Narrative Works

Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

Seduction, Sharing Stories, and Borderlinking in Co-Constructed Narratives

Angie Voela, Cigdem Esin and Jennifer Achan

Cite this article

Voela, A., Esin, C. & Achan, J. (2020). Seduction, Sharing Stories, and Borderlinking in Co-Constructed Narratives. *Narrative Works*, *10*, 39–49. https://doi.org/10.7202/1076916ar

Article abstract

Drawing on a co-constructed autobiographical narrative as our example, we explore the resonances of Catherine Kohler Reissman's concept of seduction with Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's concept of matrixial borderlinking. Borderlinking between theoretical domains, rather than comparisons or juxtaposition, brings forth potentialities and expands the theorization of feminine subjectivities in much the same way as co-constructed narratives celebrate the we without obliterating the I.

Seduction, Sharing Stories, and Borderlinking in Co-Constructed Narratives

Angie Voela   *University of East London*
Cigdem Esin   *University of East London*
Jennifer Achan   *Independent Practitioner*

Drawing on a co-constructed autobiographical narrative as our example, we explore the resonances of Catherine Kohler Reissman's concept of *seduction* with Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's concept of *matrixial borderlinking*. Borderlinking between theoretical domains, rather than comparisons or juxtaposition, brings forth potentialities and expands the theorization of feminine subjectivities in much the same way as co-constructed narratives celebrate the *we* without obliterating the *I*.

Keywords:
Co-constructed narratives, seduction, heterotopia, borderlinking, feminine subjectivity

Relinquishing Dominance

Catherine Kohler Riessman's attempt to re-appropriate the concept of seduction for narrative research is not only brave, given the bad name the concepts gets through its association with sexuality and deception, but also *essential* for rethinking modes of feminine expression that fall neither in the remit of an assertive authorial *I* nor in the domain of the "death of the author." The efficiency and, indeed, beauty of an emerging theoretical concept are primarily determined by how it enhances the field to which it belongs, suggesting new lines of imaginative exploration, drawing attention to what was until then latent or overlooked, or creating a new focal point for articulations of becoming. But it does something else as well: it opens the field to other disciplines, lending itself to resonances and synergies, especially when it partakes of

the effortless poetry that usually inhabits the true theorization of women's experience. It is this latter dimension of crossing disciplinary boundaries that we explore in this article, reading Riessman's concept of seduction with Ettinger's matrixial borderlinking.

Taking her cue, but clearly departing, from Roland Barthes, Riessman (2012) reconfigures the concept of seduction as the subversion of the subject occurring when one, and to be more precise, the researcher, taps into previously unnoticed embodied interactions and emotions while revisiting her data (p. 553). Seduction harks back to the awakening of the senses (p. 554) as one goes "beyond the spoken word into the sensuous worlds of the interview participants" (p. 555), often leading to "a circular memory" (p. 558) sensitive to the contexts of the production of meaning. Seduction is not identification or over-identification with the narrator (p. 560) but a way in which everything, from the researcher's expertise in narrative analysis to unconscious assumptions and unexplored desires, contributes to a composite scene of subtle intersubjective exchange. Seduction is neither surrender (p. 561) nor resistance (p. 562). It is mutual (p. 562), inviting us to appreciate the ways in which "we relinquish dominance in interviews and make room for the desire of the 'other' [in such a way that] improvisation occurs and the unexpected can happen" (p. 564).

This conceptualization of seduction chimes with efforts to redefine feminine subjectivity in other fields of scholarship, such as psychoanalytic feminist philosophy, which depart from poststructuralist masculine formulations of desire (always linked to lack, castration, and the phallus), advancing theorizations that lay emphasis on *becoming* through experiences of *connecting, sharing, and witnessing* each other's testimony. One such contribution comes from the artist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger. Below, we explore how seduction as developed by Catherine Riessman resonates with Ettinger's concept of matrixial borderlinking. Such cross-disciplinary and, at times, unorthodox comparisons may not only constitute fertile ground for further interdisciplinary work but also consolidate the nexus of feminist theoretical concepts that increase our distance from the canonic masculine ones that used to determine our scholarship.

