

TELLING SHAMEFUL STORIES: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS TESTIMONY

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Two years ago exactly, I stood before a similar audience, although under somewhat different climatic conditions, at the 1994 ASAL Conference in Canberra. It was the first time I had spoken publicly about my research on shame and autobiography, but by now I am quite shameless in speaking about this topic. I don't know whether it is more difficult to address an audience about humour or about shame, but whatever the case, David McCooley's polished and entertaining paper is a hard act to follow.

In this paper I discuss the importance of shame in contemporary Australian autobiography, and introduce a theory of autobiography as testimony, in which I focus on autobiographical representations of experiences of shame deriving from political and social oppression. My argument contests contemporary critical approaches which construe autobiography as simply fictive, that is, nothing more than a linguistic performance of a multivalent self. This is not to advocate an ingenuous acceptance of autobiographical texts that proclaim themselves to be true, simply because they do so. Nevertheless, to regard all autobiographical texts as elaborate linguistic fictions or lies is, I suggest, to do them a great injustice. I shall illustrate my paper with references to *Through My Eyes* (1978) by Aboriginal autobiographer Ella Simon.

The characteristics of shame

To introduce this discussion, let me begin by outlining some of the distinctive characteristics of the emotion of shame. Shame is an unpleasant and painful emotion. An experience of being ashamed is generally one to be avoided at best or at worst forgotten in the hope that the witnesses to this event will have short memories. The moral philosopher Bernard Williams offers a useful working definition of shame: 'The basic experience connected with shame is that of being seen, inappropriately, by the wrong people, in the wrong condition' (Williams 1993, p. 78). Charles Darwin, in his 1872 study, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*, classified shame as an 'emotion of self-attention', consequent on an experience whereby an individual was unwillingly exposed to the critical gaze and assessment of another (Darwin 1979, p. 310). Darwin emphasised that for shame to be experienced, there had to be an awareness of being observed by others: 'It is not the simple act of reflecting on our own appearance, but the thinking what others think of us, which excites a blush' (pp. 326-7). Freud illustrated his discussion of shame in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, with reference to Hans Anderson's fairy tale, 'The Emperor's New Clothes'. Freud related this narrative to 'dreams of being naked in which one does feel shame and embarrassment and tries to escape or hide' (1957-74, p. 242).

The possibility that others have not forgotten our individual experiences of shame may lead many of us to dread family gatherings, boycott school reunions or move away from our home town. Those who know of the shame that we still

carry retain some kind of power over us. Even speaking about one's research interest in shame at a conference or dinner party can give rise to an embarrassed silence. Secrecy, silence and concealment are the by-products of shame, and even speaking about this emotion may be perceived by some as breaking a taboo. The shame experience may be disguised in many different ways, so that an individual in a shame state may not actually feel ashamed, although anything that touches on or threatens to trigger repressed shame creates emotional discomfort. This disguised or low-visibility variant of shame has been identified in the research of Helen Lewis (1971) as bypassed shame.

On the other hand, speaking about shame frequently has the effect of stimulating autobiographical reflection in an interlocutor or audience. An encounter with the literary representation of shame in a text, whether as reader or listener, may lead one to recall and interrogate personal memories of shame, and where these are no longer too painful and isolating, to break the silence and speak of them with others.

An experience of being ashamed, however painful, may not necessarily be construed as negative, as an increasing number of contemporary researchers are beginning to point out (e.g. Braithwaite 1989, Kekes 1993, Retzinger (in press)). A shaming experience may lead to an amendment of life intended to prevent the possibility of a similar shaming event recurring. We may become more adept at avoiding social *faux pas* or unacceptable transgressions. As Retzinger points out, the contribution of shaming practices to social cohesion may be oppressive, but may also have a positive function in ensuring the maintenance of social bonds. Retzinger goes further in suggesting that 'having a sense of shame is to be a moral person' and that 'Having a sense of shame is crucial in the ability to regulate social distance', that is, in striking a balance between isolation and engulfment in relationship to others (in press, pp. 14-15).

