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Witness, Justice, and the Silent Confessional

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WITNESS, JUSTICE, AND THE SILENT CONFESSIONAL

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ABSTRACT:

Stories depicting injustice are inherently complicated by the limitations of language. Jacques Derrida's "Circonfession" uses deconstructionist theory to describe the flawed nature of the confession in that proximity becomes problematic: those who experience are unable to authentically deliver the truth of that experience. Language also becomes an imperfect channel through which to deliver the truth; the truth lies in both a person's ability to bring meaning to individual experience, but also, in an audience's ability to interpret that experience; both sides of the conversation are challenged through an imperfect channel of communication. Therefore, silence of human behavior may very well be the ultimate exposure of injustice: what is unsaid becomes more telling, body language, unique word choice, and the ways people arrange their bodies. Mary Rowlandson's Narrative and Edward P. Jones; novel The Known World both explore experiences in which language becomes more of a fallacy, failing to directly expose an unjust world, despite the authors; attempts in using language as a means to expose an unjust truth. Ultimately, language indirectly exposes injustice by being descriptive of a hierarchical system.

Authors attempt to seek justice by writing about the marginalized experience. Texts such as Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative and Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* provide a voice for the voiceless by not only describing the marginalized experience, but also aiming to expose the root of that injustice. This essay explores how a text exposing injustice of any oppressed group has a great deal of potential in reaching a just end; however, the system of language complicates an ultimately just outcome. Language is inherently flawed because it derives from a system flawed by hierarchy; too often language is used as a tool or weapon to further a personal agenda. Therefore, the silence that surrounds words paradoxically exposes more injustice than the words themselves.

Those who bear witness to unjust experiences will provide flawed testimony. First of all, the nature of confessing is flawed and so the truth is tainted. Theorist Jacques Derrida discusses the problematic nature of a witness seeking justice through confession. In the article "Quoted Confessions: Augustine's *Confessiones* and Derrida's 'Circonfession,'" Johann Schumm introduces Derrida's belief. Derrida states there is a "limitation of self-availability in the context of confession" (Schumm 732). People are incapable of being honest with their experience and therefore, in being "unavailable," will be unable to speak the truth of their experience. This is partially due to the descriptive nature of language itself. We are bound by the language we have access to when defining our experiences to ourselves. Schumm writes, there is an "impossibility of autobiography -- i.e., the impossibility to authentically speak about oneself" because authenticity is a "linguistic construct" (730). This statement seems to agree with Derrida's

argument, that there is not much value in the direct confession themselves, and it helps to explain why. The weakness partially lies in the witness: he is incapable of speaking his whole truth because he is unable to use language to perfectly define his experience. Weakness lies also in the act of speaking itself: language alone is too flawed to use as a tool of truth because in addition to authenticity being a "construct," language itself is a "construct." The initial complication in exposing injustice through storytelling seems to be the speaker's inability to define the truth of the experience to both himself and his audience, given the limitations of language. Therefore, accounts of injustice are complicated by, not freed by, language.

The paradoxical nature of a deconstructionist reading exists in seeking truth through the act of storytelling, and whether justice can be achieved through those stories. According to Derrida in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice,* "a deconstructive interrogation...bring[s] out the paradoxes of values" (8). The values at play here are truth versus fiction in storytelling. Understanding the truth of the witness' experience is imperative to seeking justice. The truth lies somewhere in the witness' testimony, but it also rests somewhere in the audience's ability to understand that testimony. However, language is complex; much becomes lost in translation between witness and world. In order to seek truth, we must speak the same language. According to Derrida, there is a relationship between language and justice, but language is a barrier to break through in order to reach justice. Derrida acknowledges that complication of language. He writes language is an "always possible but always imperfect compromise between two idioms" but then proposes it is "just" to speak the language of the "majority" (5). This position raises several questions in regard to seeking justice through sharing stories. If language is an "imperfect compromise," where does truth lie and can truth even be reached? Additionally, in shifting to the "majority," a power dynamic is introduced. What truth is then compromised in shifting one's language to the language of the majority? Is that truth now tainted with bias? Schumm exposes Derrida's own counterpoint: there is an inherent fallacy within language, and therefore, it might be an impossibility to even speak the same language (731). Language is defined by its interpretation; therefore, truth and justice are defined by the people who both hear and speak it. If language is an inherently problematic way to define an experience, there is no authentic story to confess or way to hear it.

