The Evidentiary Power of Grief: Relational Witnessing and Testimony in the Gwen Araujo Case

Through analysis of the Lifetime network movie *A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story*, this paper investigates grief as a form of evidence that, as it elicits chains of identification, can lead to political and social change. As we focus on the movie that represents Gwen Araujo’s life, her brutal murder by four men upon discovery that she was biologically male, and then the trial following her death, we forward a formulation of what we call “relational witnessing and testimony.” In such testimony, the witness speaks not only on behalf of the lost loved one, but also to the singular experience of loss, and thus expands our sense of who is victimized by human rights abuses.

*A Girl Like Me* first aired in June 2006 to five million viewers, a few months after the trial, and before passage of the Gwen Araujo Justice for Victims Act that outlaws the panic defense used by Araujo’s murderers. As the movie establishes viewers’ identification with family members, it suggests the ethical and political possibilities for focusing not only on the singular victim of a violent crime, but also upon the victim’s loved ones.

That the movie gave rise to a chain of websites and youtube videos protesting Araujo’s death provides evidence that grief is powerful—that it is a psychic process that can serve as a form of evidence, one that create nodes of identification and possibilities for empathy out of which creative cultural expressions and forms of political action can arise.

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