

Narrative Identity and the Challenge of Multiculturalism

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Abstract: *Narrative identity is central to human existence. We become persons in and through the "storying" of our experiences. The tales we tell of ourselves—both individually and collectively—not only call out for recognition by others, but arise through negotiation with the intersecting and often competing claims of others. Dynamic dialogue is therefore essential to narrative identity. The discursive ideal of multicultural liberal democracy turns on the possibility of mutually influential colloquy across social divides. The realization of this participatory ideal, however, is impeded by the perceived incommensurability and self-containment of distinct cultural communities, the mutual disinterest or distrust that further separates them, and the lack of a coalescent ideological or spiritual center in many of the world's most pluralistic societies. Only by prioritizing the need to listen closely to the narrative identities of others while sharing our own in a search for common understanding through syncretic reconciliation will state multiculturalism ever achieve its promise of genuinely inclusive national self-realization.*

Over a half-century ago, social psychologists Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel (1944) reported the results of a series of studies examining how people interpret the motion of geometric objects interacting on a screen. In a short film used in the studies, two triangles and a disc appeared to move about in relation to each other and enter and exit a large square with an opening on one side. In one study, participants were simply asked after viewing the film to describe "what had happened." Their answers were surprising. Despite the poverty of visual content, nearly all participants produced full-formed stories. They described the geometric shapes as animate beings that acted on the basis of reasons and motivations, and whose various "social" interactions represented dramatic relations of conflict and alliance. The participants had experienced the brief and barren episode as a richly narrative affair, where even the simplest of line-drawn figures in motion were endowed with storied lives that made sense within the cultural frames through which they were perceived. Despite the many decades that have passed since this seminal paper was published, I know of no better laboratory demonstration that we are an innately story-telling species—*homo narratus*. From the cave paintings of our Upper Paleolithic ancestors to the frenzied microblogging of today's digital youth, we have always understood and shared our inner and outer worlds with each other in narrative form (Boyd 2009; Gottschall 2012). As Roland Barthes famously put it: "Indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their

stories . . . Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural” (Barthes and Duisit 1975, p. 237).

In this chapter, I outline a narrative understanding of personal and collective identity. I then go on to describe what I believe to be the main challenge faced by multicultural liberal democracies such as Canada in regard to the dialogical construction of narrative identities. My account of narrative emphasizes the centrality of time, which is where I begin.

The Time of Our Lives

Human beings not only exist *in* time, along with the rest of the world, but live *through* it. Temporality is, as Heidegger observed nearly a century ago, the “transcendental horizon” of our being. The very structure of human experience rests upon our threefold subjective awareness of past, present, and future. Time nonetheless presents its own mysteries to those who seek to hypostatize it. Augustine’s struggles with the aporias of defining and measuring time in Book 11 of *The Confessions* provide a well-known example. After accepting that time can only be understood as the uncertain “distensions” of his own mind, the 4th-century theologian resigns himself to the limitations of human knowledge and declares the only remedy to be God’s divine love: “I have torn myself between one time and another, not knowing the due order of these times; and my thoughts, the inmost bowels of my being, are riven with these clamorous diversities, until I flow back to you, refined and purified by the fire of your love” (Augustine 2001, 11.29.30).

Augustine, who feels himself “torn” across disparate distensions of memory and anticipation, finds solace and unification through God’s eternal love. It might be said that every life, however religious or secular, is similarly an attempted articulation of “clamorous diversities”—experiences and actions sliding from future to past without the clear part-to-whole coalescence one is fully aware of when, to use Augustine’s example, reciting a familiar poem. We live in time, but how to frame that time so as to unite the congeries of what transpires into a meaningful form is both an individual and cultural challenge. Time must be humanized to avoid personal and collective dissolution, as its substantive discontinuity and lack of fixity can cause us to literally come apart at the (temporal) seams. Just such a humanization of time, I would argue, is the primary function of narrative.

