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Testimonies, Investigations, and Meditations: Telling Tales of Violence in Memoir

"Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."
–Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story"

In October 2017, a repeated phrase began appearing in Facebook status updates and on Twitter—a simple, blunt "Me Too." The phrase was sometimes accompanied by a cut-and-pasted explanation: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote #MeToo as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." Sometimes, the person posting the status added a story, or a series of stories, to illustrate and comment on harassment and/or assault they experienced. Many attributed this online phenomenon to reports, revealed that same month, that over a dozen women had accused famous movie producer Harvey Weinstein of harassment, assault, and rape. While actresses Rose McGowan and Alyssa Milano deserve credit for their roles in publicizing the hashtag and exposing misogyny and abuses of power in Hollywood, activist Tarana Burke began #MeToo ten years ago; as she told *Democracy Now!* in a 2017 interview, the campaign is about "reaching the places that other people wouldn't go, bringing messages and words of encouragement to survivors of sexual violence where other people wouldn't be talking about it" (Goodman and Gonzalez, 2017). In its current incarnation, #MeToo may also have been inspired by disgust with the behavior of U.S. President Donald Trump, who has also been accused of sexual assault and was elected despite having been recorded describing women as conquests and himself as aggressor: "I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star,

they let you do it. You can do anything… Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" ("Transcript" 2016). #MeToo did become a subject of critique—some Facebook statuses acknowledged concerns about triggering readers or excluding the experiences of trans people; *Vice* (which has since fired three employees in an ongoing sexual harassment investigation) published a piece noting that "people…need to be held accountable, instead of survivors being put on trial to prove their assaults were bad enough to count for something" (Ratchford 2017). Still, many more posts and comments celebrated the power of speaking out, as well as the possibilities for social justice via support, trust, and solidarity.

The tension about #MeToo—widespread support for the idea and significant criticism of it—seems in line with broader uncertainties about the uses and effects of personal storytelling. We hear about the importance of personal stories from many, and quite disparate, realms. Pop psychology insists that keeping stories of traumatic experience bottled up is unhealthy. Activists and scholars want to hear from "unheard voices"—people whose views and stories are ignored as power dynamics favor the wealthy and white. Corporations, not typically seen as institutions that celebrate individuality, want to know the life stories of their employees, clients, and customers in order to leverage talents and increase market share. Doctors struggle to help patients who refuse to disclose their medical histories or lie about those histories. Yet, the risks of storytelling remain: the teller's sometimes-painful struggle to be heard and believed, the vulnerability involved in sharing a story with a judgmental audience, and the real-life, everyday effects of the stories people share.

The memoirs under consideration in this essay, all written by women about their experiences with violent crime, are different from each other in terms of content and style but share a common theme: an effort to use storytelling to understand a crime, its victim(s), and its perpetrator(s). People often call crimes "senseless," especially when they are particularly shocking or heartbreaking, but these memoirs all aim to reveal, imagine, or impose a certain "sense" on the crimes they describe, some way of seeing and understanding developments through a psychological or sociological lens. The books represent thought

processes about what makes violent crime happen. At the same time—and this is one of the advantages of creative nonfiction for writing about crime—these memoirists offer no easy answers, and continually deconstruct or challenge their own storytelling processes throughout their narratives. Some readers might express frustration about a lack of closure or certainty, but an uncertain account, while perhaps less than reassuring, seems the most reflective, credible way to approach such troubling subject matter. Describing her experiences teaching life writing—specifically, the personal essay—Amy Robillard writes about questions she asks students to consider: what are students certain about, how did they become certain about those things, and how does certainty "make navigating the world easier, more comfortable? On the other hand, what does uncertainty do? What will you do to squash that uncertainty, to trade it for certainty?" (Robillard 2017). The goal of such conversations, Robillard writes, is to "familiarize students with the power of cultural narratives to inform our reading practices and our assessments, interpretations, and judgments" (2017). There is more than one way to tell a story, the teller decides how to construct the narrative, and the reader can benefit from being cognizant of the ways in which those decisions dictate what appears on page or screen. Robillard implies that these questions about narrative can (and do) reach far beyond the writing classroom, and her work is relevant here because it indirectly suggests two reasons why memoirs on violent crime and its aftermath, however troubling, can be so valuable to read and teach. One reason is the way such memoirs call attention to narrative construction as it functions in legal proceedings and journalistic investigations, as well as in the way families and individuals come to understand themselves and others.

The title of this essay indicates three modes—testimony, investigation, and meditation—and Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich's *The Fact of a Body*, Joanna Connors's *I Will Find You*, and Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts* all include elements of each: the first-person, confessional quality of a testimony, for instance, or the suspenseful trial-and-error quest of an investigation. No matter the mode, though, these books have one common theme: the uses and limitations of storytelling in processing traumatic

experiences of violence. We see storytellers—the memoirists themselves and some of the people they depict in their memoirs—making decisions about constructing their narratives in order to malign or exonerate accused criminals, to explain or question their responses to being victims, to analyze, to justify, to process. The other reason why Robillard's essay seems particularly relevant to these memoirs is its insistence on the value of open-ended narratives. Readers may expect or desire the solution to a mystery, or the promise of a solution, and these three texts deliberately avoid such tidy conclusions.

