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SUMMARY PRESENTATION

of

Who Writes and About Whom in Personal Narrative?

A practice-based dialogical inquiry into the influence of Postmodernism and Social constructionism on the understanding and practice of nine writers of personal narrative.

While personal narrative writing is normally the domain of English and humanities scholars, creative writing faculty and pedagogists, I am interested in personal narrative at the intersection persons and narrative.

The writing of personal narrative might *seem* to be the epitome of individual industry; yet constructionist ontology raises the question: How are we to understand the practice of personal narrative writing in context of postmodern objections to individualism and the psychology it implies?

The initial purpose of this research project was to get some inkling of how much social constructionist and postmodern theorizing has affected the practice of nine writers and their conception of themselves as authors and persons.

The method was ethnographic and dialogical, resting on the epistemic assumptions of philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Mikhail Bakhtin. Wittgenstein believed the "meaning" of any utterance is in its practical use and being "understood" is known by the ability of conversers to "go forward" together. Bakhtin supposed that language is both unavoidably ideological and the source of working knowledge. "A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another," Bakhtin said, and its meaning is determined equally by

whose word it is and for whom it is meant. It is the product of the relationship between a speaker and a listener. Being situated in a historical moment and social environment, utterance is saturated by ideological consciousness.

Considering this, I did my best to open a space of conversation saturated with collegiality, reciprocity and respect. The goal was to recruit collaborators rather than subjects or specimens. I hoped that the reflective and reflexive processes of writing about how they go about writing would move them closer to their experience of personal writing than is possible when simply talking about it.

Phase 1of the project consisted of recruiting a sample of writers and inviting their responses to a series of open-ended questions. After working with the responses, I decided Phase 2 should continue mining the same vein but include a larger sample and adopt a more interactive and dialogical format. I offered multiple venues for communication, including e-mail, an interactive blog space and instant messenger to encourage participants to use the medium most comfortable for them at times most convenient to them. Telephone or Skype also was available, although I privileged written communication, thinking that verbatim transcripts of oral interviews often seem stilted, incomplete, and to some degree incoherent in print. I would feel compelled to edit and improve them, to make them sound more like "what they meant to say." The result becomes more what *I* say they said than what they said, more *my* "way of thinking" and *my* way of saying the world.

I join John Law (2004) in holding the ideal of "escaping singularity, and responding creatively to a world … that appears as it does when it does *not* because that is its nature but because of the way we position ourselves to it, the way we approach it, and the way we

study it" (p. 9). Preferring richness and complexity to singularity, I participate by responding into their responses and by bringing up competing explanations.

The dialogs are center staged, unadulterated and unedited, although I do organize the back-and-forth elements to read more like "natural" conversation and label them so this is obvious. I do not chunk "the data" into categories or variables and plot them on graphs. Instead, I present the entire conversational archive in its multi-voiced glory.

In the discussion chapter, I reflect on the conversations as folk ontology (Goldman, 1992, p. 35) and find many "social constructivists" among my companions, writers who accept that much of what we "know" is learned through social interaction, but also embrace the notion of a "deeper" or "truer" self that knows in a more profound and revelatory sense. It is *this* self and *this* knowing they seek to tap when engaging an issue through personal narrative.

<center>Dead Man Writing</center>

Some postmodern theorizers—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard among them—pronounced (I think convincingly) the "death" of the autonomous individual, the mind, and the author.

What does it *mean* to say that the individual is a social construction rather than an immutable essence? When I sit down and write a personal narrative, who writes and about whom?

Obviously, individual human organisms write personal narrative. Less apparently, this does not prove that they are persons or authors—the self-contained and originary sources of what they write. In a social constructionist sense, writers are partakers of a

discourse community that embraces distinctions such as insular persons, chronological history, representational fidelity, and so on. Persons are accomplices in customs of personhood, in stories about what being a person means and entails.

In this sense, originality becomes the imaginative use of *the given,* taking up a position and stance in relation to the given, and adopting preferred ways of interacting with and expressing the given, and so on. Yet even these are resources of time and place. Thus, this organism *writes* but the *subject* and the *author* is a communal creation.

