

Narratives and the Gift of the Future

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Article abstract

In this paper, I address the assumption that narratives work normatively, and argue instead that narratives are as important for registering particularities and differences that evade normalisation. Such singularities can be understood as moral appeals from the future. I draw on notions of deconstruction as a future-and ethics-oriented technology, to suggest that narratives can work similarly, and I give some examples from my own recent study of visual autobiographies.

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In this paper, I address the assumption that narratives work normatively, and argue instead that narratives are as important for registering particularities and differences that evade normalisation. Such singularities can be understood as moral appeals from the future. I draw on notions of deconstruction as a future-and ethics-oriented technology, to suggest that narratives can work similarly, and I give some examples from my own recent study of visual autobiographies.

In this paper, I engage with the common assumption that narratives work progressively to improve and adapt (Plummer, 2001), or conservatively to consolidate, maintain, or at times evade (MacIntyre, 1984; Frosh, 2002), but in any case in a normative way. In addition, I argue that, at the same time, narratives do something as or more important. Through the possibilities of movement towards the future, in the sense of an opening of a new context, they register the particularity of difference, dissidence, and the hard-to-understand. Such narrative appeals from elsewhere, and from others, are not merely disruptive or fragmenting; they can be understood as moral appeals from the future.

I make this argument by drawing on some of my research on visual autobiographies, conducted with Cigdem Esin and Chila Burman, and a group of adults and young people of varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds in East London: an emblematically socioeconomically and culturally diverse area of a world city (Massey, 2007). This work defined autobiographical images, interviews, and other talk and writing about the images, and the activities of making, commenting on, and exhibiting the images, as all forms of *narrative*. That is, the signs that constituted them moved, or changed, within each medium, and also between the media, in ways that built socioculturally recognisable meanings; and these meanings were particular, rather than general, as one would find within a theory (Squire, 2012; Esin and Squire, in press). This research project gave rise to some very open and contextually responsive forms of narrative,

which are particularly salient for the theoretical framework I am discussing.

Narrative's prominence in social science academic and applied research has led to some idealisation of stories as in themselves progressive and a "good thing," and sometimes as capable of solving problems not obviously confined to the realms of representation (Riessman, 2008). The opposing argument is that a reliance on personal narratives, whether those narratives seem "progressive" or not, is problematic, because narratives are not a privileged source of knowledge, and may indeed be inherently rigid, reifying, and monolithic. Atkinson (1997, 2009) suggests that social researchers have romanticised narrative "voice" at the expense of narrative analysis, particularly in the area of health and illness, where stories have become elided with critiques of medicalisation and patient empowerment. Craib (2004) suggested that narratives' simplifications and superficiality can be forms of "bad faith," both in intellectual explanations and emotional workings-through. Frosh (2010) points to the necessary repetitions and closure within conventional narratives, with their beginnings, middles, and ends, as working against psychoanalytic deconstruction and fixing the self—and yet also as a canonic structure, at least in the west, that has to be worked with, and that is part of an emancipatory and activist agenda (pp. 115, 198).

There is, however, a great deal of narrative research that already tries to take into account these undoubtedly valuable criticisms. Riessman's (2008) and Andrews' (2008) work focuses on the always recontextualised, reread nature of narrative meaning. Freeman (2006) articulates the regions and multiplicities, rather than the unity, of narrative truth. Hyvärinen and cowriters (2010) synthesise a growing body of work focused on incoherence rather than coherence as narrative's most interesting feature. In my own research, I have tried to articulate the openness and flux that characterise narrative genres (2007). Such work pays attention to the opening-up, multiplicative effects of *context*—interpersonal, social, and cultural milieu—on narrative meanings. Here, however, I am going to define context more broadly, to take in the wider matrix of narratives: non-linguistic elements of signification, the bodies of storytellers and audiences, the physical environment, historical memory, economic determinants, and political contests. In addition, I am going to explore some less-considered aspects of context: its disruptive and productive effects on narrative's relation to the future, and to responsibility.

