

Bodily Narratives and the Social Oppression of Women

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Abstract

This paper addresses the charge that narrative theory of identity lacks explanatory power and the further claim that for narrative theory to have such explanatory power, there would need to be an answer in the positive to the question: 'Is human reality (or some especially important dimension of it) itself narrative in nature' (Meyers 2004, 289). I claim that the dynamic creativity that is central to Merleau-Ponty's account of expressive cognition and the living body's ability to transform sedimented structure into new meaningful forms, is narrative in nature. I revisit Iris Marion Young's claims in her seminal paper 'Throwing like a Girl'. Instead of the focus being on the body 'exhibiting' an ambiguous transcendence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity with its surroundings' (Young 2005, 35), thus exhibiting oppression, I claim that this is a woman's bodily narrative, thus drawing attention to the way that the observed comportment and behaviour are already narrativised—are infused with meaning—and tell a story of gendering and oppression. This emphasises the ethical need to listen or attend to the authentic narrative and the way this tells a story of the world as well as the body-subject. The presentation of this narration as the 'natural' way of the female sex as weaker, both mentally and physically, and experiencing a childish will, is thus a re-configuration that erases the authentic narration of the body's expressive cognition.

I

A narrative view of identity claims that we can best understand who we are, make sense of experience, choose, and relate to others as well as to objects in our world through the narrative form. The narrative form reflects our experience, embracing its temporal and subjective existence. In our personal narratives, most commonly expressed as, or in, conversation, we have beginnings, middles and endings, protagonists, purpose and meaning. The stories we tell about ourselves engage our past, present, and future selves and are inherently open to alteration, at the same time being subject to some sense of integrity. The narrative form, with its abilities to weave together disparate and similar

aspects of plot and reflect time, contains our engaged experience and reflects its directedness towards the world.

Central to support for a narrative notion of identity is its capacity to resist the tendency of ‘philosophical abstraction and analysis [to] squeeze the life out of moral experience’ (Meyers 2004, 299). While such support exists, however, the relationship between life and the story remains contentious; the role of narrative in our lives and identities remains one where it is the stuff of life that is *made into* a story — we *select* the incidents and themes, we explain their importance by using the various literary techniques available to us. Such a position accords with literary theorists who identify the narrative form as merely an artistic device, imposing a shape that is not “naturally” there on experience. Often in such theory though, the modern, rational, atomistic subject is assumed. Additionally, as Gail Weiss claims, ‘[t]he postmodernist claim that “the body is a text”...has become passé’ (Weiss 2008, 62). The question of how the body becomes discursively constructed is, again, contentious. Thus, problems for narrative identity arise out of both assuming a fixed subject who has this narrative identity, and the idea that there is only interplay as narrative identifying a subject.

However, persistent support for narrative theory of identity remains, significantly from those who argue its ability to account for the moral subject who has internalized her own oppression and lives, therefore, a compromised self-determination (Meyers 2004, 297). Morny Joy, for example, prefers to characterise what Ricoeur calls ‘narrative identity’ as ‘strategic identity’ (Joy 1997, 38) in order to emphasise the way that identity is understood not only as never completed, but also as a ‘construct that allows for the movements of change and [...] provides for a form of critical self-awareness’ (Joy 1997, 38). Joy refers to the process of writing autobiography as a form of recuperation — the experience of writing utilises the power of the narrative mode to initiate and undertake a sense of repair of identity, the re-claiming of autonomy and the growth of self-esteem, self-trust and self-confidence. Hilde Lindemann Nelson also sees narrative identity as the

best way of understanding self-identity and claims a role for the counterstory in our exercise of self-determination and as an instructive act of resistance to dominating and oppressive master narratives (Nelson 2001, 61-62). For Diana Meyers, also, it is the linguistic competence which grounds narrativity that has the creative power to generate the formulation of new possible stories, and this is a commonplace human capability that is not neutralised by internalized oppression. The creative potential of our commonplace linguistic competence not only empowers people to tell their own life stories but also empowers them to creatively construct a different life story for themselves (Meyers 2004, 298-299).