It is up to the audience bearing witness to the testimony to seek truth in moments of silence. Jacques Derrida came up with the idea of "circumfession" (Schumm 732). Speaking about the details that surround the main truth is more valuable than confessing itself, because of the inability to define one's truth. There is also a significance to silence itself. Silence has been studied in the context of communication for hundreds of years "at least partly in recognition of the futility of any attempt in language to express adequately the transcendent perfection and splendor of the supreme" (Franke 622). Even when not in the context of theology, this statement proves that language has the inability to appropriately convey complex ideas. For example, Holocaust poet Paul Celan "lends language to silence in order to give voice to the unspeakable" (Franke 622). In his expertise, the injustice suffered during the Holocaust is too difficult to convey to an audience who has not suffered the same experience. Again, there is a "futility" that exists in the accurate expression of language. And when speaking on his relationship with the poet Paul Celan, Derrida recalled "silence prevailed over any kind of dialogue, conversation, or interaction" (Crockett 61). To suggest that silence "prevailed" suggests silence is superior to dialogue. Perhaps this is because it provides opportunity for true listening. Author William Franke agrees with the significance of examining silence in communication. He writes of the "[w]estern tradition of apophatic discourse, a discourse about what cannot be said," stating "the movement of transcending all linguistically

defined sense or meaning is what characterizes apophasis"; "language necessarily withdraws from whatever it posits or intends" (Franke 621). To say it is "necessary" for language to withdraw because then it will then "transcend" suggests words themselves imprison the experience. Therefore, if the problem lies in defining the truth directly through language, studying the silence that surrounds the truth should reveal the truth.

Even though language proves problematic in both understanding and exposing injustice, the truth language does expose in those moments of silence are systems inherently flawed by power. Justice is ultimately complicated by the flawed nature of the system in which it exists. Derrida posits that "studies of deconstructive style should culminate in the problematic of law, of law and justice" (7). Derrida acknowledges the "problematic" nature of justice, and that deconstruction seeks to expose *that* truth. Therefore, it is necessary to first understand the very troubled nature of justice itself when considering whether or not a text works to achieve justice, as well as the reason why justice is troubled. Derrida questions the paradoxical nature of deconstructionism and justice. He writes, "deconstruction doesn't in itself permit any just action, any just discourse on justice, but instead constitutes a threat to *droit*, to law or right, and ruins the very possibility of justice" (4); he then states that "[l]egality is a construct of the powerful, not of justice" (qtd. in Glendinning 188). Justice is interpreted through the law, but its framing is dependent upon a system of power, and power systems are themselves unjust. Therefore, a corrupt power dynamic is what complicates justice. Does this make the act of seeking justice through texts pointless? According to Derrida, texts about a "drive for power and the paradoxes of power... [are] obliquely discourses on justice" (7). Therefore, it appears as though what needs to be studied first when considering the relationship between deconstructionist texts and justice are power dynamics at play between people. This, too, is something that can be studied through the imperfection of language.

Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* is one testimonial which captures the fallacy of language. Throughout her testimony, she quotes the Book of Job in what seems to be an attempt to form a connection with God and with her Puritan audience. However, the way she utilizes language results in an inauthentic testimony. Based on deconstruction theory, what she is doing in confessing through Job is actually confessing "the others' confession" (Schumm 731), in this case, Job's confession. The paradox alive here is that by attempting to form a connection to Job (and God and her religious audience) she is actually distancing herself from all of them, and this makes her confessional faulty at best; it is inauthentic, and she lacks the ability to seek any justice from sharing her account. In fact, she proves over and over to manipulate the truth for her own moral gain. Rowlandson frames her narrative with an immediate comparison to the Book of Job, and this is a purposeful attempt to gain agency for her experience. In utilizing Job's story as agency through which to speak, Rowlandson not only borrows someone else's story, but she ultimately provides an exaggerated perception of herself. Therefore, she has both an inauthentic perception of her experience and provides an inauthentic experience for her audience. Her testimony is flawed because she is unable to be honest with herself. In attempting to rationalize some of her unjust behavior, ultimately, her comparison proves to be hypocritical.

