**Social Media—Narrating and Othering Our Selves**

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**Introducing Cavarero and Narratable Selves**

Adriana Cavarero’s work, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000) explores how our conceptions of the self are fostered through and borrowed from narratives provided by others. Cavarero’s insight is that we are narratable selves, we are exposed to tales of ourselves and others from birth and we rely on mutual exhibition of narratives of the self for personhood. In short, recognition and identity stem from relational storytelling premised upon a view of humanity that is interactive, interdependent and reliant on forms of togetherness.

Through this work, Cavarero, as a feminist philosopher, takes aim at the failure of mainstream Western philosophy to account adequately for the particular and specific over the abstract and universal. Here she interrogates the place of women within discussions of ‘Mankind’ where we are simultaneously Othered and written out whilst patronisingly accepted under the gendered guise of ‘Man’. She utilises the tale of Oedipus as evidence for how such a state of affairs fuels misrecognition at the individual level whilst undermining the broader philosophical quest at the collective. Her reclamation and celebration of narrative, which is necessarily unique and specific, stems in part from this misrecognition of the place of women within philosophic thought. Narrative, in Cavarero’s eyes, has been derided by a philosophy predicated on exploring what a man is (abstract), rather than recognising human uniqueness and its emergence by exploring who man is (particular). In doing so she does not valorise individuality, but rather singularity—we are unique only in the context of our relations with others who are themselves unique. Whilst narratable selves are only possible because we borrow and take from the tales of others, and we morph and change over the life course, we can only ever be ‘this and not another.’

Cavarero puts forward the argument that the stories we tell about ourselves are touchstones in our creation of personal identity and self-understanding. Yet, we are always in the middle. Thus our own tales are not enough. We are reliant on the narratives others have told us about ourselves in order to understand and create ourselves as we move onwards. Put most simply, we cannot remember or express our toddling selves with the clarity of a tale told by someone present, and such stories are crucial for the formation of identity and our ongoing relationship to ourselves. We would struggle to remember or express our wandering ways prone as we were to escaping from nurseries (tales of adventure), our childhood predilections for hiding parental wallets or keys (tales of mischief), or our strange fear of butterflies (tales of vulnerability). Such things may seem trifling but they are interwoven with how we present ourselves to others, how we understand ourselves. They are our origin stories that we improvise upon and deploy within discrete contextual settings. In this vein Cavarero takes Arendt’s position on natality and pushes it into the explicitly gendered and political. Reproduction is the touchstone and again this runs counter to more traditional philosophical concerns with the centrality of death for the human condition. This is made clear in her argument that moments of co-authorship are not constrained within our childhoods, but expand
throughout the life course. Cavarero’s point is that we are social and that this sociability goes beyond a need to interact, love and learn from one another. Our very understanding of ourselves and the ongoing project of maintaining ourselves are innately social and premised upon numerous acts of collective narration even if we forget to cite our references. Even our most intimate understanding of selfhood is built upon the tales offered by and co-opted by others. We are borrowers. Through this prism she expresses a literary path into philosophies of recognition.

Of course the idea of being spoken or written into meaningful existence (or out of it) has a deep intellectual history; we see this from Parmenides to Descartes to the broad church of postmodernists who in extremis seek to persuade us that the subject is in fact dead. Here the subject is no longer manifested by text but subsumed by it, it has disappeared and all that remains is the trace left by the textual performance. Cavarero finds a way between these positions of collapse under the weight of words and the solo pursuit to define and maintain an autonomous selfhood atomised from others.

Twitter Narratives, Gendered Attack and the Self

Social media is a set of contemporary spaces where selves are revealed and exposed in a circular reciprocity, rendering narratable selves political. Yet social media can also provide spaces where the self, especially the gendered self, is threatened and where boundaries of intimacy can be contravened. In recent times, such spaces seem to place women in particularly precarious situations. The work encompassed within Relating Narratives combined with the proliferation of examples of the gendered nature of shaming on social media has led to the production of this somewhat unexpected sketch of a piece for these pages.