Narratives, Futures, Responsibilities, Selves

My theoretical framework for this paper proposes that understanding narratives as embedded in changing contexts is also a way of conceptualising their placement in relation to the future—and in relation to a responsibility that calls subjects themselves into being. This relation between context, future, responsibility, and selves in language, including narrative language, can usefully be understood through the work of Jacques Derrida, Drucilla Cornell, and Judith Butler.

The title of this paper is adapted from a piece that the philosopher Drucilla Cornell (2005) wrote after Derrida's death for the journal *Differences*, "Derrida: The Gift of the Future,"¹ in which Cornell draws out Derrida's rather specific notion of the future, as what she calls an "other already with us" (pp. 20-21)—not a horizon or a teleology, but a singularity that calls to us and demands something from us. This future does have something to do with time—but as elsewhere in Derrida's work, it is not about linear temporal progression, but about interruptions: an intrusion of the past into the present; the overdetermination of the future by a future already lived through; a retrospective resignification of past events (Cornell, 1992). This future as interruption or break positions us as responsible, and as needing to attend to the requirements of justice. Its call is also a gift, always opening up the possibility of a new context; in responding to that call, therefore, we are always on the move, always living and making a story.

Narratives are frequently understood as morality tales—usually, as means of transmitting past moralities (MacIntyre, 1984). What this paper suggests, drawing on Derrida's idea of the future, is that a singularity or exceptionality that calls for *something different*, morally, that is, in terms of the narrator's responsibility, is always getting expressed within narratives: for instance, through those constitutive incoherences that Hyvärinen and colleagues (2010) note, or through exceptional moments (Squire, 2012)—at the same time as narratives sediment and reproduce themselves. This dualism is something like that described in Ricoeur's (1991) work on narrative as simultaneously embodying and shifting traditions. Here, however, we are talking about a dualism that is not dialogue or coexistence, but contest; about exceptionality as constitutive of, and not remediable

¹ Cornell takes this title from Derrida's (1995) *The Gift of Death*, which theorises human responsibility in relation to the subject's living with the certainty of impending death, and the necessity and impossibility of responsibility in the face of it. These are themes that this paper does not have space to explore further in relation to narrative.

within, narratives; and about disruptions that can be very ambiguous and subtle.

This subtlety lies in the nature of the gift (Derrida, 1995). A gift is inevitably compromised: any response that recognises it, also traduces its intransitive nature, turning it into something else, something reciprocal; but such a response is also inevitable; it is what makes the gift what it is. The call of the future, the “other already with us,” is similarly ambiguous. It happens repeatedly, infinitely, and the outcome is not fixed in any way. A gift does not predetermine any response or return, but it does make an open appeal to us as some kind of recipient, even if we choose not to answer, we answer insufficiently, or we answer from the position of a subjecthood that we can never fully assume. The responses we make in and through narratives to the gift of the future are not, though, random or relativistic; they occur in specific contexts, and they matter to us.

The impossible yet necessary nature of such personal responsibility is important for us to recognise when analysing narratives. Judith Butler (2005), in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, emphasises how this requirement ties subjects, even though they are fundamentally unknowable to themselves, to others: “If the subject is opaque to itself, not fully translucent and knowable to itself, it is not thereby licensed to do what it wants or to ignore its obligations to others” (pp. 19-20). And this insistence of responsibility comes about because of the repeated appeals of singular “futures.” As Cornell (2005) puts it, “The mark we leave on the world we share will be inseparable from those infinite appeals made to us and how we responded when we were called” (p. 69).

