

# NARRATING THE SELF

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## ABSTRACT

Across cultures, narrative emerges early in communicative development and is a fundamental means of making sense of experience. Narrative and self are inseparable in that narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience. Narrative activity provides tellers with an opportunity to impose order on otherwise disconnected events, and to create continuity between past, present, and imagined worlds. Narrative also interfaces self and society, constituting a crucial resource for socializing emotions, attitudes, and identities, developing interpersonal relationships, and constituting membership in a community. Through various genres and modes; through discourse, grammar, lexicon, and prosody; and through the dynamics of collaborative authorship, narratives bring multiple, partial selves to life.

## NARRATIVE HORIZONS

Narrative is a fundamental genre in that it is universal and emerges early in the communicative development of children (4, 19, 152, 157, 164, 182, 209). This review focuses on narratives of personal experience, defined here as verbalized, visualized, and/or embodied framings of a sequence of actual or possible life events.

Personal narratives comprise a range of genres from story (60, 135, 147, 175, 177, 207) to novel (11, 38, 39, 132, 188), diaries (239) and letters (21) to memoirs (100), gossip (20, 28, 101, 160) to legal testimony (10, 165), boast (207) to eulogy (29, 30), troubles talk (119) to medical history (49), joke (191) to satire (132, 183), bird song (65, 202) to opera (40), etching to palimpsest (150), and mime (5, 233) to dance (93, 205). Counter to a prevalent ideology of disembodied objectivity (98), even scientific narratives can be personal in tone. Scientists, for example, routinely construct oral narratives of procedures

and interpretations, casting themselves and others as protagonists (136, 137, 169, 170).<sup>1</sup> Culture and gender studies scholars have advocated written scientific narratives with subjects who reflexively situate and resituate themselves with respect to the objects they are visualizing (51, 98, 149). While differing in complexity and circumstance, narratives transform life's journeys into sequences of events and evoke shifting and enduring perspectives on experience.

Echoing Aristotle, Kenneth Burke deems ritual drama "the *Ur*-form" of narrative (39:103), and Victor Turner (233:154) proposes that enacted social drama is "the experiential matrix from which...oral and literary narrative have been generated." This perspective parallels the ontogenesis of narrative, wherein embodied enactments of experiences anticipate verbal accounts (33, 181, 234).

Narratives are not usually monomodal, but rather they integrate two or more communicative modes. Visual representation, gesture, facial expression, and physical activity, for example, can be combined with talk, song, or writing to convey a tale (43, 85, 88, 91, 102, 103, 167, 170). These blendings characterize narratives in a wide array of settings and communities. Conversational narratives told during American family dinners, for instance, can involve dramatic enactments of past and present problematic events (167, 227). Ceremonial narratives of personal experience among the Xavante (93) and Kaluli (205) blend song and dance. Courtroom testimonial (88) relies heavily on pictorial renderings such as photographs, drawings, diagrams, models, and graphs.<sup>2</sup> Novels and other written accounts evoke orality by incorporating reported speech (11). Visual art forms tell a story along a continuum of condensation and abstraction (1, 16, 150). A story may be told across a sequence of pictures, as in cave art, or condensed into a single frame, which can be unpacked using a particular form of narrative literacy. Paintings and sculptures may similarly detail a narrative through realistic representations or may minimalistically evoke a narrative through metaphor and juxtaposition of shape, texture, and color (41).

## THE NARRATED SELF

Personal narrative simultaneously is born out of experience and gives shape to experience. In this sense, narrative and self are inseparable. Self is here

<sup>1</sup> Members of a physics laboratory used the term "story" throughout their collaborations to describe what they were constructing (79). Further, the physicists stated that their experimental narratives were highly personal in that they spent their days building equipment, running experiments, and relating results to theory.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, scientific narratives blend linguistic and visual representation (22, 141, 211).

broadly understood to be an unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the-world, including a sense of one's past and future (62, 106). We come to know ourselves as we use narrative to apprehend experiences and navigate relationships with others.

The inseparability of narrative and self is grounded in the phenomenological assumption that entities are given meaning through being experienced (106, 110, 155, 208) and the notion that narrative is an essential resource in the struggle to bring experiences to conscious awareness. At any point in time, our sense of entities, including ourselves, is an outcome of our subjective involvement in the world. Narrative mediates this involvement. Personal narratives shape how we attend to and feel about events. They are partial representations and evocations of the world as we know it.

From this perspective, narratives are versions of reality. They are embodiments of one or more points of view rather than objective, omniscient accounts (76, 178, 219, 240). While some narrators emphasize the truth of a narrated text (83, 105, 120, 127, 136, 203, 229), others grapple with the fragility of memory and the relativity of point of view (7, 54, 126, 130, 131, 238). A leitmotif running through the writings of Milan Kundera is the paradoxical relationship between remembering and forgetting. While warning us that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (130:3), Kundera despairs that memory never captures authentic experience. "We immediately transform the present moment into its abstraction. We need only recount an episode we experienced a few hours ago: the dialogue contracts to a brief summary, the setting to a few general features.... Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting" (132:128). An important challenge to humanity is to recognize that lives are the pasts we tell ourselves.