Narrative, Trauma, and the Law

In her memoir, *The Fact of a Body* (2017), Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich mentions pursuing graduate study in two subjects: the law and writing. While she does not indicate the type of writing she specialized in while pursuing her MFA, *The Fact of a Body* repeatedly emphasizes the importance and power of storytelling—not a surprising revelation, given that Marzano-Lesnevich has written a book full of stories both personal and professional. What is more provocative, however, is the series of links the book makes between legal proceedings and stories. *The Fact of a Body* takes as its focus the act of processing traumatic events through narrative: investigators and legal teams attempt to make sense of "what happened;" archives of testimonies are formed and consulted; lawyers present cases to juries by crafting their accounts in particular ways; the narrator looks back at a criminal's history, as well as her own.

The book opens by discussing a 1928 civil case, Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad Co., which hinges on the concept of proximate cause: a man runs to catch a train that is leaving a station, porters on the train and platform attempt to help the man aboard, the man drops a package, the package falls to the tracks and explodes. The explosion—the package happens to be a bundle of fireworks wrapped in newspaper—reverberates through the station, causing a set of scales to fall. The set of scales injures a woman on the other end of the platform. The woman sues the Long Island Railroad. A central legal question of liability is at issue in this case: who, or what, is to blame for what happened—the man with the fireworks, the

porters pushing or pulling him, or the Railroad company and its managers, who presumably chose where to place the scales in the station? Marzano-Lesnevich begins with this historically distant, seemingly tangential story because "[t]he idea of proximate cause is a solution. The job of the law is to figure out the source of the story, to assign responsibility. The proximate cause is the one the law says truly matters" (3). In the course of uncovering the histories of two crimes, Marzano-Lesnevich discovers—in the courtroom and in her everyday life—the difficulty of finding the "source" or starting point of a story, choosing which stories to believe, and deciding how to respond to the stories she hears or reads. She also learns that finding the source may seem crucially important, but may not yield satisfying or expected results.

One of the two crimes addressed in *The Fact of a Body* is the 1992 murder of six-year-old Jeremy Guillory in the small town of Iowa, Louisiana; a man named Ricky Langley confesses to the killing when the body is discovered, and Langley is eventually convicted and sentenced to death. Marzano-Lesnevich learns about Langley's crime while working at the Louisiana Capital Assistance Center, where lawyers provide representation for prisoners on death row. When she sees a videotaped interview with Langley, she —a longtime, staunch opponent of capital punishment—is shocked by her adamant feeling of wanting him to meet his punishment, wanting him to die. Here is the "proximate cause," then, of *The Fact of a Body*: reflection leads Marzano-Lesnevich to connect this feeling with a related trauma in her own past: her grandfather molested her and her sister, just as Ricky confessed to molesting children (including Guillory, in some versions of the confession). The narrator weaves together narratives of these two crimes in order to process her responses to each. While she never serves as Langley's legal representation, like/as a lawyer, she must examine and assess multiple, sometimes conflicting, stories in order to decide how she will proceed, how she will feel, what people need to know, and why people should care about what happened. Marzano-Lesnevich compares stories about both crimes in a way that allows for multiple points of view while simultaneously questioning their necessity and legitimacy. In short, the narrator endeavors to remain open-minded, and realizes good reasons for remaining so, but sometimes wants to dismiss open-

mindedness altogether; after all, in both of the crimes described in this memoir, children's bodies are being abused.

Structurally, *The Fact of a Body* begins with an account of the murder and its immediate aftermath, but then brings readers back in time, into Langley's past: the car wreck that killed two of his siblings; his mother's serious injuries, chronic illness, and alcoholism; the fact that his mother became pregnant with him while taking multiple medications and painkillers; and his delusions about being haunted by his dead brother. Marzano-Lesnevich describes Langley's troubled childhood and adolescence, and his aimless, lonely adulthood. These stories can be told in multiple ways: they can play on readers' sympathies, refuse to make any excuses for Langley's crimes, or balance tolerance and harsh judgment, for instance. She expresses uncertainty about these options, sometimes by asking questions; when describing the car crash, she writes,

> Does [Alcide, Langley's father] now have a flask hidden under his seat, a flask that holds liquor he must balance the wheel to gulp down, but that makes all the long hours of giving up—of steering his family right toward giving up—possible? For some acts the heart must be steeled. But as he is about to lose so much, I must find a kinder way to tell this story. (83)

She also implies that the reader's way of perceiving Ricky, much like her way of narrating Langley's past, is inevitably tied to personal perspective: "What you see in Ricky may depend more on who you are than on who he is" (147). She is dismayed to find that her attempts to sympathize with or understand Ricky reach the same limits again and again: she wants to defend prisoners on death row, wants to believe that every life is worth saving, but struggles to muster the desire to save someone like Ricky, someone like her grandfather. Stories help her to work through this struggle but do not provide solutions. This careful attention to the process of "working through" may be attributable to aspects of the narrator's subject position: she is a young woman accusing an older, male family member of sexual violence.

