

REVIEW ESSAY

Storytelling as Experience

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STORIED LIVES: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING. Edited by George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. 304 pp. Hardbound, \$37.00.

NARRATING OUR PASTS: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ORAL HISTORY. By Elizabeth Tonkin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. 171 pp. Hardbound, \$59.95.

Narrative analysis proposes that the stories people tell follow regularized systems of codes. What is still hotly debated, however, is the degree to which linguistic codes control us by setting the rules for how we think and act as well as how we speak. These two books accept the normative power of language and argue that speech codes are the glue that stabilizes social relations. However, they also propose that the narrative concept of the subject provides a position within language that allows individuals to break the rules they otherwise must follow to participate in their societies. While neither volume comes from the field of oral history or is concerned with use of interviews as historical evidence, they do provide excellent insight into current thinking within the fields of clinical psychology and cultural anthropology on the relation of ideology to subjectivity. They are contributions to a growing literature that finds important evidence for the nature of social relations in the construction of the stories that people tell when asked to talk about themselves and their communities.

The way in which interviewees recount their histories is as rich in information as the factual details of their accounts, argues George Rosenwald, a psychotherapist and professor of psychology at the University of Michigan. The whys and hows of discourse rather than the what is the focus of the fourteen essays he and Richard Ochberg have collected. Their book covers a broad range of topics, jumping from family counseling to workplace disputes to charismatic religion to modern dance to German death camp survivors. The majority of the contributions are by psychologists, but the clinical focus is balanced with essays by two anthropologists, two sociologists, and a historian. Rosenwald has prepared particularly effective introductory and concluding essays that convert what easily could have been a potpourri of viewpoints into a more unified ar-

gument. He contends that the culture-specific narrative rules ensuring intelligibility are also the rules governing identity. Yet, in opposition to the relatively stable and stabilizing patterns of self that arise as one talks in ways that are comprehensible to others, Rosenwald poses the force of subjectivity, which he defines as “the restlessness of desire.”

This at first vague formulation assumes greater specificity as the first six essays explore ways in which the conflict between identity and subjectivity shapes the course of interviews. The remaining essays examine the ways in which interviewees who have become conscious of this conflict can use narrative strategies to challenge and even subvert the social rules governing their lives.

One of the strengths of the Rosenwald and Ochberg volume is the connections the essays make between narrativity, politics, and individual psychology. Life stories are often deformative because they reinforce narrow views of the self and its potentialities and thus often help keep people in social positions that are exploitative and destructive. The editors' goal is to understand how interviewers can intervene in their interviewees' narratives and facilitate reconstructions of a self better able to determine meaning and therefore to act more effectively in its own interests. Most oral historians will be hesitant to intervene in the lives of their interviewees as vigorously as Rosenwald and Ochberg recommend to their fellow clinicians. Nonetheless, Jacquelyn Wiersma's chronicle of the changing life stories of one woman in mid-life who overcame her lack of self-confidence to pursue a Ph.D., and Catherine Kohler Riessman's chapter on working with battered wives to create a new language for discussing marital rape, strongly support the editors' argument that self-empowerment leads to richer, more fully detailed examinations of the past. William R. Earnest's essay on an autoworker's response to criticisms of his employer is an intriguing case study in the interaction of social and psychological dynamics. Apologies for the company became so narratively intertwined with defense of an abusive father that the narrator himself became aware of his own self-obfuscation and approached rethinking how his life stories had reinforced an oppressive personal and political environment.

At first sight, Tonkin's book appears tangential to the discipline of oral history. She is professor of social anthropology at the Queen's University of Belfast, and her fieldwork focuses on how oral traditions among the Kru people of Liberia can be used as evidence of historical change in the distant past. Following the pioneering work of Jan Vansina, Tonkin spends much of her book using the narratives of storytellers she met in Liberia to reconstruct the history of that country. Her concerns broaden quickly, however, to the more general question of how ideas of the self originate in oral narration.