Narratives are tales that tellers and listeners map onto tellings of personal experience. In this sense, even the most silent of listeners is an author of an emergent narrative (11, 60, 85). A particular telling inspires distinct and only partially overlapping narratives, as interlocutors link the telling to their particular lived and imagined involvements in the world. Among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, for example, performers of the Gisaro ceremony motivate listeners to recall experiences through reference to significant places in their lives: "Framed in sentiments of loneliness or abandonment, the mention of particular trees, hills, and other details of the locality evoke for the listeners particular times and circumstances" (205:181). Regardless of their elaborateness, tellings of personal experience are always fragmented intimations of experience. While telling surely assists the construction of a tale, the tale necessarily lies beyond the telling (242).

Every telling provides narrators and listener/readers with an opportunity for fragmented self-understanding. Each telling of a narrative situated in time and space engages only facets of a narrator's or listener/reader's selfhood in that it evokes only certain memories, concerns, and expectations (41, 126, 162). In this sense, narratives are apprehended by *partial* selves, and narratives so apprehended access only fragments of experience. Marcel Proust captures this insight in writing, "it is only in one small section of the complete idea we have of [a person] that we are capable of feeling any emotion; indeed it is only in one small section of the complete idea he has of himself that he is capable of feeling any emotion either" (185:91).

Narratives situate narrators, protagonists, and listener/readers at the nexus of morally organized, past, present, and possible experiences (95, 106). For example, narrators and listener/readers exist in the here-and-now world of the telling/reading as they are drawn into the multiple worlds of emergent, apprehended narratives (37, 242). Narrators may cast protagonists as aware of their past, present, and possible moral selves (78). In *The Man Without Qualities*, for example, Robert Musil casts the protagonist Ulrich as two selves: "At this moment there were two Ulrichs, walking side by side. One took in the scene with a smile....[T]he other had his fists clenched in pain and rage" (163:164). Similarly, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust portrays the young Gilberte as throwing a ball not to the present "me" who loves her but to the past "me" who was merely a friend of hers (185).

In these ways, narratives have the potential to generate a *multiplicity* of partial selves. Selves may multiply along such dimensions as past and present (11, 106, 130, 131, 185, 188); subject and object (98, 100, 106, 149, 163, 169); male and female (73, 98, 107, 113, 121, 163); id, ego, and superego (70); good and evil (as in the biblical tale of Adam and Eve); normal and aberrant (7, 43, 46, 67, 73, 113, 225); and public and private (79, 81, 82, 101, 159, 239). A narrator may first present partial selves in the form of distinct protagonists and then recognize them as facets of a single being. Such recastings are common in psychoanalysis, as analysts and patients interpret figures in narratives as facets of the patient's psyche (70). Theological narratives also present deities as distinct and at the same time treat them as parts of one being and one's self. For example, the Christian Bible holds that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are at once a trinity of distinct entities and a unity and that this trinity/unity inhabits the souls of followers.

As narratives are apprehended, they give rise to the selves that apprehend them. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (161:22) noted, "Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created." As narratives reach out to tap a preexisting identity, they construct a fluid, evolving identity-in-the-making (54, 117, 139). Spinning out their tellings through choice of words, degree

of elaboration, attribution of causality and sequentiality, and the foregrounding and backgrounding of emotions, circumstances, and behavior, narrators build novel understandings of themselves-in-the-world. In this manner, selves evolve in the time frame of a single telling as well as in the course of the many tellings that eventually compose a life (78, 197). It may be that novel self-understandings are attributable to hearing or telling novel accounts of events. However, like the protagonist in *Remembrance of Things Past*, whose memories are evoked through reexperiencing the moist crumbs of a madeleine, one may return to a known account, rereading or relistening to it utilizing a different facet of one's self. This self may construe new narrative readings, which in turn alter one's sense of being-in-the-world.

Self-understandings do not always take the form of soothing narrative solutions to life's dilemmas. Rather, narratives may illuminate life as we know it by raising challenging questions and exploring them from multiple angles (100, 132). Although they sometimes deceive, narrators may also probe beneath the surface of phenomena and take interlocutors on "an adventurous journey toward a deeper understanding, or rather to a new and deeper question, of ourselves in the world" (100:252). While narrative does not yield absolute truth, it can transport narrators and audiences to more authentic feelings, beliefs, and actions and ultimately to a more authentic sense of life.

## TWO DIMENSIONS OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Scholars of narrative highlight two basic dimensions of narrative: temporality and point of view (5, 38, 39, 82, 133, 135, 177, 184, 188, 192).

### *Temporality*

Narratives depict a temporal transition from one state of affairs to another. Paul Ricoeur referred to this as the "chronological dimension" of narrative (188). Temporality is a cornerstone of William Labov and Joshua Waletzky's linguistic definition of narrative as two or more temporally conjoined clauses that represent a sequence of temporally ordered events (135). The Kaluli mythic tale "The Boy Who Became a Muni Bird," for example, begins as follows (202:113):

Once there was a boy and his older sister; they called each other *adē*. One day they went off together to a small stream to catch crayfish. After a short while the girl caught one; the brother as yet had none. Looking at the catch, he turned to her, lowered his head, and whined, "*adē, ni galin andoma*"—"adē, I have no crayfish."

This passage lays out a narrative setting ("Once there was a boy and his older sister; they called each other *adē*") then presents a sequence of events, which

includes going off to catch crayfish, the sister but not the brother catching one, the brother's gaze at the catch, and subsequent whining.