To explain these always-renewed calls, Cornell quotes an explanation from Derrida’s (2001) *A Taste for the Secret*, where the appeal of the future is given a language-based exegesis that makes its significance clear for narrative work:

A simple phrase takes its meaning from a given context, and already makes its appeal to another one in which it will be understood; but, of course, to be understood it has to transform the context in which it is inscribed. As a result, this appeal, this promise of the future, will necessarily open up the production of a new context, wherever it may happen. The future is not present, but there is an opening onto it; and because there is a future, a context is always open. What we call opening of the context is another name for what is still to come. (pp. 19-20)

We can extend this argument: what happens with “a simple phrase” also happens at a smaller contextual scale—from phoneme to

phoneme, gesture to gesture—and at larger scales, within and across narratives. Narratives take meaning from particular contexts while being understood within different ones. These hermeneutic processes transform the narrative “context” ready for the next attempt at understanding (Medved and Brockmeier, 2010). At the same time, this movement towards the future is enacted within narratives, because they are themselves characterised by what, at the most minimal, we can call some kind of movement or change: temporal, thematic, causal, spatial, syntactic, or tonal. A narrative inherently constitutes an appeal to its own future as something different. So it is doubly—at least—“on the move.”

The issue of the future—and different ways of understanding it—is particularly important for narrative work because, despite the diversity of definitions, narrative is frequently and hegemonically conceptualised in relation to linear time, as rather straightforwardly “on the move” towards “the future,” albeit with many complications and circlings-about along the way. This is particularly true within social research; work within the humanities has taken a more complicated approach to how narratives are “on the move.” For instance, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s (1991) emphasis on the question, “is it happening?” (*arrive-t-il?*), a question that the closed “grand” narratives of modernity do not ask, is also for him an ethical imperative, a question about the link between one thing and the next that recognises the “nothing” between them, that requires a radical receptivity and responsibility to incomprehensible events and that puts the future in question at every instant. My approach differs from Lyotard’s because it does not focus only on “forward” motion. It is interested in what Derrida often called *nostalgia*, an opening of the future through the past, death, and it charts disruptions that are not just events. Jasmina Sermijn, Patrick Devieger, and Gerrit Loots (2008) draw on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s idea of *futures* by presenting another alternative, a rhizomatic way of understanding narrative movement according to which one can enter into the narrative network anywhere and be immediately fully connected. The approach that I am advocating, however, is more tied to the particularities of histories and social formations, more committed to the discontinuities between the present moment of a narrative, and its futures—and indeed pasts—than this Deleuzian work. Narrative moment for me is, as in Derrida’s work, less mobile, more entangled. It is always complicated by traces—the unpredictabilities of postal delivery; the delay on the line between voices talking; the letters already etched on the typewriter ribbon; the prior documents or lines of machine code that sometimes flash up on a computer; the

undecideability of what someone says, or writes—that hang in the air or blur the text.

Within this perspective, narratives do not just transmit, but create. We are used to hearing that narratives—among other functions—transmit and inculcate moralities. This has been repeatedly claimed by psychologists such as Jerome Bruner (1990) and by some philosophers, notably Alastair MacIntyre (1984). The work of Derrida, Cornell, and Butler suggests also that narratives respond afresh to the implicit ethical calls from other contexts, other futures, that repeatedly disturb them. Moreover, in this work, the multiple futures necessarily *not* responded to, the narratives not articulated, and the inevitably to some extent totalising, violent effects of the narratives produced, are also part of the “story,” the movement. Ethics involves choices that *compromise* ethics: “I am responsible to any one ... only by failing in my responsibility to all the others” (Derrida, 1995, p.70; see also Derrida, 1985). We are all aware of stories not told when we tell a certain tale, and of the often very clear moral implications of such narrative choices. But narratives’ ethical closure is not, for Derrida, something that can be stopped by avoiding stories or opposing them with other kinds of significations. Rather, it can be addressed by working with the singularities that also disrupt narratives.

Personal narratives have a particularly intimate involvement with the ethical call of the future. Butler (2005), in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, perhaps gives the best sense of the narrative positioning of the self in response to such particular, contextualised sociomoral appeals—calls that say “who are *you*, in this particular sociomoral context?”:

Only in the face of (such) a query or attribution from an other—“Was it you?” (who did this)—do any of us start to narrate ourselves, or find that, for urgent reasons, we must become self-narrating beings. ... Narrative capacity constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one’s actions through that means. (pp.11-12)

The “future” features here, within the “desire to know and understand ... explain and narrate” (Butler, 2005, p. 11), which brings the self-account to the other, the audience.