Narrative theory, however, whilst supporting a richness of lived experience, and the creativity that can open us to new possible stories, can also be seen to subordinate embodiment in a way that is ethically unconscionable. While both speech and action belong as intertwined aspects of human expression, there is a tendency to focus on the act of verbal articulation as both achieving and expressing our understanding of lived experience as being the actions of a self. Such a focus achieves two things. It claims speech, and language use in general, as the products of mind — an action that denies any role for the body in consciousness apart from that of resource to consciousness, thus both constructing and maintaining a mind/body dualism. The focus on verbal articulation as achieving and expressing understanding also orders mind, and its products, as central and primary to being a self — an action that makes subjectivity an interiority and an immanence. This functioning of the mind/body dualism, in ignoring or subordinating the body and its particularities to processes of reflection and rationality as mind, facilitates the theorising of selves as “gender-neutral selves” or the imposition of a story. Into such gender-neutral conceptualisations of selfhood and via imposed stories are smuggled the tools of oppression.

A critical methodological argument against narrative theory of identity comes from Meyers who makes the claim that such theory, while having descriptive power, has no

explanatory power (Meyers 2004, 294). She identifies two disturbing omissions to narrative theory; the first is a failure of such theory to account for ‘the richness of the moral subject’s constitutive experience — the material that the narrator’s stories relate’ (Meyers 2004, 290), and the second is the failure that occurs when ‘excessive attention to narrative leads philosophers to overlook the capacities that make narration possible and valuable’ (Meyers 2004, 290). In terms of Meyers’ first claim, we must now remember that she has also said that narrative theory is able to preserve the richness and vitality of moral experience — ‘reflexivity, exchanging rebukes and reassurances, and negotiating ways to reconcile or live with moral disagreements’ (Meyers 2004, 299). It also resists the tendency of ‘philosophical abstraction and analysis [to] squeeze the life out of moral experience’ (Meyers 2004, 299). So the richness of experience that narrative theory cannot account for, is of a different type, or exists at a different level of being. As constitutive experience it is the ‘material’ that the stories, exchanges, and negotiation refer back to, draw upon, rely upon, in order for the subject to be a moral subject at all. In terms of the second claim, Meyers herself says that for narrative theory to have such explanatory power, there would need to be an answer in the positive to the question: ‘Is human reality (or some especially important dimension of it) itself narrative in nature?’ (Meyers 2004, 289).

Understanding the body as text also remains problematic, for while it can focus our attention to ways that the body is discursively constructed, the lived-body is constituted as a resource to such ‘found’ stories and remains vulnerable to such re-configuration of lived experience. Weiss emphasises that this remained a problem for Judith Butler who saw that it was not clear how it is possible to ‘fix bodies as simple objects of thought’ (Butler 1993 cited in Weiss 2008, 62); the body does not exist in isolation but is always in the middle of being ‘engaged with (and formed by) other bodies, social and political institutions, language and gesture’ (Weiss 2008, 63). This means that bodies are always not only being inscribed but are inscribing other bodies, thus they are actively and creatively engaged as part of, or indeed constituting, those social forces that inscribe.

Weiss continues to find the notion of the narrative useful and refers to the body as a narrative horizon rather than simply as a text exploring its role in taking up physical, social, political economic and psychical forces (Weiss 2008, 62). Thus the subject position is an *ongoing* achievement.