The chronological dimension offers narrators a vehicle for imposing order on otherwise disconnected experiences. That is, chronology provides a coherence that is reassuring. Robert Musil captured this aspect of narrative in depicting the reflections of the man without qualities (163:709):

It struck him that when one is overburdened and dreams of simplifying one's life...the law one longs for is nothing other than that of narrative order, the simple order that enables one to say: "First this happened and then that happened..." Lucky the man who can say "when," "before," and "after"! Terrible things may have happened to him, he may have writhed in pain, but as soon as he can tell what happened in chronological order he feels as contented as if the sun were warming his belly.

Narratives often do not unfold parallel to the chronological ordering of events. Rather, narrators may shift back and forth in time as bits and pieces of a tale and the concerns they manifest come to the fore, as in the following conversation in which a white working-class American mother recounts an episode about her daughter (Beth) and niece (Edith) to the researcher (157:299):

Mother: Beth won't hit a little baby back. I told her that. But she did—Edith must've hurt her on her hair or something. And she bit her.

Here the narrator recounts that Beth hit Edith, then goes back in time to identify a possible event that precipitated this action ("Edith must've hurt her on her hair or something"), and then shifts forward in time again to recount that Beth subsequently bit Edith.

Sometimes chronology is artfully altered for rhetorical purposes, as when a narrator uses flashbacks or slow disclosures to enhance the dramatic effect (212). As Goffman noted, a narrative "falls flat if some sort of suspense cannot be maintained" (82:506). At other times, the telling lurches forward and back in time, as interlocutors recall or dispute various details, some of which may have been buried or skewed in an attempt to portray a protagonist in a particular light (91, 172).

Predominantly, narratives of personal experience focus on past events, i.e. they are about "what happened" (82, 135, 177, 188). However, such narratives link the past to present and future life worlds. The myth of "The Boy Who Became a Muni Bird" relates to a multiplicity of enduring cultural themes, especially expectations of reciprocity between older sisters and younger brothers. Similarly, in the above excerpt Beth's mother situates a past episode with respect to a present desirable trait ("Beth won't hit a little baby back"). When young Xavante men of Brazil publicly narrate dream-songs, their form and

composition link them to the past of their elders, while their collective performance links them to a present cohort of peers and ultimately legitimizes them to transmit dream-songs to future generations (93).

Personal narratives about the past are always told from the temporal perspective of the present. Narrators linguistically shape their tellings to accommodate circumstances such as the setting as well as the knowledge, stance, and status of those in their midst (14, 148). Zuni storytellers, for example, code-switch from Zuni to English to mark a story's transition from past to present relevance (229). Peruvian Quechua storytellers personalize mythic tales by situating them in local places, thereby linking those present to a moral past (148). Moreover, the most fundamental linguistic marking of the past, namely the past tense, implies a time closer to the present (19). It is also common for narrators in many speech communities to shift into present tense, called the historical present, in referring to past events. In these cases, narrators move the deictic locus of a story from there and then to here and now, a process Karl Bühler calls "transposition" (37). This rhetorical strategy renders narrated events vivid and captivating. The use of the present tense to relate past events may indicate a continuing preoccupation; the events are not contained in the past but rather continue to invade a narrator's current consciousness. This is the case in an agoraphobic woman's narrative about an anxiety-provoking experience (42:420):

Meg: I felt real *helpless*. I thought here I *a::m*. (.2) I'm so *damm mad* I could just storm outa here in the car but? (.2) (.hhh) I can't *le:ave*

In this passage the narrator casts temporally and spatially remote events and emotions as present time phenomena. The narrated experience is upsetting now, as it was then.

In this manner, the telling of past events is intricately linked to tellers' and listeners' concerns about their present and their future lives (91, 106, 167). Even a toddler lying in her crib uses narrative to forge understandings of unsettling events that remain puzzling (66). The narrated past matters because of its relation to the present and the future. Interlocutors tell personal narratives about the past primarily to understand and cope with their current concerns. Thus, narratives are often launched in response to current worries, complaints, and conflicts (91, 167). In a reciprocal way, in the course of their telling, portions of narratives may provoke interlocutors' concerns about the present and future. For example, among the Weweya of Indonesia, clients' present concerns about a past misfortune lead them to diviners, who exhort spirits to tell the tale of misfortune, delineating who is to blame, how to atone, and who should do so (129).

### Point of View

A narrative of personal experience is far more than a chronological sequence of events. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle discerned that narratives have a thematically coherent beginning, middle, and end (5). As Goffman noted, every tale is told from a particular vantage point (82). Ricoeur referred to the configurational dimension of narrative, which “construes significant wholes out of scattered events” (187:174), and Labov (133) stressed that narratives of personal experience have a point to make, which is linguistically realized through phonological, lexical, morpho-syntactic, and discursive evaluative devices.

While point of view may be explicitly conveyed through soliloquies, asides, idioms, and other predications (82, 157), it is implicitly realized through the structuring of narrative plots. Aristotle used the term *mythos* to characterize how events and emotions form a coherent narrative (5). Interweaving human conditions, conduct, beliefs, intentions, and emotions, it is the plot that turns a sequence of events into a story or a history (71, 184, 188, 232).