This sociomoral account of oneself is not the only kind of narrative, of course; nor is it ever a final account, because of the infidelities of language. Butler understands well the inevitable betrayals written into narrative responses to sociomoral appeals, through the elisions and violence of representation. We can “remain

silent” in the face of the “was it you?” question, for instance. Or we may respond to it as to an inquisition, to what Derrida (1995) calls the demand (in English) for narrative truth, “a violent putting to the question, an instrument of torture working to wring the narrative out of one as if it were a terrible secret” (pp. 94, 87). Our narrative account of ourselves is also lost in language even as we give it:

My words are taken away as I give them, interrupted by the time of a discourse that is not the same as the time of my life. This “interruption” contests the sense of the account’s being grounded in myself alone, since the indifferent structures that enable my living belong to a sociality that exceeds me. (Butler, 2005, p. 36)

Moreover, narratives’ “suspect” coherence may close off the possibility of ethics, because that possibility at times depends, as Derrida also says, on *refusing* to make moral judgements, that is, on “an acceptance of the limits of knowability in oneself and others” (Butler, 2005, p. 63). There has to be something unknowable, which Derrida (2001) calls “the secret,” to allow for ethics—even though it may seem to make ethics impossible: “if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space” (p. 59). Derrida says that “the autobiographical is the locus of the secret” (2001, p. 57)—not the autobiographical genre, but the autobiographical itself which overreaches the genre of autobiography through its irrecoverable original referents (2001, p. 41). This secretion of unknowability within narratives is what works against closure and allows for the opening of future contexts. Narrative can therefore work, I am suggesting, as a critique of presence, not only as *making* present, as assessments of narrative totalisation and reification tend to suggest.

Visual Autobiographies and the “Gift of the Future”

I want now to look at some examples of how people in our recent study of visual autobiographies in East London responded to the “gift of the future” offered within narrative. In selecting these examples, I have focused on cases where marked ambiguities arose within narratives, or between them. These ambiguities were generated by contradictions, excesses, repetitions, simplifications, or absences of particular types of signs that created disruption and a corresponding possibility for narrative movement. It can be argued that such disruptions appear in every narrative, even the most limpidly clear and relentlessly coherent, if we read them carefully, at multiple levels. However, since narrative researchers’ analytic resources are usually

limited, I concentrate here on levels that are accessible to them through visual and verbal recording, transcription, and field notes.

The study from which these narratives came was conducted by myself; Chila Kumari Burman, Leverhulme Artist in Residence at the Centre for Narrative Research in London; and Cigdem Esin. I shall not describe this study in much detail; it is reported more fully elsewhere (Squire, Burman, & Esin, 2012; Squire and Esin, 2012). Briefly, the research involved four workshops conducted by the artist in three geographically close but socially divergent locations in Spitalfields, East London: an art gallery with considerable community involvement; a study support centre for secondary-age children, mostly of Asian origin; and a Bengali cultural centre. The area is home and place of work for people of diverse economic statuses and features high levels of recent migration and health needs; child poverty locally is the highest in the UK (Imrie, Lees, & Raco, 2009).

The workshops lasted up to four hours. Eleven women and girls and eight men and boys, with ages ranging from 10 to the mid-50s, participated. Participants were asked to bring their own materials to the workshops if they wanted. However, Burman—who has conducted similar workshops in many UK and international environments—also brought along a large amount of materials for people to use: acrylic paint pens, magazines, and natural materials for collage, printed images from a variety of artistic and cultural traditions, glitter, mylar, sequins, different kinds of paper. The workshops started with Burman drawing round the body of the person, or if people wanted to work together, friends or family members doing this for each other. This was explicitly not a “realistic” procedure. People were encouraged to have more—or no—heads, arms, legs; to twist, narrow, or expand their bodies if they wanted; to signify action if they wanted to.

