brave to speak out and did what few women back then did. She took her case to court.

But the highest court of the land did not believe she was telling the truth. The justices overturned the convictions of her attackers, two police constables who maintained their innocence, and set them free.

Her case was monumental, both from a social and legal perspective. It sparked public protest for the first time about rape in India and led to the reform of sexual assault laws. It gave rise to a women's movement in India, sprouting a host of groups dedicated to empowering women. At last, people here began to see gender-based violence for what it really is: a brutal act of power.

I first read about the case after I began working as a journalist in the United States and developed a curiosity about women's rights around the world. Though the courts ultimately refused to believe Mathura was raped, history has come down on her side. She is uniformly depicted as a rape victim -- not a woman who cried rape.

For me, her case became a prism through which I could see my homeland and measure its progress over the past four decades. Then, in December, another rape galvanized India.

Thousands marched on the streets after a young New Delhi woman was viciously gang-raped on a bus, an act so horrific that she later died.

A headline in The Hindustan Times newspaper caught my eye. The accompanying column lamented that the attitudes of men had changed little since the landmark 1972 case. Some said the outcry in Delhi could be traced to the rape 41 years ago. Numerous other stories, opinion pieces and timelines on rape legislation mentioned the case.

But no one seemed to know what had happened to the victim, the teenage girl whose court-given name now popped up everywhere: Mathura.

Was she still alive?

So began my quest to find the woman who had innocently walked to a village police station to settle a domestic dispute and returned home a rape victim.

I wanted to find her for many reasons. In profound ways, I related to her.

Sweeping generalizations about my country in news coverage on sexual assault both embarrassed and angered me. I wanted to learn for myself how India, as a society, dealt with rape. And how Mathura had fared.

I knew how devastating rape could be, and I wondered how she had coped given her hardscrabble life, the crush of poverty, illiteracy and patriarchy. Did she manage to love, have children, find happiness? Had she heard about the New Delhi gang rape that pulled her name back into the news?

The answers to these questions would not come easily. Myriad phone calls -- mainly to lawyers, journalists and activists -- led nowhere. It was 40 years ago, they told me. She was a poor, uneducated girl who lived in a remote village.

"You will never find her."

From Kent Jacobson:

Q. Who are some of your favorite first-person nonfiction writers?

KJ: *I keep rereading Jo Ann Beard's "The Fourth State of Matter," the writer's familial and professional lives collapsing. Kathryn Harrison's* ***The Kiss*** *started me writing memoir. She modeled the courage it demanded. I've been reading Joan Didion since my Stone Age;* ***The Year of Magical Thinking*** *about losing her husband is different. I'm drawn to writers chirping about other writers. Read Terry McDonell's* ***The Accidental Life****. Or if you need to laugh (laughing our current best option), go to a memoir by my fellow panelist Damon Young,* ***What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Blacker****. Damon makes you laugh about matters that curdle your innards.*

There's Jon Krakauer's ***Into Thin Air*** *about a tragic ascent of Mt. Everest. Or Tobias Woolf: either* ***This Boy's Life*** *or his Vietnam memoir,* ***In Pharaoh's Army****. In James McBride's* ***The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother****, young McBride asks his mother what color God is. "God is the color of water," she replies.*

Linda Katherine Cutting's ***Memory Slips****; anything by Poe Ballantine or Nancy Mairs – and top of my list, Anne Lamott's* ***Bird by Bird****.*

Kent's reading

From "White People," published in ***Talking Writing*** *(Fall 2020).*

[The year is 1967]

I'm twenty-three and fresh from graduate school with plans to return to finish a Ph.D., one of the few whites at Tuskegee Institute. A Master's was enough for the college in last-minute need of an instructor, even an unworldly Northerner like me, and after several weeks I understand a minimum about the Institute or the students I teach, and less about the South except for images on the news: howling men with bats and women with signs "We hate n*****" as a tiny black girl in a starched flared dress passes on a sidewalk to integrate an elementary school.

I'd gotten a first live dose two months ago.

