

## Editor's Introduction: Amor Narratio

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### Article abstract

In this paper, the editor of this special issue introduces Catherine Kohler Riessman's festschrift by making connections between its title, amor narratio and the notion of amor mundi in Hannah Arendt's philosophical thought. The author asks what it is about Riessman's scholarship that has inspired love for narratives. In doing so she looks at the contradictions in Arendt's take on love, highlighting understanding and critical thinking as its most salient features, but also as the two main strands that correspond to the notion of amor narratio in Riessman's narrative scholarship. Amor narratio eventually becomes the red thread that brings together the contributions of this volume in different manifestations and expressions.

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

*AMOR NARRATIO*: A FESTSCHRIFT FOR  
CATHERINE KOHLER RIESSMAN

**Editor's Introduction: *Amor Narratio***

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In this paper, the editor of this special issue introduces Catherine Kohler Riessman's festschrift by making connections between its title, *amor narratio* and the notion of *amor mundi* in Hannah Arendt's philosophical thought. The author asks what it is about Riessman's scholarship that has inspired love for narratives. In doing so she looks at the contradictions in Arendt's take on love, highlighting understanding and critical thinking as its most salient features, but also as the two main strands that correspond to the notion of *amor narratio* in Riessman's narrative scholarship. *Amor narratio* eventually becomes the red thread that brings together the contributions of this volume in different manifestations and expressions.

**Keywords:**

*amor narratio, amor mundi, critical thinking, understanding*

In May 2019, we celebrated Catherine Kohler Riessman's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday with a research symposium held in London, one of Riessman's beloved cities. Narrative scholars from all over the world gathered to talk about Riessman's influence upon their work and thought, in a beautiful setting by the river Thames at the University of Greenwich.<sup>1</sup> At the time of imagining this event, it did not take me long to come up with its title: *Amor Narratio*, love for narratives. I thought that this phrase encapsulated in an excellent way not only Riessman's love for narratives, but also our passionate entanglement with her scholarship. The inspiration came from Hannah Arendt's influential notion of *amor mundi*, love for the world. It

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<sup>1</sup> For more details about this event, see <https://sites.google.com/view/amor-narratio>

should have been *amor narrationis* if I wanted to be faithful to the Latin grammar. However, *amor narratio* sounded better and I took the poetic licence to express it this way. In introducing this special issue of the journal *Narrative Works* as a festschrift to Riessman's stunning scholarship, I want to start with this inspiration of transposing the notion of love in Arendt's work into Riessman's inspiration for a love of narratives.

"Why it is so difficult to love the world?"<sup>2</sup> Arendt (2002) scribbled in her philosophical diary, thus coining the notion of *amor mundi*, love for the world. Her letter of 6 August 1955 to her PhD supervisor and lifelong friend, Karl Jaspers (Arendt & Jaspers, 1993), expresses her "love for the world" as a feeling that she only became aware of late in life, to the point that she wanted to use *Amor Mundi* as the title of her magnum opus, *The Human Condition*: "Yes, I would like to bring the wide world to you this time. I've begun so late, really only in recent years, to truly love the world that I shall be able to do that now. Out of gratitude, I want to call my book on political theory 'Amor Mundi'" (p. 264).

But love in Arendt's work has become a puzzle, given her famous argument in the *Human Condition* (1958/1998) that "love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical forces" (p. 242). If we consider that her PhD thesis was on the Augustinian notion of love (Arendt, 1996), things become even more complicated in understanding love within Arendt's corpus<sup>3</sup>—there are indeed many "loves" in her thinking and writing.

According to Tatjana Noemi Tömmel (2017), it is in Arendt's (2002) philosophical notebooks, her *Denktagebuch*, that one can see the entanglements of her conceptualization of love, some of which, but not all, found a place in her published works (p.106). Being at the heart of Arendt's philosophical thought, love is intertwined with the crucial concept of plurality in her unique take on politics: "In this realm of plurality, which is the political realm, one has to ask the old questions—what is love, what is friendship, what is solitude, what is acting, thinking, etc., but not the one question of philosophy: Who is Man" Arendt wrote in an entry in the *Denktagebuch* (D XIII.2.295).