The Redemption of Time

To better understand the significance of stories in our lives, it serves us well to look back in ontogeny to our earliest years. Consider, for example, the private crib talk that many toddlers engage in when put down for a nap or for the night. This pre-sleep talk often consists of short monologues tracing out recalled or

anticipated action-event sequences. The verbalized reenactments are often drawn from the prior events of the day, whereas the prospective sequences often relate to expectations for the imminent future. Why this investment in linguistic work in the hiatus before sleep? The developmental psychologist Katherine Nelson, who analyzed the crib narratives of a colleague's daughter, Emily, from 21 to 30 months of age, offers this insight:

The major topics and themes of Emily's talk involve the effort to make sense of her experience, to construct a model of the world that will permit her to anticipate what will happen and thus enable her to take part in events effectively. Her parents assist her in this by their extensive talk about what will happen, while Emily contributes an independent account of what has happened. The child needs to talk about what *has* happened because—together with parental explanation—it serves as a foundation for an understanding of what *will* happen. (Nelson 1989, p. 41)

According to Nelson, Emily is engaged in the reconstitution of her own experience. This amounts to linguistic practice at fleshing out the temporal-causal relations amongst actions and events, sometimes retrospective and sometimes exploratory, as when playing out future possibilities. Although such reconstruction is a solitary activity, it is also communal insofar as Emily uses the resources of a shared language to give her world semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic form. It is also socializing to the extent that she mimetically builds her mini-narratives upon and around the recent dialogical productions of her parents, who have been narrating her life for her even before she could do so. Emily's monologues are a form of self-education, understood in its pragmatist sense as a "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (Dewey 1916, 89-90). What grows out of this activity is Emily's increased cognitive capacity to represent herself in time and in relation to others. As Nelson puts it: "These two systems—self-reference and temporal reference—developed over the same period of time [in Emily's life] because they are both essential to the construction of self within a temporally organized social world" (p. 305).

Emily's crib talk provides us with a functional portrait of narration *ab ovo*. In her growing ability to use language to narrate her past and future, she learns to narrate *herself* through time. Her incipient identity emerges from the threads of continuity that bind the temporal shards of experience into predictable, repeatable sequences. With Frank Kermode (1967), we may call this the "time-redeeming" gift of narrative: "Time cannot be faced as coarse and actual, as a repository of the contingent; one humanizes it by fictions of orderly succession and end" (p. 160). All stories, argues Kermode, are "fictions of concord" in that

they give human form and significance to the empty duration of time. They do so by bridging the unmarked interval between the *tick* and *tock* of the clock, as Kermode imagines it. Stories have beginnings and ends that infuse all that comes between with structural meaning. Time is formed into contentful episodes and, coextensive with this, identity is achieved through the narrative binding of action and experience within this “redeemed” time. Narrative identity can be seen in this light as a myth of concord—mythic because we cling to it as true and not merely fable, but fictional nonetheless because it involves artifice, invention, and the dramatic reconstruction or integrative refiguration of the innumerable fragments of time that make up our lives. Paul Ricœur (1992) explains the creation of identity through narrative in this way: “The person, understood as a character in a story, is not an entity distinct from his or her ‘experiences.’ Quite the opposite: the person shares the condition of dynamic identity peculiar to the story recounted. The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told” (pp. 147-148).

In other words, we emerge from our personal narratives as emplotted characters with enduring dispositions. The disorder of time is thereby organized and integrated into what Ricœur (1988) calls a “discordant concordance”—partly historical, partly fictional, but wholly human.

Identity and Dialogue

Narrative identity positions us in a world of action, situating us in a present intentionality that presupposes a remembered past and reaches toward a desired or expected future. To know who we are as persons means to know where we stand *in medias res*. “Standing” in this sense, and the specious present itself, dissolves into movement along the ever-changing trajectory of an unfinished and uncertain existence. *Peripeteia* is not limited to Greek tragedy; it defines the jagged articulation of life itself. This temporal perspective on ourselves requires a moral horizon against which happenings and actions, hopes and fears, and triumphs and failings can be interpreted and integrated into a continuous and continuing story. As Ricœur (1992) points out, there are no “ethically neutral” narratives (p. 115).

But are the morally-backgrounded narratives we weave only for ourselves? The example of Emily discussed earlier reminds us that we are amply assisted and guided in narrating ourselves into social existence. Parents and other caregivers position us in their narratives before we are able to offer up any of our own. They provide us with an identity to which we can respond in time through our growing powers of self-construction. The sociality of human existence renders all narration, even that of personal identity, an ineluctably dialogical affair, a colloquy of sorts. Upon the knees of others, we absorb a personal and collec-

tive heritage of stories, from the most banal anecdotes of everyday experience to the sacred texts that bind a faith community. Narrators invite us to recognize ourselves in their stories, either explicitly, as in a family member's informal recollection of a shared household experience, or implicitly, as in an author's attempt to have us identify with a character in a novel.

