*On the Primacy of Narrative Agency: Re-reading Seyla Benhabib on Narrativity*

1. Why Narrative Agency?

Finding a model of agency appropriate for feminist philosophy is an exceedingly difficult task. The goals of feminism (which often include, but are not limited to, autonomy, emancipation, and equality) require a robust notion of agency, which can account for critical reflection and rational action. But to posit such a strong sense of agency is to ignore feminism’s insights into the extent to which subjectivity is constituted by deeply gendered, often harmfully subordinating, norms. Many theorists in recent years have suggested that a narrative concept of agency presents a practical alternative to an overly rationalist or hopelessly subordinated notion of the subject (Benhabib 1992, 1999; Cavarero 2000; Atkins 2008; Mackenzie 2008; Allen 2008). Indeed, a theory of narrativity, one which relies upon a notion of the subject as contextualized, contingent, unique, and relational, can fruitfully posit narrative agency as a precondition for individual critical capacity, for communication, and for progressive social change.

It is important to differentiate between narrative agency and narrative identity. The first is the capacity to say “I” over time and with relation to others. This is not the “I” of pure reason or the doer beyond the deed. It is not an entity at all, but a basic capacity. The second refers to the shifting constellation of narratives which make up a particular self. Conceiving of narrative agency as a precondition for narrative identity is an important theoretical move because it allows us to account for the endless permutations of narrative identity—its contingency, its complexity—without having to articulate a specific, fixed narrative identity.

This configuration seems to me to suggest that a notion of autonomy, understood as reflective critical capacity, only makes sense after the self as narrative agent has been identified. We cannot presume to know the extent to which a subject’s critical capacity is limited by the relations of power into which she is born. Critical capacity ultimately depends on the individual’s conception of herself as a coherent yet mutable formation over time within a specific socio-historical context. The self cannot transcend power relationships, social context, or time. Nor can we posit a self with a static critical capacity. But we can change power structures from within through the collective interplay of narratives: we can recognize, rearrange, and reframe norms through the collective creation of meaning.

In this article, I argue that shifting such narratives depends first and foremost on a robust notion of narrative agency. I will start by developing a clearer picture of what I mean by ‘narrative agency’ through a reading of Seyla Benhabib’s early work on narrativity. Then I will engage with two critiques of Benhabib’s narrative model in order to illustrate some of its theoretical and pragmatic limitations. In the first, Amy Allen argues that Benhabib is able to tout the importance of narrative agency only by downplaying the fundamentally subordinating nature of gender norms on individual identity formation. The second is Lois McNay’s concern that Benhabib’s conception of narrative is predicated upon the assumption that experience is essentially communicable within relationships which are themselves somehow innately reflexive. Both McNay and Allen gesture toward a ‘rationalist residue’ in Benhabib’s theory.[[1]](#endnote-1) I will argue that the model of narrative agency I draw out from Benhabib stands up under the scrutiny of these two critiques. What we are left with is a model of narrative agency which is irreducible, inherently relational, and essential for the generation of new narratives within a plurality.

2. Narrative Agency and Narrative Identity

To begin, I want to draw out what I see as the three most salient aspects of Benhabib’s theory of narrativity. First, narrative agency is primary: it precedes narrative content (narrative identity) in the sense that the former is both necessary for the creation and implies the continued existence of the latter. The subject’s capacity to say ‘I am female’ depends on her capacity to say ‘I’; that is, a subject’s experience of herself as a unique being is a precondition for narrative identity formation.[[2]](#endnote-2) Second, narrative agency is relational. I can only meaningfully distinguish myself as an “I” in relation to others. Third, and finally, narrative agency is (infinitely) generative. The interactive plurality of narratives is the site of the creation of meaning in the form of new narratives and norms (individual, social, political, etc.). These collectively constructed narratives and norms are immanent, contingent and, though they may be harmful as often as they are emancipatory, are foundational for social change.

In her early work, Benhabib outlines a system of critique in which normative criteria may be posited only when the validity of those normative criteria are left ever-open to interpretation and debate. For Benhabib, this contextualized version of critical theory—at which she arrives through a rigorous deconstruction and reframing of Habermasian communicative ethics—is preferable to other epistemological methods because it can furnish (contingent) norms capable of influencing various disciplines, thereby making the most immediate difference in terms of promoting mutual recognition and social justice, even as it admits that these are contingent goals, based on the concerns of a particular episteme.[[3]](#endnote-3) A normative restructuring that seems ‘positive’ today might just as easily seem repressive or exclusionary tomorrow. In other words, the theorist can only work within the intellectual parameters already set for contemporary critique, even as she reflects critically upon the formation of those parameters.