Rowlandson is ultimately inauthentic in her firsthand account of captivity because she interprets scripture to benefit herself emotionally. This proves she is unable to access her truth and also furthers the argument that language is too problematic to reach a just conclusion. She manipulates scripture to rationalize her unjust behavior. Rowlandson references the Book of Job

during her experience in The Eighteenth Remove, but she frames her experience in a way to manipulate her audience. She recalls:

> Then I went to another wigwam, where there were two of the English children; the squaw was boiling horses feet; then she cut me off a little piece and gave one of the English children a piece also. Being very hungry I had quickly eaten up mine, but the child could not bite it, it was so tough and sinewy, but lay sucking, gnawing, chewing and slabbering of it in the mouth and hand. Then I took it of the child, and eat it myself, and savory it was to my taste. (Rowlandson The Eighteenth Remove)

Upon first glance, Rowlandson is acting out of a state of both desperation and logic. She admits to being "very hungry" and states the children "could not bite [the food]"; however, these statements are simply a way to frame her unjust behavior. She then "took [the food] of the child" and not only that, but in writing the food as "savory," she admits to enjoying it. Here is one example of Rowlandson acting cruel and unjust: she literally stole food from a child. However, her reference to (and interpretation of) Job soon after allows her to both rationalize her cruelty and absolve personal responsibility. She writes in The Eighteenth Remove, "Then I may say as Job 6.7, 'The things that my soul refused to touch are as my sorrowful meat.' Thus the Lord made that pleasant refreshing, which another time would have been an abomination" (Rowlandson). Both in spending time describing the food in an unappealing way, as "tough and sinewy," and then likening it to "sorrowful meat," she rationalizes why that food is not worthy in the first place. Rowlandson then puts power into the hands of God here. The act she is committing is detestable, but "The Lord made it." She has used her interpretation of language to absolve herself of moral responsibility. Part of this rests in the fluidity of language: Rowlandson is able to interpret it freely because there is no universal truth in language itself; communication is formed as it is both spoken and understood. However, her use of language proves she is lying to herself as well as to her audience.

Rowlandson uses language as a tool of manipulation. She manipulates her experience in an attempt to present herself as the solely oppressed, however, in the circumfession surrounding her account, she ironically uncovers the unjust treatment of the truly marginalized population: the Wampanoag. She continually uses storytelling to both exaggerate her oppression and frame the Wampanoag as inhuman. Her intention is to illustrate herself as the oppressed captive is clearly illustrated in comparing herself to a suffering Job throughout her narrative. She continually uses hyperbolic inhuman words to reference her captors, such as "ravenous bears" (Rowlandson Introduction), "barbarous creatures" (Rowlandson The Thirteenth Remove), and "black creatures in the night which made the place a lively resemblance of hell" (Rowlandson The First Remove). She purposefully uses language to manipulate her Christian audience, especially by presenting her captors as inhuman or demonic "creatures" from "hell." But by using such hyperbolic language, she provides a biased account of the Wampanoag for an ultimately biased audience. Rowlandson ignores moments of morality from her captors in favor of self-aggrandizing hyperbole, one significant being when they buried her dead child (The Third Remove). Rowlandson instead chooses hyperbole wisely, to describe in more detail moments she suffers rather than moments her captors are just, kind, or moral. Rowlandson also gives credit to God for any good that comes, even if that good was at the hands of the Wampanoag. For example, she writes "And, indeed, quickly the Lord answered in some measure my poor prayer" (Rowlandson The Third Remove). When she fails to recognize humane moments in her captors, and instead, attributes any kindness to God, Rowlandson ensures her audience will also fail to see morality within her captors. In her book *Captivity and Sentiment*, Michelle Burnham writes the following about Mary Rowlandson's

account: "The Puritan Englishwoman's extended habitation within the radically alien culture of her Indian captors necessarily makes her narrative a history of transculturation and of a subjectivity under revision" (Chapter 1). Ultimately, Rowlandson is unable to present an unbiased truth because she herself is biased towards her "alien" captors. By breaking through the language itself and reading into that which surrounds her words, in this case, Rowlandson's fears and biases, justice is more possible because she reveals the true injustice; it is not her oppression as a captive, but rather, her unfair representation of a group simply because they are foreign to her.