Although *The Fact of a Body* chronicles Marzano-Lesnevich's attempts to make sense of violent, "senseless" crimes, the book also highlights her awareness that some testimonies, some stories, are difficult for readers/listeners to acknowledge, understand, believe, and take seriously. In *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say about Their Lives* (2017), life writing scholar Leigh Gilmore argues that even in an era marked by widespread interest in hearing testimonies and confessions, "women's witness is discredited by a host of means to taint it: to contaminate by doubt, stigmatize through association with gender and race, and dishonor through shame, such that not only the testimony but the person herself is smeared" (Gilmore 2). Gilmore, who was interviewed by PBS as the aforementioned #MeToo phenomenon unfolded, also suggests that life writing, and life stories in general, can offer testifying women an important opportunity to be heard, even when other channels fail them: "Autobiography is more flexible than legal testimony. Because it permits innovation, writers have historically made use of its literary elasticity to assert legitimacy, to challenge power, and to enable counterpublics to coalesce around life stories" (9). Certainly, the more optimistic responses to #MeToo support this claim—autobiographical stories shared on Facebook and Twitter demonstrated how widespread sexual harassment and violence are, and offered for many writers and readers a sense of solidarity. Even the criticisms of #MeToo do not focus, in the main, on "tainting" the women who have shared their experiences, or on undercutting their stories. But, as Gilmore notes, women speaking or writing about their lives still risk having their stories tainted, or being tainted themselves; she refers to such high-profile cases as Anita Hill's testimony about Clarence Thomas and Rigoberta Menchú's disputed *testimonio*, examples in which women's perspectives were discredited and reputations smeared. By constantly reflecting on and challenging her own perspective, Marzano-Lesnevich, who describes her family as staying silent in the wake of her (and her sister's) accusations about their grandfather, insists on her story's credibility and her own fair-minded approach to her story.

In the more autobiographical sections of the book, Marzano-Lesnevich establishes a questioning, patient tone early on, asking the reader to consider carefully the facts and perspectives she provides: "So before my grandfather gets any higher on the staircase, before he climbs his way to our bedrooms, know this: He was not all bad" (44). She also refuses to condemn when she wonders how much, if anything, her grandmother knew about her grandfather molesting her and her sister. Later in the book, she describes overcoming her reluctance to learn more about her grandfather's past and its role in family history, even pleading with her mother for answers: "*Please tell me about Grandpa. I have realized that all I know about him is what he did*" (224, italics in original). Ultimately, she confronts her grandfather, and listens as he claims that he was also abused as a child. This revelation, though, does not lead her to any definitive claims about culpability or cause; instead, she comes back to the notion of narrative—multiple ways to hear and craft stories: "Begin Ricky's story with the murder—and it means one thing. Begin it with the crash—and it means another. Begin with what my grandfather did to me and my sister. Or begin when he was a boy, and someone did it to him" (282). This strategy—including multiple points of view on a particular event or person in order to create a richer, more complex narrative—has a long history in life writing, particularly as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TEDTalk, "The Danger of a Single Story," has gained popularity across genre. For example, in *The Art of Memoir*, her 2015 book on craft, memoirist Mary Karr states that writers should let readers know "how their own prejudices mold memory's sifter…transcribing the mind so its edges show," and should consider how their "views—especially the harsh ones—may be wrong" (Karr 16, 121). Marzano-Lesnevich cannot, however, easily reconcile storytelling strategies with her knowledge of the law, claiming that in terms of personal histories, "[c]riminal law doesn't care where the story began. But how you tell the story has everything to do with how you judge" (282).

This uncertainty about how to tell the story, which perspectives to privilege, also manifests itself in the memoir's self-aware moments, when Marzano-Lesnevich discusses and even questions aspects of her approach to her project. While any memoirist must reconstruct the past, especially when writing about