Below, we explore the concept of matrixial seduction by drawing on a collective autobiographical piece of writing produced as part of a research project on sharing and witnessing life stories (see Voela & Esin, 2020). Precise narrative or psychoanalytic interpretations of this piece can be easily constructed, but our aim is to avoid both in favour of

highlighting proximities emerging between the two fields. Immediately below, we explain the origins of our project and provide a co-created autobiographical narrative. The latter is both a piece of writing developed by revisiting an original script again and again, and a shared notional space between participants—a collaborative heterotopia, as Gonick and Hladki (2005) would call it, after Foucault. Such a space, we argue, does not simply accommodate disparate identities and individual perspectives for a while but also acts as what some psychoanalysts would call a *holding environment*, a welcoming one in which we can share and co-create with compassion and care for one another. We did not see this latter dimension at first, nor did we see seduction immediately. While we were busy teasing out the little stories embedded in the bigger story, we did not pay attention to the affective subtleties of our interaction, to how we were seducing each other out of entrenched individual perspectives—attitudes to life and theoretical ones included—and back into the immediacy of the present, which suspends and transcends certainties and anxieties, relinquishing dominance to make room for the desire of the "other" (Riessman, 2012), while being there, contained and held by the other.

The theoretical argument we develop in the section following the autobiographical narrative is an attempt to transpose the highly reflective concept of seduction into a communicative situation which de-prioritizes the *I* but also has movement—interaction, taking turns, passage from and to the other—and the capacity to alter the fabric of our being through mutuality. And rather than shoehorning or conflating theoretical concepts, we let them borderlink freely, like we did, observing their resonances as they momentarily converge and alter one another while being altered into the heterotopic passage-space.

Like an Errant Child

A few years ago, we recorded a series of collaborative autobiographical interviews for a project on sharing and witnessing stories of arriving and living in the United Kingdom. Each recording was strictly limited to one hour and focused on a specific theme, such as loss, nostalgia, sharing, etc. The interviews were free-floating discussions of a small group of participants of similar age and diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. While the initial aim of the small project was to explore the heterotopic nature of such collaborative interviews (see Gonick & Hladki, 2005), we soon noticed that the transcripts bore witness not only to a

desire to tell and recognize one another's story (Cavarero, 2000) but to feel welcomed in a *hospitable space* created through small stories as well as—and as is always the case with collaborative interviews—unfinished sentences, fragments of dialogue, moments of surprise or bewilderment, and affect. To use a topological metaphor, each of our recordings was **a** *scene* as much as an event, the beauty of which lay not so much in the biographical precision of the contributing testimonies, but in the multiple threads holding together the acts of sharing and receiving. And while each of us spoke our own experience, sharing-in-difference made it clear that, taking turns, each one of us somehow spoke on behalf of the others. Thus, we decided to use the data to produce co-authored first-person narrative texts, drawing liberally on the conventions of collective autobiographical writing established by Gonic and Gannon (2014).

We also paid attention to how we responded *obliquely* to one another. For example, when revisiting one of the transcripts many months after the recording, it immediately became apparent that one of us was rather keen to theorize and always make hasty feminist connections during the interview, while the others kept frustrating this demand by not responding directly, always taking it *elsewhere*, pushing and pulling the narrative threads into different directions. We joked about it ("You cannot help yourself, can you?"), and then, upon looking again, we started tracing what was previously unseen, the meandering of the signifiers which did in fact respond to her demand, *albeit not directly, but differently*. It was as if the other two tried to coax, correct, and lure one back into the narrative, into sharing and into the enjoyment of the present. We worked this experience into the text cited below. The latter aims to depict not the stories told within the hour but the *environs* of storytelling as a seductive-holding realm. The constructed text posits a fictional *I* (isn't the *I* always fictional?) which belongs to all of us, and follows the trajectory of what we saw unfolding, from the opening statement of total ignorance (*not knowing what sharing is),* to other responses, and to the evocation of others: maternal, social, filial, cultural, ethical, and so on. As we worked on successive versions of the text, our collaboration on heterotopias became *another space*,[1] which held not only our personal experiences, but also our diverging theoretical perspectives, which illuminated one another in the way demonstrated after the short text.