Rowlandson uses language in the Book of Job to manipulate her audience into sharing her biases. In doing so, she complicates any opportunity for justice. In The Thirteenth Remove, Rowlandson recounts how "[a] squaw...threw a handful of ashes in mine eyes. I thought I should have been quite blinded, and have never seen more" and in the same breath, she references Job:

> All my inward friends abhorred me: and they whom I loved are turned against me.
> My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.
> Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me.
> Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh? (19.19-22)

Rowlandson's use of the Book of Job here is to set herself up as a victim to her audience and to ensure they equate the Wampanoag as the Devil. In referencing the Book of Job, she both makes a hyperbolic statement both about her victimhood: her situation is as desperate as Job's and furthers her comparison of the Wampanoag to the Devil: they test her faith. However, Rowlandson also interprets the language of scripture to communicate her victimhood to a specifically Christian audience. Those who hear her testimony have no choice but to equate Rowlandson with Job, the Indians as the devil, and to view themselves as the gracious God with the ability to provide her with some relief. Rowlandson's story fails to address the real issues behind the captivity itself, which was a "[tool] of economic negotiation" due to the "growing Euro-American hegemony in the region, including diminished land, contests over political power, and property disputes" (Burnham Chapter 1). The real injustice surrounding Rowlandson's captivity narrative lies not in her mistreatment, not even in her negative portrayal of the Wampanoag, but in a complex history of colonization, greed, and the inhumane treatment of indigenous peoples. Her narrative functions like propaganda to further a damaging rhetoric and therefore, it complicates any opportunity for justice because of its damaging implications.

Language can also be descriptive of hierarchy. Similar to Rowlandson's account, it is through the complex nature of language that Edward P. Jones' novel *The Known World* reveals a corrupt hierarchy. The language Moses uses compared to Caldonia's language presents a power dynamic indicative of class disparity; they speak different languages because they reside in separate worlds. Moses portrays a more colloquial dialect, which serves to reveal the working-class world from which he comes and from which Caldonia is not a part of, when he says, 'Lookin at every nail, as I member. Weighin every board, every board of this room" (Jones 272). He reverts to the vernacular when he drops the consonants of some of his words; he pronounces the word "remember" as "member," he drops the "g" in the words "weighing" and "standing," and later in the conversation he pronounces the word "that's" as "thas" (Jones 272). The effect of the language indicates his lack of formal education and illustrates a class distinction between him and Caldonia; it hints at Moses and Caldonia being from two different groups of people as their language simply does not sound the same. Whereas Moses drops consonants and shortens words, Caldonia does not speak with the same dialect, but rather, she punctuates clearly and refrains from speaking in the

vernacular. She asks him, "Moses, you won't forget him, will you?" (Jones 272). They clearly reside in two different worlds, and this is indicated through their language. The language disparity also proves they exist in separate spaces within a hierarchy: Moses below Caldonia.

Similar to Rowlandson, it is not in the story itself, but in the "circumfession" surrounding the words that more significant truth comes forward. The romantic scene between Moses and Caldonia on page 272 illustrates how truth comes from the silence in language. Caldonia gives the power over to Moses by remaining silent and asking him to speak: "'Tell me what he did,' she said, leaning back and closing her eyes" (Jones 272). Caldonia commands Moses to follow an order here: "tell me," she states, and her tone alone exposes her higher status when compared to Moses. Her body language similarly displays her higher status as she "lean[s] back and clos[es] her eyes" in comfort and security. It is not her words that are significant here so much as it is how she says the words and uses her body language to communicate. Caldonia's words ironically provide Moses with agency because he is given the platform to speak, despite him having to obey her will to speak. In responding, he is able to gain a bit of status, not only in having a platform to speak, but also in showing Caldonia, she can trust him. He uses language cues to narrow a power gap in this relationship. Although Caldonia's words reveal her need for human connection, her silence in this scene reveals something greater: her ability to give power over to someone who does not typically have any in their relationship. The only other time Caldonia speaks during this conversation is to ask a question and it aids in the reorganization of their power dynamic. Caldonia asks, "Moses, you won't forget him, will you?" (Jones 273). The language here closes an emotional gap between the two of them. She equalizes their status in addressing Moses by name, in asking him to share memories with her, and in seeking his approval through her question. Additionally, the way she forms the language reveals just as much information about her as the words themselves. Whereas the first time she spoke she was commanding Moses to follow an order, here she asks a question, and that interrogation illustrates a shift in power; that she no longer is giving orders to her slave but is treating him as more of an equal in their conversation. Overall, the way language is used in this scene exposes a hierarchy, and the sharing of language eventually equalizes Moses and Caldonia. Uniquely, it is the silence of language that allows for the justice to incur: the temporary suspension of a corrupt hierarchy, which suggests hierarchy is not permanent.