We come to understand others and their experience in storied form. Full participation in the stories of others requires insinuating ourselves as members of the cast. At the level of identity, affiliation requires the interweaving of personal stories. We learn early on that our stories must be negotiated with those of others to be received as credible, interesting, and intelligible. Narratives are, after all, for sharing. They are a means of communion and social coordination. If two people cannot agree on who they are for each other, they will be unable to harmonize their actions into familiar and predictable cultural patterns. Cooperative and complementary activity requires mutual acceptance of identities.

Identity as social positioning requires assent, acknowledgment, or recognition. As a guide to social action, identity can be conceived of as an implicit "claim" (Goffman 1959). This consists of a communicative projection upon the other that one is a certain kind of person with corresponding rights, needs, abilities, and obligations—and that the social situation should therefore be understood as having familiar normative contours. Self-identity claims implicitly position the other as well, owing to the interdependence of social roles: doctor-patient, teacher-student, performer-spectator, master-slave, etc. To proclaim who one is *for* the other in a social context is to also make a claim *about* the other. Seen in this light, identity politics are nothing new in cultural life. They are an inevitable dynamic in all relationships and begin in the playground and the family room, not the courts or the public sphere of political debate. Our identities have always been as much for others as for ourselves. As Charles Taylor (1994) observes: "We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things . . . others want to see in us" (pp. 32-33). This agonistic view of identity is especially relevant in the case of contemporary self-narratives that are sustained less by the weight of fixed social structure than by the convictions of the individual and the contingent recognition of others.

Personal and Collective Narratives

In pre-modern societies, the individual's identity was inherited at birth, regulated through public rites of passage, and conferred by others on the basis of public action and achievement. Although the social-structural regulation of identity remains in force in late modernity, most developed and especially Western nations valorize the pursuit of a deeper and more "authentic" identity, understood as what we are able to make of ourselves as distinctive persons. Anthony Giddens

(1991) refers to this autonomy as the “reflexive project” of self-construction. “We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves . . . Self-understanding is subordinated to the more inclusive and fundamental aim of building/rebuilding a coherent and rewarding sense of identity” (p. 75).

Accordingly, “Autobiography—particularly in the broad sense of an interpretive self-history produced by the individual concerned . . . is actually at the core of self-identity in modern social life. Like any other formalized narrative, it is something that has to be worked at, and calls for creative input as a matter of course” (p. 76).

The responsibility of the late modern individual to forge his or her own identity through autonomous narrative construction helps explain the preoccupation of so many in our society with independence from, and even opposition to, cultural and institutional sources of self-definition. As Charles Taylor (1991) argues, however, this extreme and distorted view of authenticity empties it of its dialogical and ethical promise in social life. It appears blind to the reality that our self-narratives must be written for and with others as much as for and by ourselves. Living justly and productively with others requires a constant negotiation and renegotiation of intersecting identities, a dialectic of assertion and recognition/rejection.

The interpersonal dynamics of identity are further complicated by the internal complexity of self-definition itself, which always reduces to an interplay of personal and collective narratives. Who we are to ourselves as individuals—as stories in time—will always be shaped and informed by the collective stories of the groups to which we belong by choice, accident, or ascription. All of us are embedded within a rich constellation of *social* identities referring to race, ethnicity, culture, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, political allegiance, occupation, lifestyle, etc. Individual self-narration will inevitably draw upon the content of these social identities, either affirmatively or resistively. Any enduring social group is defined and sustained in part by its own stories and imaginings of what it is as a community (Anderson 1991), and by the corresponding accounts that others give of it, be they fair or invidious. Such social identities can scarcely be ignored in the reflexive project of personal identity, as they are of great import for how individuals are treated by others in ethical and political life (Appiah 2005). Collective identities can be both constraining and enabling for individual self-definition, but they can hardly be ignored.

Multiculturalism and Narrative Identity

The notion of collective or social identity is key to understanding the contemporary challenge of narrative identity construction in multicultural liberal democracies. *Multiculturalism* is a term that straddles many political and ideological commitments, ranging from the preservation and protection of distinct cultural

communities within a diverse polity to the promotion of normative forms of dialogue and participation across those communities. It is the latter, interactive reading of multiculturalism that I would like to take up in relation to identity. The former is more a matter of negative liberty and its safeguarding through procedural liberalism. My exemplar of a society committed to multiculturalism is Canada, a nation famously characterized by John Ralston Saul (1997) as a "Siamese twin" experiment in cultural and linguistic coexistence. The experiment Saul refers to is the conflictual history of Canada's French and British constituencies, whose formal efforts at mutual accommodation can be traced back to the Quebec Act of 1774. A more fitting metaphor for Canada, however, might be Siamese *triplets*, in recognition of the fact that its Aboriginal peoples have figured prominently in the political narrative of governmental accommodation since the Royal Proclamation of 1763. From this conflict-ridden and at times precarious experiment in coexistence emerged Canada's broader commitment to state multiculturalism, codified in 1982 in Section 27 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and in 1988 in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act.