"What're you doin' down here?" A white man in a greased baseball hat spits a chaw at my penny loafers at a Birmingham gas pump. I'm blurry after August days in the car, short miles now to Tuskegee, the heat melting the station's asphalt into a nasty stink, my

undershorts and shirt soaked with sweat. He's spotted the Connecticut plates on the rusty old Cadillac with a U-Haul. Civil-rights people call this city "Bombingham."

"Teaching," I say, "I'm a teacher," and don't tell him where. Teaching has to sound harmless to him. I am harmless.

He rams the nozzle into my gas-tank.

Jesus, what have I walked into? Ex-Alabama-governor George Wallace swears the South had no "colored" trouble till "outside agitators" showed up. We're the trouble. And true to form I've blundered into Alabama with a sense of superiority, all the while "black riots" (the media's term) have surged in June and July in Boston, New York, Detroit, Chicago, and a hundred other Northern cities. I can appreciate Baseball Hat's resentment.

He seizes the soggy bills I hand him and stalks off.

And following that, I peer constantly into the rear-view mirror when I drive: What's the beat-up pickup with the rifles across the back window doing?

I barely grasp why I've come South. I've scoured Wordsworth and Browning and the Brontës in grad school and I'm feeling removed and less than essential and, whatever I yearn for, it's here in America somewhere and not with the British writers I love. In months Martin Luther King will die a half-day's ride up the road in Memphis. Race is ripping my country apart.

Wallace says: "N****** start a riot down here, first one of 'em to pick up a brick gets a bullet in the brain." We've grown evil. And a tiny black child in a flared, flowered dress on her way to elementary school pulls at me. I need a place in this life. I ache to be of use.

Kent's "Afterword" about writing this controversial piece:

I grew up in a tough Rhode Island mill town, but I wasn't ready for Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1967, only months before Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed in Memphis a few hundred miles away. Yet my experience at Tuskegee Institute led to thirty years of teaching in Black and Brown settings, including an inner-city Great Books program—Bard College's Clemente Course in the Humanities—a 2015 winner of the National Humanities Medal from the Obamas.

I have changed names, except my own, for the purposes of privacy. The names of historical figures—King, Sammy Younge, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman—have not been changed.

I instinctively framed the writing without the present me, even after so many years' work with non-white people. Recapturing some of how it felt the first time became an end: I was 23 again and green. Personal history like "White People" allows the writer and the

reader to come in a side door to a difficult subject. I wanted to talk about racism without putting us all back on our heels. Writing this story has helped me untangle some of my earliest acquired feelings about race, and I hope the attempt to detail my initial plunge into a Black world will open readers (especially white readers) to their own, often-veiled beliefs about race.

From Lewis Raven Wallace:

Lewis's Reading

From "The 'Assault on Reality': Trans People and Subjectivity," Chapter 10 of ***The View from Somewhere*** *(University of Chicago, 2019).*

In reality, is the subject a boy or a girl?
– Dr. Gaffe, writing in a French medical journal in 1885

I went in for a diagnosis, but I already knew what I had. The trick was to tell the symptoms just as the doctor wanted to hear. And I knew, from reading and from hearsay, what she'd require me to say: I can't stand my body. I have been wanting to live as male for as long as I remember, and I have been living as male for at least a year. All I want in the world is to make my femaleness disappear.

With that, I could get a letter saying I had gender identity disorder, in the psychiatric parlance of the early 2000s. That letter would allow me to get a surgery to alter my body to feel more aligned with my inner sense of self, my inner "sex."

These psychiatric appointments were absurd, a performance for an audience of one who was also in on the joke. But the shrink wrote me the letter, which I showed to my parents and to a plastic surgeon in Texas before I got my breasts removed in 2005.

I was twenty-one when I had the surgery—a double mastectomy with nipple reconstruction—and I had been out as transgender for a little over five years. How did I "know" this was the "real" me? Why would someone as effeminate and soft as I was want to "live full-time as a man," as I had told the psychiatrist at the free clinic in San Francisco? Well, I had lied. I didn't want to live full- time as a man. I wanted surgery in order to align with an inner sense of self that had little representation in either medical or media discourses about trans people at the time. I had to lie to get the letter, and I had to get the letter to get the surgery. So, I pretended to be normal, or at least normative, a normal male stuck in a female frame, despite the fact that this story never resonated with me.