Following Benhabib, we can think of the individual as having the capacity to construct a meaningful story about who she is with relation to others. ‘Narrative agency’, conceived as such, does not posit a static subject who possesses, over a lifetime, an unchanging or completely transparent identity. For Benhabib, the subject is not an a priori formation, wholly definable, but an irreducible site of meaning creation. An individual will make sense of her own identity by exercising her narrative agency, but she can never give a ‘complete’ account of her self because so much of her narrative identity depends upon the narratives of others. Indeed, narrative agency does not assume a fixed ontological subject who pre-exists discourse. Narrative agency does not imply any other intention or motivation than to ‘make sense’, so the narrative agent need not have any moral commitments or well-informed opinions. Narrative as capacity, the capacity to make meaningful one’s situation within a web of other narratives, is a precondition for any narrative content.

Creating ‘meaningful’ narratives is always a social activity, carried out within a group of individuals, each of whom is unique by virtue of a particular, unrepeatable perspective. Each individual is ‘the same, that is, human’, as Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, ‘in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live’ (Arendt 1958: 8). Benhabib’s concept of narrativity is built upon this Arendtian notion of plurality, in which the self is never ‘withdrawn from the world’ but is always a ‘self in the human community, an acting [and] interacting self’ (Benhabib 1992: 127). Within the human community are formed protean, context-dependent relationships; and these relationships constitute the parameters of the self in the same way that collectively agreed upon norms establish the parameters of critique. Both norms and narratives are arrived at collectively, through social interaction; and these norms and narratives can only be confronted, resisted, and changed through social interaction.

Narrative agency refers to the subject’s capacity to construct a meaningful narrative, and not on the actual content of that narrative.[[4]](#endnote-4) The subject of narrative identity need not subscribe to a particular morality or be governed by a particular set of normative criteria. Benhabib makes this point in contrast with Charles Taylor (1989). For Taylor, a self is definable by her evaluative or moral commitments. Identity, as he puts it, ‘is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose’ (Taylor 1989: 27). The self retains her identity, in this view, by knowing where she stands with regard to certain evaluative commitments. Furthermore, for Taylor, these evaluative commitments are only meaningful within the context of ‘webs of interlocution’. That is, identity depends not only upon what one stands for but also upon the person to whom or with whom one is speaking (Taylor 1989: 36).

For Benhabib, these webs of interlocution are indeed the setting for identity formation. At birth, we are thrown into a network of other people’s narratives, and we ‘become who we are by learning to be a conversation partner in these narratives’ (Benhabib 1999: 344). However, this process of collaborative individuation does not have to entail making strong evaluative commitments. On the contrary, Benhabib argues, it is entirely possible to have agency (in the form of the capacity to construct meaning through conversation) without having a set of values or an innate moral integrity. Taylor’s tendency to conflate agency with moral commitment is, Benhabib argues, a confusion of levels of analysis, one which must be avoided. It is important to ‘think of the continuity of the self in time not through a commitment to a specific set of evaluative goods but through the *capacity* to take and adopt an attitude toward those goods’ (Benhabib 1999: 364, emphasis added). In other words, the subject’s capacity for agency must not be confused with assumptions about what a self *ought* to think or do—narrative capacity must not be conflated with narrative content. As Benhabib puts it: ‘it is not what the story is about that matters but, rather, one’s ability to keep telling a story about who one is that makes sense to oneself and others’ (Benhabib 1999: 347).

The narrative agent, conceived as conversation partner, in no way represents a fixed or static core self: she is contingent and contextual, but also irrepressible—for the narrative agent will always try to make sense, even out of nonsense, no matter how varied, fragmented or overwhelming such nonsense may be. The subject’s capacity to make sense is the constant which allows for a coherent sense of self over time. Moreover, if the process of making sense of the self over time is conceived as inherently relational, then the subject is never solely responsible for her own story. Indeed, she must always fit her story in with and alongside the stories of others. ‘Narratives,’ Benhabib writes, ‘cannot have closure precisely because they are always aspects of the narratives of others; the sense that I create for myself is always immersed in a fragile “web of stories” that I as well as others spin’ (Benhabib 1999: 347). ‘Making sense’ paves the way for mutual recognition: I include you in my story as you include me in yours. Parts of your story resonate with me, as parts of my story resonate with you.