---

[1] "Of Other Spaces" is the title of Foucault's (1986) paper, in which the concept of *heterotopia* is discussed. (The paper also appears in print with title "Of Different Spaces.")

I do not know what sharing is, "I can start by saying that I don't know where to start with sharing." As I do so, I share my ignorance, my aporia. Then, my ludic self gets the better of me and I dive deep into jest: "sharing one's last bite, that's sharing and not when you have plenty but when you have little and feeling obliged to do so. 'Is that your ultimate idea of sharing?' Dee asks. 'Ultimate? It amounts to "requires some sort of self-sacrifice.'" "A self-test, then, testing your goodness?" A hint of tease in her voice. Pause. Em remembers an incident from her childhood: feeling neglected at the dinner table when her mother, a gracious hostess, would offer the best cuts to her guests. "Learn to share" was the lesson, with a punishment to boot (was she sent to her room without food? The child feels deprived of maternal love when her demand goes unanswered). The adult Em tells the story to her own daughter (What did she make out of it?).

I insist: "Sharing is a feminist idea, you know what I mean." No we don't but we will tell you this: sharing is thinking of the other and being considerate; sharing is responsibility towards your friends and co-workers, sometimes offering to do what others do not want to do; sharing is generosity, even when it goes unacknowledged and unnoticed, even when it threatens to "leave you with nothing" (mother always advised caution, "one day your generosity will leave you with nothing if you give away your things like that"). Sharing is sharing knowledge ("It spills into other areas of your life"), helping others, even when you are unsure yourself. Sharing is sharing oneself ("This thing is always in my head when I give and receive"): "There is a saying, but it does not translate very well in English. It goes like this 'share something and forget about it.'" "But it is not the same with grief and loss. People can be really reserved, they stare at you with a blank gaze as you talk and talk until you feel ashamed and stop." "When you open up yourself to someone it is really an invitation to the other person to enter your space, which is never entirely yours, as you know. If you are ready to share that space, you become very human. I really value being that human." Opening up oneself and one's house: "My grandparents never locked their front door, the house was in the middle of a big garden, but I only have hazy memories of it." "So, sharing is generosity!" "Ok, but do you always need to pin it down like this?"

Seductive Borderlinking

The rich properties of seduction closely echo those of matrixial borderlinking, Ettinger's (1992) conceptual and physical space of sharing and co-experiencing appearing at borderlines and thresholds, between being and absence, memory and oblivion, *I* and not-*I* (p. 201).

Consciousness is not excluded from such a space but rather resides in or slides in and out of the realm of margins and thresholds, transgressing the old and creating new ones (p. 201). It forms part of, or better *is*, co-poietic activity (Ettinger, 2006, p. 144). Borderlinking accommodates various elements of desire such as "jouissance, traumas, pictograms, phantasies, affects,… death-drive oscillations, libidinal erotic flows,… imprints and affected traces, conjointly but differently" (Ettinger, 2000, p. 195). Departing from Lacanian orthodoxy, Ettinger envisages this trans-subjective space as a feminine realm, a multi-layered interaction which occurs in conscious communication but goes "beyond the cogito" (Neill, 2008). In such a context, seduction would not be delimited to sexuality and would manifest itself in the minute ways—noticed or unnoticed—in which interlocutors respond to words, desires, and demands, not by satisfying them directly but by receiving, acknowledging, and responding to them *differently*. In our case, this *oblique* response invites the *I* to let down the "serious" academic gaze and heed the voice of the other, who will deftly twist and turn, desist and push, repeat and suggest a new turn, until one is able to see that sharing is the seduction of meaning, opening up to your interlocutor's generosity, beyond the fear of annihilation which usually has no other way to speak but as loss of knowledge or capital.

