

*Book Review*

## Revised Consent

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*Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*

by Natasha Trethewey

Ecco/Harper Collins, 2020, 201 pp., \$27.99, cloth

*Girlhood*

by Melissa Febos

Bloomsbury, 2021, 336 pp., \$27, cloth

*White Magic*

by Elissa Washuta

Tin House Books, 2021, 432 pp., \$26.95, cloth

On a late pandemic morning in Chicago I walk around alone, in the Loop, our downtown district, named for the circling L train but also, to me, evoking a kind of experience, the loops of repetition, rumination, perhaps, but also, perhaps, captivity. This summer, unlike last summer's peak pandemic time, there are a good number of people down here, but not as many as there used to be on a typical summer morning. Before pandemic-era Zoom work meetings and medical telepointments, I was down here every week or so, and in the summer I spent hours in the shady corner of a restaurant patio on Michigan Avenue, gone now, another pandemic casualty, but then with my laptop open, reading and writing essays, or

responding to work emails, looking up now and then at the sidewalk parade, hardly a gap between groups of people, art school students or tourists or downtown workers or the panhandler working the sidewalks. The constant motion helped me write in the present tense, the uninterrupted progression of bodies, essay-like in my estimation, the sound of steady movement expanded by car horns, bus engines, the drums of street musicians, rising voices of people laughing or arguing, or some other rhapsody of the overpopulated street.

By comparison, now the streets are sparsely populated; there are enough people to feel normal for some cities, but in Chicago the absence is palpable, and also more local, reminding me of a messier late-20th-century Loop where I walked at the end of my workday. I was employed at a bank here once, on a block that functioned as a bankers row, in this same city center but before all the tourists flocked here every summer, at a very different time in my life as well. I was not who I am now, younger of course, but also put together differently, because the rules for understanding myself were not what they are now. So many things happened to me then without my consent—without even the knowledge that I could have consented. I had yet to imagine a world where I might feel I had the right to refuse the tiny-to-large intrusions. In the relative emptiness in the Loop now, where I walk with my umbrella opened—I haven't mentioned yet that it's raining, the sound and texture inviting memory unbidden—my older self and those of others are looping around the city center with me, too much space available for the bodies we used to be, walking a repeating circular pattern, improvisational and revelatory, not unlike the movement of the essay, not unlike everything we've always expected nonfiction to do.

The nonfiction I've read so far this summer does just this—circles with stories already known, but in need of reknowing, now that the rules have changed. The books are Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive*, Melissa Febos's *Girlhood*, and Elissa Washuta's *White Magic*. All three of these books meld memoir, essay, and reportage to get at the common and tragic intrusions that face women and femme-expressing bodies, from words to murder. These are books that both vanquish and rebuild, despite the damage done. I'll add a content advisory here, as each one of these books repeatedly circles misogynist trauma. These are all books about taking back silence or accommodation or the inability to actively remember. Each of these authors revises who she (therefore who we) gets to be in the world. They don't try to make us feel better about the things that happened but rather seek to build a new space, worthy of our progressing existence.

In her book *Memorial Drive*, subtitled *A Daughter's Memoir*, Natasha Trethewey turns to a memory she certainly hadn't forgotten, but had still yet to fully inhabit. She had long survived by not knowing everything, which meant the story of herself had also been left incomplete for three decades. Her narrative is bookended by a question that comes to her first in a dream. "Do you know what it means to have a wound that never heals?"(3)

When Natasha Trethewey was 19 her mother was murdered by her stepfather. Trethewey had long known her stepfather was an abuser. She had come of age in the captivity of his presence, learning early to keep her distance from his raging. After she first heard him hitting her mother, she tried to tell somebody at school but was told only that sometimes grown-ups get mad at one another, and so she learned to keep her distance from her beloved mother, as the abuse escalated, hastening the worst possible outcome. Young Natasha sensed, but did not yet know, that violence is key to binary-based power, and that the end game, stated or not, of misogynist abuse is murder.

The escalation of the violence in Trethewey's tale is brutal and unstoppable and I won't reinscribe all that her stepfather did here, except to say that the author's lyric framing and reflection, as well as her ongoing portrait of her strong and beautiful mother, makes the terrible recounting readable. The author and the reader, for the most part, have the buffer of time and analysis to keep us safe as we careen toward the terrible act that eventually led to this book's writing. The story is as much about the narrator's rediscovery of her mother's formation as it is about the unforgivable way she died, so we are prepared at every frightening turn.