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<sup>2</sup> *Warum ist es so schwer, die Welt zu lieben?* (D XXI.21.522)

<sup>3</sup> See Tamboukou (2013) for an extended discussion of the Augustinian notion of love in Arendt's PhD thesis.

There are thus four entangled modes of love in Tömmel's reading of Arendt's *Denktagebuch*: love as "a worldless passion," as "eros ... a desire of what is not," as "*amor mundi*," and as "unconditional affirmation" (p. 109). In this maze of different love modalities in Arendt's work, Tömmel argues that love is not as unworldly as Arendt proclaims it to be in the *Human Condition*. Taken as a "creative force," love may become "politically destructive," but it is "nevertheless generative of human plurality" (p. 109).

What I want to add to Tömmel's pithy analysis is that Arendt's powerful epistolary ending expresses a twofold configuration of love in Arendt's (1996) PhD thesis on love in St Augustine: first, love as a memory journey that connects us with our emergence in the world; and second, as a *fort-da* movement, a force of radical futurity, that brings us back into the world (see Tamboukou, 2013, p. 44). When in love, we fly away from the world, in search of past time, the memory of our beginning, but then we return to the world reconciled with its "horrorism" (Cavarero, 2008). We need to love the world as it is, reconcile with its tragedies, and this is "only possible on the foundation of gratitude for what has been given," Arendt wrote in her *Denktagebuch* (D I.1.4).

Thus Arendt's conception of *amor mundi* has more to do with understanding and critical thinking than with sentiment or affect, as Samantha Rose Hill (2017) has argued. It is these two crucial components of the Arendtian *amor mundi*—understanding and critical thinking—that I have deployed in configuring the notion of *amor narratio* in relation to Riessman's narrative scholarship. In an autobiographical essay looking back at her scholarly engagement with narrative research, Riessman (2015) has written that her encounter with narratives was unexpected, an event that erupted from a conventional interview process, to illuminate the grey world of her sociological data, which never read the same again:

I had what feminists call a "click moment" during the divorce research (Norm Denzin might call it an "epiphany"). I asked a man in an interview one of our standard questions: "What would you say were the main causes of your separation?" We expected—and often got in response—a listing with some elaboration, but this man paused for a long time and then said "Well, that's a long story, maybe I can sum it up by saying ...." The proverbial lightbulb went off in my head: of course, I was hearing divorce stories in interviews, not simply responses to items on our

interview schedule. Could I analyze them as stories with a plot, protagonist, other characters, and a turning point? (p.13)

Although “an epiphany,” Riessman was actually waiting for this unexpected knock at her door. As she writes in the above essay her interest in literature, the history of ideas and the philosophies of knowledge goes back to her student days at Bard College, when she attended Heinrich Bleucher’s seminars: “I remember going into the women’s room to cry during one class break because I was so moved by what we had been discussing—can’t remember the ideas, only the tears.” (p. 11). While reading this essay, it was my turn to be moved by realizing that Riessman and Arendt lived in New York at the same time and that Arendt’s husband—and more importantly, intellectual friend for life—was Riessman’s teacher at Bard, now considered the Arendtian research centre par excellence.<sup>4</sup> Riessman’s engagement with narratives was thus an Arendtian insertion in the web of human relations through the power of stories, and in recounting her career, she has written how a web of narrative scholars and ideas was woven after her first “click moment”:

About the same time, I went to a Women’s Studies conference where sociologist Susan Bell gave a paper on the structure of women’s stories of their medical encounters, which they had developed in interviews with her. She drew on analytic concepts from sociolinguistics that, I learned later, she was learning in a post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard with psychologist Elliot Mishler. I wanted to learn this approach and see if it would help me make sense of the divorce stories. (p. 13)