Seduction also chimes with maternal containment, an embrace that reins in and gently recalls the child to order. In his commentary on Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, Fletcher (2013) interprets the painting as a scene of containment, drawing attention to Mary's posture and extended arm towards the infant, in response to the child's rough handling of a baby lamb at the corner of the painting. The author argues that containment is located in the outstretched gesture, which is not just an attempt to repossess the errant child but which intervenes in the child's violent stranglehold on the unfortunate animal (p. 202). The eruption of violence and aggression at the corner of the picture testifies to the continuing need for maternal holding and containment of the unruly impulses, a containment that is implemented through the *seductive power* of the smiling gaze of the mother that draws the child's return gaze back to her even as he eludes her grasp (p. 202, emphasis added).

Seduction, then, is the power to temper the other's stubborn (aggressive) tendencies by gently capturing, turning, and redirecting affect and signifier away from their initial goal. We saw this clearly *after the event*, only when revisiting our data, in the gentle yet repeated effort to pull this "errant child" back to the flow of the *immediate present* of communication, inviting her to inhabit the moment, to "go along with it."

When one gives in to such an invitation, the pleasure afforded by seduction is mutual and "headless." It is hard to determine with whom it originates. It can be compared to a game of peek-a-boo between a baby and an adult. It is pointless to ask who started the game. Who is seduced there, the baby? Or the adult who gives in to the baby's inarticulate pleasure (Levin, 1996, p. 159)? At the same time, seduction can be radical, disruptive, and counter-hegemonic, a different way of making sense (not meaning), *other* to both normative notions of production and purposeful storytelling. This is the space that Deleuze and Guattari identify as "an alternative dimension of subjectivisation," one inhabited by affects, intensities, flows and linkages, which "indicate the essentially nomadic, excessive and a-signifying dimensions of textual practices" (Barrett, 2000, p. 256), giving priority to processes which do not always originate in decision or will (Barrett, 2000, p. 257).

Ettinger envisages a similar space with the matrixial borderlinking, a kind of communication which includes, among other things, "*overlapping circles of biographical fragments and chimes with the 'ordinary' transmission of cultural memories*" (Pollock, 2004, p. 11). As we have already pointed out, in borderlinking, consciousness is not denied but gives way to multivocality and severality, the latter being defined as intimations of the *we* which disrupt the logic of the subject and the object (Pollock, 2004, p. 30). Seduction, we would therefore argue, is a vehicle of severality, the ability to play with becoming and alterity without being afraid of loss or vanishing, and which, in turn, implies welcoming the unexpected (see also Riessman, 2012). When the *I* is seduced away from its fixed ideological formations, it loses nothing but the imaginary *epopteia* (high or vantage point of view) of possessing secure knowledge in favour of a process of making sense.

It is important for feminist scholarship to keep creating such loci, making them identifiable but without enclosing them with hard borders. For that reason, let us further add *passage* and disruption of interiority and exteriority to their qualities. Ettinger coins the term *transport-station* to signify this locus-passage "between subjectivities that desire co-affection or co-emergence because of a desire for such linkages and processing of the pain of the unknown other" (Pollock, 2004, p. 52). The Ettingerian passage chimes with the Foucauldian heterotopia, "[a] floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea" (Foucault, 1986, p. 27).

Considering the sharing-storytelling practice as a passage-heterotopic space allow us to rethink *knowing* as a troubled process that involves making sense without being trapped into the categories of what is known. Our shared stories brought forth many material and emotional interstices, as well as fragments of memory landscapes. By sharing, we established a relational disruption of time and space, a heterotopia that ruptured the boundaries between the three of us revealing more layers in our stories than we talked about and more voices than our own (mothers, relatives, strangers, folk wisdom, proverbs). Composed of stories and fragments, these passages also indicate that there are more planes in our lives than we can think and enumerate. Thus, within moments of remembering, we picked up words to join in each other's narrative, talking about the little big things that we thought we had forgotten and left behind in our home cultures, now turning into snippets of (trans-subjective) realization. In that sense, our shared experience produces a rich transport-station, encompassing *me* and *her-other* and the several others evoked in their absence.

