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# Artists deal with abuse in our work — so why do we struggle to confront it in our communities?



"We need to start using our voices to make our positions on abuse in our communities resoundingly clear"

 [Alicia Elliott](#) · CBC Arts · Posted: Aug 18, 2017 5:38 PM ET | Last Updated: August 18, 2017



"The problem with silence is that people fool themselves into believing that it's somehow neutral. If they're quiet, they're not taking a side. But silence only ever benefits the accused abuser." (Shutterstock)

I have been thinking a lot lately about silence in the arts community. Who does it benefit and who does it hurt?

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Joseph Boyden's sudden reemergence in Maclean's after his own self-imposed silence gave me a renewed clarity on the subject. In his 4,000-word essay, which mostly attempts (and in my opinion, fails) to clarify which Indigenous nation or nations he belongs to, there is one line in particular that startled me: "Last October I'd spoken up publicly to demand accountability by a university and its conduct in the treatment of a friend — and the complainants — embroiled in an ugly and horribly mishandled controversy that ended up sending shockwaves beyond literary Canada."

Boyden was referring to the case of his friend Steven Galloway, who was [publicly dismissed](#) from his post as head of the UBC Creative Writing Department following an investigation into then-unknown allegations. This spurred Boyden and over 90 prominent members of Canadian literature and culture to pen and sign the [UBC Accountable letter](#) — a document which focused on how UBC's investigation process had affected Galloway's life and reputation, but seemed to show no concern for the lives and reputations of the complainants. When [Galloway's lawyers](#) and the [main complainant's lawyers](#) confirmed Galloway was accused of both sexual assault and sexual harassment, UBC Accountable simply added a statement to their website acknowledging that the "original open letter did not express explicitly our concern for all victims of sexual assault and harassment." But why was the specific issue of abuse within the literary community — and more importantly, our inability as a community to address or acknowledge that issue — never given a single mention?

I'm not interested in speculating on Galloway's innocence or guilt — I'm interested in speculating on silence. We as writers deal with violence and abuse in our work. We acknowledge creatively that these are problems that exist in real life and create damage in real life. Yet there is an ominous silence around how that reality affects other artists in their everyday lives. Why can we so easily turn issues of abuse and violence into a well to fuel our art, but not turn them into a well to fuel our own commitment to safety in our communities?

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- Alicia Elliott

It is foolish to believe that artists are not capable of abuse or violence. They are human — and like all humans, they have flaws, traumas, unhealthy coping mechanisms and destructive ways of dealing with anger and frustration. This sometimes exhibits as abusing other people. Even when that abuse is criminally convicted — as happened with Roman Polanski — there is often no clear detriment to that person's career. Polanski has worked steadily. Chris Brown, the R&B star who beat his then-girlfriend Rihanna until she was nearly unrecognizable, still works steadily. Recently, more allegations have come forward against Casey Affleck and R. Kelly, both of whom still work steadily. Those allegations, though they had their minute in the news cycle, have had no clear effect on any of the accused's careers. In fact, all of these men have been nominated for — and won — awards.

People are too comfortable separating the art from the artist, as though that very cognitive dissonance has no part in creating the atmosphere that allows such abuse to thrive. We as a society are told that when it comes to abuse, private lives are just that — private — and the issues that people have in private should not be considered in a public way. But when should that privacy become public? Does there have to be a certain level of seriousness to the allegation before we can talk about it? Does there have to be a certain number of victims? There are 33 women involved in a [sexual assault lawsuit against Bill Cosby](#). Was that enough?

“Abuse is something we only unequivocally condemn as long as it's outside of us and our communities, even in the arts — as long as those engaging in it aren't people we know. It's easier to believe that our peers and friends — those we respect, admire, laugh with, joke with, who may blurb our books — are not abusers.”

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The problem with silence is that people fool themselves into believing that it's somehow neutral. If they're quiet, they're not taking a side. But silence only ever benefits the accused abuser. They would prefer if you don't talk about it. When you don't talk about it, it allows them to pretend nothing is wrong. They can continue to live their lives as though nothing happened, knowing that others will be too polite to address the elephant in the room — because the fact is that everyone else probably wants to forget the elephant, too.

Silence never helps the victim, though. They have to live with the knowledge that their own lives will never be the same — that if they speak of their trauma and pain at the hands of their abuser, people will be uncomfortable, call them "divisive" and ultimately want them to just shut up. Meanwhile, their accusers can continue to write books, or get speaking deals, or act, or direct, or win awards and accolades and money and fame.

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Abuse is something we only unequivocally condemn as long as it's outside of us and our communities, even in the arts — as long as those engaging in it aren't people we know. It's easier to believe that our peers and friends — those we respect, admire, laugh with, joke with, who may blurb our books — are not abusers. It's easier to decry a university that fumbles sexual assault investigations because they, too, would prefer silence than to ask why we haven't been protecting our communities from this type of abuse in the first place.

We want the art, the fiction — to talk about abuse without being accountable for how we may be complicit in it through our silence. We need to examine our silence, examine who it's helping and who it's hurting and start using our voices to make our positions on abuse in our communities resoundingly clear.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Alicia Elliott is a Tuscarora writer living in Brantford, Ontario. Her writing has been published most recently in Room, Grain and The New Quarterly. Her essay "A Mind Spread Out on the Ground," originally appearing in The Malahat Review, is nominated for a National Magazine Award.

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