The democratising force of social media feeds a contemporary polyvocality, nourishing DIY spoken and textual cultures where almost anyone can have their say. There can be little doubt as to the power of social media to forge connections, share information, learn and interject oneself into the miasma of virtual life. Yet social media and selfhood conjoined to forms of social narrative share an uneasy relationship. Social media is Janus-like in its identity work. The immediacy of social media can transgress comfortable boundaries of exposure whilst the anonymity proffered can enable attacks to be undertaken with relative impunity. One way to consider these Janus-like opportunities and threats is through Twitter with its powerful 140 character vignette approach to telling. Despite the numerous positives that have come with the rise of Twitter and the sharing cultures it engenders, it also opens up more ambiguous spaces to tell stories about each other and to transgress boundaries of pre-internet intimacy. Social media in general, provides an array of authorial weaponry of dubious provenance and its quick-fire deployment can serve to undermine narratives of selfhood as we are offered up an arsenal to shame and humiliate. Photographs, videos and assertions proliferate quickly and with little time for neither reflection nor consideration of origin take on a life of their own. Never more so can we said to be perennially in medias res. Artefacts or traces of a life whether true or false are regularly woven into broader narratives about a person, often attacking in gendered terms the selfhood of the target.
Twitter can also collectivise storytelling and pool strength to share experiences and support one another. This has recently been epitomised in the success of the #YesAllWomen hashtag following the fall out of the Isla Vista shootings and the perpetrator’s clear sense of sexual entitlement to women. Here a collation of experiences bonded together to truly write a fresh narrative spoken in multiple voices across continents about women’s daily experiences of sexism, misogyny and subjugation. In Cavarero’s terms, identity is entrusted to the gaze of the other through this spontaneous coming together. Such entrusting makes us vulnerable in a highly exposed and public manner, something perhaps not experienced so clearly, for so many, prior to the rise of social media. Twitter is able to simultaneously draw and repel us into acts of revelation encompassed within our engagement with virtual others. The rise of #YesAllWomen was responded to through a largely unsuccessful drizzle in the form of #NotAllMen, epitomising perfectly the politics of narratable selves in an era of quick-fire interjections.

Yet for all the moments of collective strength, of subversive sharing and black humour, social media and Twitter in particular pose real challenges to the project of the self when premised on socialised narratives. The impact of bombardment wrought by the interpolation of other people’s tales about oneself can be seen most clearly in the attacks on women who dare speak their minds on Twitter: Mary Beard, Stella Creasy, Laurie Penny, Caroline Criado-Perez, Hadley Freeman, Grace Dent. Hostility toward women thrives online. These attacks are not undertaken solely by men, a recent report from the think-tank Demos shows that women engage in these gendered attacks almost as often. Such findings remind us of the social nature of speech and narrative acts. Words like “slut” and “whore” are thrown around so frequently they embody a kind of malevolent cultural lexicon. Hegemony of thought finds expression in turns of phrase associated with dominance.

**Slut-Shaming, Identity Work and Subversion**

‘Slut shaming’ is an attack on women who are deemed to have escaped the iron cages of acceptable gendered behaviour, be it dress, sexual activity, body presentation. In reality, shaming behaviours can be directed at women who simply pose a challenge in some way: in speech or look or presentation, for being too clever, too outspoken, too comfortable within your own skin or sexuality. Slut-shaming is a process of Othering, of ostracising women. Being ripped from the social milieu has profound consequences as a new academic study exploring college life in the United States, *Paying for the Party*, reveals. This ethnographic work found that slut-shaming (in person and online) was a common social practice riddled by classism, performed by young women undertaken as a form of boundary management for identity. The insidious nature of the language and its slipperiness was commented upon by the authors as a threat to selfhood, “The term [slut] is so vague and slippery that no one knows what a slut was or no one knows what you have to do to be that. It circulated around, though, so everyone could worry about it being attached to them.”

Twitter, unlike the dorm rooms of *Paying for the Party* seems to be better able to muster solidaristic, albeit virtual, collectivised responses to gendered attacks on the self. This collectivised response calls out the misogyny involved in policing women’s bodies, activities, aspirations and desires. Despite the ability of collective telling to bring together
diverse voices in defence of the self or others, the potency of such gendered attacks cannot be understated. As Feministing founder Jessica Valenti put it, “this nebulous, unquantifiable quality of the slur is what makes it so distressing – there's no way to disprove something that has no conclusive boundaries to begin with.”

Whilst the path of relational narratives often may be rocky, and tales of the self often contradict one another, provided such identity work is premised on a degree of respect and recognition such ridges and knocks may too support the narrative of the self on its journey. That is, narratives in and of themselves need not be wholly positive in order to support the work of the self. Yet, without a respectful foundation and the basic premise that yes, we are all human here, there is a transgression of the principles of co-productive relational narration, so tales about a person become interrogatory, intrusive and harmful. We are faced with an inescapable interplay between recognition and narration. This is the key learning from the identity model of recognition theory, that to be denied recognition or to be ‘misrecognized’ within the conditions of such an attack is to suffer a distortion of one’s relation to one’s self and an injury to one’s identity.