It is precisely this intersubjective give-and-take which lends narrative agency its heuristic strength, for ‘[f]urthering one’s capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within a solidaristic community that sustains one’s identity through listening to one, and allowing one to listen to others, with respect’ (Benhabib 1999: 350). For Benhabib, narrativity, or narrative practice, must go hand in hand with plurality. Stories are produced culturally, as well as individually, and individual stories have no meaning unless they are shared:

Only if somebody else is able to understand the meaning of our words as well as the whatness of our deeds can the identity of the self be said to be revealed. Action and speech, therefore, are essentially interaction. They take place between humans. Narrativity, or the immersion of action in a web of human relationships, is the mode through which the self is individuated and acts are identified. (Benhabib 1992: 127)

Narrative agency thus fosters an appropriate model of narrative identity whether it applies to individual or collective identity. The impetus toward making sense of oneself in relation to the world and over time drives identity formation for both the individual and the group.

How does this process of making sense play out in the world? Conceptualizing the creation of meaning through communicative action represents an important point of tension between Benhabib’s narrative model of agency and other feminist definitions of agency, especially Judith Butler’s much-cited performative model. For Butler, speech is an action that reiterates a norm or set of norms. Reiteration and subsequent resignification, in this model, constitutes a linguistic transformation, a ‘speech act’. The result of this transformation, for Butler, is a new linguistic configuration, but it is not a unique configuration. On the other hand, Benhabib argues that this conceptualization of language in action does not go far enough because it cannot account for the ‘surfeit of meaning, creativity, and spontaneity’ that arises out of communicative interaction. As Benhabib puts it, these ‘speech acts are not only iterations but also innovations and reinterpretations’ (Benhabib 1999: 339). In other words, resignification and reinterpretation must create some new meaning apart from the norms or sets of norms that they reproduce; otherwise, there is no way of understanding that any resignification or reinterpretation has taken place.

Different theorists have addressed this concept of the surfeit of meaning in language in various ways, but for Benhabib, the most important thing to remember is that this new meaning arises out of the mutual recognition (between unique and unrepeatable individual perspectives) involved in the sharing of narratives. The subject cannot be understood apart from her relationships to others, and so, by the same logic, statements cannot be understood apart from their context. Breaking apart and reconfiguring norms of discourse, as the performative model does, cannot fully explain the experience of participating in or appreciating these performances even though, Benhabib argues, performative actions do create a unique meaning. This creation of shared meaning cannot be explained by performance alone. As she puts it: ‘My contention is that the narrative model has the virtue of accounting for that “surfeit of meaning, creativity and spontaneity” that is said to accompany iteration in the performativity model as well but whose mechanisms cannot actually be explained by performativity’ (Benhabib 1999: 341). The meaning created by the sharing of narratives is, in other words, more than the sum of its parts.

3. Individuation, Socialization, and Gender

Amy Allen (2008) argues that Benhabib’s conception of narrativity retains an implicit reliance upon a subject with robust autonomy in the form of critical reflexivity. According to Allen, Benhabib posits the existence of an ‘ungendered core self’ capable of ‘making sense’ of subordinating gender relationships before becoming gendered. To choose how to relate a narrative about gender, a self must first have the autobiographical capacity necessary to ‘make sense’ at all, but an individual does not gain such a capacity, Allen reasons, until that individual is *already* gendered. Recall, however, that narrative agency, conceived as an individual’s capacity to make sense out of nonsense, does not need to posit the extent to which an individual can gain reflective distance from her situation within society. The capacity to ‘make sense’ does *imply* a critical distance but does not depend on a quantitative *evaluation* of that distance. An individual will make sense of the gender norms into which she is thrown, but the way she will make sense of those norms be neither predicted nor guaranteed. As we have seen, the individual’s capacity to form a narrative in the first place constitutes her agency, regardless of the content of that narrative.

Allen’s broader goal is to find a framework for feminist subjectivity which allows for the possibilities of both agency and autonomy in the face of power ‘in all its depth and complexity’ (Allen 2008: 2). Thus, her aim in looking at Benhabib’s work is to determine whether Benhabib’s narrative agency falls victim to an unsupportable rationalism in the face of ubiquitous power relationships. Allen certainly admires Benhabib’s ability to posit admittedly contingent norms for critique (Allen 2008: 180). However, Allen is reluctant to allow that Benhabib’s conception of the subject is sufficiently informed by this framework because she finds that it does not take into account the severity of the influence of subordinating gender norms on the process of individuation.

How, then, should we read Allen’s critique of Benhabib? Allen argues that the ‘I’ who ‘chooses’ her narratives is always already gendered (Allen 2008: 163). But even the gendered ‘I’ always has the *capacity* to make choices, and the content of those choices is secondary to this capacity. As we undergo the process of socialization, we are introduced to what Benhabib calls the claims of culture, many of which are uncomfortably subordinating and marked by unequal distributions of power. These claims constitute narrative identity, but, in themselves, they do not account for every aspect of narrative identity. The capacity to form and reform attachments to these claims first depends on the unique and irreducible role of the individual as narrative agent, as a coherent ‘I’.

