Maternal Affect and Journalistic Agency: Features by Three Pulitzer Prize-Winning Women Journalists

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I. Are Women More Empathetic than Men?

I will begin by asking a controversial question: “Are women more empathetic than men?” At the risk of sounding essentialist, I will iterate that the truth-claims of such a stereotypical assumption has been empirically and meta-analytically investigated in psychological research, with conflicting, and sometimes inconclusive results (Simon-Thomas; Mestre *et al*). In literary discourse, such an assumption that women are more empathetic, and that, by extension, women’s writing is affective and emotional, is validated and valorised by many women writers and feminist critics as part of their efforts towards empowering women.

Helene Cixious, proponent of *l’ecriture feminine,* for instance, in “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976), calls out to women to “write your self. Your body must be heard”, in order to re-inhabit and reclaim their bodies and selves (880). Apparently, this self-focused approach of women’s writing contradicts the basic premise of journalistic writing, which is to write about events and persons other than the self. Journalistic writing, which, even at the beginning of the twentieth century was exclusively male writing, is writing for effect, not just affect: it commoditises and centralises writing that is “newsworthy” (Fleming et al).

In a way, the body that Cixious urges the woman writer to inscribe is more than her own individual body, it is the collective body of all women everywhere. Women’s writing must turn inward to reclaim her own self, and it must also turn outward, to engage with other women’s selves. Which means, therefore, that women should, “write about women and bring women into writing” (Cixious 875). Cixious goes one step further and categorises this affective ability of women writers to reach out and empathise as

explicitly maternal: "A woman is never far from 'mother'…. There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink" (881).

This paper attempts to situate the writing of some women journalists, winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism (Feature Writing), in the intersection of maternal writing and journalistic writing. Writing about children with a difference, these features show a clear connect of purpose and potential between affective, maternal women's writing and effective journalistic writing. Contextualized against Cixious's reiterated emphasis on "what it [women's writing] will do", these features demonstrate how "true texts of women—female-sexed texts" can combine affect and agency to empower and engender change (875; 877).

II. Alice Steinbach: A Mother of Unusual Vision

Alice Steinbach won the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism Feature Writing in 1985, for her feature "A Boy of Unusual Vision", which appeared in *The Baltimore Sun Magazine,* 27 May 1984. The boy in question is 10-year old Calvin Stanley, who has been blind since birth because of congenital glaucoma. The story opens directly: without pity but with empathy:

> First, the eyes: They are large and blue, a light, opaque blue, the colour of a robin's egg. And if, on a sunny spring day, you look straight into these eyes – eyes that cannot look back at you – the sharp, April light turns them pale, like the thin blue of a high, cloudless sky. (1984, 3).

The detailed emphasis on colour might seem unsympathetic in a narrative about a blind boy, but actually it is an insightful and empathic connect to the interior life of the boy:

He listens as only he can listen, then: "Orange used to be my favourite colour but now it's blue", he announces…. He is a boy who has a lot of pictures stored in his head, retrievable images which have been fashioned for him by the people who love him – by family and friends and teachers

who have painstakingly and patiently gone about creating a special world for Calvin's inner eye to inhabit. (1984, 3).

Steinbach's feature had been much praised, analysed and emulated by journalism schools, and the *Neiman Storyboard* at Harvard cites it as a "masterful example of how a journalist can use literary techniques – scene, dialogue, revelatory detail, character development, the top and bottom rungs of the ladder of abstraction – to elevate nonfiction from craft to art" (Banaszynski, n.p.). Recreating Calvin's world through effective intimacy journalistic techniques, Steinbach describes a network of empathy and support: "teachers, vision specialists and mobility instructors" who teach him in a regular public school with sighted children, and also special skills like independent travel and Opticon (Steinbach 9). There is Lois Sivits, his "favourite teacher", who is also blind and who teaches him braille (12). There is his policeman father: "They go to the movies together and they tell each other they're handsome" (5).