Between one and four weeks after the workshops, all participants except two (who declined because of illness) were interviewed by me, Chila Burman, Cigdem Esin (who had herself participated in a workshop), and/or Abu Maruf, a workshop participant who provided translation help in a case where the interviewee felt more comfortable speaking in Sylheti. The semi-structured interviews lasted around an hour and explored why the participants had made the work they had, what they had included and why, what they had left out and why, effects of the materials, effects of working in the group, effects of the body outline, and how participants might want to change the image or do the project differently. These were not deliberately “narrative” interviews. However, to be asked to explain the process of the visual

autobiography was also to be invited to retrace this imagic narrative and this was indeed what happened in every case.

Two of the interviews—one involving a family of four, another a group of four students from the study support centre—were collective at interviewees' request. Burman subsequently curated an exhibition in a close-by community art gallery which included all but one of the visual autobiographies. The opening was attended by many research participants and after the exhibition ended, the works were rehung as a street-facing display in the windows of the gallery for a further two months. Notes were made and photos taken to document the processes of image making. Field notes were also made about the interviews and to describe participation at the exhibition.

Our analysis described, for each participant, how they positioned themselves within all the autobiographical narratives produced by the research: a) the activity narratives constituted by how they came to, performed, and in the process talked about the research; b) the visual narrative of the image ; c) the interview narrative of how the image came about; and d) the activity narrative of whether and how participants did the interview and attended the exhibition.

The changing contexts within each narrative element, as well as those created by the disjunctions between autobiographical modalities, displayed how the “promise of the future” could operate as a gift of possibility within the narratives, allowing the stories to “move.” To describe how such movements happen, I am going to give examples which show a variety of relations to temporality, and differently valued narrative directions, but which all also display newly produced contexts or spaces for “what is still to come” (Derrida, 2001, pp. 19-20), new possibilities for participants to which they must, it seems, respond.

An example of a self-account that generated an opened-up future marked in temporal terms appeared in our interview with Anwar (all names are pseudonyms), a young man of 15. At the study support centre workshop, Anwar started making his image with red and marks which he described, at the time and later, as indicating punches, and bullet and knife wounds. He then covered these up protectively and recuperatively with his own, his friends', and his postcode graffiti'd names, or tags—as well encouraging friends in the workshop from the same and different postcodes to graffiti on his image, and including tags of friends who were not there. During the workshop, Anwar and other young participants loudly if jokingly praised their own postcode areas, while also describing the constraints on movement and behaviour that such identifications currently involve for many young people in under-resourced urban areas (Pitts, 2008).



Figure 1. Anwar's image

In the interview, describing how he made the image, Anwar said:

Anwar: I just done it to, express myself. Well basically what happens in, when you go to different areas and people are like, how, how can you be safe....Yeah that's the red bullets it shows, as in, around London, wherever you go people are getting killed, stuff like that, so yeah...I drew the stars to show black eyes, so yeah, it's like you're knocked out, have you seen some animations/oh yeah/when you get knocked out, you start getting stars...it's to show how people can be more careful...basically it's (the tags) all my friends you know...20, 25 of us, there's more, I didn't include them, where I live, the street, area, postcode, stuff like that yeah.

After this explanation, Anwar paused. Then he took his autobiographical narrative in another direction, suggesting that the image was limiting. He distanced himself from the places and people that contained but also constrained him, via a kind of “what-if” (Sools, 2012) narrative of the future, of what he “could do”:

Anwar: I think when I just look at this yeah, it feels like, there's other stuff in life you could do instead of hanging around with a group of people, it ain't gonna get you through anything in a way (.) as in, everyone needs education to become someone...it might be fun to do, but like, yeah, if I stay with them, if I'll stay with them sometimes, say once every two, three days.

Later, Anwar attended the whole of the exhibition opening and spent some time standing in front of his image, explaining the process of making it and its sequential meanings to visitors.

In these interview and exhibition processes, then, Anwar narrated a rather different future for himself than his initial visual autobiography and description of it suggested. It seemed to be, not a visual gap or absence, but the excesses within the visual image,

particularly the tags and wounds written all over it—the insistent visuality of the postcode identities, and the dangers drawn under them—that made this “opening.” It was not made directly by the interview, though the interview maybe allowed Anwar to look at the image differently. It was an ethical call to what he could be; but it was not a call that demanded a single response.