II

In turning my attention to the broader experience of the social oppression of women through imposed narratives of gender, my aim is to understand how we can be embodied subjects without body being a resource to mind (as narrative theory typically ends up structuring the relationship between life and story), woman being a resource to man, nature being a resource to reason, or any of the other patterns of domination that the mind/body dualism tacitly supports. The pattern of domination that is the social and political oppression of women, includes the way women take up and embody bodily narratives of subordination. The subject can take up modes of action that participate in the fact of their own social oppression. For example, the subject may not consider educational options that they are inclined towards, saying that they are not clever enough to pursue such a path, and believing that these are not choices appropriate for themselves. Some individuals are not aware that they are not seeing opportunities for their own self-fulfilment, and speak instead in terms of their actions being ones of personal preference, reflecting personal values, or even just that this is 'the way it is'. If confronted with their actions as upholding systematic oppression, they would go on to justify personal ways of being that in fact contribute to their own harm, and/or deny contribution to oppression. Other individuals who participate in their own oppression can sense that there is something wrong. They are often aware of experiencing feelings ranging from fatigue, demoralisation, and frustration to anger and rage. Within this range are states of depression, anxiety, self-loathing, low self-esteem, underachievement, perpetual immaturity of needs, drug, alcohol, food and sex addiction, and violence, with these often attributed to some personal failure of character. With increasing awareness of internalised oppression, this range can also include the possibilities of insightful understanding,

assertiveness, tenacity of purpose, courage, and open and compassionate commitment to the needs of others as well as self. Any theory of the subject, as Meyers rightly emphasises, needs to be able to account for the possibility of this range of response to systematic oppression and its overcoming.

Iris Marion Young has taken up Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject and used it to articulate the subtle and powerful ways that systematic oppression of women genders women and in doing so she suggests but does not claim a bodily narrativity. Young, in her paper 'Throwing Like a Girl' draws on both Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir, claiming that 'there is a particular style of bodily comportment that is typical of feminine existence, and this style consists of particular modalities of the structures and conditions of the body's existence in the world' (Young 2005, 31). While not claiming bodily narrativity, her work is grounded in the same sense of meaning-making and world-making that grounds narrativity. She says:

Merleau-Ponty gives to the body the unifying and synthesizing function that Kant locates in transcendental subjectivity. By projecting an aim toward which it moves, the body brings unity to and unites itself with its surroundings; through the vectors of its projected possibilities it sets things in relation to one another and to itself. The body's movement and orientation organizes the surrounding space as a continuous extension of its own being. (Young 2005, 37)

It is thus that bodily comportment has a 'particular style', produced by a bodily unifying and synthesising function. Her understanding of Merleau-Ponty's refiguration of the ordering principle recognises the body's work of unifying and synthesising as primordial. Young quotes Merleau-Ponty: 'I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body itself' (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Young 2005, 38). She argues that 'feminine movement exhibits an ambiguous transcendence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity with its surroundings' (Young 2005, 35). For her, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body-subject has enabled us, not only to observe the comportment,

behaviour and action of women, but to observe the ways that systematic social oppression operates to gender the sexed body of the woman. What needs further articulation here is how women come to have the particular style they do: that is, why these modalities?

My claim is that these expressions, telling of our inherence in the world, are characteristic themes of women's bodily narratives. I present an argument for bodily narrativity, using Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject (see also Utley 2010). The notion of narration implies that consciousness is at work, but if we understand consciousness as perceptual consciousness — that is, if we understand the body and perception as ontologically central — the body comes properly into view. The dynamic creativity that is central to Merleau-Ponty's account of expressive cognition helps us to overcome the problems due to the mind/body, and story/life dualities that remain contentious sticking points for narrative theory of identity. Such work helps us not only to review the way we think about life, but also how we think about the narrative. My arguments are based in an understanding of perceptual consciousness and its relationship with the structures of embodiment — transcendence, motility and unity — producing the expressive body as having a characteristic narrativity. As such there is an intertwining of both bodily and verbal aspects of narrativity and the subject is a narrating subject 'through and through'. Narrative capacity is present and active in meaning-making at the point of operative intentionality. Bodily narrativity, as an account of phenomenological narrativity, meets the minimum conditions for what counts as a narrative: the story is made, not discovered (it is a telling, of something); the story has a minimum of two events that are in some way related with this relationship having a temporal dimension (that is, the story has a beginning, middle and end); and the story can be about any subject (referring to real or imaginary events and/or entities), can serve a multitude of ends, and can be true or false in what it tells (Lamarque 2004, 394).