In extreme circumstances an individual may choose to change from a shaming milieu to one where he or she is not shamed for particular characteristics or practices. However, one of the most effective ways to divest oneself of shame is to simply reach maturity, as being ashamed is an integral part of the experience of being a child. Shaming, in both moderate and severe forms, is frequently deployed in the upbringing and education of children to ensure what at best is a respect for others and at worst a repressive conformity.

Shame in autobiography

Given that shame is associated with secrecy, concealment and repression, the recurrent representation of experiences of shame in autobiographies must give rise to the question as to why episodes are so frequently included in which the self is shamed in some way. Rousseau's account in the *Confessions* (1781) of his theft of the ribbon has been much analysed. Hal Porter, in *Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony* (1963) dwells on his failure to return a sum of money to Miss Hart after their brief sexual encounter. Woven into the fabric of most autobiographies are accounts of personal errors and failures, of deception and lying, of humiliating punishments by parents or schoolteachers, of other children's mockery for some

perceived difference, of embarrassing sexual experiences in adolescence, or shame about parents, self, status, race or ethnicity, class or gender. An autobiography may represent occasions when the self is publicly scrutinised by others and found wanting, or privately scrutinised by the self with the internalised gaze of others, and adjudged deficient. The literary representation of shame appears to be fundamental to the autobiographical process.

The European autobiographical tradition acknowledges its origins in religious confession, accepting its debt to St Augustine's *Confessions*, overlaid by the contemporary confessional practice of therapeutic discourse. Both religious and therapeutic confession involve the revelation of shameful aspects of the self to another, whether the interlocutor is a priest in the confessional, a community of faith, a professional psychotherapist, or God in private prayer. In an autobiographical text, the other who is addressed is the anticipated reader. The term 'confession' has two meanings. The first, 'an acknowledgement of a sin or offence', is concerned with the kind of shameful revelations discussed above. The second meaning of confession however, is 'a declaration of faith or statement of principles', a definition closely related to the meaning of 'testimony', which is defined as 'evidence, demonstration, affirmation or a solemn protest or confession by a witness' (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

The first kind of confession focusses on the self and its shameful deficiencies, but a wily autobiographer has a repertoire of literary devices to resist the shaming aspects of confessing and instead to deceive the reader into admiration and approval rather than condemnation. As Clive James wittily puts it:

'I am ... well aware that all attempts to put oneself in a bad light are doomed to be frustrated. The ego arranges the bad light to its own satisfaction' (James 1981, p. 9).

The narcissistic aim of the contemporary confessing autobiographer may well be to convince the reader that the self on display in the text is a self deserving attention or worthy of admiration.

Even the most self-critical of autobiographies may succumb to narcissism. As moral philosopher Michael Walzer puts it:

... self-criticism is commonly thought an exemplary activity; we approve of this activity both in others and in ourselves: 'I look at myself critically, and then I look approvingly at myself looking at myself critically. Perhaps my criticism deflates me; but then the spectacle of myself as critic puffs me up again (1994, p. 87).

In relation to contemporary autobiography in the confessional tradition, autobiographical criticism becomes a kind of postmodern game. Like the hero of a detective novel, the critic looks for the fictional elements in autobiography, 'narrative cracks and fissures', suppressed discourses, internal inconsistencies and surprising omissions, as well as falsification of 'facts' that are reliably documented

elsewhere. Why in his autobiography does Hal Porter omit to mention his father's profession (he was an engine driver)? Why does Kathleen Fitzpatrick devote only half a sentence to her former husband? Why does George Johnston characterise his fictionalised self in *My Brother Jack* as an unathletic wimp rather than a rugged Aussie Rules player? In their turn, self-consciously postmodern autobiographers play games with readers and critics. The epigraph for Robert Dessaix's autobiography *A Mother's Disgrace* (1994) is Jeanette Winterson's: 'I'm telling you stories. Trust me'. In this way, Dessaix can reveal what he believes is the truth about himself, encouraging the reader to distrust him all the while. Or vice versa! Like most contemporary critics, the critic of autobiography is also on the track of literary perspectives shaped by class, race and gender, searching for the possibly inadvertent confession within the confession.