In Anwar’s narrative, there was a gap between “it ain’t gonna get you through anything” and “everyone needs education,” which disrupted the links between these parts of the argument, already only vaguely tied together by “as in.” The articulated future at which Anwar arrived was “education,” but that was not the full range of possibility: more generally, “there’s other stuff in life you could do,” he said. Indeed, when he re-performed this narrative by coming to the exhibition and talking about the picture, this did not have much to do with “education.” Anwar’s response to the image’s call and “gift” of the future does not, therefore, repeat the violent closures, circumscribing his life through physical danger and local identities, to which the image itself draws attention. Instead, this later narrative response is committed to keeping the future open and unknowable; it does not tell everything. The possibilities of who the narrative subject could be are not closed down—Anwar’s narrative marks the undecideability of the future.

A rather different example, about a narrative future differently temporalised, was that of Fatima, who came to the UK around 15 years ago, and had been predominantly occupied since then in caring for her family. During her extensive three sessions of work on her image, conducted at the Bengali cultural centre, Fatima started to redefine herself as an artist. In her interview, she narrated this progression as a renewal of her earlier, submerged artistic identity as a child and young woman. Performing this self-definition, her autobiographical progress then involved her attending the exhibition opening, bringing a number of family members along to meet the artist and researchers, and being photographed in front of her visual autobiography. These developing narratives repositioned Fatima social and culturally within her neighbourhood and city (Squire, Burman, & Esin, 2012). But the beautiful, sophisticated, laboured-on image, which Fatima described as her “own,” had a couple of gaps, and even when finished later on, always had some areas less worked on than others. These disruptions, contradicting its completeness, seemed to propel Fatima into a different future context, as someone who could make this but also other such images:



Figure 2. Fatima's image

Fatima: I like this picture, it's my own, er, I did nicely, yeah yeah nicely, with art and I try again and again but it's my— long time before, I (did) art, this is my college life er I was, I did art, but sometimes (there was a) break, the centre, this is my first art [laughs]...and I like the picture, I am very happy and I enjoyed (in) this art...I cannot properly complete it but something, I finished...I will try different things...time was short. In UK this was my first art. I was in Bangladesh when I was a student in the college, then I (did) art...long time (ago), 10 to 15 years (laughs), and UK, my first art in the UK.

Fatima's interview narrative, responding to the visual "call" of the image's perpetual incompleteness, opens up an autobiographical possibility that elides time and indeed continents and that is, again, ethical. Her sense of the future comes from a very specific, even nostalgic reanimation of a past which sets this possible future in motion for her, starting from the person she was, proceeding towards the person she ought to have been and, perhaps, still has the responsibility to be. The context that brings this possibility about is a history reanimated by art activity, marked by an image's incompleteness. This possibility is not closed off by the interview or by Fatima's later activities within the research project. For even after another session working on the image, Fatima was not convinced at the time of the exhibition that it was as good as it could be. Something still escaped it; an "opening of context" still constituted the image's gift of the future for her.

The dialogue between artistic and interview autobiography usually—but not always—produced a positive sense of possibility within the narratives. In at least one instance, however, the opening up of a new but *negatively* valued context constituted the important movement within the narrative. Khadija, who also made her image at the Bengali cultural centre, started her interview by describing the image's collaboratively produced and thus for her compromised, lacking, "not-me" character—she had made the image with a friend—as well as the image's time-limited and unprepared-for production which she characterised as leading to facility rather than depth. The simplicity and one-note "attractiveness" of the image, its apparent closure, was the singularity that opened it up to her, in the interview,

as both aesthetically and personally inauthentic—indeed, as ethically inadequate work that one cannot be proud of:

Khadija: I had (a friend) coming along with me and (she) wanted us to do it together but I sort of, wanted it to be mine, my piece of work and in the end we sort of decided we didn't have enough time we had two hours, so I thought "okay," so I directed the whole thing...it's not fully me but it has bits of me in there, sort of the creativity, what she's wearing...I feel this isn't an adult, mature kind of an, art, it's very childish...because there was other people working on it we need(ed) to make it really fun and stuff...I'm not proud of this piece of work, so, cause I feel as though I don't fully own it...there's a lot of stuff that's not there, that's missing, to do with me.