The proclivity to organize experience in terms of plots is characteristically human, a point that has recently garnered the attention of cognitive psychologists (9, 19, 34–36). Jerome Bruner has propelled this orientation by hypothesizing that narrative is one of two fundamental modes of cognitive functioning. In contrast with paradigmatic thinking, which emphasizes formal categorization, narrative thinking emphasizes the structuring of events in terms of a human calculus of actions, thoughts, and feelings. In recounting their tales, narrators construct a dual landscape, one of action and one of consciousness (34). The landscape of action focuses on what a protagonist does in a given circumstance; the landscape of consciousness focuses on what protagonist and narrator believe and feel. William Hanks (97:324) illuminated how a Mayan shaman, for example, recounted the experience that instilled his shamanic powers in terms of actions (“I entered the woods...I disappeared from among the people, from my family”) and interior changes that altered his consciousness (“My *nà’at* ‘understanding’ was lost, taken away. I didn’t know anything at that time, because everything was lost, everything was forgotten to me”). The landscape of consciousness categorizes and rationalizes protagonists’ actions, beliefs, and emotions in relation to norms. It is the landscape of consciousness that socializes narrators and audiences into local understandings of events (34, 35, 97, 157, 168, 202, 204). Singly, each plot attempts to illuminate an experience. Pieced together over time, narrative plots attempt to illuminate a life.

Narratives of personal experience display a discursive syntax or story grammar that binds narrative (146, 220). While linguistic, psychological, and literary treatments of narrative identify somewhat different narrative elements, they all stress that narratives of personal experience characteristically revolve

around an unexpected or troubling turn of events. In “The Boy Who Became a Mum Bird,” the narrative initially centers around the troubling predicament of the younger brother who catches no crayfish to eat. Similarly, in the narrative about Beth and Edith, Beth’s mother recounts a probable trouble source for Beth, namely that “Edith must’ve hurt her on her hair or something.” For the Mayan shaman, the narrative trouble hinges on the meaning of being lost.

Narrative activity attempts to resolve the discrepancy between what is expected and what has transpired (38). In the Muni bird myth, the discrepancy is between the Kaluli expectation that an older sister be generous toward her younger brother and the sister’s withholding of food that transpires later as the myth unfolds. In the Beth and Edith story, Beth’s mother tries to reconcile how she hopes her daughter will behave with how her daughter acted. The Mayan shaman uses narrative to explain the unexpected disappearance of body and consciousness during a routine walk in the woods.

Referred to as the complication (5), complicating action (133), trouble (38), the meeting event (212), the initiating event (220, 221), or the problematic event (31, 42), the discrepant event is contextualized and partly defined by story *settings*. Such settings include not only time and place but also psychological dispositions, historical precedent, and other domains of background knowledge. A narrator may thus frame an event as problematic by drawing upon listeners’ commonsense knowledge of what is expected in particular circumstances (73, 76). Or a narrator may render the event problematic in light of a protagonist’s emotional predisposition, as in the following (1388):

Me: And I remember (.6) not really *wanting* to go (.3) that morning, feeling  
some *foreboding*, some feeling that um (.4). For one thing I had a lot on  
my *mind*.

Alternatively, a narrator may frame an event as problematic through detailing one or more distressing *responses* to that event (43). Thus, when the narrator reveals the whining response of the boy who became a Muni bird, we learn that not catching a crayfish is distressing to him. Similarly Beth’s mother casts Edith’s conduct as distressing in part by recounting Beth’s angry response: Beth hit and bit Edith.

In forging story elements into a plot, narrators build a theory of events (15, 66, 175, 240). Narrators attempt to identify life problems, how and why they emerge, and their impact on the future. As such, narrative allows narrators to work through deviations from the expected within a conventional structure. As mentioned, the conventionality of narrative structure itself normalizes life’s unsettling events.

In addition to the discursive structuring of the plot, narrative point of view is realized through a community’s linguistic repertoire, including its set of

languages, dialects, and registers (103, 153, 160). Guugu Yimidhirr co-narrators, for example, piece together shards of experience through a mosaic of codes (103). The juxtaposition of English, mission language, and a six-year-old's version of Guugu Yimidhirr captures the "confusion of tongues and selves in modern Hopevale" (103:345). As narrators shift between codes they iconically represent the radical displacements that define their life history.

Within each code, point of view is further realized through lexical, morpho-syntactic, and phonological forms (42, 43, 134, 171). Invoking the linguistic relativity hypothesis, psycholinguists in recent studies point out how languages offer narrators different resources for parsing and constructing experience (19, 47). In their introduction to a cross-linguistic, developmental study of narrative, Ruth Berman and Dan Slobin articulated a Filtering Principle: "The world does not present 'events' to be encoded in language. Rather, experiences are filtered—(a) through choice of perspective and (b) through the set of options provided by a particular language—into verbalized events" (19:9).