Autobiography as testimony

This approach, which I initially found so fruitful in examining Australian autobiographies by middle-class Australian autobiographers of Anglo-Irish extraction, seemed increasingly inadequate when I turned to Aboriginal autobiographical writing. Although the shaping influence of race, class and gender emerged clearly from these texts, to adopt a critically distant stance in relation to narratives of suffering to which the autobiographers were explicitly committed as 'true accounts' seemed grossly inadequate. Aboriginal autobiographers such as Ella Simon, Margaret Tucker, Glenyse Ward, Sally Morgan, Elsie Roughsey and Charles Perkins are not playing postmodern word games but bearing witness to the physical and emotional suffering, the political and economic deprivation that had characterised not only their own lives, but those of Aboriginal people since European contact. Similarly, references to the Holocaust in autobiographies by Jewish Australians of European origin also make serious claims on the reader.

An alternative approach to these texts was suggested to me in an essay by John Beverley, entitled 'The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)' (in Smith & Watson 1992). Beverley's essay discusses the 'testimonio', as a newly emerging genre in Latin American Spanish literature, concerned with the rights of the oppressed, briefly acknowledging its role in liberation theology-based community dialogues (p. 98). Beverley defines *testimonio* as:

a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet ... form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience (in Smith & Watson 1992, pp. 92-3).

Beverley argues that '*testimonio* coalesced as a new narrative genre in the 1960s and further developed in close relation to the movements for national liberation and the generalised cultural radicalism of that decade' (in Smith & Watson 1992, p. 93). Although Beverley finds historical antecedents for *testimonio* in specific Latin American narrative forms, the genre has much in common with forms of Aboriginal autobiographical writing which also emerged in the 1960s.

Beverley also quotes Raymond Williams, who attributes the superiority of the

nineteenth century British working class autobiography over other forms (such as the novel) to the fact that:

the form coming down through the religious tradition was of a witness confessing the story of his life, or there was the defence speech at a trial, when a man tells the judge who he is and what he had done (quoted by Beverley in Smith & Watson 1992, p. 92).

What seems to be emerging here is an autobiographical form influenced by the Judaeo-Christian tradition of testimony, rather than confession. Although the term 'testimony' was extensively used in Quaker women's autobiographical writing of the seventeenth century (Foxton 1994), Beverley does not make links with this literary tradition.

The broader meaning of testimony implies bearing witness for a moral purpose rather than for self-display, a commitment to justice reflected in protest at injustice, and also recalls the Old Testament tradition of complaint and lamentation. Testimony differs from the public confession which is a feature of evangelical and Moral Re-Armament practice, because what is being revealed that was previously hidden is not the shame of personal sin but the shame associated with oppression and suffering, 'the shame we don't deserve' as L. B. Smedes subtiles his book, *Shame and Grace* (1993). 'Testimonio' diverges from the interpretative preoccupation of European postmodernism in that its truth is constructed as evidence of shameful and undeserved suffering.

The intentionality of the narrator is paramount in *testimonio*, according to Beverley, who elaborates:

The situation of narration in *testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself (Smith & Watson, p. 94).

A number of Aboriginal autobiographers whose stories demonstrate many of the characteristics of testimony have mission backgrounds (e.g. Ella Simon, Margaret Tucker and Glenyse Ward), so it is not unreasonable to assume that this has contributed to shaping the way they represent their life stories.

A consideration of Aboriginal autobiography as *testimonio*, involving revelations of shame, raises the issue of reader response. Beverley states that 'The position of the reader of *testimonio* is akin to that of a jury in a court room' (Smith & Watson, p. 95). But in the religious tradition from which the genre derives, courtroom scenes where testimony is given are generally narrated so that the positions of jury and accused are reversed: the testimony of the accused implicates the hearers in some form of moral deficiency (e.g. the trial scenes in the Book of Acts: the trial of Stephen; Paul before Festus).