However, at the centre of Calvin's life is his mother, Ethel Stanley: "[h]e moves in the sighted world with trust and faith and the unshakeable confidence of a child whose mother has always been there for him" (7). Inheriting a maternal legacy of nurturing from her own "wonderful mother", Ethel Stanley got over her "awful" guilt at her son's blindness by pouring "her mothering love into Calvin" (7). She is both firm ("You have to learn how to deal with this") and encouraging:

> You are *seeing* Calvin. You're just using your hands instead of your eyes. But you're seeing. And remember, there is *nothing* you can't do (3; 5). By reaching out to Calvin "in different ways", she is the one who inspires him to cycle, to play baseball, to dream of being a pianist or a computer programmer – metaphorically, to fly. As Cixious says, Flying is woman's gesture – flying in language and making it fly (1976, 887).

Steinbach's story is impactful because of her efficacy in juxtaposing journalistic observation with maternal emotion, by blending the accurately-observed details with long, heart-tugging quotes. Steinbach is able to reach

out to this ‘other’ world of the blind boy – a child with a physical, congenital difference – and his mother and maternal surrogates because she (herself a divorced mother of two sons) engages so deeply with her own self. As she says in her memoir, *The Miss Dennis School of Writing and Other Lessons from a Woman’s Life*: “But one thing remained constant: My struggle to pay attention to my own inner life; to hear a voice that I would recognize finally as my own. Not only in my writing but in my life (1996, 12)”.

III. Sonia Nazario: Maternal Commitment to Immigrant Children

Sonia Nazario won the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism Feature Writing in 2003, for her feature “Enrique’s Journey”, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times,* 29 September 2002. Enrique is a Honduran boy whose mother, Lourdes, leaves his sister, Belky, and him, when he is five years old, as she goes to the United States as an illegal immigrant to find work. This story, too, is centered around the mother-child relationship, with the other characters mostly peripheral, although important to Enrique’s life. Nazario begins her story with the impending separation, and the maternal desperation and guilt that accompanies Lourdes’s forced choice to leave her child:

> The boy does not understand. His mother is not talking to him. She will not even look at him. Enrique has no hint of what she is going to do. Lourdes knows. She understands, as only a mother can, the terror she is about to inflict, the ache Enrique will feel and finally the emptiness. (Nazario 2002, 1).

Regularly sending money back home, she never saves enough to come back. Shunted between various grandmothers, uncles and aunts, he gradually spirals downwards, stops going to the church, drops out of school and sinks deeper into substance abuse, haunted by a deep sense of abandonment. Even as his mother keeps sending money for him and his sister, he is fixated on one goal: “I want to be with you” (2002, 1). As a fifteen year old hooked to glue-sniffing, Enrique realizes that his road to redemption is that “he simply has to go find his mother” (2002, 6). On 2

March 2000, eleven years after his mother left Honduras, he too leaves on his “dangerous odyssey to reunite with his mother” (2002).

Tracing Enrique’s emotional journey till the point where it impels his physical journey, Nazarion recreates the trauma of millions of “mobility orphans”, left behind every year in countries like Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Sri Lanka, as their mothers are forced to migrate to more prosperous economies in search of jobs that will support their families back home. In an article in the *United Nations Chronicle*, Nazario recounts how migration is inscribed in her own personal history:

I come at this issue with migration in my blood—my grandparents fled Syria and Poland for Argentina; my parents migrated from Argentina to the United States—and as someone who has written about the issue for nearly three decades. From my perspective in the United States, I see it as an issue with many shades of gray, with winners and losers. (2013a, n.p.).

Nazario’s empathy extends to both the mother and the children. She represents the mothers’ act as an act of love, not selfishness: “To them, leaving was the ultimate act of love; their sacrifice meant their children might eat and perhaps even study past the third grade” (2013a, n.p.).