While the grammatical repertoires of languages vary, the following morpho-syntactic forms are widely used in shaping point of view: word order (19, 202), tense-aspect marking (3, 13, 18, 202, 210), case marking (2, 34, 35, 42, 43, 58, 228), verb voice (134, 171), evidentials (12, 21, 23, 48, 89, 102, 108, 127, 148, 203), deictic adverbs (42, 43, 96), and pronouns (2, 31, 50, 56, 122, 202, 217). Phonological resources for conveying point of view include primarily suprasegmental features such as loudness, pitch height, stress, sound stretches, pacing, and voice quality (21, 27, 42, 55, 74, 93, 102, 114, 138, 156, 160, 199, 200, 229). These linguistic forms depict actions and stances and in so doing cast protagonists, narrators, and listeners in a certain light (54, 166, 189).

Penetrating the use of discursive and grammatical forms illuminates *how* narrative creates us at the moment it is being created. While difficult to apprehend, narrativization of the self is not entirely mystical. Rather, the process can be understood in part in terms of linguistic tools and resources for painting selves in the world. Each person draws from community repertoires of codes, genres, lexicons, and grammars in a more or less different way to render self and other in a particular evaluative hue.

## BOUNDARIES OF THE SELF

The notion of a narrative of personal experience implies that a person has his or her own experiences, that selves are ultimately discrete entities. At the same time, the unfolding narrative defines selves in terms of others in present, past, and imagined universes.

Developing a sense of one's self as separate from others is considered a cornerstone of human cognition and well-being (143, 159, 176, 222). The inability to differentiate objects in the world marks an infantile state of being, which gives way to the recognition that people and things exist as discrete entities (object permanence). This intelligence hinges on the development of memory, i.e. apprehending the continuity between past and present experience. From 8 to 18 months, the normally developing child gains a sense of "me" as a coherent, continuous, and discrete being over time.

This view of human development and the invention of referential forms such as personal names and pronouns imply a unified self. In its simplest form, this perspective contrasts with the view that the self comprises multiple, partial selves in flux. A protean world view of person has been linked to small-scale, non-European societies (57, 109, 123, 189, 195, 213), as in Michele Rosaldo's account of the Ilongot (189:146): "Ilongot hearts are not fixed entities.... Personal names may change when one contracts disease, moves to a new locale, makes friends, or marries." Yet notions and realizations of self as fragmented and fluid are much at home in the postmodern Western world (54, 82, 100, 106, 142, 139, 190, 211). Scholars and artists emphasize that selves are not necessarily the same across time and place nor do they necessarily cohere. As Harcler (199:188) commented, "I exist...as the tension between all my 'versions'—for that tension, too (and perhaps that above all), is me." Narrative is born out of such tension in that narrative activity seeks to bridge a self that felt and acted in the past, a self that feels and acts in the present, and an anticipated or hypothetical self that is projected to feel and act in some as yet unrealized moment—any one of which may be alienated from the other (42, 43, 94, 132). It is in this sense that we actualize our selves through the activity of narrating. We use narrative as a tool for probing and forging connections between our unstable, situated selves. Narrative activity places narrators and listener/readers in the paradoxical position of creating coherence out of lived experience while at the same time reckoning with its impossibility. The struggle to reconcile expectation with experience is particularly salient in the narratives of sufferers of mental and physical illness (6, 42, 43, 46, 77, 111, 112, 158) and political repression (51, 67–69, 94, 98, 100, 132, 161).

Whether or not a narrative offers a resolution for a particular predicament, all narratives, through dialogue, action, and reflection, expose narrators and listener/readers to life's potentialities for unanticipated pain and joy. Herein lies the spiritual and therapeutic function of narrative activity. Artists and healers alike use narrative to confront audiences with unanticipated potentialities, by either (a) laying bare the incommensurabilities of a particular lived situation, (b) luring the audience into an imaginary, even shocking, realm where prevailing moral sentiments do not apply, or (c) improvising a form of

narrative expression that unsettles status quo principles of a genre. Kundera articulated how the modern novel in particular carries out this mission: "A novel's value is in the revelation of previously unseen possibilities of existence as such: in other words, the novel uncovers what is hidden in each of us" (132:264).

Narrative activity is crucial to recognizing and integrating repressed and alienated selves. Posttraumatic stress disorder, for example, arises when an experience is too devastating to incorporate into one's life story. Such experiences invade present lives in the form of somatic sensations or fragmented memories, i.e. flashbacks, but are not narrativized into a coherent sequence of events and reactions associated with a past self (216, 230). In the most extreme form, a traumatic event too threatening to make explicit through narrative may lead to dissociated selves, as in multiple personality disorder (186, 218, 236). In these cases, individual personalities have different names and may not even know of one another. One personality may begin a narrative from a particular perspective only to have this narrative abruptly circumvented by the intrusion of another personality, who has another narrative to relate, and so on and so on. Many therapeutic interventions strive to develop a narrative that articulates the dissociated events and reconciles them with subsequent past, present, and future selves. Clinical cases help to illuminate dynamics characteristic of all human beings. While people do not usually abandon and start new narratives in midstream, they do display multiple selves as a narrative unfolds and use narrative as a forum for dialogue among them. The struggle for everyone is to cultivate both diversity and coherence among potential and actual selves.