The injustice of regarding all autobiographical texts as elaborate linguistic

fictions or lies is illustrated by Dori Laub of the Yale Centre for Holocaust studies in 'Bearing witness or the vicissitudes of listening' (Chapter 2 of Felman and Laub 1992). Laub includes a discussion of a woman's eye-witness account of the uprising at Auschwitz at which, historians agreed, one chimney was blown up. The woman described a scene in which not one but four chimneys went up in flames, and as Laub explains, the historians present were inclined to discount this testimony as inaccurate (in order to avoid being discredited by revisionist historians). Laub however, listening to this testimony as a psychoanalyst, thought differently, believing that:

it was through my listening to her that I in turn came to understand not merely her subjective truth, but the very historicity of the event, in an entirely new dimension. She was testifying not simply to empirical historical facts, but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination ...And she came to testify to the unbelievability, precisely, of what she had eye-witnessed - this bursting open of the very frame of Auschwitz (p. 62).

The psychoanalyst notes the transformation in the woman's narrative style from 'self-effacing, almost talking in whispers' to one with 'a sudden intensity, passion and colour' as she recounts the uprising (p. 59). He acknowledges and responds to the subjective truth of her testimony, in which an historical event is embedded, although appreciating that the woman's recall of that event is coloured by her own imperfect knowledge of what had occurred.

It may be equally misguided to dismiss the testimony of an Aboriginal autobiographer referring to a massacre for which no European records exist, either in terms of the testimony's subjective truth or its potential historicity.

Veronica Brady's review (1987) of Ella Simon's *Through My Eyes*, together with Sally Morgan's *My Place*, offers a view of reader response that is consistent with Beverley's definition of *testimonio*. Brady's review is entitled 'Something that was Shameful', a quotation from Simon's work, in which she wrote that for her father's white relatives: 'I was still a secret that had to be kept from the world - something that was shameful, something whose very existence was distasteful' (Simon 1987, p. 23). Brady, quoting Fanon's phrase, that 'the Aborigine is for them the 'absolute not-self' (p. 4), suggests that both these works 'point a way to the transition from guilt to understanding' (p. 3). Although Brady does not attempt a precise distinction between shame and guilt, her argument implies that Simon's and Morgan's narrative representation of personal shame originating in racist oppression may/should convince their white readership of moral responsibility with regard to racism. Brady expresses this view in theological terms: 'Sooner or later the question of the past must be faced ...Ultimately, this question is ethical, existential, even, I would argue, theological. Our treatment of Aborigines is our "original sin" '(p. 3). For Brady, reader response to these autobiographical texts is critical. Beverley puts it this way:

The complicity a *testimonio* establishes with its readers involves their identification - by engaging their sense of ethics and justice - with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience.

Testimonio in this sense has been important in maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements. It is also a way of putting on the agenda, within a given country, problems of poverty and oppression (in Smith & Watson, p. 99).

Patterns of shame in Ella Simon's *Through My Eyes*

I shall now turn to the autobiography of Ella Simon, *Through My Eyes* (1978) (republished posthumously in 1987), which I suggest, is consistent with Beverley's understanding of the *testimonio*. Ella Simon, more than the other writers, explores complex issues of shame which she associates with being of mixed race. By telling shameful stories about her life, Ella Simon testifies to unjust suffering and in so doing resists a number of shaming myths promulgated by the dominant society about Aborigines which contributed to and perpetuated her suffering.

Ella Simon gives an unromanticised view of daily living on Purfleet Mission Settlement near Taree in central New South Wales and records her impressions of the consequences of alcohol abuse and other social problems in other Aboriginal communities she visited when travelling with the United Aboriginal Mission (e.g. Simon 1987, pp. 138-9).