Luminous Exceptions to the Encapsulated Experience

In special circumstances like meditative epiphanies or fentanyl-induced oceanic euphoria in the emergency room or, sometimes, even during transfixed reading and writing, this becomes apparent. Our insularity can evaporate into a pleasurable melding with humanity, life, world. In those rare and fleeting moments, I "know" without reservation that compassion and kinship, affinity and connection, mutual support and cooperation (while being *no more inevitable*) are *just as viable* a foundation for human life as insularity, animosity and competition. Likewise, I know

that we are

what we are

because we *say*

we are that.

Therefore, we can be something else.

Under the weight of commonsense reality, though, this certainty skitters away like spittle on a hot iron; and our aloneness again seems obvious. Still, these small luminous moments apprise us that other embodiments of ourselves are possible.

After many months of communing with the countless others who paraded through hundreds of books and journal articles, I began to write …

and "I" altered.

That is, the experience of "I-ness" and of its location budged.

This is one of those rare luminous exceptions to individualizing experience. I as homunculean "mini-me" sitting in the driver's seat behind my eyes—no longer fit. I am prone to say I found myself "out there" rather than "in here"; but that is not quite it. It seems more the case that "out there" and "in here" became nebulous, continuous and concurrent.

I am said into the world. I exist in conversation and I am never *without* conversation, even when alone. Dethroned as the source of myself, I exist where you exist, in the familiar social space that envelopes us, the incorporeal place where *"we"* is.

"I-in-we" exist because you exist in "we"

and "you-in-we exist" because I exist in "we"

but neither of us is sufficient.

We-as-we-are-together depends to some uncertain degree on our prior "we" experiences and the narratives each of us carries about those experiences. On the other

hand, new stories generated in our current relationship can retroactively transform prior *we* experiences, leaving them always already altered.

The now,

the then,

the we,

the you,

the I,

all of these socialities are fluid, changeable and always under erasure. The apparent historical permanence and unity we experience is a trick of narrative that we do not even notice.

I sometimes feel deeply nostalgic at losing a central, meaningful and long-standing narrative of heroic struggle and personal triumph to which I have clung for most of my life. Yet, there is this joyous kind of awe at becoming far more than I had imagined—a participant in an immense and continuous conversation in which every voice I have ever heard makes me possible, makes you possible, makes us possible.

"I hear voices everywhere," Bakhtin (1981) said; each voice exists only in dialogue with other voices and no utterance is self-sufficient. It seems to me, then, that when we "dig deep within" and discover an important story there, we are living a profound paradox: when we dig deep within, we are looking deeply out, for that which is within is fashioned

from without. More accurately, within and without are ways of being in an individualist conversation. In a relational context, this binary becomes porous and continuous.

In preparing this dissertation, I had the brief occasion to eavesdrop on conversations that make me possible. This conversation is never finished. New characters enter stage left and stage right contributing an extra bit of dialog that becomes added on, woven in, merged with, or juxtaposed to the wealth of dialog that precedes it and the combinations and permutations approach the infinite.

How extraordinary. How splendid. How like life.

What Now?

There is a Zen saying, "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment: chop wood, carry water." At first glance, this seems analogous to the proverb "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Change is illusory, perhaps futile.

I take the Zen statement to mean something else. Before enlightenment and after enlightenment *seem* the same to the observer but the subjective experience of the enlightened is profoundly transformed. To be fully engaged in chopping wood while chopping wood, to be fully engaged in carrying water while carrying water, this nothing like the usual chopping of wood and carrying of water.

For the most part, daily writing life continues to be internal and solitary; although, I am more aware of performing the solitary writer in "make believe"—more like strutting a part upon the stage, beret cocked wryly.

I am not suggesting that individualism is wrong, only that it is not inevitable. There are viable alternatives, other places to stand. I am suggesting that we stand there and consider a question posed Kenneth Gergen (1999, p. 62):

What kind of world do we bring forth with what we say together?

What kind of person?