What seems to be largely in dispute is the idea that life has a narrative structure. That our life experience has more than two events comprising it, that these events are in some way

related, and this relationship having a temporal dimension would seem plain. Life encompasses a broad range of experience, including both reflective and imaginative thought, and this experience is directed towards a variety of ends, thus no possible life experience is ruled out. That life has a beginning — birth — a middle — the lived life, and an end — death, gives it a relevant structure. These parameters of life, in effect, form the underlying themes and motifs for many of our stories, or inform in some way the significance of many other themes. That there are also many beginnings, middles and ends within this broader structure, perhaps strengthens this qualification. Most essentially, then, it is the making of the story, as opposed to finding the story, that is at issue.

Where Young claims that a woman's body exhibits, which is to say that the products of perceptual consciousness are expressed and on view, I claim that what is exhibited is the woman's bodily narrative, thus drawing attention to the way that the observed modalities, infused as they are with meaning, tell a first order story of oppression and gendering. This is not a found story; it is not a story found in the particular style of modality as an imposed reading of weakness etc., as such a style can be interpreted. Women present a narrativity that has unity and meaning, and their comportment actions and behaviours tell us not only about women but also of the world; in particular, they tell us of a woman's inherence in the world and the measure of her phenomenological trust in this world. This, I believe, is centrally important to the notion of internalised oppression, for who would willingly choose an ambiguous transcendence, an inhibited intentionality, and a discontinuous unity with one's surroundings, when the experience of our forms of transcendence flying up 'like sparks from a fire' and a gaze of wonder at the world is on offer (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xiii)? The internalised oppression that a woman narrates tells us what she trusts her world to support.

Yet women's first order narration has been re-figured and presented to us as the 'natural' way of the female sex — as weaker, both mentally, and physically, and experiencing a

childish will. This re-figuration of the woman's narration of oppression erases the way that gendering constitutes the oppression of women's sexed bodies.

In her article Young refers to the way that women live daily with the possibility of rape and this is a point that I have regularly heard cause expressions of surprise and question. Yet, take, for example, a relatively recent newspaper article focused on a circulating email about 'how not to get raped' saying that this was an electronic version of the common missives that tell women how to take responsibility in a world where women are raped. Advice included the familiar tones: ' [...] don't go out alone, don't get drunk, carry [your] car keys as a weapon, take self-defence classes, don't dress revealingly, don't talk to strangers, and on and on' (Maguire 2007, 33). The author of this column goes on to say: 'Here's a radical suggestion: direct the rape prevention message to men. Write emails and advice columns that say: don't rape. Don't rape drunk women, solitary women, sleeping women, flirtatious women, any women. Seriously, just don't.' (Maguire 2007, 33). That there are not email missives of this sort attests to the culture of acceptance of rape, and she says: 'Telling women they're responsible for rape doesn't keep them safe; it just keeps them scared. It also lets rapists know they can get away with their crime as long as they pick the right victim — one who "makes herself vulnerable" by refusing to live according to the edicts of a rape-tolerant society' (Maguire 2007, 33). This is oppression that women take up—they don't go out alone, they don't get drunk, etc., or whatever it is that the particular culture requires and in this way women's bodies tell the story of oppression, of the threat that they live with. Women's bodies are telling us of the world they live in, but this narrative is not heeded. It is misconstrued and appropriated by a society that remains determined that women number among the oppressed.

III

Merleau-Ponty does not discuss social oppression, but he indicates his direction of thinking about the presence of social and cultural norms and how these might give us a

way to know the ‘essence’ of a society. Merleau-Ponty gives the economic framework of any society a central role in shaping and expressing that society. He says:

[...] economic life is at the same time the historical carrier of mental structures, just as our body maintains the basic features of our behavior beneath our varying moods; and this is the reason one will more surely get to know the essence of a society by analyzing interpersonal relations as they have been fixed and generalized in economic life than through an analysis of the movements of fragile, fleeting ideas—just as one gets a better idea of a man from his conduct than from his thoughts. (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 108)