It should be added at this point that when using the term "seduction," we are not talking about fascination or over-identification with the other. In psychoanalysis, part of the challenge of rethinking the concept of seduction is its close alignment with the order of the Imaginary which is seen as an obstacle to the way to the truth of the speaking subject (see Lacan, 1998). By moving away from this specific formulation, by exporting Riessman's concept of seduction to the realm of psychoanalysis,[2] we are able to see how the concept lends itself to desire, not as similarity-sameness, but as similarity-in-difference, co-affection, and linking, which further disrupts the fixed notional distance between the subject and the object. *S*eduction, we might add, is objectless desire, which compels us to re-posit difference *beyond* appearances. It challenges us to appreciate *simultaneity* at the level of *being*, allowing for the possibility of "multiple subjectivities" entwined in a spiralling fashion (Sjögren, 2006, pp. 72–73). Thus, in each other's sameness, we do not see imaginary identification (or over-identification) but a way of reclaiming unity-in-difference.

(Criss)crossing Disciplinary Boundaries

Let us return to life narratives in order to explore one more borderlinking. Life narratives provide a space for the *I* to appear as a

---

[2] For the concept of seduction in psychoanalysis see Jean Laplanche (1985).

constant element of the story, a space in which "plotting and mapping of the life history function to reinforce the narrator's 'I,'" but also a space of reflexive dissociation in which the self is othered (Sandino, 2013, p. 90). This also happens to be a narrative space which creates a synthesis of heterogeneous elements, a "discordant concordance" of temporality. Ricoeur's (1988) term is *narrative emplotment*. If sharing one's story is a form of sense-making, we opened up to the other, imagining the world through the other's *being*, feeling close to what this person feels, knowing we can never fully imagine their experience, but trying with all our might, and doing so without losing a sense of ourselves. As we skirt around becoming-other, we show compassion (humanity) for the other as we might for ourselves; we become witnesses to the other and to ourselves. We also learn from the other. Discussing the autobiography of the Italian activist Louisa Passerini, Lisa Baraitser (2013) argues that the desire to tell one's story is subtended by the desire to be enlightened, to be told what one does know about one's epoch and one's generation. We do not align this kind of learning to conscious or epistemological knowing, but to *looking back* in a temporal activity that transforms the past, without succumbing to repetition compulsion. *That* is also seduction, and another way of diverting the fixed gaze from the fixity of the past.

On a similar note, Ricoeur (1988) argues that a narrative identity inheres a temporal dynamic which upsets sameness:

> The self characterized by self-sameness may then be said to be refigured by the reflective application of such narrative configurations. Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. (p. 46)

For us, this was the experience of the event[3] in its spatial enfolding, containing moments of discovery through relating to each other in specificity; when completing each other's stories and, at times, unfinished sentences, other layers of relations were revealed to each one of us. Remembering, for example, the vague cultural command to not let oneself and one's family down, enabled us to relate to one another and to expose the vulnerability of the self simultaneously in this particular moment. We discovered vulnerability in our fear of failing not only

---

[3] The definition of the *event* differs in various philosophical paradigms. Here we use the term in a quasi-Deleuzian sense: moment or state of transformation, rather than temporal or structural disruption.

ourselves but our families. This was also a discovery of what was narratable about that fear in all of us. At the same time, the act of co-storytelling moved beyond the realization of our desire to tell the story of ourselves to the other(s); it became an act of solidarity though which we recognized our own and each other's uniqueness in relational narratives.