Riessman’s interest in philosophy and the literary, that goes back to her days at Bard, thus found new grounds to develop at Harvard, where she lived the fever of “the narrative turn,” following trails of Mishler’s inspirational teaching while developing a voice and an approach of her own. While at Bard she had practiced “the craft of good reading” that goes beyond the plot, at Harvard she learned how “to take talk and conversation seriously during the analytic process, rather than treat them as a simple container of ideas” (p.14). Reading narratives closely and listening to stories attentively are thus the two tropes of Riessman’s

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://hac.bard.edu>

understanding and critical thinking in narrative research, her way into a state of *amor narratio*, as I have imagined it. This love for narratives is not just about feelings, emotions, and affects; perhaps more importantly, it is a creative force that brings memory and imagination together in making sense of stories as existential traces of the Arendtian human condition. Moreover, *amor narratio* is entangled with the political in the Arendtian sense and beyond. As I have discussed elsewhere at length (Tamboukou, 2015), narration is a process of connecting with the world and responding to it, a scene where questions of the self are raised, ethical responsibilities emerge, and political actions are enacted. The papers that comprise Riessman's festschrift revolve around the notion of love for narratives, as briefly sketched above, in different patterns, twists, and turns, ultimately creating "an assemblage" of *amor narratio* forces at play.

Margareta Hydén's paper of encountering Riessman in a New York bookshop, while taking shelter from an unexpected spring rain shower, takes the storyline of the Harvard narrative group to some of its European connections. Riessman's *Divorce Talk* (1990), an influential exposition of how she made sense of the interview stories that forcefully threw her into the world of narrative research, also became Hydén's entry point to the field. Hydén carefully presents the difference that different tellers' and listeners' positions make in the way that we understand and analyze narratives of intimate partner violence in the Swedish context and beyond. Tessa's story runs like a red thread through Hydén's engagement with Riessman's scholarship: she follows trails of Riessman's different takes on this story, ultimately making connections with her own engagement with Ruth's story. Tellers and listeners, as well as non-human animals, are entangled in Hydén's reflection of what stories can do to the narrator, the researcher, as well as the reader. More importantly, Hydén's analysis unveils the visceral forces of embodied narratives and their effects on understanding the nuances of violence against women when entering the maze of narrative research. *Amor narratio* is a force throwing light into the dark holes of patriarchal violence.

Elaine Martin's paper on attending to the uniqueness of the voice in an auto/biographical collective of breast cancer narratives is a moving tribute to Riessman's intellectual influence in taking the performative scene of narratives seriously. What does it mean to analyze vocality in storytelling? How can this be done and with what effects? Martin's paper looks at Riessman as a teacher and retraces the effects of her guidance in cultivating the author's narrative sensibility. In doing so, she makes

connections with Adriana Cavarero's (2005) philosophical analysis of the singularity of corporeal voice, her deconstruction of the voice/logos binarism and her attention to the politics of voice. Women's voices, or what Martin configures as "our shared vocality," not only become the red thread connecting relational narratives of life and death, but also and perhaps more importantly, turn it into a healing force that has ultimately given rise to the idea of creating a narrative archive of these voices. Taking embodiment and trauma in the wider field of health narratives, Martin shows how Riessman's latest book, *Narrative Research in the Human Sciences* (2008), has opened up new vistas in narrative understanding. *Amor narratio* and *amor mundi* are thus closely intertwined in Martin's contribution to this special issue.

Cavarero's philosophy of relational narratives in dialogue with psychoanalyst Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger is also the focus of the contribution by Angie Voela, Cigdem Esin and Jennifer Achan, which revolves around Riessman's important notion of seduction in narrative analysis. Drawing on a collective auto/biographical experiment, the authors argue that Riessman's reappropriation of the concept of seduction for narrative research opens up new ways of rethinking feminine expression in the cracks between an authorial self and the Barthian "death of the author." In doing so, they throw light on Riessman's contribution to narrative-based feminist research, not only in the field of methodological approaches, but more importantly in the realm of epistemologies and philosophies of knowledge, as well as the critical area of feminist narrative ethics. As the authors have beautifully put it: "If anything must arise (in)to consciousness, it is not interpretation in the analytic sense or as conscious knowing, but recognition of an ethical decision against indifference." The paper also points to the interdisciplinary dimensions of Riessman's scholarship, which facilitates and inspires "resonances and synergies, especially when it partakes of the effortless poetry that usually inhabits the true theorization of women's experience." Feminist sharing story-telling practices seen through Riessman's (2012) notion of seduction are entangled with "the pleasure of the text" in entering the *amor narratio* assemblage.