Merleau-Ponty draws a parallel between the access we gain to understanding the person through attending to a person’s actions and behaviour in general, and the access we gain to understanding the society through looking at its economic mode of operations. Bodily narratives, again, appear to have a validity that cannot be overlooked. They appear to reveal to us, in a matter of fact way (though not matter of fact in content), things about both the individual and society. Yet the nature of the intertwining of the self with her world means that any narration cannot be understood outside of the relations that are constitutive of what we might ‘see’ as a stand-alone entity. That is, what we see is an individual who has been completed by the world, who has taken up, from the very beginning, in some way or another, the dominant norms and cultural narratives of their society.

Merleau-Ponty, in seeing economic life as central, casts it as something ubiquitous and ongoing in any society. Economic life has been continuous throughout the history of mankind. While we have had various forms and modes of exchanging goods (goods both needed and desired), and while these might vary across cultures and through historical epochs, the fact of some form of exchange occurring remains. This aspect of human society, how we practice these exchanges, then, is a ‘historical carrier of mental structures’. In having practices of exchange, all members of society are subject to these practices in some way. Even if they are refused entry to the practices of exchange, it is in

this way then that they are subject to those very practices. Distribution of resources to these members of the society is denied — these members are not distributed to. This being inside or outside the distribution of resources, or the way that one is inside the process (for there can be many variations associated with the rules of exchange) has profound effects on who we are.

Luce Irigaray maintains that the interpersonal relations that have become fixed and generalised and revealing of the essence of western capitalist society are those relations that constitute women as commodities. Women, she says, are ‘the symptom of the exploitation of individuals by a society that remunerates them only partially, or even not at all, for their “work”’ (Irigaray 1985, 190). Irigaray describes a social order where women’s experience is primarily one of ‘subject to being produced, consumed, valorized, circulated, and so on, by men alone’ (Irigaray 1985, 191). She refers to the work of Claude Levi-Strauss who claims that the remaining structures of kinship relationships act as the basis for this experience. Similar work is taken up by Gayle Rubin, who detects Levi-Strauss’s ‘sense of a systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products’ (Rubin 1975, 158). Rubin claims that the systematic social apparatus is a kinship system in which:

[...] one’s duties, responsibilities, and privileges vis-à-vis others are defined in terms of mutual kinship or lack thereof. The exchange of goods and services, production and distribution, hostility and solidarity, ritual and ceremony, all take place within the organizational structure of kinship. (Rubin 1975, 169-170)

Rubin recognises a wide-spread oppression of women in societies, both capitalist and non-capitalist, and so, while appreciating the Marxist explanation for the oppression of women, cannot see it as properly descriptive of the nature of the widespread oppression. Rubin turns her attention to kinship systems as being able to describe ‘the social organization of sexuality and the reproduction of the conventions of sex and gender’ (Rubin 1975, 168). She notes that they are ‘observable and empirical forms of sex/gender

systems' (Rubin 1975, 169), with 'the essence of kinship systems [lying in] an exchange of women between men' (Rubin 1975, 171). These systems are enacted as ritual forms of exchange and interaction, and, as conventions of exchange, are reproduced in their enactment.

Property ownership and material prosperity as indicators of success and well-being remain a powerful cultural narrative of modern society. These cultural narratives invoke a strong role for the marketplace in the distribution and exchange of goods and current debate around market boundaries and what are properly considered market goods belong to what Luce Irigaray describes as the '[fascination] of the infinite subtleties involved in the manufacturer, commerce and ownership of property' (Irigaray 2004b, 204). Yet, as Irigaray argues, 'money can never be enough to guarantee either human identity or dignity' (Irigaray 2004b, 208). Irigaray calls for civic rights for women, because not until they have these will women be able to 'become responsible for their own physical and moral integrity, responsible for their child bearing and their children, responsible for their dwelling place and home, responsible for their culture' (Irigaray 2004b, 210). Irigaray describes women who, as a result of their continued oppression and abuse, and their history of not enjoying rights, have not reached 'civil adulthood' as women, and 'perpetually [make] demands as social minors' (Irigaray 2004b, 210). This is a heavy charge against many women who have also fought against their oppression, and have been committed to bettering the situation of themselves, their sisters, friends and children. Yet there is substance in Irigaray's description. For Irigaray, it is because women have enjoyed 'too few rights and too many duties' (Irigaray 2004b, 208) that they have 'compensated by impulsiveness and subjectivism without social bounds, in the form of either persistent childish behaviour or maternal authoritarianism extending into the social sphere' (Irigaray 2004b, 205).