Importantly, multiculturalism as federal policy in Canada is understood not only as tolerance, protection, and full inclusion of all ethnocultural groups, but also the active promotion of cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and respect *among* those groups. For example, the Act mandates policy that increases "the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins." It is in relation to this interactive ideal that struggles over "the politics of difference" (Kymlicka 1995) often arise in narrative identity claims.

In the twenty-first century, Canada receives around 200,000 immigrants a year, the majority coming from Asian countries. The sustained influx adds to an already rich social diversity. In keeping with Canada's historical commitment to multiculturalism, little institutional effort has been made to impose a common set of values or vision of a good life as a condition for citizenship. In fact, it is often claimed that the most defining feature of Canada's national self-image is tolerance and respect for its dizzying diversity, along with a deliberate *reluctance* to promote any superordinate identity or allegiance to some binding essentialist narrative. Relative to most other national cultures, the core of shared Canadian identity might appear as problematically thin or even "weak." Many Canadians, however, see this weakness as a strength, claiming that it reflects the inclusiveness, flexibility, and freedom of their social order. The absence of a strong and coalescent national identity does indeed reflect the successful realization of Canadian multiculturalism at one level but, I would like to argue, it impedes it at another. It is at this second level that the dialogical challenge for narrative identity becomes clear.

In many multicultural societies, the content of national identity serves as a focal point for disputes over the identity claims of distinct constituencies. Take

the example of Europe. In recent years, a succession of prominent European leaders have voiced doubts about the success of multiculturalism in their societies. British Prime Minister David Cameron, speaking at the Munich Security Conference in 2011, claimed that: "Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and the mainstream. We have failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We have even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run counter to our values" ("David Cameron" 2011).

Similarly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, addressing her fellow Christian Democratic Union members in 2010, proclaimed that "This [multicultural] approach has failed, utterly failed" ("Angela Merkel" 2010). Her position was echoed the following year by former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who added, "We have been too concerned about the identity of the person who was arriving and not enough about the identity of the country that was receiving him" ("Nicolas Sarkozy" 2011). Arguably, such comments reflect a reactionary sentiment rooted in growing European anxieties over the politically-charged social divisions—especially ethnic and religious—of their rapidly changing populations. At the same time, these official comments sparked a great deal of impassioned dialogue in the public sphere over just what it means to be British, German, or French in the twenty-first century. Most importantly, both majority and minority groups participated in the public dialogue and were forced, to a greater or lesser extent, to negotiate their positions against the rational force of opposing viewpoints. The discussion was far from harmonious or always mutually respectful, but it was richly interactive and in its best moments, promoted the hermeneutic "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 1989) that represents multiculturalism's discursive democratic ideal.

A nation like Canada, in contrast, lacks the grand, mythic narratives of European national identities. As such, there is less of a cultural center to galvanize dialogue aimed at negotiating the disconnected or competing claims of its diverse constituencies. This political deflation makes for a far more harmonious and tolerant society, but does not necessarily foster the state multiculturalist ideal of mutual recognition and understanding, which can only be realized through the negotiation—often effortful and contentious—of difference. Where there is little impetus for such dialogue in the sphere of public opinion, and equal participation in it by all groups with distinct interests, commitments, and viewpoints, diversity too often reduces to communal insularity and cultural self-segregation. Worse, at the individual level, people contending with the social complexities of diversity tend to withdraw from civic participation. The political scientist Robert Putnam captures this unfortunate consequence in characterizing the negative relation of diversity to civic life and social capital in large American cities: "Diversity seems to trigger not in-group/out-group division,

but anomie or social isolation. In colloquial language, people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to 'hunker' down—that is, to pull in like a turtle. So far I have limited my presentation to evidence regarding social trust . . . However, a wide array of other measures of social capital and civic engagement are also negatively correlated with ethnic diversity" (Putnam 2007, 149).

Consistent with this pattern, majority group members in Canadian cities become less trusting of others in their community as the local proportion of visible minorities increases (Hou and Wu 2009; Soroka, Helliwell and Johnston 2007). My point here is that in a successful discursive democracy, cultural groups need both cause and opportunity to speak to one another as political entities across social divisions. Otherwise, the natural tendency will be to pull farther away from each other in terms of mutual concern. Insofar as dynamic collective identities require recognition, this can only be achieved through dialogue (Benhabib 2002). Moreover, recognition through dialogue is destined to become an increasingly shared imperative around the world. In a globalizing era of high immigration, densely multi-faith, multi-race, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual societies, however democratic, are becoming more typical than exceptional.