A discussion on Facebook about a nude photograph seen without the woman’s consent or the publication of personal ‘sext’ messages on Twitter can be used as weapons for shaming and are almost always indicative of our schizophrenic attitude toward female sexuality. More importantly, they are violations of forms of consent. Whilst the sharing of such material does not conform to traditional narrative forms they are markers of narrative intent, to ‘tell about’ or ‘tell on’ a person. More positively, the sharing of family photographs, tales of pregnancy, work and the everyday are also markers of narrative production and identity sustenance, even if on occasion they push us into the uncomfortable waters of ‘oversharing’. This sense of (in)voluntary indiscretion is not new, Simmel (1961) put it,

Human intercourse rests on the fact that everybody knows somewhat more about the other than the other voluntarily reveals to him; and things he
knows are frequently matters whose knowledge the other person (were he aware of it) would find undesirable. All this may be considered
indiscretion in the individual sense: in the social sense, it is a condition
necessary for the concrete density and vitality of interaction.

Returning to narrative, if nothing else, surely social media is about the rise of a new form of narrative premised upon a culture of accounting for oneself that is almost always tied to the presentation of the self. This is why we are frantically accusing one another of narcissism whilst panicking about the influence of social media on young people—social media is conjoined to the project of identity.

Conclusion

The informal, hyper-personal arrows of gendered attack which have formed part of the topography of social media in recent years are part of the same fabric as those mundane slurs found in daily discourse. They are so painfully effective because they are representative of and continue to fuel the broader social conditions and categories of
thought under which women live. These attacks need not be of any great magnitude for it is the small, daily insults, the tittering and the undermining of the broader narrative of the person which indicate the scale of the threat to selfhood as much as any case which reaches the courts for its violent intent. The shame of these events stems not only from the shock, the unexpected and unwelcome exposure, but because the narratives we tell about ourselves are threatened. Regarding Twitter slurs against women Carl Miller from Demos put it, “It makes women hate other women, even, perhaps, some women hate themselves.” It plays on the aspects of our selves that Cavarero identifies as making us most human, and most vulnerable – our inevitable interdependency on one another for the construction and maintenance of our selves.

Of course, social media did not invent these problems, but it does provide a new outlet for them, for good or ill. The problem is that the assertions of others in the sphere of the internet tend to gravitate towards ‘what’ a person is, where Cavarero seeks to address the failure of Western philosophy to comprehend the uniqueness of ‘who’ a person is. Her argument is that to know who someone is, is to follow the protagonist’s narrative even though such a story is always more akin to socialised bricolage than the certitude of autobiography. The stage of textual performance in 140 characters is narrative nonetheless and the porous-boundary of ‘what’ from ‘who’ problematizes the sense of self within the innately social politics of recognition. Cavarero’s orientation in Relating Narratives is toward the subject’s emergence within spaces of appearance of which social media would be one. The discursive interplay in these spaces constitutes an address as the self can only make a claim for itself through the presence of others; in Butler’s terms an account of oneself aims at the self but also at presenting the self to another. Social media collapses the distance inherent within more traditional forms of this address. Thus, despite the desire to disentangle the ‘what’ from the ‘who’ in acts of identity work, the practicalities of it in the accelerated spheres of the internet make it near impossible.

The narratable self is a unique existent constituted through relations with others, even where those others attack or assault the protagonist’s narrative of the self. No doubt Cavarero’s frustrations with the universalising tendencies of philosophy would find productive vent in exploring the particulars of the micro-politics of interactive and virtual social spaces for selfhood (Relating Narratives was written six years before the birth of Twitter.) After all, Cavarero renders the construction and telling of selves political because such activities demand reciprocal exposure of the self within a relational frame. It is political because it deals in the intangibility of ‘who’ rather than ‘what’ whilst rejecting more frequent references to ‘essence’ commonly conjured up in talk about the self.

Where social media poses particular problems for Cavarero’s insistence on the existent rather than the essence of selfhood is through issues of stewardship and revelation. Stewardship over the narration of the self is tied intimately to self-understanding and self-determination, and it acts as a crucial ballast against attempts to shame. Yet social media, as mirror for broader social proclivities in understanding selfhood, challenges the primacy of authorial control often under the guise of transparency. That is, the idea of the existent runs counter to the revitalised prevailing notion that there is an essence in need of disclosure. This conceit can allow a culture to flourish whereby the individual is
repeatedly subject to attacks as part of some crusade for revelation. This in turn is driven by the contemporary cults for authenticity, which often behave in a self-serving ‘gotcha’ mode, concerned with embarrassment or one-upmanship rather than engaging in some higher purpose to genuinely expose wrongdoing or further debate. This is a problem for the narratable self in the grander sense, because whilst authorial primacy does not constitute the self, rather it is part of understanding ‘who’ the self is—there is a complex mutuality at play. In the accelerated world of the internet we may need to accept that hypocrisy in the old-fashioned sense is a necessary veil for selfhood, a civilising force against the destruction of the self. This is not to protect the ‘essence’ of the self but rather to allow for the ongoing writing of the self without a persistent need for incessant auditing or enforced confession.

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References