It is precisely this differentiation between ‘I’ and the content of the choices that ‘I’ make, however, of which Allen is skeptical. In her view, the capacity to say ‘I’ is preceded and thus at least partially determined by gender identification. As she puts it: ‘If the roots of gender identity lie deeper than those of the narrative ability that Benhabib views as the source of spontaneity, creativity, and agency, then interrelated assumptions about gender difference and gender dominance are so basic to our sense of ourselves that they are likely to be extremely resistant to critique and to change’ (Allen 2008: 170). For Allen, Benhabib assumes a universal narrative agency at the expense of recognizing the gendered constructs which shape even the child’s first exercise of this narrative agency. But does the reality of gender subordination, even at the earliest stages of individuation, compromise Benhabib’s definition of narrative agency as the irrepressible capacity to make sense over time and in relation to others? And does this concept of narrative agency really carry with it a harmfully rationalist endorsement of autonomy vis-à-vis gender norms?

In the model of narrative identity detailed above, gender identification, like all other narrative content, depends upon the capacity to say ‘I’. Narrative agency (capacity) and narrative identity (content) are inextricably bound together. To conceive of narrative agency as primary is not to suggest that the self exists in some fixed state apart from the narrative formation of life-stories. The narrative self is the site of making sense, and as such, is fragile and contingent, always in flux. Benhabib does not argue for a static individual who may step outside of her position in the world and ask: How ought ‘I’ to confront this or that norm? Narrative agency, as we have seen, is the capacity to make sense of one’s position *within* a web of narratives and not the capacity to get outside of this web in order to choose whether or not to accept its terms. Furthermore, the narrative agent is not the master of her own narratives. Her access to meaning-making is always mediated not only by external norms and other stories but also by the very early unconscious internalization of these norms.

Allen refers to several studies which suggest that gender identity forms before a child develops either autobiographical memory or the narrative capacity through which to share information about herself (Allen 2008: 167). By age two, it seems, children have ‘mastered the concept of gender difference,’ but they do not begin to develop the capacity for autobiographical memory until the age of three or four (Allen 2008: 168). Autobiographical memory is different from episodic memory in that it gives the subject a sense of self over time, rather than just an ability to recall past events. Because research suggests that autobiographical memory is developed ‘through social interactions with adult caregivers’ and because those adult caregivers tend to ‘interact with infants and young children in ways that correspond to gender stereotypes’, Allen concludes that ‘autobiography is deeply gendered as well’ (Allen 2008: 167). To support this claim, she cites a study which concluded that little boys’ and little girls’ narratives ‘tend to be different in both their content and, perhaps more significantly, their structure.’ (reference) Researchers found that little boys tended to relate memories that were shorter and more self-involved, whereas little girls tended to give more elaborate and relational accounts of past experiences (Buckner and Fivush 1998).

Based on this empirical evidence, Allen claims that individuation, as well as socialization, is a fundamentally gendered process. She argues that ‘gender structures not only the substantive content of our very narratives but also our very narrative capacities, thus, our narrative selves as well’ (Allen 2008: 168). According to Allen, Benhabib does not take seriously enough the extent to which gender dominance is at work on this foundational level and thus gives ‘an overly optimistic account of what is required in order to exercise autonomy with respect to gender narratives’ (Allen 2008: 164).[[5]](#endnote-5) But this criticism of Benhabib misses the mark for a few important reasons.

First, Allen gives dubious privilege to the systematic dominance of gender relations over the systematic dominance of other relations of power, such as class or level of education. Autobiographical understanding is formed chiefly through social interaction (Benhabib’s ‘learning to become a conversation partner’) with caretakers, but there is nothing to suggest that gender stereotypes are more influential in forming this understanding than these other important factors. Many of the experiments to which Allen refers examine the autobiographical narratives of white, middle-class American children (Buckner and Fivush 1998: 407). Presumably, the development of autobiographical capacity would be different in children of other cultures or other classes thus Allen’s singling out of gender over other developmental factors seems to give us only part of the story. The confrontation with norms, *whatever these norms may be*, is an integral feature of the process of identity formation: the capacity to confront these norms remains constant.