childhood conversations and long-ago events without the benefit of supporting documentation or recordings, the practice may seem more troubling when a writer imposes a particular perspective on someone else's past. As many memoirs do, *The Fact of a Body* starts with a disclaimer (on an unnumbered page titled "A Note on Source Material") explaining some of the author's writing decisions. Marzano-Lesnevich notes that she decided to include "competing facts, claims, slippages, and ellipses, and to hold those contradictions and absences up to the light…this is a book about what happened, but it is also a book about what we do with what happened"—a decision in keeping with the book's theme of storytelling and concerns about narrative credibility. More controversial, perhaps, is her acknowledgement of the way she reconstructed events based on "bare-bones records," though she writes that each such instance is explained in the "Sources Consulted" section at the book's end. Here again, though, Marzano-Lesnevich's admitted use of "imagination" in recreating Ricky Langley's past seems in keeping with the book's storytelling theme, and functions as a performative example of the issues of truth and interpretation central to *The Fact of a Body*. Marzano-Lesnevich reminds readers that she is in charge of what they know (and therefore can affect how they read and feel). She simultaneously evinces an appropriate discomfort with that position of authority. This discomfort is particularly apparent when she writes about her sister, who is given the pseudonym "Nicola" in *The Fact of a Body*. Marzano-Lesnevich, who as writer controls the narrative, states that as an adult Nicola decided to disavow their grandfather's abuse:

> She said to me, 'I've decided to think of myself as someone who wasn't abused.' This was brutally hard for me to hear. We'd shared a room. I'd watched my grandfather touch her… She can't just pretend none of that happened. She can't.
>
> But of course—she can. I have changed my sister's name in this book, out of respect for her choice, and as much as possible I have changed my other family members' names and the names of some of the people in Ricky's life. But I can't bring myself to write a

> narrative that puts my experience alone in my family again. I won't do on the page what was done in life. (230-231)

The bluntly stated "She can't" underscores the narrator's sense that Nicola's decision feels like a betrayal, and the fact that chapters of the book remain devoted to family dynamics suggests that Marzano-Lesnevich has stayed true to her stated belief that "the determination to turn away from the past isn't benign," particularly in light of her parents' near-silence on various family traumas, including the grandfather's molestation of both sisters (230).

There is more at stake for writer and reader, too, when Marzano-Lesnevich decides how to present the story of what happened. In the narrative strand about her research on Langley, she realizes that defining the "source of the story"—pinpointing a moment in his life that set other important moments in motion—is an impossible but legally necessary task (even in a criminal case such as State of Louisiana v. Ricky Joseph Langley— Marzano-Lesnevich notes that the concept of "proximate cause" is used in civil, not criminal, trials). One cannot know with certainty which life events or elements of family history, if any, might have led Langley to his later troubles in life: his criminal record, the murder of Guillory, his stint on death row, or even his confessed feelings of loneliness and rage. Yet, the conventions of courtroom trials dictate that stories be told and presented as possible causes: lawyers for prosecution and defense make opening and closing statements to influence the jury's thinking; psychologists and social workers offer commentary on the background and motivations of the accused; witnesses are called to give their perspectives on what happened (though their comments on why events happened are often dismissed, objected to as hearsay). Interpretations of stories have other social effects as well. Court documents indicate that Langley once tried to get himself institutionalized, but his account was not taken seriously: "He tells the caseworker he wants to be hospitalized so he won't molest anyone…But they won't hospitalize him. He is clean and kempt, the caseworker checks off. He acts appropriately. He is not that

sick… he is assigned to outpatient therapy" (125). Clearly, as Gilmore's work suggests, some storytellers are perceived as more credible—and have more influence—than others.

Why A Reporter Investigates: Seeking and Telling the Story

The title of Joanna Connors's memoir, *I Will Find You* (2016), has multiple meanings. When Connors, then a reporter for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, is raped by a man in a college theater, he threatens her into silence before kissing her on the lips and walking away: "If I have to go to prison, I'll miss you…And when I get out, I will find you" (51). Her investigative project in this book takes his threat and turns it upside-down—years after the rape, she, the victim, will use her resources as a journalist to find out all she can about the rapist. She will "find" him by finding out where he is years later, learning what his story is, and attempting to discover his possible motivations, the roots of his violence. The "You" in *I Will Find You* may also be read more broadly as the meaning of the story, the sense she can make of what has happened. The resulting book—with its multiple quests—is an uneasy combination of elements, driven by a reporter's emphasis on verifiable fact as well as a memoirist's interest in the fallibility of memory and the diverse perspectives that make up a story. Indeed, though the book's subtitle (*A Reporter Investigates the Life of the Man Who Raped Her*) emphasizes fact-seeking, the "Author's Note" at the start of the book describes the Rashomon effect—each of the characters in the Akira Kurosawa film *Rashomon* tells a different version of the same violent crime, suggesting a "shorthand for the way perspective can alter memory. Neuroscientific research suggests that memory is not solid. It is capricious and highly susceptible to outside influence… The addition of trauma makes memory the ultimate unreliable narrator of our own past" (Connors, no page number).