From that perspective, if anything must arise (in)to consciousness, it is not interpretation in the analytic sense or conscious knowing, but recognition of an ethical decision against indifference. This may be intimated in the trans-subjective realm of a *fortuitous* encounter, but it must nevertheless be trans-formed into a conscious decision to uphold the meaning of the other's story as a permanent non-place of cultural and personal significance. Of course, the *topological simultaneity* of elements in the heterotopic/seductive/matrixial realm cannot exclude interpretation as one of the possible transgressive effects with-in-to the feminine (Ettinger, 2006, p. 140). However holding, containing, bearing up with the other, drawing her back in and repositioning her-us in the fold produces something more directly ethical, leaving us solaced at a deep level "by the potential contact with what formed our humanity, with what humanized us as a dimension able to share or rather unable not to share" (Pollock, 2004, p. 52). If that is seduction, so be it; and if that is deception, let deception become the *cause celebre* of feminist research.

References

Baraitser, L. (2013). Collecting time: Some reflections on the psychopolitics of belonging. *New Formations, 72*, pp. 8–25.

Barrett, E. (2000). Mutant enunciations: Feminist practices and the anoedipal. *Social Semiotics*, *10*(3), pp. 253–263.

Cavarero, A. (2000). *Relating narratives: Storytelling and selfhood*. Routledge.

Ettinger, B. L. (1992). Matrix and Metramorphosis. *Differences 4*(3): 170–208.

Ettinger, B. L. (2000). Transgressing with-in-to the feminine. In P. Florence, & N. Foster (Eds.), *Differential aesthetics*. Ashgate.

Ettinger, B. L. (2006). *The matrixial borderspace.* (B. Massumi, Ed.). University of Minnesota Press.

Fletcher, J. (2013). *Freud and the scene of trauma*. Fordham University Press.

Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, *16*(1), pp. 22–27.

Gonick, M., & S. Gannon. (2014). *Becoming girl: Collective biography and the production of girlhood*. Women's Press.

Gonick, M., & Hladki, J. (2005). Who are the participants? Rethinking representational practices and writing with heterotopic possibility in qualitative inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *18*(3), pp. 285–304.

Lacan, J. (1998). The mirror stage as formative of the function of the eye as revealed in the psychoanalytic experience. In *Écrits: A selection* (A. Sheridan, Trans.), (pp. 1–7). Routledge.

Laplanche, J. (1985). *Life and death in psychoanalysis*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Levin, C. (1996). *Jean Baudrillard: A study in cultural metaphysics*. Prentice Hall-Harvester Wheatsheaf Press.

Neill, C. (2008). Severality: Beyond the compression of the cogito. *Subjectivity, 24*, pp. 325–339.

Pollock, G. (2004). Thinking the feminine: Aesthetic practice as introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the concepts of matrix and metramorphosis. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *21*(1), pp. 5–65.

Ricoeur, P. (1988). *Time and narrative* (Vol. 2). University of Chicago Press.

Riessman, C. K. (2012). The pleasure of the text: The sensual and seductive aspects of narrative inquiry. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologica*, *8*(4), pp. 553–572.

Sandino, L. (2010). Artists-in-progress. In M. Hyvärinen, L.C. Hydén, M. Saarenheimo, and M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Beyond narrative coherence* (pp. 87–102)*.* John Benjamins.

Sjögren, B. (2006). *Into the vortex: Female voices and paradox in film*. University of Illinois Press.

Voela, A., & Esin, C. (2020). Movement, embrace: Adriana Cavarero with Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger (and the Death Drive), *Hypatia* (First View), pp. 1–19. doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2020.49

Angie Voela, PhD, is a Reader in Social Sciences at the University of East London, UK. She is the Co-Editor of the international journal *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* and the author of *Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, and Myth in Contemporary Culture: After Oedipus* (2017). She has published widely on gender, feminism, and philosophy; psychoanalysis and philosophy; space and politics; psycho-social approaches to families and education; and the individual and society.

Cigdem Esin, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences and Co-Director of the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London, UK. Her research interests include narrative methodologies, interconnections between power and personal politics, migrant and refugee narratives, and visual storytelling.

Jennifer Achan, MSc, is a Systemic Family Practitioner in London, UK, currently working with children and families as a clinician offering targeted early help. She also supports the Evelina children's department and is a trustee at Guy's and St. Thomas' hospital.