And so, it does not matter all that much whether the ‘I’ who creates narrative meaning is already gendered—what matters is the capacity to say ‘I’ at all. From birth, the narrative agent interacts with the (often contradictory) claims made by gender norms over the course of a lifetime. These gender norms themselves are fluid and multi-layered, not homogenous. They mean different things to different people at different times and in different cultural contexts. Thus, a subject might very easily be ‘gendered’ in that she is constituted by and embedded in the web of gender norms into which she has been born, but this does not mean that she cannot challenge and transform, with varying degrees of success, the norms with which she is confronted. Knowing that an individual is gendered, even down to her most basic conception of herself, does not *lessen* the individual’s capacity for narrative. Benhabib writes:

We always have options in telling a life story that makes sense to us. These options are not ahistorical; they are culturally and historically specific and inflected by the master narrative of the family structure and gender roles into which each individual is thrown. Nonetheless, just as the grammatical rules of language, once acquired, do not exhaust our capacity to build an infinite number of well-formed sentences in a language, so socialization and accumulation processes do not determine the life story of any unique individual or his or her capacity to initiate new actions and new sentences in conversation. (Benhabib 1999: 345)

Finally, a notion of gender subordination, even one that is deeply entrenched at the psychic level, does not compromise our concept of narrative agency. Narrative agency does not mean that a self can always identify or isolate, and then choose whether and how to take up as narrative, subordinating gender norms. On the contrary, Benhabib concedes, after Freud, that the ego is not the master in its own house (Benhabib 1999: 349). Benhabib takes seriously psychoanalytic insights into the phenomenon of subjection. As she puts it: ‘Every story we tell of ourselves will also contain another of which we may not even be aware; and, in ways that are usually very obscure to us, we are determined by these subtexts and memories in our unconscious’ (Benhabib 1999: 349). For Benhabib, this unavoidable subjection does not preclude narrative agency. The subject tries to form a coherent identity for herself by relating to others, but she may never fully know what psychic forces at work within herself influence the course of this interaction.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The deeply ingrained system of subordinating gender norms into which all humans are born will limit the subject’s capacity for autonomy vis-à-vis these norms; it will not, however, compromise the subject’s narrative agency. The agent will make sense of herself within society whether she accepts or rejects the claims of stereotypical gender norms, when she is able to recognize them at all. The narrative subject is, indeed, constituted by a host of subordinating relationships; and yet, she is not totally determined by them. While these relationships of power, many of them gendered or gender-based relationships, often limit a subject’s ability to recognize power at work in and on herself, they do not completely determine the stories a subject will tell about herself. Narrative agency, therefore, is, very simply, the capacity of a contingent, constituted subject to make sense. This narrative model does not propose a core self that transcends the subordinating claims made by systems of gender dominance, and so there is nothing in it that prevents a gendered subject from exercising narrative agency. ‘Gendered’ identity, as it plays out in the open field of choice and circumstance, is as complex and varied as identity itself.

4. Narrative Practice: The Pragmatics of ‘Making Sense’

What, if anything, can conceiving of narrative agency as a precondition for narrative identity tell us about narrative identity formation? Narrative identity is essentially relational in that it arises out of conversations within ‘webs of interlocution’. Within a radically contextualized critique, there exist no static or quasi-transcendental rules which govern conversation in action; however, if we take seriously Benhabib’s notion of the creation of shared meaning through shared narratives within a plurality, then we might reasonably conceive of narrativity as a sort of engine for social change. Together, we are able to make and re-make meaningful statements about who we are. The problem then becomes how to identify whether or not such change is for the better: how to identify, in other words, moments of ‘positive’ mutual recognition and to distinguish those moments from harmful patterns of systematic subordination, miscommunication, and mis-recognition.

Lois McNay admits that Benhabib’s narrative model of agency is more conducive to theorizing intersubjectivity and creativity than other models put forth by feminist political philosophers (2000, 2003). She sees much heuristic potential in the narrative model of agency—a subject with the constant capacity for sense-making seems to her pragmatically preferable to the disconnected, serialized, and fractured subject of postmodernity because it emphasizes ‘the temporal and intersubjective aspects of subjectivity and agency’ (McNay 2003: 7). However, McNay points out that a concept of narrative agency necessarily ignores some of the important ways subordination is at work within relationships. McNay locates Benhabib’s ‘rationalist residue’ in her over-reliance on the inherent communicability of ‘narratives’. Much of Benhabib’s theory of narrativity, McNay suggests, is still haunted by the untenably rationalist assumptions of the Habermasian communicative ethics that Benhabib has worked so meticulously to contextualize. McNay also points out that narrative, focused as it is upon relationships between individuals, struggles to address systematic domination on a broader social scale.