Tonkin rejects static polarities between traditional and modern societies, arguing that it would be nearly impossible to locate either a purely oral or a purely literary culture in today's world. Most Americans and Europeans continue to live primarily in oral culture, she observes, but how orality shapes cognition in formally literate societies remains understudied. She views collecting oral narratives as essential for the analysis of social consciousness and proposes a definition of oral history that synthesizes the ethnographic concept of traditions conveyed orally with historically motivated documentation of personal experience. Tonkin ranges far and wide beyond West African oral traditions to consider autobiography, oral history, and performance in Europe and America. In doing so, she develops a broad argument about what she calls "oracy," which we can define as skill in oral communication comparable to literacy. Like Rosenwald and Ochberg, she is most concerned with the how and why of speech. She chides those scholars who use personal recollections to pick out useful facts "like currants from a cake." Ordering, plotting, metaphor, and other means of presentation provide more evidence about social reality than the specific content of narratives.

The book includes concise surveys of major theories on identity, subjectivity, and social action. As she explores issues of genre, authorial intention, temporality, and verifiability, Tonkin devotes considerable space within her short book to the theories of Louis Althusser, Mikhail Bakhtin, Marc Bloch, Pierre Bourdieu, Maurice Halbwachs, Alesandro Portelli, Paul Thompson, and Jan Vansina, in addition to work by African ethnographers. Her summaries are readily understandable, and by using examples from both postindustrial nations and Africa she helps to specify the degree to which frequently discussed theories are limited by their cultural specificity.

The two major themes of Tonkin's book are remarkably congruent with the Rosenwald-Ochberg volume: she argues that narratives are cultural constructs that stabilize existing social relationships by establishing rules for identity that are continuously reinforced and naturalized by everyday oral discourse. Yet, since narratives are performative, their tellers are always free to construct variations expressing their own personal desires for change. Social personality cannot fully replace an individual sense of self. She observes that most narrators are conscious of this distinction and often use narrative devices to mask the conflict between social imperatives and personal desire.

For both Tonkin and Rosenwald-Ochberg, society assumes the position of the objective. The subjective is desire, which takes shape most clearly through the breaking of codes. The third and essential factor in both books is the listener—or audience—whose presence is essential to oral discourse and who therefore can act as the catalyst for the new self

that emerges with every performance. The potentially transformative role of the listener stimulates the authors of both books to present an image of the scholar as one who encourages people to take self-liberatory risks they might otherwise avoid. In a provocative argument that many historians will find uncomfortable, Tonkin concludes that speculative imagination and lying—that is, the ability to shatter the rules of communication through resort to contrafactuality—are the foundational steps for creating new social realities. The self as a social actor finds liberation by breaking the conventions that constrain it. As historians we often prefer evidence to actors; we want to explain events through regular patterns that make life less confusing; we are naturally concerned about verification. Tonkin's book warns us that our need to define the past with precision may prevent us from seeing the potential for change, for which oral narratives are one of the clearest, most direct sources of documentation. Tonkin also offers salutary warnings against overreliance on transcripts. Performances are not texts, she argues, and to confuse the two is to miss the centrality of nonverbal cues, as well as the connotative speech acts that help establish the link between listener and teller.

These two books are useful, readable essays on narrative thinking at the beginning of the 1990s. The strong epistemological parallels in otherwise quite distinct material show how far the linguistic turn, of which oral history is an integral part, has matured. We can now say that much contemporary academic thinking on narrative is structured by two contradictory ideas: language is a set of rules that impose categories of knowledge upon speakers, but all performative acts are unique expressions that push against the boundaries established by genre, medium, and language. To date, this contradiction has been productive of wide-ranging, new investigations of subjectivity, yet the tension between the two halves of current narrative theory sits like a time bomb, certain to force, sooner or later, a more fundamental revision of our current set of assumptions.