Nazario also physically re-traces, “step by step” the perilous odyssey that these mobility orphans undertake, “around 100,000 every year”, journeying alone on the tops of freight trains through Mexico to try and enter United States, falling off to evade detection, falling prey to criminal narco-gangs; some dying, some surviving, many getting deported. As she writes, “Enrique tries eight times to get through Mexico—braving 122 days and 12,000 miles”. Nazario locates the crux of this journey made by the mobility orphans in the desire to find the mother:

Many, including Enrique, begin to idealize their mothers. In their absence, these mothers become larger than life. Although the women struggle to pay rent and eat in the United States, in the imaginations of their children

back home they become deliverance itself, the answer to every problem. Finding them becomes the quest for the Holy Grail. (2002, 1)

Sonia Nazario's life-long involvement with the trauma of these different children can be read as maternal commitment. She has written incisively about "The Orphans of Addiction" (1997) and "The Plight of an Immigrant Family" (2013). She expanded her Pulitzer-winning feature into a best-selling book, "perhaps the most widely read book about immigrants in the United States today", which later came out in multiple translations and version, including one for young adults (2013a, n.p.). In her maternal commitment to Enrique, she also did a follow-up to his journey, narrativising his life post-migration in the United States. Her "Update on the Family"(2011) is centered around Enrique, reunited with his mother, his wife and children, and on Enrique's determination that despite his continuing struggles with his drug habit, he will never allow his family to disintegrate and suffer the way he himself had.

Most importantly, however, Nazario's maternal commitment has led to her activism. Her solution to the problem of mobility orphans is based on her empathy:

The migrants I met in Central America and along the train tracks in Mexico stressed that if they could stay at home with all they love… they wouldn't leave…. We must bring everything to this task: more microloans to help women start businesses, trade policies that give preference to goods from these countries and help promoting education for girls…. What if, instead, each developed country took on the task of job creation for women in the handful of countries that send them immigrants? (2013, n.p).

Nazario goes beyond writing: she is also part of the Kids in Need of Defense, a non-profit which provides pro-bono attorneys to unaccompanied immigrant children. It is this faith and hope that "everything will change" that Nazario's writing is imbued with, and which lifts it above mere reportage into a call for action (Cixious 1976, 881).

IV.Lane DeGregory: Indictment of a Failed Mother

Lane DeGregory won the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism Feature Writing in 2008, for her feature "The Girl in the Window", which appeared in the *St. Petersburg Times,* 31 July 2008. The girl is the almost-seven-years old Danielle, the "rarest and most pitiable of creatures, a feral child", who is forced to stay in a tiny closet-like room, unfed, unclothed, uneducated and uncared for, despite having a physically-able mother and brothers who stay in the same flat (DeGregory 2008, n.p.). After being glimpsed at the window by a neighbour, the city detectives and social workers intervene and take the girl away to the pediatric intensive care unit. In the narrative, the "window" opens to give a shocking full view of the feral child:

First he saw the girl's eyes: dark and wide, unfocused, unblinking. She wasn't looking at him so much as through him. She lay on a torn, moldy mattress on the floor. She was curled on her side, long legs tucked into her emaciated chest. Her ribs and collarbone jutted out; one skinny arm was slung over her face; her black hair was matted, crawling with lice. Insect bites, rashes and sores pocked her skin. Though she looked old enough to be in school, she was naked — except for a swollen diaper. (DeGregory 2008, n.p.)

A victim of the "the most outrageous case of neglect I've ever seen", Danielle cannot talk, cannot cry, cannot nod to indicate yes or no, cannot even make eye contact: she is diagnosed with "environmental autism" and will remain severely disabled for life (2008, n.p.).

DeGregory's narrative deliberately absents the mother till the very end, paralleling her deliberate absence from her daughter's life. The court orders the child to be put into foster care, and the mother forsakes any claim to the child in lieu of not being prosecuted for criminal negligence. Danielle is legally adopted by Bernie and Diane Lierow, and very gradually starts a new life adjusting to her new family.

In Part Three of the narrative, the mother is re-introduced, because a failed mother is a monstrous other that attracts readers' curiosity as much as she repels and outrages.