McNay argues that Benhabib’s assumption that ‘making sense’ is an essential human capacity keeps her from appreciating ‘the blocks, both psychic and social, to the formation of a coherent sense of self’ (McNay 2003: 7). McNay equates Benhabib’s notion that narratives are inherently communicable to Habermas’ reliance on the context transcendence of certain kinds of communication. Benhabib, according to McNay, tends to disassociate narrative from the factors which might prevent the construction of narratives in the same way that Habermas tends to disassociate communication from inherently subordinating forms of power. In both cases, there is an overly ambitious attempt to theorize identity in terms of unproblematically equal and ‘authentic’ communication. However, where Habermasian communicative ethics depends on the use of rhetorical rather than poetic language—in other words, the acceptance of another person’s point of view on predetermined terms—the process of sharing narratives is anything but rhetorical. The Habermasian project of communicative ethics and the Benhabibian notion of narrativity are thus fundamentally incompatible, according to McNay (McNay 2003: 2).

Intersubjectivity and interpersonal interaction, within Benhabib’s schema of narrative identity formation, can never function according to universal rules of engagement because the commitments, identifications, and perceived truths of the individual within society are ever-shifting. Thus, relationships between the individual and the other, the individual and her self, the individual and certain social norms, may never be definitively judged ‘subordinating’; and, as a result, identifying situations in which mutual recognition or positive re-signification are certain to occur becomes nearly impossible. Moreover, the process of telling stories is not always helpful; it can also be disruptive, mythologizing, or reifying. Is Benhabib blind to this problem of systematic inequality, as McNay suggests, because she implicitly relies on ‘Habermas’s model of a communicatively symmetrical intersubjectivity’ (McNay 2003: 2)?

McNay is bothered by what she sees as Benhabib’s assumption that all experience can lend itself to narrative. She claims that Benhabib grants a disproportionate authority to stories about the self, an insupportable primacy of the said, a ‘linguistic monism’ that does not take into account the myriad aspects of selfhood that are difficult, if not impossible, to put into narrative form. In other words, Benhabib copies the Habermasian ‘assumption of the unproblematic transmissibility of inner nature’ (McNay 2003: 10). A theory that relies on any kind of narrative-making is overly ambitious because it implicitly relies on the assumption that the self is always capable of constructing a coherent narrative identity.

Indeed, McNay claims that Benhabib posits an irreconcilable difference between the fragmented self and the coherent self and in doing so ‘avoids addressing important issues, such as the nature of the boundary between the sayable and the unsayable, or of the passage of experience from a pre-discursive to a discursive level’ (McNay 2003: 9). The problem here is not that Benhabib posits, a priori, a core self; rather, it is that she presupposes an essential relationship between the experiences that constitute a self and the process of making sense of those experiences. Experience, according to McNay, is not so universally translatable. Many experiences, such as the everyday episodic experiences of eating lunch or riding the bus are so mundane that they ‘resist incorporation into a meaningful account of the self’ (McNay 2003: 9). Conversely, experiences of rape or sexual abuse are often so traumatic that an individual will disassociate from them completely and have no way of rendering them meaningful at all.

McNay also accuses Benhabib of a kind of fetishization of meaning—she refers to Benhabib’s problematic preoccupation with narrative’s ‘normative redemptive force’ (McNay 2003: 2). Privileging the stories we tell about ourselves is harmful because, McNay argues, the ‘[N]arration of identity may involve the reification as much as a clarification of the self’ (McNay 2003: 11). When we rely on someone else’s memory or someone else’s perception, we often tell ourselves stories about who we are in order to fit in with the agreed upon notion of who we ought to be. The telling and retelling of such codified narratives can ‘create crevasses, ruptures, emptiness and deep wells of non-being’ (McNay 2003: 10). An individual trying to make sense of a traumatic event, for example, might tell a story in which she identifies herself as victim, where the telling of that story results in a reified, alienating narrative identity of victimhood.

Finally, McNay is concerned with the now-familiar tendency in critical theory to reduce systematically subordinating power relationships to identity politics. Gender issues, especially, are far too often conceived of in terms of identity or recognition rather than as ‘systematically maintained forms of oppression’ (McNay 2003: 14). McNay argues that Benhabib’s narrative model suffers from this oversight because of its emphasis on immediate interpersonal interaction instead of trends of subordination on a broader scale. A narrative subject might be able to identify or confront the subordinating norms with which she comes into direct contact, but, at the same time, be unable to theorize a ‘public’ or ‘impersonal’ undercurrent of oppression (McNay 2003: 14). In the context of gender, for example, a narrative subject might make sense of gender as a system of formal or official equality while failing to recognize the ways in which gender is still responsible for various permanent asymmetries of power within society as a whole. McNay writes: ‘In short, the culturalist understanding of gender in terms of narrative identity and mutual recognition obscures the systemic levels at which gender inequalities are perpetuated and thereby renders them invisible’ (McNay 2003: 14). Emphasizing the importance of these overarching objective asymmetries of gender subordination is, for McNay, an indispensable task of feminist theory.