Throughout the narrative, Connors troubles her own interest in verifiable fact as well as the ways in which facts are utilized in storytelling. Even the degree of separation in the subtitle—*A Reporter Investigates* versus *I Investigate*—may indicate some desire on Connors's part to distance herself from the

fact-bound world of journalism while simultaneously demonstrating a journalist's typical discomfort with first-person pronouns. Early in *I Will Find You*, Connors confesses to feeling out of place during the early years of her career: "I worked for a newspaper, where facts mattered and skepticism was essential, and I tried to develop the cynicism I saw in older reporters while praying no one would figure out I was a fraud who had no business being in a newsroom" (1). The reference to fraudulence calls to mind the concept of impostor syndrome, in which individuals (particularly high-achieving women and people of color) assume that they eventually will be exposed as underqualified or less-than-credible, and then work hard to forestall that fate. Like Marzano-Lesnevich in *The Fact of a Body*, Connors, in her memoir, evinces awareness that aspects of her subject position affect her approaches to telling her story and to being heard and judged credible and qualified. As a woman, she may be trusted more because she announces from the beginning, as a reporter might, her methods for fact-checking her memories of what happened. On the other hand, as a woman, she may also have good reasons for distrusting voices of authority and the institutions that demand particular types of testimonies. (Leigh Gilmore's examples of "tainted witnesses" are again relevant here—in these cases, the institutional conventions of testimony contributed to women and their stories being discredited.) As Connors's narrative develops alongside her investigation, she shows why she sometimes relies on techniques beyond the journalistic or legalistic to tell the story.

Although Connors's account of the rape seems to have been taken seriously by police, lawyers, judge, and jury—the rapist, David Francis, is arrested and eventually sentenced to 30 to 75 years in prison—Connors expresses anxieties not only about crime itself, but also its aftermath. These anxieties lead her to try to make her own sense of what happened: "I wanted this random act of rape to have meaning. I wanted to do what human beings have done for thousands of years—tell the stories that help us understand who we are and what happened in our lives to shape us" (27). The fact-finding mission on which she embarks in order to find that story and its meaning, however, opens up more questions rather than providing answers.

She revisits her personal records, as well as public records, about the investigation, arrest, and trial, and she finds that certain verifiable aspects of her story's "characters" have already been used (in the police station and courtroom) to move the system toward particular outcomes. For example, *I Will Find You* repeatedly challenges the construction of "good" or "bad" crime victims and witnesses via storytelling. The prosecuting attorney first seizes on Connors's subject position to deem her "the perfect victim… I happen to fulfill just about all the requirements of a woman accusing a man of rape, going back to before the Civil War. I am white, educated, and middle-class. I resisted…I immediately ran to report the rape" (110). The lawyer then hesitates, demanding to know "why the *hell*" she went into the darkened theater where the rape took place—a decision that taints her as a witness, to use Gilmore's phrase (Connors 112, italics in original). He also tells Connors of his plan to discredit a witness for the defense by announcing in court that she "is on welfare and her boyfriend lives with her, and that makes her ineligible for the welfare… he's cheating to win by taking advantage of her poverty" (129). Again, a verifiable fact about an individual becomes the basis for a certain kind of story about that individual, a story that works to discredit and exploit its subject.

Much of *I Will Find You* is devoted to dissecting conventional narratives about what gender, race, and socioeconomic class mean in a given time and place (specifically, Cleveland, Ohio from the 1980s to the present, but more broadly, in cities and towns all around the United States, then and now). Sometimes, the narrator focuses on her own subject position and its meanings. She considers the ways in which her gender shaped her decisions and behavior both before and after being attacked. For instance, she remembers feeling carefree, unhindered by conventional stipulations and warnings directed at women: "Never venture into the dark forest alone. At sixteen, I decided that rule did not apply to me. If a man could do it, then I should be able to do it, too. What happened to that headstrong girl? [Now] …I organized my life to avoid risk" (6). She recalls telling a therapist about her anger: "It was too large, too unruly, too honest. There was no way I, raised to be a polite girl, could roar my terrible roar, and gnash my

terrible teeth, and show my terrible claws" (103). This reference to Maurice Sendak's famous children's book *Where the Wild Things Are* connects back to the prosecutor's depiction of Connors as "perfect victim"—she was not the scantily clad, promiscuous, "asking for it," wild thing, but the reasonable, orderly, rule-following woman victimized in a senseless attack. She is a particular kind of character in *his* story, but sees *herself* as a different kind of character—one who feels guilty and afraid, one who is barely able to keep that reasonable, orderly control over her everyday life: "I turned my life into performance art. I acted normal, or as normal as I could manage, all the while living on my secret island of fear" (9). It is this guilt, in part, that drives Connors to try making sense of what happened through story. She expresses a desire to rewrite her family dynamics, to seek stability through her investigation of the crime and its aftermath as a way of apologizing for what she describes as her difficulty living with her husband and mothering her two children. She wants to tell her son and daughter her story in the hopes that they will come to understand why she "baby-proofed our entire lives, putting locks on everything, including the children themselves" (8). This is a complex guilt, but other types of guilt she addresses are even more complicated, requiring a particularly careful and vulnerable approach to narrating.