One of the myths resisted by Ella Simon is the stigmatising of Aborigines as unclean. Ella Simon's narrative resists this myth by differentiating between her part-Aboriginal grandmother's European understanding of health and hygiene and the practices of full-blood Aborigines still living tribally. Simon is shamed when this distinction is not acknowledged, explaining: 'That's probably why it used to hurt so much when people treated me as though I was one of these old tribal people'. Significantly, she explains that although her grandmother would attend to the health needs of the people designated as tribal, she would not allow them inside her house, and would serve them tea from tin mugs hanging outside. This practice, which occurs in other white and Aboriginal accounts of white racial discrimination, is explained by Simon as motivated by the prevalence of tuberculosis (Simon 1987, p. 4).

Simon, born in 1902, is writing about the first two decades of this century, but Glenyse Ward's account of her experience as a domestic servant in South Western Australia refers to her employer's insistence that Ward use a tin mug rather than a china cup as one aspect of the discriminatory daily practices which were imposed upon her in the 1960s. Daisy Corunna's story, in Morgan's *My Place*, also refers to the tin mug. Her employers drank from fine china cups: 'Some of them were so fine, they were like a seashell, you could see through them. I only ever had a tin mug' (Morgan 1987, p. 335). The tin mug served as a token of racial inferiority in Aboriginal testimony.

A deeply damaging myth was that Aboriginal women were freely available for sexual exploitation by white men. From this belief stemmed the complex and shameful history of sexual contact between Aboriginal and whites in Australia. Ella Simon's narrative testifies to the suffering and shame of a part-Aboriginal woman

born of a casual one-night stand, even though her white father acknowledged his daughter and maintained an affectionate relationship with her. The mature Simon opposed marriages between Aboriginal and white Australians. She recounts a white employer's prying questions about her background, in which praise of Simon's abilities is a shaming reminder of perceived Aboriginal inferiority: 'I just wanted to know, Ella, because you seem so different, so intelligent. Why don't you go away to live somewhere and marry a white man?' Ella Simon records her response:

Well, I told her what I thought of that! I told her about some of the things I'd had to face since childhood and how I didn't want to get involved in my father-type of situation again. I wanted my family to marry their own people, too (Simon 1987, p. 172).

Aboriginal people of mixed race bore a double stigma. Those who were born out of wedlock were illegitimate in terms of European law, and even those whose parents were legally married under European law were considered by European Australians as children who 'should not have been born' (Teichman).

In *Through My Eyes*, Ella Simon's first point concerning her identity, made in the first sentence of her autobiography, is that she is illegitimate (p. 1). Her second point is that she is of mixed race, her father being white (from a 'good' white family) and her mother Aboriginal ('or an "Australian of Aboriginal descent", which is the latest title they give us' (p. 1)). She describes these two points as 'two handicaps there's never been any escape from' (p. 1). Both aspects of her origins are shown to have caused her deep shame and suffering, yet are given prominence by being mentioned first, resisting the psychic impulse of concealment. At the end of her narrative she writes that the shaming social climate has changed: 'At least now you can talk openly about discrimination and how it hurts' (pp. 172-3).

Simon's narrative presents an alternative view to that of some other Aboriginal autobiographers (for example Charles Perkins) concerning Aboriginal attitudes to the mixed race child. According to Simon, survival was precarious for a part-Aboriginal child, more so in earlier generations, citing the example of her grandmother, who was abandoned in infancy by her mother's tribe because of the lightness of her skin.

Simon's grandmother was found by a stockman, who attempted to return her to the tribe, but they refused her, 'She was evil, they said' (p. 2). She was brought up by 'the station people'. As an adult she chose to return to her tribe, who welcomed her nursing skills and understanding of white practices (p. 2). Simon, like her grandmother, was often rejected by darker-skinned Aboriginal people, but like her, had leadership skills. She writes of herself:

Even at school I was never accepted as Aboriginal. They could see by my lighter skin that I was different to them ... Some of them were very black and they'd try to get at me by saying I should have been over at Taree, at the white's school (p. 39).