5. The Primacy of Narrative Agency

It seems to me that McNay’s critique is a useful jumping off point for further discussion of the relational and generative implications of narrative agency. First, McNay’s charge that Benhabib is overly optimistic about the communicability of experience demands a careful definition of what “narrative” is and what it is not. The narratives that emerge in narrative identity formation, as we have seen, are contingent and unpredictable. Their existence does not depend upon a fixed system of communication. Benhabib allows that experiences which resist conventional narrative structure, such as ‘fragmentation and collage, the senselessness of being next-to-each-other in space in time’ are just as ‘authentic’ as more straightforward life-stories because they express a ‘material and lived reality’—for Benhabib, these experiences are still classifiable as narratives in that they involve exercising the capacity of narrative agency, or “making sense” (Benhabib 1999: 345). The construction of narrative content is an open-ended process of remembering and retelling within a web of other narratives.

The ‘conversations’ which constitute this web almost always take place on unequal ground. Certain aspects of selfhood, especially the effects of trauma and abuse, may elude narrative awareness. But Benhabib extends Freud’s metaphor of the ego who is not the master of his own house even further: the self, she says, may be imagined as a crowded household in which all of the petty bickering of a family brawl is apt to be acted out. No relationship, whether intrasubjective or intersubjective, is free from confusion, contrast, or argument; and, of course, there is no possibility of extricating oneself from the web of relationships into which one is born. Some conversations are mutually beneficial, but ‘[M]ore often than not they fail’ (Benhabib 1999: 349). Importantly, individuals and collectivities continue to weave identities for themselves out of the web of interlocution into which they are thrown, regardless of how repressive or subordinating relationships within the web may be. McNay reads Benhabib’s insistence on the resilience of narrative agency as a ‘reliance on the inherent communicability of “narratives”’, but perhaps it is better to understand the resilience of narrative agency as certainty of the communicability of some narratives, some of the time (McNay 2003: 10).

Within Benhabib’s theory of narrativity there is room for the idea that narrative is repressive and exclusionary, but there is also, simultaneously, room for the idea that narrative is essentially communicable. The process of creating narratives is indeterminate, marked not by the construction of any specific narrative, but by the uniqueness of each narrative agent. Inherent in the formation of each narrative is the generation of a new meaning, unique by virtue of its unrepeatable perspective. McNay gestures toward a problematic privileging of ‘meaning’ in this formulation of narrative construction, but Benhabib’s theory of narrativity does not have any intractable attachments to what constitutes ‘sense’. Rather than read Benhabib as emphasizing meaning itself, I read her as interested primarily in the *capacity* to formulate and reformulate meaning. It is precisely this open-endedness, this unpredictability, which is foundational for the formation of narratives within a plurality. She writes:

we have to explain how every human infant can become the initiator of a unique life-story, of a meaningful tale—which certainly is only meaningful if we know the cultural codes under which it is constructed—but which we cannot predict even if we know these cultural codes. (Benhabib 1992: 218)

The individual child’s construction of narrative content is essentially relational. Her idea of what makes ‘sense’, though unique, is informed by, and limited to, collectively decided upon, and ever-shifting, ideas of ‘sense’.

Within this landscape of relational identity and collectively decided upon norms, is the individual’s autonomous capacity to confront and change these norms. Recall Benhabib argues that ‘[F]urthering one’s capacity for autonomous agency is only possible within a solidaristic community that sustains one’s identity through listening to one, and allowing one to listen to others, with respect’ (Benhabib 1999: 350). An individual’s speech and action have no meaning unless they are recognized by others (and it is in this sense that ‘all action is interaction’). The meaning they *do* have is fragile and contingent, dependent upon a unique constellation of collectively constructed narratives and norms. As circumstances change, so too does the construction of narrative and normative meaning. These changes can occur for ‘the better’, under the aegis of respectful mutual recognition, which Benhabib also refers to, after Arendt, as ‘the reversibility of perspectives’ (Benhabib 1992: 9).

The reification of certain narratives alluded to by McNay can thus be challenged and changed under the correct conditions. The rape victim who feels she cannot escape the narrative of victimhood always has the potential to confront and reconfigure this narrative within a solidaristic community. The generation of new meaning through such a supportive and mutually respectful conversation (or, more likely, series of conversations) may be extraordinarily difficult. The point, however, is that the *potential* for transformative mutual recognition is always there, no matter how unlikely. Because narrative agency is an irreducible capacity, narrative identity never refers to a static subject who is the same over time. It always refers to an open and unfinished process full of potential but, as of yet, unrealized meaning.