Although many societies celebrate the notion of an individual thinking ego, the development of self-awareness in all human beings is inextricably tied to an awareness of other people and things (100, 106, 154, 176, 222, 237). From this perspective, we define our selves through our past, present, future, and imagined involvements with people and things; our selves extend into these worlds, and they into us. One of the most important functions of narrative is to situate particular events against a larger horizon of what we consider to be human passions, virtues, philosophies, actions, and relationships. As the late poet James Merrill commented in an interview, "Don't you think there comes a time when everyone, not just a poet, wants to get beyond the self" (153:59). As narrators, we evaluate specific events in terms of communal norms, expectations, and potentialities; communal ideas of what is rational and moral; communal senses of the appropriate and the esthetic. In this way, we affiliate with other members of society both living and dead. We come to understand, reaffirm, and revise a philosophy of life. Merrill once responded to a protégé's account of his troubled love affair (153:60):

I read your last letter...with pangs of recognition.... You won't be ready yet to *live* the fact of belonging to a very large group who've all had—allowing for particular differences—the same general experience. Later on, when your sense of humor and proportion returns, that fact ought rather to please you: to have so shared in the—or at least *a*—human condition.

The power to interface self and society renders narrative a medium of socialization par excellence. Through narrative we come to know what it means to be a human being.

Not only narrative content but also words, grammar, reported speech, and conventions of narrative genre join narrators and listener/readers with historical communities (11, 132, 142). Bakhtin (11:283) explained that "Prior to the moment of appropriation, words do not exist in a neutral and impersonal language, but in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts." When we use linguistic forms, we materialize and blend others' voices with our own.

The boundaries between selves and other entities are porous. In their problem-solving narratives, physicists, for example, produce utterances like "When I come down, I'm in a domain state" as they gesture a path through a graphic representation. In so doing, these problem-solvers forge a hybrid identity that fuses scientific investigators and the entities they are trying to understand (169, 170). That is, the physicists take an imaginative, liminal journey with the object of their inquiry. These narrative journeys are prosaic complements to artistic and mystical fusions of self and the world. Theater, for example, provides a lush context for merging selves into communities (100:255):

In the theater, the work we are watching is not finished, but instead is being born before our eyes, with our help, so that we are both witnesses to its birth and—in a small sense, its cocreators as well.... An immediate existential bond is created between the work and we who perceive it.... Seeing it is more than just an act of perception, it is a form of human relationship.

A similar point has been made for rites of passage and other rituals wherein participants forge a collective identity (30, 93, 99, 224). Communion with others, elusive and fleeting though it may be, constitutes the greatest potentiality of narrative.

Self-world fusions fall along a continuum of perceived completeness. Past and present company can play a significant role in authoring a person's self-identity. As noted, voices of the past enter into narrated experience in the form of reported speech, words, idioms, and narrative style. Young children as well as adults may also incorporate stories they have heard into a present telling (157, 167, 172, 182, 201). Further, those present contribute to one's life history by co-telling the evolving story through verbal comments and questions, gestures, eye gaze, facial expression, and other modes of body comportment (15, 57, 60, 61, 84, 85, 86, 90, 103, 104, 116, 118, 125, 192, 198, 199,

229, 231). Co-telling can be elicited through a narrator's forgetfulness (20, 87), teasing (206), or blaming (91, 145), among other narrative provocations, and it can be as fine-grained as syllable by syllable (138, 199, 235). If we develop our selves through the stories we tell and if we tell them with others, then we are a complex, fluid matrix of coauthored selves.

Members of some social groups worry that sociability can define and override the needs and desires of a vulnerable "private" self (159). Indeed, such fear of fusion can lead to hatred of both those one perceives as radically different and those one perceives as almost the same (17). Ethnographic accounts suggest, however, that the concern for a unique, autonomous, private self is culture specific (213, 215). Further, phenomenologists and hermeneuticians consider the fusing of self and other an impossibility, given that one person cannot completely enter into the experience of another person (72, 208). Co-narrators may *attempt* to establish intersubjectivity or empathy with one another or with protagonists in their tales but can only partially achieve this goal. This accounts for the multiplicity of narratives that are mapped onto a single telling and for the isolation that persons may suffer upon realizing that their narrative has not been heard.

## NARRATIVE ASYMMETRIES

Whether in the courtroom, workplace, scientific laboratory, classroom, athletic field, or simply in the course of conversing with family and friends, narrative activity challenges participants to make sense of enigmatic and frustrating situations. Faced with such a challenge, narrators alternate between two fundamental tendencies—either to cultivate a dialogue between diverse understandings or to lay down one coherent, correct solution to the problem. The first tendency is associated with relativistic and the second with fundamentalistic perspectives (44, 51, 75, 98, 105, 151, 203). These two polarities are present (to varying extents) in all human beings as they struggle to narrate lives (43).

The relativistic tendency offers a potentially infinite range of interpretive frames for organizing experience and promotes alterity and relative openness to new ideas. However, it can also lead to a paralyzing sense of indeterminacy. The fundamentalistic tendency lends consistency to otherwise fragmented experiences and allows us to assess what is happening in an expedient manner. Adherence to a dominant narrative is also community-building in that it presumes that each member ascribes to a common story. Reliance solely on a dominant narrative, however, may lead to oversimplification, stasis, and irreconcilable discrepancies between the story one has inculcated and one's encounters in the world. As noted earlier, psychological disorders such as post-

traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety involve silencing would-be narratives that deviate from the dominant story by which one lives (42, 43, 112, 115, 186, 218). Silencing is a product of internal and interactional forces in that a person may repress and suppress emotions and events, but these processes are linked to external circumstances, including others' expectations and evaluations. Silencing takes many forms, most of which do not lead to severe psychopathology. Silencing is part of the fabric of culture in that it is critical to socializing prevailing ideologies. Assuming one's expected place in society entails conforming to and telling stories that reinforce social order.