When participants asked Riessman about her future plans during the symposium, she simply said: "Oh, I am not writing anymore; I have been taking a course on music theory." "Is there such a thing as narrative music?" Lars-Christer Hydén later asked her. And this is how a whole discussion around narratives and music emerged. Vielda Skultans' contribution explores the commonalities of structure in the life histories

of a mother and her daughter by drawing analogies between narrative and music. For Skultans, it was the publication of Riessman's *Narrative Analysis* (1993) that inspired and indeed encouraged her to delve into life history research, but also "to search for musical analogies" in narrative analysis. "As in the art of music, creation and interpretation are closely linked," Skultans notes, introducing Milda's story in its interrelation with Mudra's, a mother-daughter life-history duet, in search of continuity and structure in life history research. "Family narratives raise questions about the nature of selfhood," argues Skultans, drawing on Arendt's notion of new beginnings in search of an agential self. By reflecting on how she worked with the two stories, Skultans suggests that "authoring and interpretation are as indissolubly linked in the verbal arts of life story telling." Thus, Skultans' love for music becomes an entry point in the realm of *amor narratio*, through Riessman's inspiration.

While Riessman's work has often been invoked as an inspiration for narrative imagination, Natasha Carver and Paul Atkinson look at the formal aspects of her narrative analysis, particularly focusing on her unique take of ethnopoetics. Here they have drawn on Riessman's insistence that narrative analysis should pay attention not only to content and themes, but also to the discursive and dialogic context of the story, as well as its performative aspects. In demonstrating the rigorousness of Riessman's approach to the ethnopoetics tradition, the authors use data from Carver's research on marital relations after migration. They suggest that ethnopoetics is very useful not only for narrative content analysis, but it also facilitates reflexivity and challenges uncritical modes of (re)presentation. Ethnopoetic modes of transcription are critical in their contribution. Although Riessman has maintained that transcription is always, already an interpretation, the authors show that "ethnopoetic analysis allows for this interpretation to be demonstrated visually." In this way, interpretation also becomes open to critique and interrogation. What the authors also argue is that through an ethnopoetics approach, transcription is "a speech act in and of itself." In reopening the black box of transcribing oral narratives, the authors' insertion in the whirl of *amor narratio*, through the tradition of ethnopoetics, is both innovative and intriguing.

Riessman has enthusiastically embraced "the visual turn" in narrative research, citing Wendy Lutrell as the researcher who coined the term. Lutrell's contribution to this special issue is a close discussion of Riessman's take on reflexivity in narrative research, taking up the thread of Tessa's story again, but linking it to her own engagement with "the



visual turn.” Lutrell draws on Riessman’s unique model of reflexivity, not only in devising her own schema of visual inquiries in narrative analysis, but also in demonstrating how reflexivity was critical in the ways teachers and students responded to the visual images of her research archive. Riessman’s *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, which Lutrell had access to well before its publication, was crucial in her engagement with the visual: “Cathy was a witness, supporter, cheerleader and most importantly, a friendly critic throughout my process,” Lutrell writes, concluding her contribution with the acknowledgement that Riessman’s meticulous study on reflexivity “is the lasting intellectual legacy she leaves to Narrative Studies.” Lutrell’s entry to *amor narratio* is entangled with feminist friendship and love through her twenty years’ involvement in the Harvard based reading group that Riessman has so fondly written about.