Trethewey renders her mother in the historical and geographical context of her making. Gwendolyn Grimmette, formerly Trethewey, formerly Turnbough, came of age at the center of an African American family in the Jim Crow South, raised by powerful women and breaking convention in her first marriage to the author's father, a white man, whom she bonded with over love of literature. Natasha was born in Gulfport, in 1966, on the date of Mississippi's 100th anniversary celebration of Confederate Memorial Day. The threats inherent in white supremacy, particularly in the Deep South, formed the landscape of Gwendolyn's and Natasha's upbringings.

Even had my mother wanted to ignore the racial violence and increasing turbulence around her, my grandmother would not allow it. In her house the latest issue of *Jet* lay on the coffee table beside a book of documentary photographs of the civil rights movement, images ranging from lynchings to peaceful protests and the resilient faces of black Americans—constant reminders of the necessity of fighting for justice in a state where the external reminders were increasingly unavoidable (18).

Out of this brew of justice-seeking and refusal to succumb came a mother who took the risk of marrying a white man before *Loving v. Virginia* changed the laws governing interracial marriage (anti-miscegenation laws remaining on the books in Mississippi until 1987—Trethewey’s famous poem “Miscegenation” tells some of this story). This same mother retrained herself as a social worker after her first marriage dissolved and she moved herself and her child to Atlanta. Natasha’s wounds as the result of her parent’s divorce were mitigated by the love of several generations of Black women and through her twin-like bond with a mother whose sense of justice may have allowed her too much sympathy for the damaged man she married when the author was still in grade school.

In the phone records from her mother’s last days, which the author does not encounter until decades after her mother’s murder, we see the heartbreaking archive of a just and patiently terrified mother and estranged wife, trying to talk her husband out of killing her. The book bears witness to a brilliant woman unable to escape captivity, within a system of justice that didn’t try hard enough to help her, and who had written a good part of her own autobiography in the remnants she left behind. The portrait that remains is stunning and resonant, but even this portraiture is not the book’s only intention.

Because we know from the start that Trethewey’s mother is murdered, the book’s narrative arc is not built on that revelation. Rather, the book explores what it means for the daughter to reconstitute a missing mother, and in the process shows how her fate before and after the murder is built into all she knows as an adult poet. Trethewey was the U.S. poet laureate during the Obama years, and her body of work exposes the structures of racist American oppression, each poem with a subtext that speaks to that operative question, words spoken by Gwendolyn in Natasha’s dream: “Do you know what it means to have a wound that never heals?” In Trethewey’s poetry, that wound is American white supremacy. In *Memorial Drive*, told in the context of white supremacy, the particular wound is her mother’s murder, but the wounding includes the brokenness of the Black man and Vietnam vet Gwendolyn married under duress yet still tried to save, her daughter’s unrelenting grief, and the systems that failed to protect Gwendolyn from the ultimate harm. Despite all the living the author has accomplished since the loss of her mother, she knows there’s a part still missing. She writes to refind herself in this immutable context, finally consenting to fully remember the wound.

The local news comes on and I see my likeness on the TV screen. The clip is on a loop as the newscaster speaks, showing over and over the same scene: a young woman walking up to the door of an apartment and stepping in, shutting it behind her. This is where it begins, our estrangement. For several minutes I watch her, the girl I have left behind, stepping again and again into the last place I saw my mother alive (197).

Part of the journey of letting her mother back into her body leads her to remember key moments of childhood when she did not speak. Her stepfather gaslighted and verbally abused young Natasha when her mother was away, but she did not tell on him then, and for this she feels guilty. The silence that overtakes any of us when we are young, before we possess the mechanism for truthful speech, is not our fault. And would speaking up have changed anything? Did she have the power to prevent the wound? We all know the answer is probably not. Gender-based violence is a fence few can scale. What Trethewey reveals to us on these pages is not self-indictment, but an accusation of systems that maintain supremacies and keep women and girls in danger. In the process of retelling her own story, and the story of her mother, the author finds not healing but meaning—nonfiction’s purpose revealed in its rendering of multiple times, metaphors, ways of remembering. “Even my mother’s death is redeemed in the story of my calling, made meaningful rather than merely senseless (211).”