To varying degrees, the silencing of alternative stories is a form of linguistic oppression. Dominating stories that preserve the status quo can estrange and muffle alternative perspectives. In Morrison's words, such stories can "sanction renounce and preserve privilege." She likened them to "a suit of armor, polished to a hokey glitter, a husk from which the knight departed long ago...exacting reverence in schoolchildren, providing shelter for despots, summoning false memories of stability, harmony among the public" (161:14). Morrison's point that dominant stories yield a false stability in communities is analogous to the psychodynamics of posttraumatic stress, in which a false sense of psychological stability is attained by muffling inconsistencies. In both cases, the fear of countervailing stories is ever present, on the edge of recognition.

Institutionalized master storylines prevail in educational, military, religious, legal, and medical settings (7, 49, 51, 63, 67, 68, 69, 88, 98, 136, 140, 149, 203, 213, 227). Foucault, for example, has detailed how legal and religious institutions organize moralizing narratives that define world views of criminality, family, and sexuality (67–69). Religious narratives have been institutionalized and missionized for centuries, reconfiguring communities worldwide. Missionized, legitimized storylines can extend beyond matters of the spirit to matters of health and the body. Bambi Schieffelin's analysis of missionization in Papua New Guinea indicates how pictures and factualizing grammatical forms can imbue a narrative text with authority. These rhetorical strategies are also used by scientists to render scientific narratives accurate and factual (98, 136, 141). Similarly, storylines promulgated by defense intellectuals use statistics, technical terms, and impersonalization to authorize and sanitize the stockpiling and testing of nuclear weapons (51). These narratives become all the more powerful when domestic metaphors are used to depict deadly weapons. On a seemingly more benign but nonetheless consequential level, parental accounts of family incidents often carry more legitimacy than those told by children (6, 227). Family therapy involves bringing children's versions to the fore as viable counterpoints to adult renderings of reality (6).

Narrative asymmetries lie in the values assigned not only to different versions of experience but also to different ways of recounting experience. Uni-

versally, families and schools socialize novices into prevailing conventions for narrating events (26, 45, 105, 156, 157, 175, 226, 227). While family norms organize personal narration in the early period of life, schools may disfavor family-preferred narrative styles and resocialize children into teacher-preferred ways of narrating. The personal storytelling style of African American children, for example, during so-called sharing time periods at school, are often radically reconfigured in terms of the genre conventions favored by the teacher (74, 156).

Yet another manifestation of narrative asymmetry involves entitlement to narrate. Who can tell a story? What role can one play in the course of a storytelling interaction? In many communities, those who have participated or otherwise witnessed an event have priority to tell the story of what happened (145, 192). However, there are circumstances that disqualify central participants as storytellers. Among the Australian Aborigines of Darwin fringe camps, for example, those who have suffered illness or accident do not have rights to narrate the tale of that experience (194). Rather, such rights are allocated to those who nursed the sick back to health. In these communities, when one is sick, one is not oneself and therefore not able to access what happened.

But curtailing narrative rights of parties central to an event is more pervasive than may seem to be the case. In many societies, children are deemed less than competent tellers of their experiences. The right to tell can be contingent upon a formal rite of passage into adolescence, as in the Xavante mandate that adolescent males be ceremonially initiated to recount dream narratives (93). In other cases, adults may preempt children's tellings of their experiences (8, 25, 157, 173, 174, 214, 226, 227). During visits to pediatricians in Sweden, for example, children are rarely asked to describe their own conditions; more often doctor and parent co-narrate a child's situation (8). Similarly, at the dinner tables of many mainstream American families, children rarely initiate stories about themselves; rather, such stories tend to be introduced by mothers (e.g. "Chuck went to gymnastics today? 'n he *swam* a lot?"), which renders children overhearers of their own experiences (173, 174, 227). Criminal suspects also have diminished rights to recount their version of what happened. In Western Samoa, suspects' accounts are recouched by orators as they announce the topic of the day at juridical decision-making assemblies (58, 59). In Sweden and in other countries, suspects' stories are told to police, who transform them into official, much modified written reports (140).

Narrative asymmetry also involves curtailment of the rights to decide when to narrate. When parents elicit a narrative from their child (e.g. "Tell Dad what you thought about gymnastics and what you did"), they attempt to determine the timing, content, and teller of narrative topics. The child, however, may not

want to tell that narrative at that time or to have it told at all. Forced confession represent a more extreme form of curtailment of such narrative rights. Confession is predicated on the principle that human beings must divulge their sinful acts and thoughts to avoid damnation (69:79).

In addition to entitlements to determine the content, shape, and timing of a story, there is the entitlement to hear a story. Within this entitlement, there is a further privileging of primary reciprocity of a telling. A primary recipient is the party to whom talk is principally addressed (86, 144). Thus while a story may be overheard by some persons, it is directed to particular recipients. Institutional settings such as courtrooms closely regulate and linguistically mark who is the authorized primary recipient and who are authorized overhearers of narrative (10, 82).