When the prosecuting attorney asks her "why the *hell*" she went into the theater where she David Francis attacked her, Connors does not really respond, but *I Will Find You* reveals her answer: "Because he was a young black man" (114). She goes on to write, "I could not allow myself to be the white woman who fears black men…My decision came out of what James Baldwin called 'that panic-stricken vacuum in which black and white, for the most part, meet in this country'" (115). The Cleveland context matters here; she writes that she and Francis lived in the same city but "might as well have lived in different countries" given the segregated neighborhoods and the many warnings she received from white friends and acquaintances that she should avoid certain areas: "'At stoplights, they smash the window and grab [your purse] before you even know what's happening.' 'They,' while never overtly identified, implied the black men and boys in the designated danger zones of the city" (26, 37). Moreover, she may (rightly) fear

victim-blaming when the prosecutor wants to know about her decisions that night, but her discussion of her response to David Francis, if troubling, pushes back against the ways in which victim-blaming "obscures the context surrounding any specific person; it is consistent with a neoliberal distortion of responsibility…neoliberalism presents an aspirational but false agency to an individual cleansed of history" (Gilmore 10-11). Here, Connors tells a story about her feelings that may upset or anger readers, but also acknowledges the ways in which she cannot be "cleansed of history" in a neoliberal sense—her status as a middle class white woman in an urban environment riven by racism affects her responses; she cannot always impose her individual will to control and be fully responsible for all situations. This becomes particularly apparent when she confesses to later, ongoing fear of, even panic responses to, unfamiliar black men she encounters in public spaces: "My fear was evil, and it was stronger than my will…I wanted, desperately, to uphold my values and judge others on the content of their character" (118). Again, this moment is not easy, comforting, or conciliatory—she even anticipates reader disgust at any "but some of my best friends are black" comment she might make to excuse or downplay this fear of racial difference (117). By the end of *I Will Find You*, she seems to recognize that her efforts to impose order and create a clean narrative with closure may be as problematic as the fear she continues to face—she sees that another, open-ended and questioning, approach may tell a story that helps her more and better expresses what happened to her readers.

As G. Thomas Couser writes in *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (2004), "[e]thical scrutiny is most urgent with regard to subjects who are disadvantaged, disempowered, or marginalized" (15). Much of *I Will Find You* is devoted to the life story of David Francis, a man from a disadvantaged background, damaged by trauma, who becomes what the aforementioned prosecuting attorney might have called the "perfect perp"—black, low socioeconomic status, unstable family background, significant criminal record. Again, Connors challenges that kind of construction; while she does not excuse or forgive Francis's crime, she does attempt to make sense of it, acknowledging the differences between her subject position and his

particularly in light of institutionalized racism and class-based disempowerment. Many of the facts about Francis's identity and background are indisputable, but the meaning to be made of these can be disputed. Rather than depicting Francis as a person destined for criminality or for martyrdom, *I Will Find You* presents (but does not fully demonize or redeem) a frightening but complicated figure. David's younger sister Laura claims that she was close to becoming his victim, that he planned to force her into prostitution. Another sister, Charlene, remembers David as "one of the nicest kids you'd want to meet… but Laura told me he grew up to be a real thug" (179). While Charlene claims that she felt her childhood was fairly normal (as she had no basis for comparison), all Francis family members interviewed by Connors seem deeply traumatized by the terrible abuses in their past: David's father allegedly hanged his sons from hooks and whipped them with belts, and beat up the women living in his home.

Connors's possible distrust of institutional insistence on facts (and of conventional methods for testifying and recording facts) can also be seen in her responses to the Francis family and the stories they tell. The family cannot or will not keep their comments within the realm of the verifiable; indeed, some relatives even point toward supernatural causes when recounting and explaining the family's traumatic experiences. Their stories—independently repeated by various family members at various times—seem to Connors to have been retold so frequently that they have become family lore, even if riddled with inaccuracies. Despite her status as professional journalist and reporter, however, she "figured that even if these and the other implausible stories weren't exactly true, after a lifetime of repetition they were true to the family. They gave a narrative shape to the chaos of their childhood" (176). In other words, she is willing to give others control over the story and to deem untraditional testimonies credible, worth sharing.

It is important to note in this context, too, that Francis, deceased since 2000, is unable to respond or "talk back to" the story Connors tells. Couser notes that "whether a biographical subject is living or dead would seem to change the ethical standards, as it does the legal rules: one cannot libel a dead person, and the right to privacy is also held to terminate with death" (6). So, it would seem that Connors has a

right to write about Francis's life as she sees fit, and that she is not in violation of any broader (if unwritten or unofficial) ethical standards. She does, however, express concerns about the ethics of her relationship to the living members of David Francis's family. When speaking with his siblings, for instance, Connors thinks about journalist Janet Malcolm's depiction of journalism—a depiction also referenced in Couser's work: reporters often benefit from "preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse" (181). She mentions her own misgivings about the journalistic enterprise but ultimately does give this family a voice. While some readers may justifiably respond to its narrator with impatience or doubt, given her confession of race-based anxieties, *I Will Find You* offers a careful, sensitive approach to storytelling that does not impose "sense" at the expense of nuance and ethical self-examination.

Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts*: Smashing Against Futility

Though Maggie Nelson is not the victim of the violent crime at the center of her "autobiography of a trial," *The Red Parts*, this book—like the other two under consideration in this essay—rethinks the idea of victimhood by exploring a crime and its aftermath through an open-ended narrative. Nelson, however, has a style and approach markedly different from that of Marzano-Lesnevich (a lawyer) and Connors (a journalist). Whereas Marzano-Lesnevich and Connors both begin with the premise of investigation, of finding out more about what happened in order to process or reflect on past events, poet and essayist Nelson begins with two epigraphs which, in their juxtaposition, problematize investigation: a reference to Luke 12:2 ("For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known") and a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche ("In all desire to know there is already a drop of cruelty.") This juxtaposition, which appears in the book before the narrative starts, suggests discovery as a threatening inevitability, and immediately implicates both writer and reader in the possible "cruelty" of the story, of wanting to tell it or wanting to hear it. The epigraphs establish *The Red Parts* (originally published in 2007

and released in paperback with a new foreword by the author in 2016) as an example as well as a deconstruction of life writing as a way of processing trauma.

In 1969, Nelson's aunt, Jane Mixer, was murdered, her body left in a cemetery and discovered by a passerby. In 1970, John Collins was convicted of the crime. Though Nelson was born after Mixer's death, she grew up knowing about her family's loss and became determined to explore the issue in her writing. Just as the resulting book of poetry, *Jane*, was about to be published, investigators re-opened the Mixer case and arrested another man, Gary Leiterman. *The Red Parts* is an account of Nelson's experiences witnessing Leiterman's trial alongside her mother and other family members. It is also an account of other issues raised in her mind by her attempts to record and analyze the trial: the ethics of writing about other people's traumatic experiences, the impulse to document one's own life, and the experience of being a young woman in a culture that constantly reminds women of their status as potential victims.

Nelson's concerns about writing Jane Mixer's story first appear early in *The Red Parts*. Nelson divulges her worries about the poetry project, which range from fear of her mother's possible responses to skepticism about her own motivations. These worries are driven by uncertainty: is it ethical for Nelson to remind family members of a story they seem intent on forgetting? Is it right to force relatives to confront the past in the hope that they will process their grief in a healthier way? Is Nelson, who never met Mixer, the most appropriate storyteller, and will she be able to represent fairly and thoroughly the people and events involved in the murder? While Nelson chooses to go through with the poetry book and later decides to write *The Red Parts* as well, her uncertainty about both projects remains central to the narrative. For example, while her mother (Mixer's sister) says she is "grateful" to Nelson for the poems about Mixer, Nelson realizes that the goal of helping her family process their grief is based on flawed, possibly even offensive, assumptions: "I had started writing *Jane* with the presumption that my family's repression of her awful death was an example of faulty grieving…When I think now about 'faulty' or 'successful' grieving, I feel only bewilderment" (10). Nelson the storyteller cannot presume to know what is right; she can only

choose how to respond to a situation for herself, not make choices for others. Ironically, it is the act of storytelling that leads her to this realization; when Nelson is unable to grieve for her family's loss in a way that satisfies the recommendations of popular psychology and self-help books, she learns that breaking silences may be as futile as the silences themselves, and that defining responses to grief as productive or unproductive is in and of itself problematic, perhaps even pointless.

As for representing Jane Mixer herself, Nelson struggles to balance her desire to give Mixer a voice with her desire to craft a narrative voice of her own—she notes that she used "poetic license" to select, edit, and reorganize quotations from Mixer's journals, and the fact that this confession appears in a chapter titled "Poetic License" suggests uneasiness, perhaps even guilt, about this decision (Nelson 145). Similarly, Nelson confesses that Mixer may not be "hers" to represent: "During the trial I try not to look at what my mother is writing down on her legal pad, but when I do, I notice that we gravitate toward the same details. And I begin to wonder if this is really her story to tell, and if I'm stealing it from her, even now" (104). Concerns about representation and motivation also apply to Nelson's descriptions of and commentary on murder suspect Gary Leiterman. Like Marzano-Lesnevich, Nelson describes herself as an opponent of the death penalty, but seems to struggle less than Marzano-Lesnevich does with her feelings about justice for the accused as well as for victims: "if your family has lost a loved one via an act of violence, you speak out so that advocates of capital punishment can't keep relying on the anger and grief of victims' families as grounds for their agenda" (79). She recalls Mixer's boyfriend at the time of the murder, a man who was briefly suspected by police and, when exonerated, expressed his hope that any future suspects' civil rights would not be violated. She even confesses her own difficulties mustering anger at Leiterman, who at the time of the trial seems more pathetic than dangerous until another possible victim of his violence comes forward.