Those previous selves that keep surfacing are also the subject of Melissa Febos’s *Girlhood*, a collection of essays that remake her understanding of the girl she was before. In *Girlhood*, Febos remembers, interviews, and researches the stories we tell about ourselves as girls, and later as women, that make up who we think we are.

Do we accept the names people call us? Do we acknowledge our small and large intrusions? Did we agree to be touched in grazing or violent ways? Unlike Trethewey, Febos is not forced to link small aggressions to murder (and there will be no more actual murders in this essay, just murderous hauntings). But as we will see in Washuta’s *White Magic*, we can’t deny that shared continuum and the ways all supremacies are linked. The men in Febos’s and Washuta’s books, some of them terrible, some merely asinine, probably did not murder anyone, but the systems that created them certainly contributed to those who did. *Girlhood* is the pivot text in this discussion because of its grappling with these systems through a sharp consideration of our ability to consent.

Let’s consider systemic denial of consent, as it is (along with white supremacy) nothing new, yet a core articulation of our time. There are many differences between these systems. Sometimes they intersect and amplify each other, and other times

they overcome each other. Febos, when applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality to her examinations of girlhood, reminds us: "[W]henever systems of oppression overlap their power compounds (75)." What these intersecting avenues have in common is the relationship any of us have to power, as implementor or subject. How has power skewed our relationships to our bodies, and how do our stories change if we acknowledge the presence of forces invested in anything but feminist agency? Nonfiction, because of its inherent hybridity, is a form uniquely equipped to grapple with supremacies. There is room on the nonfiction writer's pages for facts as well as feeling, for dreams as well as memories, and for multiple timelines, modes of discourse, and narrative structures, all of which can't help but intersect with power.

Some say the purpose of nonfiction is to recover and illuminate the past, and some say its *raison d'être* is to attempt to understand by circling a subject. I will suggest, as I have argued at greater length in the past, that one of nonfiction's primary jobs is also to keep us looking for the machine behind the image. What else but a multimodal form that takes from all the genres can get at the meaning of that post-pandemic street I describe at the start of this writing, crowded with so many timelines and versions of all our bodies and so many ways to understand ourselves in multiple forms? While reading Febos's *Girlhood*, I had the experience of seeing the nuances and tiny moments of my former self from a view I have not had access to before, because I had not yet considered when, in my own history of circling, I learned I had the means to consent. Febos states this theme clearly at the start:

I no longer think that the pains and darkness of my own childhood exceptional. [Girlhood] is a darker time for many than we are often willing to acknowledge. During it, we learn to adopt a story about ourselves—what our value is, what beauty is, what is harmful and what is normal—and to privilege feelings, comfort, perceptions, and power of others over our own. This training of our minds can lead to the exile of many parts of the self, to hatred for and the abuse of our own bodies, the policing of other girls, and a lifetime of allegiance to values that do not prioritize our safety, happiness, freedom, or pleasure (xi).

Throughout the essays in *Girlhood*, Febos recounts memories of the formative moments that transformed her from a free and pleasure-seeking child at home in her body to a teenager and woman subject to the naming, diminishing gaze, and unsolicited touch of others. She tells us what her classmates said about her when, as a preteen, her body began to change earlier than that of the other girls. She unravels and examines the word *slut*—what it means to be on the receiving end of that controlling word and the class-based origins of the language itself. She tells the story of a boy

who expresses that he wants her attention by repeatedly spitting on her, refusing to stop until the author—just an eleven-year-old middle-schooler then—relinquishes her defenses and allows herself to cry. That boys are taught to declare desire through abuse is part of her thesis, but at the center is the realization that girls are taught to translate and accept these actions through silence and a smile, not refusal.

Febos is a woman who has made many non-normative choices in her lifetime, from her work as a young woman as a dominatrix to her concerted pursuit of her own pleasure from a young age, to active love of both men and women as an adult, to a primary partnership today with a gender-nonconforming woman—yet still she finds herself cornered by her old training, and has trouble refusing requests to comfort and acquiesce to the desire of strangers, even in the most benign scenarios. In her essay “Thank You for Taking Care of Yourself,” about attending a “cuddle party,” Febos writes:

It wasn't enough to “love” my body in the privacy of myself or my primary relationship. Like any kind of love, my self-love needed to manifest as an active practice of care. I had learned this about relationships with lovers, that “love is what love does,” but I had not internalized it. A body isn't very well loved by a person who abandons it when its needs conflicts with the desires of strangers (260).