Given that narrative mediates self-understanding and that narratives are interactional achievements, the role of primary recipient can be highly consequential (60). The primary recipient is positioned to provide feedback on a narrative contribution, for example, to align and embellish; to question, tease, and refute; or to ignore. Ignoring can lead the narrator to revise the story content to secure acknowledgment if not support from the intended recipient or catch for another, more responsive primary recipient (84–86, 104, 179, 180, 193). Insufficient feedback from a designated recipient can lead a narrator to amplify volume, pitch range, and/or the scope of a claim. If even this fails to secure feedback, the narrator may suffer loss of validation as narrator and protagonist. This dynamic characterizes the narrative interactions between some sufferers of mental disorders and those around them when they relate upsetting experiences. Sufferers can become ensnared in a catch-22 situation when interlocutors withhold feedback, perhaps to contain intense emotions; but paradoxically, such withholding often leads to escalation of displayed distress (42, 43, 80).

At American family dinner tables, narratives tend to be told by mothers and children and directed primarily to fathers. Fathers, in turn, may exploit this position to pass judgment on mothers and children as protagonists and narrators (173, 174). Children in these families, however, are rarely selected as primary recipients of narratives about parents. In contrast, in Japanese families mothers and children tend to select each other as primary recipients, while fathers are much less involved in family narrative interactions (223).

Differential control over narrative content, genre, timing, and reciprocity is central to the constitution of social hierarchies. Narrative practices reflect and establish power relations in a wide range of domestic and community institutions. Differential control over content, genre, timing, and reciprocity is also critical to the selves that come to life through narrative.

## NARRATIVE RESISTANCE

Narrative asymmetries do not preclude narrative acts of resistance. Narratives are coauthored and as such allow for the possibility that particular contributions will be challenged. Such challenges require positive uptake to successfully neutralize the status quo. Reestablishing asymmetries in the face of narrative challenges demands effectively issuing a counterchallenge or otherwise managing dissent through minimization or suppression.

Resistance to dominant narratives is salient among academics, politicians, and artists. Challenge is central, for example, to the evolution of scientific paradigms in Western societies, especially to the social perception of an idea as distinct and novel (128). It is a routine and expected practice when scientists deliberate the meaning and reliability of scientific accounts of events (136, 141). The to-and-fro of challenges and counterchallenges also characterizes narrative-laden political discourse: for example, that between American pro-choice and pro-life supporters (78) or between Ecuadorian advocates of and objectors to commodification of peasant labor (53). The emergence of new genres within artistic communities can be understood in terms of dialogic resistance to the status quo. Indeed, refusals, contradictions, and rejections are among the earliest speech acts to develop, and across many communities and languages the expression of negation is a hallmark of social growth (24, 32, 52, 202). Negation marks children's increasing autonomy and awareness of self and other. Although children are not universally entitled to protest narrative renderings of experience (92, 105), developmental studies indicate that they are capable of doing so.

Resistance to narratives of experience assumes many forms, including minimal feedback, ridicule, denial, and counterversion. We illustrated how a husband's minimal feedback to his anxious wife's tales of panic implicitly undermines her point of view. Minimal feedback also characterizes many white middle-class American children's responses to parental castings of experience; these children often provide only one-word responses or ignore altogether their parents' persistent attempts to elicit narratives (173, 227). Ridicule in the form of teasing, insult, and mockery is also woven into narrative interactions, as in the following exchange between a white middle-class American couple (175:53):

- Jon: (f) Janie had come out and said to me—"Dad will you tell M:ommy where the films- are from the pic?ures." I would have said "Yes? Janie"  
 Marie: Well when she's about eight or nine I bet she'll be able to do that...  
 Jon: YOU; are over eight or nine are you not?

A third form of resistance, denials (e.g., "NO I'M NOT!"), are usually coupled with counterversions, as in the elaborate challenges posed by African Ameri-

can children to "he said she said" narratives about their wrong-doing (94:200):

- Barb: They say y'all say I wrote everything over there.  
 Bea: UH H— THAT WAS VINCENT SAID.

Counterversions may arise in the immediate aftermath of a telling, as in the above excerpt. They may also emerge long into the future—even after generations of alignment or silence (64, 98, 124, 161). Further, counternarratives do not necessarily involve overt reference to a prevailing narrative world view. It is the voicing of a disjunctive reality itself that constitutes the counterpoint. Indeed, the posing of an alternative account may be more effective in dismantling the status quo perspective than overt critiques. In making reference to their critiques, perpetuate the salience of the dominant discourses they otherwise aim to uproot.

## CONCLUSION

Through it, various genres and modes; through discourse, grammar, lexicon, and prosody—and through the dynamics of collaborative authorship; narrative forms multiple, partial selves to life. Universally, tellers grapple with the interstices between expectation and experience through narrative. Each narrative organizes a vector of experience along a temporal horizon that spans past, present, and possible realms. Each imbues the past with significance—both personal and collective—and, in so doing, constructs present and projected life worlds. Subject to challenge both from without (i.e., others) and from within (i.e., multiple, conflicting selves), these worlds are not fully coherent and are ever evolving. Whenever narrators launch a story, they open themselves to reconstrual. For better and for worse, everyday narrative practices confront interlocutors with unanticipated emotions and ideas and ultimately with unanticipated selves.

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