The indictment of the mother is obvious, though understated:

> She's out there somewhere, looming over Danielle's story like a ghost. To Bernie and Diane, Danielle's birth mother is a cipher, almost never spoken of. The less said, the better. As far as they are concerned Danielle was born the day they found her. And yet this unimaginable woman is out there somewhere, most likely still on probation, permanently unburdened of her daughter, and thinking — what? What can she possibly say? Nothing. Not a thing. But none of this makes any sense without her. (2008, n.p.).

Michelle Crockett, the biological mother, claims that "part of my heart died that day" when Danielle was taken away, she has Danielle's photograph hanging in her mobile home, and she keeps asking after her daughter. Yet, to DeGregory it seems that she is making a plea, spinning out a "story", feeling "wronged" instead of assuming responsibility. DeGregory is subtly normative: the chain-smoking habit of the mother, the fact that she would regularly leave her children unattended to go off on trysts with a long line of male partners is reiterated to emphasise that "she is not fit to be a mother" (2008, n.p).

In the follow-up to Danielle's story, "Three years later", DeGregory, demonstrating maternal commitment, tracks the slow advances Danielle has made under the love and attention of her adoptive parents: she can understand instructions, is learning to toilet-train herself, can make a few sounds, and most importantly, can hug her family back when they hug her (2011). DeGregory's prize-winning story has had an enormous impact, it was read by over one million people online, strangers donated over 10,000 dollars for Dani, the Lierows appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show, and also wrote a book about her. In the update, the biological mother is absent, but it is a sinister absence:

Six years after that detective found Dani, four years since the Lierows adopted her, she still can't talk. She has spent as much time away from her birth mother as she did with her. Maybe, even with constant conversation and professional therapy, you still can't rejuvenate parts of the brain that were never stimulated.(2011, n.p.)

V. The Maternal as a Gender-Neutral Category

The three texts selected above centralise the maternal relationship, or its absence, and they explore the nuances of maternal contact—in both senses, as touch and communication. Read together, the three texts support the two hypotheses that this paper proposes.

The first is that women journalists can create tremendous impact, and even initiate change, through their unique use of journalistic agency and maternal affect, an affect that includes empathy and commitment to the causes of children with a difference. This is demonstrated even more inextricably in the Pulitzer-nominated feature, "Never Let Go" by Kelly Benham in 2012, when she transforms her personal narrative of mothering a severely premature baby into an exploration of the cost and ethics of extreme medical intervention. Benham's feature is written on the maternal body and the child's body, and it moves through the body to question and change the context where these bodies are embedded.

The second hypotheses which this paper proposes is that the maternal is not a pre-determined, gender-based category. As was evident in Dani's story, mothering is not always best done by women. Lane DeGregory foregrounds the special relationship that Dani shares with her adopted father, Bernie Lierow, in both the original and the follow-up features:

She looked at her dad, lifted her hands and cupped his chin. Then the girl who had gone so long without love, whom everyone worried might never love, leaned close. And licked her dad's beard.(2011, n.p.).

Psychological research also corroborates that empathy is gender-neutral:

So while some research suggests women are more empathic than men, perhaps this is the only definitive conclusion we can draw: "Almost all humans, regardless of sex, have the basic ability to cultivate empathy" (Simon-Thomas 2007).

When Cixious says, "Women are bisexual", she is foregrounding the empathetic ability of women's writing, the ability to include and embrace differences (1976, 884). Men too can be empathically bisexual if they go beyond phallogocentrism. In the two stories of trauma, Enrique's and Dani's, childcare was thrust on the woman alone, whereas in Calvin's story of triumph, nurturing was a collaborative effort by parents of both genders. Extending the feeling of empathy and commitment to define the category of the maternal, the paper concludes with the suggestion that children's nurture should be a shared responsibility irrespective of gender. This seems to be the common message linking the three Pulitzer-winning features discussed above.

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