Reading Febos's essays about herself and her body through so many formative years leads me to look again to my own previous selves with new comprehension, despite the fact that feminist rewriting of the body is not new to me; much of the theory in this writing is present in the radical lesbian feminist politics and philosophies of the 1980s that marked my own queer coming of age. The difference between then and now is that in the late 20th century, body-centered feminism was still inalterably tied to gender binaries, and the queer femme body, with its tricky gender alliances and betrayals, has still today not been fully written. In Febos's world, the perceived or real differences between bodies marked as male and female don't matter so much as the dirty work power-based language does to empower or disempower our ability, wherever we land on the gender spectrum, to recognize actions or words to which we do or do not consent. I praise Febos here for building so well on the past, further exposing the impact of social control on the most interior nodes of femme bodies. Her essays bring us to the knot that resides far within, that even the most sexually radical among us—through words like “sex positive” and “liberation” and “beauty”—keep unwittingly agreeing to preserve, even when encountering language or touch that surpasses the boundaries of our consent. What is the damage of repeatedly trading in

our actual pleasure for the care and accommodation of strangers? What do we suppress when we say we consent without really consenting? In “Wild America” Febos writes:

I began assigning my creative writing students the task of writing a love letter to the part of their body with which they have the most fraught relationship. . . . The students find it extremely difficult. However painful, we often cherish our own self-hatreds, mistake them as intrinsic to our survival. After they write these letters, however, after they read them with tremulous voices and flushed faces, there is a wildness in their eyes, as if a door has opened, as if a tiny flame has lit inside them. I would cup my hands around each of them if I could (123).

The improvisational brilliance of Elissa Washuta’s collection *White Magic*—which we might call a memoir-in-essays, or a book-length essay cycle, or a postcolonial break-up dirge as magic trick and recovery tarot spell—is in its unrelenting awareness of the linkages between micro-violence and femicide.

One of the ways women are taught to disavow our own traumas is to ignore not only the content but also associations linking what appears random to systemic oppressions larger even than the common machinations of misogyny. In my own life I think again of the layers of my downtown-circling self at age nineteen, absorbing the invitations of men on the street and in the train stations as both compliment and cut, but not, for decades, speaking of their impact. Seeing now the girl I was, walking in the city, I am aware that it was not just my body that evoked response, and not even the red platform shoes I wore (for which I probably did want some kind of attention, or some romance of attention) but also the fact that I was in motion and had a purpose, which was then both commuting to and from my job but also about gathering sensation and information. I was actively traversing, attempting to understand who I could be in the built surroundings of the city, a kind of pre-world building curiosity, but my passages were slowed by so many encounters with the perception of strangers.

Such is, as Febos reminds us, not an exceptional experience of any femme-expressing human walking through patriarchy. When that experience intersects with other oppressions, the cut amplifies, and one way white readers compound the cut when reading literature by BIPOC writers is by reducing the artistry to trauma narrative alone, as if form were not also part of the passage to liberation. Washuta is a member of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and a Cascade descendent. Along with authoring two previous nonfiction books, she edited the anthology *The Shapes of Native Nonfiction*



with non-Native scholar of Native and Indigenous literatures Theresa Warburton. In “Exquisite Vessels,” their collaborative introduction to their anthology, Washuta and Warburton write that any discussion of Native nonfiction must:

. . . move away from a focus on a static idea of “Native information” and, instead, [emphasize] the dynamic process of “Native in formation.” This shift destabilizes the colonial demand for factual information about Native life in favor of a framework that insists upon an understanding of indigeneity as a dynamic, creative, and intentional form which shapes the content that is garnered through its exploration (5).