The narrative ‘identities’ of nations, cultures, and other groups are also ‘woven out of tales and fragments belonging both to oneself and to others’ (Benhabib 1999: 351).[[7]](#endnote-7) Collectivities, at their best, may derive a coherent sense of ‘who they are’ through this dynamic of generative mutual recognition. The collective identity of the Occupy movement, for example, is not definable in terms of its mission statement or its demographics; rather, it is a historically situated and contingent confluence of many narratives. Its transformative potential depends upon its recognition by its own members and by society as a whole. The movement confronts and resists deeply entrenched narratives and norms and, as these confrontations are recognized and made meaningful, these norms and narratives begin slowly to change. Changing these norms according to a set or static normative goal, applicable to everyone everywhere, is not the point. Indeed, the possibility of general consensus is an unnecessary, and often harmful, illusion. ‘[I]t is less significant’, Benhabib writes, ‘that “we” discover “the” general interest, but more significant that collective decisions be reached through procedures which are radically open and fair to all’ (Benhabib 1992: 9). This view of solidarity seems to me a very productive way of framing confrontations with what McNay refers to as ‘systematically maintained forms of oppression’.

Mutual recognition, solidarity, reflexivity—these are all plausible normative aims of an admittedly contextualized feminist philosophy. The ‘positive’ goals of reflexivity and mutual recognition are inherent in narrative practice—by virtue of narrative agency I understand myself in time and in relation to others; and through this understanding of myself I come to recognize the same narrative agency in others. Equally inherent in narrative identity, however, are the problems of subjection and misrecognition—some narratives will always be reductive, harmful, alienating, and misrepresentative. Tracing possible pathways for positive social transformation thus involves attending to moments, however transitory, when new meaning is created within a community of unique selves (a plurality).

Allen, for example, suggests that feminist philosophy may encourage positive self and social transformation by ‘acknowledging recognition as an ethical ideal and understanding it as a permanent—though temporally fleeting—possibility of human relationships’ (Allen 2008: 95). There is no way to transcend the subordinating power structures we, as feminists, seek to change. However, ubiquitous subordination does not compromise narrative agency. On the contrary, it is *only* by positing narrative agency as a constant that we are able to argue that the possibilities of mutual recognition and autonomy (which is a kind of ‘self-recognition’) are permanent. The transformative and generative potential of identity (whether collective or individual) first depends upon the capacity of each human being to make sense of herself as an ‘I’ within a web of other ‘I’s.

*Notes*

1. I borrow the phrase ‘rationalist residue’ from Amy Allen. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. People without this basic narrative agency—such as the insane, the infirm, the very young and the senile—are often felt to be without a coherent narrative identity as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (1986), Benhabib’s weighty examination of critical theory and Habermasian communicative ethics, gives a detailed account of the contextualization of critique. Benhabib extends this revised methodology in *Situating the Self* (1992), in which she defends a radically contextualized universalism. I do not provide a comprehensive review of Benhabib’s methodology of critique in this paper, but refer to it only insofar as it is relevant to a discussion of narrative agency. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See especially Benhabib’s article “Sexual Difference and Collective Identities” (1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Allen also says ‘the very language that we use to articulate our critique of gender subordination is relentlessly structured by the same’ (Allen 2008: 171). The extent to which language is gendered makes for an interesting discussion in itself. I imagine that Benhabib would maintain that a concept of language as gendered shapes narrative identity but does not compromise narrative agency. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. But how does the subject know whether or not she has recognized the extent to which gender norms are at work in determining her narrative identity at any given time? And how can we cultivate a desire for self-transformation if an attachment to subordination structures our psyche at the most intimate level? Benhabib allows for the possibility that subordinating relationships of power are at work even at an unconscious level, but she cannot explain why or how we become attached to this intimate psychic subjection. It is at this point in Benhabib’s model of narrative identity that Butler’s theory of attachment to subordination (1997b) might serve to enrich our understanding of the limitations imposed upon the subject. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. But do these ‘tales and fragments’ consist of language alone? It seems that the communicative action Benhabib writes about is, for the most part, based in language. She does address the problem of privileging language over other forms of communication in *Situating the Self*: ‘If communication is not understood narrowly and exclusively as language but if body gestures, behavior, facial expressions, mimics and sounds are also viewed as non-linguistic but linguistically articulable modes of communication, then the “ideal communication community” extends well beyond the adult person capable of full speech and accountable action.’ See Benhabib 1992: 58-59fn.

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