When I made this choice, I was changing my own body, but through this change, I was also helping to change what was possible in the world. It was a world, at the time, that said that people like me—nongendered, genderqueer, or nonbinary people—simply didn't exist. There were men, and women, and a few folks born in the "wrong" bodies

who simply needed to be corrected through medical intervention. I knew I was none of these, and so I had to help create a new language, both linguistic and somatic, a new kind of body for myself. In doing so, I also changed reality. This insight that we have the power to change reality has been with me since I was young, and it is key to my understanding of what journalism is—and could be.

Throughout my exploration of "objectivity," there remains a nagging question for me about the underlying philosophical problem of facticity and truth claims themselves. "Objectivity" isn't only a set of protocols for being unbiased, fair, and balanced that I reject because it is impossible, impractical, or oppressive (though I think these are all true). It hinges on a more fundamental belief that there is a knowable world, a way of seeing that, once we set aside our own subjectivities, can be universally achieved or at least universally agreed upon. It hinges on an understanding of truth that turns all bodies and shapes into objects—the ocean, the human body, human events can ultimately be known and spoken of and described from some unassailable point of view. It is this objectification, not just the protocols of journalistic "objectivity," that I believe make it an unsalvageable framework. I'm far from the first, of course, to come to this conclusion. "Objectivity" has been debunked and debated for decades now in the fields of history, philosophy, anthropology, gender and race studies, to name only a few.

If we can only ever see through our own subjectivities, isn't the attempt to tell true stories futile? If nothing can be definitely "proven," can anything at all be true? In a way, that one's easy to answer: Dispelling the myth of objectivity is not about rejecting the possibility of truth altogether; it's about accepting the possibility of multiple truths.

I have found that trans experience—my own and other people's is great material through which to look at these questions, because it has always been filtered through clearly subjective lenses, and the terms of the discussion continue to change constantly. And trans experience has granted me an insight into journalistic work: we may be trapped in our subjectivities as writers and as human beings, but that only serves to highlight the importance of choice in our public and private lives— of choosing our values and practices and frames, as people and as storytellers. These choices are powerful, because stories don't just reflect reality, but they help to create it—just as I created a new reality when I came out as trans at age sixteen.

From Damon Young:

Damon's reading

*From "I Miss Dap," published in the **New York Times** (December 30, 2020).*

It's funny how, in the 10th month of Covid, some of the things I miss most are things I hadn't thought were missable. I miss the barbershop, for instance, for reasons that would be obvious if you saw me. I used to make weekly trips, but I haven't been since March. I feel as if I look like a mashup of Frederick Douglass and Chewbacca's neck. I'm pining for the pomp and circumstance in the process of the cut, the ceremony of the barber

raising and snapping the cape before smoothing it on me and fastening it around my neck, the sting and lovely stank of peroxide applied to my fresh hairline and newly speck-free neck. And then the big reveal — the moment when the artisan has finished and spins me in the chair to face the wall of mirrors and witness the masterwork.

I miss, too, the heat of a club so packed, I feel invisible in it, when you're feeling nameless, weightless and bodiless but somehow also all things at once. I miss the subtle shift in barometric pressure when new blood enters a regular evening run at LA Fitness. I miss sitting in my car a couple of hours later and discovering a knot on my knee that happened during the game but didn't matter enough in the moment to register. I miss how precious those "How Introverted Are You?" internet quizzes used to make me feel, because *everyone's* avoiding small talk now and I feel less special. I miss mouths.

I am also missing — craving, fiending for — what used to happen when I'd see my dad. He'd come over my house to see the kids, maybe, or to watch a Steelers game. He'd knock on my door a bit too hard, as though he were the cops or something. I'd let him in, and the moment he'd pass through the doorway, we'd dap, and then we'd shift, like water, to a chest-to-chest embrace.

Sometimes I'd get annoyed because my dad smokes Kools and I could smell them on him. But that's just what happens with dap. You get so close, and hold the hug so tight, that you can smell old cologne, new Juicy Fruit, stank breath, starched collars, the outside, stale snacks, fresh cuts and all the rest of the accumulated funk of life.