That impact is one of the threads of *White Magic*, which uses Washuta’s experience with tarot, divination, magic, and spells as form and content. With segmented narrative braiding and rebraiding, the author combines intuitive memoir with pop culture obsessions (such as the performative love duet in an internet video of Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham, years after their relationship ended, and in the reboot of *Twin Peaks*’ surreal story built around a dead girl). Within this form, Washuta links the landscapes she inhabits to the eviction of indigenous spirits while she also investigates settler colonialism, her own multiple pathways to recovery from trauma and alcoholism, and the nature of narrative itself. Early on in the book she tell us what she’s up to:

[Y]ou could think of this as a dossier, the evidence of my attempts. If I don’t exit these time loops, these men echoing men, their cause, my effect, I’ll meet my tragic end. I’m saying a man might kill me if I keep choosing wrong. The protagonist’s stakes are what might be lost or gained when she takes a risk. I could write a book about what happened and what it all meant, attaching stakes to understanding it all. Or I could raise them. I could gain a life I can’t imagine if I find my way out (26).

What if we say now that this is yet another reason for nonfiction—to move beyond the passivity of merely understanding in order, as bodies and as systems, to find our way out. We see the circles. We witness and record and comprehend the loops, the same streets, different signs but the same age-old pavement. That we have been here before is the point. How do we get out? How can narrative form reveal a life-giving exit strategy?

The attempt of *White Magic* is to sink back into the circles until the repetition itself dizzies us, and we can’t tell one man from another. Which one choked her? Which one choked Stevie Nicks? Which one frightened her? Which one ghosted her? Which one wrapped the dead girl in plastic? Which one raped her while she

slept? Which one called her names? Which one helped her try to drink herself to death? The book's sequences swipe through time and men, media and autobiography, like a dating app with the same matches coming up over and over with different profiles, sometimes the hipster musician from Kurt Cobain's Seattle, sometimes an abusive pop star on YouTube, sometimes a colonizer responsible for the disappearance of generations of Native women. Her repetitions never let us forget that continuing with girlhood as it has been offered will keep her bound to a loop that may one day end with yet another story of a Native woman's death by the hand of a man purporting to love her. The story she has to disrupt in order to build a new form is the one that traps her in suffocating linearity.

Settler colonial stories take shapes like mountains and send us scaling the sides, focused on the summit. We reach it, and everything after is the comedown. . . . I've gone to the mountain that destroyed its own peak and obliterated life with lava and ash. What kind of story is that? There are shapes inside me that look like the ocean, flat and unchanging only if you look in the wrong place (250).

In the first half of *White Magic*, in the essay "White City," Washuta links a period in her life, before she stops drinking and while still tied to a man she fears, to her research into the expulsion, in the name of urban planning, of Indigenous people from land that became Seattle. She also tells the story of seeing an embodiment of herself, on the bus, older and wearing a surgical mask, embodying a frightening future form. Time is looping so quickly then, and she lives in the repetitions and echoes.

She waves her hands at me and says "Hiiiiii! Hiiiiiiiiiii! And I notice she's me. Except maybe 15 years in the future. And I don't look great. I look *aged*, beyond what time does. . . . *What does it mean?* I was thinking these were warnings—that if I keep going this is how I'll end up. Ragged. Or unsure. And wearing some medical mask (160).

In many ways, this repeating image of herself as a body she hopes not to become is the core image of the book, the counterimage to nonfiction form as world building. Synchronicity is either magic or romanticized delusion, and the real danger at this juncture in the universe, for all of us, is in not being able to tell the difference. What is love, compassion, commitment? What is beauty, abandon, pleasure? What are we condemned to be if we stay in the loops of story as we know story, in the walk we keep taking, the bus we keep riding, even when we know our familiar movement won't get us to the place we cannot yet imagine?

In Act III of *White Magic* Washuta lets us know that there is a day when she will leave the time loops behind, even though none of our bodies are yet able to leave the current show, assuring us “the reliving is an illusion, because I am safe now.” But not yet. Her magic trick comes in the form of a story that doesn’t quite end. “Now I am the magician. For my finale, I will try to make you feel the wonder I felt. Spectators feel the greatest delight when they don’t know how an effect was achieved. What is your tolerance for ambiguity? Stay with me.” (265)

I *will* stay with this nonfiction that refuses to resolve, its dénouement more bewitchment than curtain call. Such may well be the best of all possible futures for nonfiction, and for our actual lives in all our damaged landscapes. The next time I walk these streets, at the center where all our 20th- and 21st-century bodies collide, I will try to see this city as if I—as if we—have not always been from this place, watching for another passage through, not loops but winding thoroughfares, or jet streams, or an illumined spell casting, a route that would have been obvious if not for the deceptively beautiful obstructions.