Subsequently, Khadija decided not to exhibit her visual autobiography. Instead, as in the interview, she focused on the "what-if" possibility of making more, and more thoughtful, art herself and about herself—a process which, she suggests, could articulate something important if ultimately inexpressible about herself:

Khadija: I like a picture to tell like a story with loads of meanings behind it...the others (pictures I've made) are not completed, but they look good...some of them are hanging on the walls (in my house)...in my head they're not finished...I would have liked to have thought about how I portrayed my thinking.

In this case, the context opened up by Khadija looking at her work again without her friend, within the interview, and responding to what she characterised as its oversimple prettiness, created an antagonistic narrative of a different person from that generated by the image itself, and Khadija's apparently cheerful responses when she was making it. Her conditionality about a wished-for future in the past, where "I would have liked to have thought...", sets in motion some new possibilities of for the present and future. This was a strongly moral response, valuing a complexity and meaningfulness that Khadija thought was missing. Once again, though, future possibilities, like the works unfinished in the present and hanging on her wall, remain open here. Khadija does not really say what is so bad about this piece, the thing that makes her, alone of all the research participants, refuse to have the piece seen publically; this negative gift remains unspoken.

Conclusions

Drawing on some recent visual autobiographical work, I have given some examples of how futures can be opened up within and between different spoken, visual, and lived narrative modalities. In these cases, the singularities that created different contexts came from elements of the visual narratives themselves—excessive, absent, or simplified signs—read in the new context of the interview. For one woman in the study, Fatima, this opening up started to happen earlier within the endless process of making the art itself, in a way that might not have been possible for her in an English-language interview—or indeed, for such a visually oriented person, in any language-based research. For one young man, Anwar, self-narrative was on the move between media, places, and times—between the visual image-making, the subsequent interview, and the exhibition. For Khadija, the opening of possibilities worked through the erasure, in the interview, of the value of her visual narrative, something made possible by the image's own insistent simplifications.

As many interviewees themselves said, autobiographies always leave some things out. The making of the image and its later verbal mapping always produced some appeal, through these openings, to a future not yet there. The disjunction between visual and verbal narrative modalities perhaps foregrounded these elisions, this opening of other contexts. The forced verbal confrontation with the image generated by the research interview could intensify the disjunction; as Khadija said in her interview, “You guys [researcher and artist] are making me think, I forgot about her [the image].”

It is important to recognise that narratives might not always operate in a progressive way—that is, by opening up possibilities that narrators and others value as more productive and fulfilling. They can offer “gifts” that we refuse, that are negligible, or that harm us, or no gifts at all. For Khadija, the imagic narrative foreclosed the future and moved her backward, towards an earlier, “childish” time in her life. Yet the simplified, closed nature of the image was itself disruptive; it brought her to renarrativise the image in the interview, opening up its context to include possibilities beyond its prettiness, not yet fully articulated. Even if, as with Khadija, participants engaged with the process “only” aesthetically, making patterns, like someone telling a routinised story about themselves, such reiterations were never exact—something different crept in between them and allowed narratives to open new contexts and move towards possible futures.

Understanding narratives as allowing for the opening up of possible futures can, then, be important for narrative research and practice in alerting us to what is happening in clearly progressive

narratives, like those of Anwar and Fatima; but also to the ways in which less “successful,” more opaque stories, like those of Khadija, may also be narratives on the move. These are not stories dominated by the closures, rigidities, avoidances, and obfuscations to which some critics of narrative work have pointed. For in all these cases, it is not just the stories in clear view, however coherent and persuasive, but narrative singularities, complexities, and multiplicities, the different, dissident, and the hard-to-understand, that are the important aspects, “gifts” even, of the narratives. These are the “failures” of representations that allow movement, opening up new contexts and futures, new possibilities for how one might and should live.

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