Nelson is aware of the high stakes involved in telling a story like *The Red Parts*—the responsibility she has as storyteller to frame the narrative in a responsible way, even beyond her relationships with the

individuals involved in the murder and trial. Mixer's murder is not an isolated incident, but part of a larger pattern of violent crime against women. As such, Nelson finds her own efforts to make meaning of (or impose meaning on) this individual case potentially troubling. First, she dislikes the idea of the "cautionary tale"—like Connors, she describes enjoying the freedom of walking alone at night: "You've been told a million times that to be alone and female and in public late at night is to court disaster, so it's impossible to know if you're being bold and free or stupid and self-destructive" (129). Later, realizing her pleasure in growing media interest in the Mixer case and in her role as its chronicler, she puts herself on guard against a certain kind of savior complex: "Years of compulsion, confusion, and damage suddenly gel, right there on the steps, in the light of the camera, in the eyes of intrigued passers-by, into a story. And not just any story—a 'story of struggle and hope.' I am the hero of this story… But standing there on the steps, I feel like a phony" (174). She also finds her brush with media fame to be a cautionary tale about privilege, realizing that she does not want Jane Mixer to become a member of the "dead-white-girl-of-the-week club" when crime victims who are women of color get ignored or downplayed (174). Finally, like Marzano-Lesnevich and Connors, Nelson asks questions about the use of story to construct victims, perpetrators, legal proceedings, and—more broadly—what people conceive of as the "truth" of everyday life. In *The Fact of a Body* and *I Will Find You*, the institutional language of law and the strategic narratives used by lawyers, police officers, social workers, and journalists come together to create and circulate the "truth" of Ricky Joseph Langley and David Francis, affecting, in an Althusserian sense, how others recognize them and how they recognize themselves. Marzano-Lesnevich and Connors implicate themselves in this process. While Nelson belongs to none of the professions listed above, she examines the idea of family and self-knowledge in very similar terms:

> Conventional wisdom has it that we dredge up family stories to find out more about ourselves, to pursue that all-important goal of 'self-knowledge,' to catapult ourselves, like Oedipus, down the track that leads us to the revelation of some original crime, some

original truth… Fewer people talk about what happens when this track begins to dissolve, when the path starts to become indistinguishable from the forest." (72)

Here, Nelson adds a layer to the concerns raised by Marzano-Lesnevich and Connors; stories are complicit in the construction of "what we know," but storytelling is also incomplete, blurry, not to be fully trusted, a human drive that leads to more questions than it answers. The incomplete aspect of storytelling is both troubling (some voices are silenced, some representations are biased, but the story and its effects continue to circulate) and potentially progressive (the reminder that narratives are imperfect constructions may force us to rethink even the most cherished, least examined aspects of our worldview). Perhaps "there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed," but the drive to investigate and tell the story, no matter how well intentioned, will contain at least a "drop of cruelty."

Conclusion: On Not Knowing "What It Means"

When Nelson's mother gives her a postcard featuring the famous Joan Didion quotation from "The White Album"—"We tell ourselves stories in order to live"—Nelson remembers that the postcard does not account for Didion's fuller, more nuanced commentary on the impossibility of full understanding or reckoning through narrative, which appears at the conclusion of Didion's essay: "writing has not yet helped me to see what it means." This ongoing uncertainty, this lack of clarity, does not mean, however, that Nelson should not write, should not try: "I'm sure my mother knew how the essay ended. She chose to give me its beginning" (159). It seems, then, that the endeavor itself—seeking the possible "beginnings" for processing traumatic events (as in the cases of Marzano-Lesnevich and Connors as well as Nelson)—is worthwhile despite frustrations and misgivings. It seems, too, that leaving aspects of the narrative open-ended is the most ethical choice Nelson can make—an idea echoed in her commentary on another true crime memoir, James Ellroy's *My Dark Places*. Rather than longing to help their families—or themselves—heal, or a desire to learn the whole "truth," or reach some definable end point, Marzano-Lesnevich,

Connors, and Nelson instead focus on narrative as a complicated but necessary way of processing what is, ultimately, unknowable. The memoirs under consideration here never arrive at comfortable answers or stopping points, and while this lack of a tidy conclusion may seem frustrating, the sense of frustration can encourage reader understanding, and perhaps even what Tarana Burke calls "empowerment through empathy," by representing the confusing, overwhelming experience of trauma and forcing readers to reexamine their own viewpoints (Goodman and Gonzalez 2017). As Robillard claims of the personal essay, life writing's "insistence on challenging clichés and refusing simplistic answers reveals the ideological disciplining and the commonplace expectations we carry with us" (2017). In a cultural moment when increasing numbers are coming forward to reveal experiences of sexual assault, and as more and more high-profile people are accused of acts of violence, life writing's role in challenging the cultural assumptions embedded in narrative has become crucial.

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