The shame associated with identity for Ella Simon was complex. She did not find out her true parentage until she was almost eleven. Until then, she believed

that her grandparents were her parents, and their children her brothers and sisters. The shock to her identity was severe. The discovery was made worse by the cruel teasing of one sister', or aunt, who would' introduce into childish disputes the taunt "You just shut up and remember who you are and what you are" (p. 11).

The other shock was to discover that the white man she used to visit periodically as a child was in fact her father. The shame of illegitimacy and mixed race, although deeply felt, was modified by her father's sustained love and acceptance, despite his weaknesses in the face of institutionalised and attitudinal racism. He did not disown her, although his relatives did. He gave her an honest account of her conception as a mistake, but made it clear that he valued her.

Simon's narrative comments on the suffering she experienced from her mixed racial origins. 'I still didn't belong to either black or white', she wrote when explaining her fear at having to move from Purfleet into a house in town (p. 163).

The most painful aspect of the shame of racism experienced by Ella Simon was that of being excluded from her father's funeral, when she alone had cared for him in his last illness. Persuaded by the undertaker and a missionary to acquiesce in the white relatives' wish that she should stay away, she writes:

One of the greatest trials of my life was to forgive these people for that ... But then it came back to me how my grandmother drummed it into me that God made all people equal; colour is only skin deep and that the strong thing was to return forgiveness to those who hurt you ... I can truly say that, with God's help, I have forgiven them a long time ago (p. 23).

Simon's narrative reviews many experiences of shaming discrimination. Although she also worked in domestic service, her main focus is on life on Purfleet Mission. She comments on inadequate housing, with no stoves or bathrooms, various forms of intimidation of residents by managers, including threats of eviction or actual expulsion, paternalistic supervision of Aboriginal Endowment funds, sometimes involving mismanagement or even theft, and the enforcement of a curfew confining Aborigines to the reserve after dark. The narrative foregrounds the consequences in human suffering of these and other shaming conditions and practices, evaluating them against a strong standard of justice. Simon's testimony includes accounts of conflict, negotiation or outwitting Reserve managers, and protests against her own lack of opportunities such as not being able to have a government job (p. 75) or to become a nurse (p. 64). The final words of her autobiography are: 'I don't think I'll ever stop wondering what I might have been ...' (Simon 1987, p. 173).

Conclusion

Shoshana Felman postulates a link between the giving of testimony and healing, asking: 'Is the testimony ... a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing?' (p. 9) By healing, I understand Felman to mean not only a restoration of the damaged self but a contribution to the recovery of a community disrupted by the consequences of past oppression.

Testimony is an important critical approach to reader response. In this paper I suggest that autobiography has a transformative potential not only in relation to the narrating self but also the reader. The testimony of the autobiographer has the potential to transform the reader into a witness. The autobiographer's testimony, if sufficiently strong and persuasive, must elicit a response from the reader, who may find herself in a similar position to the protagonist in Camus' subtle novel of interrogation *La Chute*. The protagonist, who hears the sound of a suicidal woman's body striking the water has the choice of becoming a witness, or even an actor, in the aftermath of the event, or of failing to attend by moving on, as he chooses to do. The predicament for the failed witness, the historical passerby, is that his 'own life also loses its continuity, its ground and its balance' (Felman & Laub, p. 199).

Although accepting the value of linguistic criticism in exploring the fictive aspects of autobiographical texts, I do not accept an extreme position in which autobiography is interpreted as a meaningless exercise in rhetoric. More pertinent to the kinds of autobiography discussed in this paper is the following statement by Camus:

The questioning of art by the artist has many reasons ...Among the best explanations is the feeling the contemporary artist has of lying or of indulging in useless words if he pays no attention to history's woes (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 115, quoting from Camus' etc.).

Confronting shame draws the attention of readers both to history's woes and to their own, and to the intersections between them. Autobiographical testimony to these woes both illustrates and contributes to the restoration of continuity, ground and balance in the life of the autobiographer and the responsive reader.

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