Still in the realm of the visual, Ann Phoenix’s contribution to this special issue also draws on Riessman’s multifaceted narrative scholarship in thinking about child centred videos. In analyzing how a pre-school, Black American girl resists the way her mother combs her hair, the author considers the importance of ruptures, which is a major theme in Riessman’s overall approach to narratives. *Found narratives* is a central theme in this paper, in the sense that the narrative under analysis has not been constructed by the researcher, but has merely been found on the web, which has currently become a huge archive of traces of childhood, among other fragments produced via mobile phones and circulated through social media. What is also particularly important for this paper is the way the author follows Riessman’s urge for contextualization in linking the “small story” of resisting a hairdo to the “big story” of Afro hair and the bodies of scholarship that have been revolving around it in feminist studies and beyond. The little girl’s narrative about her hair, which is co-constructed with her mother in the context of the video-taped narrative is, according to the author, “politically salient,” and it can only be understood “if the sociocultural context of racism and contestation over the denigration of Black girls’ and women’s Afro hair is analyzed.” This contribution thus flags the political aspect of narratives in the way *amor narratio* has been linked to the care and responsibility for the world in Arendt’s conceptualization.

The special issue concludes with two papers from the three Co-Directors of the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London, where Riessman kept returning over the years during her European travels. Molly Andrews’ contribution looks back at Riessman’s

lasting influence as a mentor, both through her writing and her practice. Here she draws on *Narrative Analysis* (1993), or what Riessman used to call, “the little blue book,” linking the trope of Riessmanian reflexivity to what she calls “scholarship by example.” In positioning herself not just as Riessman’s reader, but also as one of her reviewees, Andrews recalls how Riessman’s thoughtful comments on revisiting her data over time has had a long-lasting influence in developing a sensibility towards the temporal contexts of narrative analysis. But Riessman’s influence as a mentor goes well beyond personal exchanges and intellectual dialogues among peers, Andrews argues, looking back at the effects of Riessman’s long engagement with the Centre for Narrative Research. In doing so she discusses four aspects of Riessman’s unique mentoring practices: the importance of mentoring; ways of forming, sustaining, and nourishing community; attending to the three Ps: personal, political, process; and “policing narratives”—put simply, the question of defining (or not) the very notion of narrative itself. Mentoring as pedagogical love thus becomes Andrew’s component of the *amor narration* assemblage.

The last paper of Riessman’s festschrift also draws on her impact on researchers associated with the Centre for Narrative Research, flagging up “research dialogism” as the overarching theme of her overall intellectual influence. For sociologist Cigdem Esin, it was “Riessman’s thoughts on dialogic approaches to storytellers and their many audiences, the co-construction of stories, narrative positioning, and the role of the researcher as one of the co-creators of individual stories.” For critical psychologist Corinne Squire, it was “the dialogism of Riessman’s approach, in relation to different disciplines, modalities, forms of language, and contexts.” The authors draw on Riessman’s “dialogism” in writing a dialogic paper in itself, particularly focusing on research they conducted together, using visual and textual modalities of narrative research and analysis. Following the trail of relational ethics, Esin drew on Riessman’s inspiration while developing her own unique sense of narrative sensibility, particularly so when she worked with migrant and refugee narratives of education in the Calais camp, as well as in London. Squire’s long involvement with HIV narratives displayed a concrete research strategy of crossing disciplinary boundaries, while following Riessman’s suggestion of doing narrative research creatively. There are four aspects of Riessman’s contribution to narrative research that Squire highlights in reflecting upon her own work: deploying interdisciplinary practices; paying attention to the multi-modality of narratives; considering narratives as language, and taking context seriously.

Riessman's development of narrative research as a relational and associational practice is for the authors the most important legacy of her encompassing scholarship, as well as their own entry to the *amor narratio* world.

At the end of this festschrift, it is of course Riessman's voice that the reader has been waiting patiently for. Her Afterword looks back at the process of her insertion in the web of narrative scholarship and her mentor, Elliot Mischler. "I am because we are"; the South African *Ubuntu* becomes the refrain of her own contribution to the *amor narratio* symphony of this volume. Listening to her voice is the best gift for the contributors of this volume and I hope for you, generous reader.

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