Irigaray speaks of women's need for consolation for their servitude 'through a relative pleasure in being kept, through their desires to receive and buy gifts: furniture, clothes,

jewellery, and so on' (Irigaray 2004b, 208), emphasising that the satisfaction of these needs and, therefore, the reason to manufacture them, is 'an integral part of an economic system in which we live' (Irigaray 2004b, 208). Such behaviour needs to be understood as telling us of oppression, telling us of the ways that women have taken up the compensations offered them.

Any investigation into the nature of relations, as they have been fixed in economic life, needs to unearth such aspects as the market's dependency on patterns of women's consumption that compensate for their oppression, and not only the market's tendency to appropriate bodies, in particular women's sexed bodies, for market production of "desirable goods". Such work requires that we understand the ways that women's bodily narration tells us how it is to live within, and of, a society where they experience too few rights and too many responsibilities, as their bodies have been systematically taken up as resource to the ends of others.

IV

In this research I have tried to sketch out some of the ethical implications of situating bodily narrativity in our personal and political vision. Irigaray suggests that justice begins with two. She says we need a rethinking, or re-grounding of the transcendental:

[...] locating it here between us, who, as men and women, cannot be reduced to one another, cannot be substituted one for the other. This means that we need to speak one to the other, listen one to the other, in order to construct a civil and social bond between us. And in fact, already in us. (Irigaray 2004a, 223)

This task of listening must embrace our bodily narratives, and in listening here, in this way, face to face, so to speak, we will find a need to rethink how we can focus on the need for trust to be the pivotal point of all possible action, finding ways to preserve and honour this throughout all human action and interaction. Flesh and blood experience must be understood as a structured, configured expression that implicates the world and others.

Properly considered by philosophy as such, bodily narratives are honoured, not erased. The bodily narrativity of women's resistance to oppression embraces both the writing of texts and the articulation of their stories, but such acts are also situated and accompanied by actions within which such articulation took place, and the power and significance of this as a bodily narrative cannot be overstated. For those incest survivors that Morny Joy speaks of, for example, their 'distressing and painful journey' is negotiated through autobiography (Joy 1997, 41). But in facilitating this, time and space was made by each woman — itself an act of reclaiming and an exercise of autonomy, self-esteem and self-trust. These bodily narratives of caring, of encouragement and support cannot be overlooked as participating in the process of narrative repair. We are all subject to the power of normative bodily narratives. But what do we do when our experience seems to demand us to languish, to kick, to scream in fear? Perhaps bodily narratives are hate-filled, antisocial, unable to be acted out. If normative gendered cultural narratives work to constrain what might be necessary for healing, perhaps escape through breakdown, or chronic mental illness ensue. Perhaps even death is seen as the only exit. But it is the role of the bodily— for example, the taking of time and space, the support of others — that emphasises the role of bodily narrativity in the process of narrative repair. Merleau-Ponty says that '[n]either symptom nor cure is worked out at the level of objective or positing consciousness, but below that level' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 163). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty says that it is the personal relationship formed with any doctor, or 'the confidence and friendship felt towards him, and the change of existence resulting from this friendship' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 163) that allows the person to take up any meaning in knowledge or treatment, and as such, it is 'sometimes a touch of the hand [that] puts a stop to [the condition]' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 163); the gesture embodies the meaning.

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ISSN 1393-614X

Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy 14 (2010): 128-143

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