The dialogical reading of multiculturalism is often distinguished as *interculturalism* and contrasted with "millet" multiculturalism's (Appiah 2005) more limited focus on tolerance, non-interference, and the relative autonomy of cultural communities. In the Canadian context, the use of this term is complicated by its preferential use in the province of Quebec as an alternative to federal multiculturalism. Interculturalism in this sense seeks to balance the rights of minorities against the perceived imperatives of French linguistic and cultural preservation through strategic policies of assimilation and accommodation (Taylor 2012). More broadly, however, interculturalism has been articulated as an ethical commitment to dialogical and practical engagement with the cultural other, and the rejection of wholesale relativism and presumed incommensurability of differing lifeworlds (Nussbaum 1997). This casting positions interculturalism as a sort of cosmopolitanism requiring not only *verstehen* "translation" of the claims of the other, but, perhaps more importantly, an openness to reflexive questioning and self-transformation through critical cultural interchange (Delanty 2006).

What, then, can be said about the challenge of multiculturalism or even interculturalism for narrative identity? Individual and collective identities are always in flux, their revisions, reconstructions, and even reinventions the result of the dialectical tensions of intercourse with others. Understood as positioning, an identity makes claims upon those to whom it is projected in social life. As such, it must be negotiated with the competing claims of others. Understood as history, an identity reconstructs the past in stories that morally situate other individuals or groups, giving them a stake in its wider acceptance or rejection. For example, a historically oppressed group's collective narrative of struggle against

injustice and exploitation can only be "recognized" through at least partial identification by the oppressor with how it is represented in the narrative. The points of intersection with the oppressor's own collective self-narrative will inevitably include inconsistencies and contradictions. These must be negotiated through dialogue if mutual understanding and reconciliation is ever to be achieved. More positively, this means that an identity recognized in this interpenetrating manner becomes supported by the narratives of others rather than defensively sequestered within the cultural enclave. It is this dynamic interweaving and mediation of narratives across groups that helps realize the participatory ideal of state multiculturalism. Without it, there will be at best a peaceful coexistence marked by mutual tolerance and polite indifference.

The lack of a ritually and narratively binding cultural center in multicultural liberal democracies is their distinctive egalitarian virtue. This decentered inclusiveness adds to their appeal as immigrant destinations. On the other hand, the decentering compounds the loss of a "spiritual center" (Tillich 1952) that characterizes a secular age of discredited traditions and distrusted social institutions. The resulting anxieties and insecurities are both individual and collective, complicating the construction of narrative identity. Any sustaining narrative identity must dispel the nihilism expressed in Franz Kafka's bleak pronouncement that "the meaning of life is that it ends." To do so, it must bind itself to some axial conception of the good, some organized set of values coherent and enduring enough to give both direction and meaning to the discordant succession of life. This is as important for the achievement of personal identity as for the cultural reproduction and survival of a faith or ethnic community. Again, personal and collective narratives are best seen in this context as dynamically interdependent rather than disjunctive.

The cantonization of cultural identity does not promote intergroup dialogue and full participation in national self-realization. A successful democratic society is not simply the sum of its diverse voices. Its moral success depends instead on the extent to which those voices can modulate each other in the struggle toward mutual understanding and progressive transformation. Insofar as narrative identity requires the recognition of the other to support the give-and-take of social life as *shared* meaning, diversity demands the courage to hear and speak through the discomfort of unfamiliarity and distrust. We must listen to the stories of others and attempt to connect them with our own, not just tolerate them alongside our own. Mere pluralism is not equivalent to mutualism. We must find ourselves in the narrative selves of those who are different than us and allow them to find themselves in us. This requires grappling with the often wide rifts of language, culture, and religion, and overcoming our fear of strangers and the strange that living in the midst of multicultural diversity too often intensifies. This is both the challenge of state multiculturalism and its greatest hermeneutic promise. Over two centuries ago, Hegel highlighted the need for social

recognition in the spiritual completion of identity: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel 1977, 111).

In contrast to Hegel's problematic master-slave dialectic, mature "acknowledgment" demands something other than submission or surrender to the brute force of another's identity. The sublating acknowledgment of true fellowship is participatory and collaborative. Only by producing self-narratives that are responsive to the moral claims of others can we bridge our social differences enough to take responsibility for a shared future.

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