This scene between Caldonia and Moses initially reads as a tender one; however, similar to Rowlandson's own manipulative use of language, digging beneath the surface reveals the manipulative effects of using language for personal gain. Several examples portray how Moses manipulates language to gain power. He reads Caldonia's language cues, both verbal and nonverbal, and understands what she wants. However, he also understands what he can get from using it. Once he realizes sharing that language allows him a small bit of power, he lies the next day in order to gain even more access to what he truly wants: a higher position within the hierarchy. All Caldonia has asked for is to share stories of Henry, so Moses "weaved the most imaginative story yet" (Jones 273) and as a result of this, Moses is able to fully encroach on her physical territory and he gains status from it. Moses makes a solid effort to appeal to Caldonia emotionally in order to right his hierarchical injustice. This scene presents the themes of taking ownership of personal suffering and using that suffering to manipulate a higher status; thus, a strong connection is formed between Moses, Mary Rowlandson, and the biblical Job. Throughout the Book of Job, Job questions his ill experiences and pleads with God to provide him some relief from his suffering, and he does this in a verbal, emotionally manipulative appeal. In 6.4, Job blames God for his misfortunes, stating "[F]or the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me." Job exposes God as an

unjust one because Job feels as though he is suffering. Job's vulnerable need for justice cannot be ignored in this circumstance, and similarly, Moses' lack of status moves him to pursue justice for himself, in similarly manipulative ways. Moses, too, looks towards someone with more power than he has to right the suffering in his life. Job's pleas to God for justice read in a manipulative manner; in exposing God as an unjust one, the desired outcome would be God feeling guilty for having harmed Job and thus improving Job's life. Similarly, in lying to Caldonia, Moses uses his language to appeal to the emotions of Caldonia in an attempt to improve his suffering. Both Job and Moses see the relief of suffering as just.

Nonverbal language proves superior to verbal language in rising above corrupt hierarchy. What begins as gaining emotional proximity transfers into gaining physical proximity as nonverbal communication takes over, and this indicates the value in listening not to the words themselves, but to that which surrounds them. The body language in this scene between Caldonia and Moses reveals much more truth about power dynamic than any words would. First, Caldonia "put[s] her face in her hands, crying" to which Moses' initial reaction proves a power dynamic is still in play. He believes someone will think he "harmed their mistress" (Jones 272). His verbal and nonverbal reaction, therefore, serves two purposes: to gain more emotional proximity by closing the physical space and to selfishly ensure he will not be punished by appeasing Caldonia. He wishes to equalize the hierarchy and his reaction reveals he lacks power in their relationship. Moses "went to her slowly and knelt down. 'I won't forget Marse Henry, Missus'" (Jones 273). He closes in on her space physically, testing his boundaries by moving "slowly," and he shows empathy by engaging with her question. Once he, again, shares this emotional space through both his words and his actions, the power dynamic between the two characters appears to be temporarily equalized. His actions reveal he respects Caldonia and that he is still beneath her: he "kne[els down,]" almost as though he is still serving her. The way in which the two characters share verbal and nonverbal language in this scene illustrates the fragility of human-imposed boundaries. The two characters simply choose to move across the old boundaries freely, closing in on the space even more, eventually touching one another. Jones writes, "[t]hey stood and held on to each other, and then, as if sharing the same thoughts, they separated and she put her hand to his chest, counting the beats of his heart" (273). The emotional intimacy of this scene has allowed Moses and Caldonia to transcend both physical and class boundaries; they are one, they speak the same language, they are physically aligned in a moment of passion. Eventually all verbal language, the thing that first separated them, has gone away and been replaced with only physical "lovemaking," the house being "very quiet" (Jones 274). Once again, the nonverbal language is more revealing of the power dynamic between a slave and his master. They have become one body together in the end; temporarily there is no longer a hierarchy evident. Uniquely, what is missing at the end of this scene is spoken language. The absence of language exposes an absence of boundaries. Paradoxically, language, something that typically forms a connection between people, is something people must transcend in order to become equals.

In attempting to expose injustice, authors invariably expose the flawed nature of language. Despite being an equalizer, unjust power dynamics are at play behind much of the spoken word. The result is that language becomes more of a barrier than a freedom. Those who suffer injustice must rise above the boundaries of language in an attempt to remain authentic to the truth, but they ultimately fail. As imperfect human beings navigate a corrupt hierarchical system, they will inevitably use language as a both a tool for personal gain and a weapon against a perceived adversary. Uniquely, language expressed silently, in both the body language and in the intention behind the words, does a great deal more to expose true injustice; The imperfect nature of language

remains a barrier to break through, however, in literature paints a necessary picture of the complex human condition which most definitely deserves to be explored.

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