



Editorial

# Foreword: Narrative Convictions in “Revolting” Times

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Convictions:

- (1) *strongly held beliefs, firmly felt and enacted*
- (2) *consequence of being criminalized*

Globally, we are awash in stories; here in the U.S., stories circulate about abortion, refugees, Black unarmed men and women shot by police, innocent victims of gun violence, and about boys who shoot to kill. A stunning little essay by Rebecca Traister, “the abortion stories we do not tell” (Traister 2022) interrogates the responsibility of activists, scholars, artists and journalists to think through the ethics/praxis/political consequences of narrative inquiry; which stories we circulate and which ones we censor. Traister worries that for decades activists/scholars have selectively told the “good” abortion stories, framing abortion as a rationale response to a tragic circumstance—reproducing, in the name of protection, the silence and shame that conservatives laminate on the decision to abort, excluding all the messy, bloody, complicated or just casual and not-so consequential stories of abortions, ceding space for a Right Wing narrative assault to pounce. Traister concludes her essay:

*“The additional horror is that the value of abortion stories may be about to shift in a sickening direction. We are at a terrible crossroads at which the stories of abortion—the testimony—may go from being a tool that could have been deployed on behalf of those needing care to a tool used against them”.*

In this preface, I want to think about the convictions enacted by narrative doulas in this volume. You are about to be engaged by critical scholars accompanying, historicizing, curating both births and terminations of stories, obligating us to think with theory and care about how these stories form and how they will enter a world of politics eager to celebrate, sanitize, monetize, romanticize, discredit, criminalize or exceptionalize these stories. And so we might ask the following.

## 1. What Is Our Debt—As Writers/Researchers/Scholars—In the Midst of Multiple Crises?

Almost a century ago, in 1930, Antonio Gramsci scribbled in a prison cell, “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot yet be born; in this interregnum, a variety of morbid symptoms appear”.

Today we drown in morbid symptoms indeed. But chronicling the morbid symptoms alone may be a dangerous narrative *cul de sac*, swelling despair and a sense of hopelessness.

Each essay you are about to read sketches an exquisite, braided narrative—stitching theory and multiply voiced texts—as a “case” about life in/before/during COVID-19 in South Korea, Canada, South Africa, New York City, Australia, Iran, India, Scotland, the UK and Sweden. Morbid symptoms but so much more. The writers mobilize a range of theoretical, epistemic, methodological and analytic affordances to generate intersectional montages of simmering rage/desire, stories of possibility and activism, dark inquiries into spaces of resentment and searing critique of state-borne ideologies dedicated to quell protest and circulate pseudo-science. The essays you are about to engage



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are beautifully curated to provoke/invite/reveal new lines of analysis, new ways of seeing/writing/researching/imagining/resisting this moment of what Massey and Hall (2010) would call conjunctural crisis—when seemingly autonomous forces converge, fracturing into rupture and rage, releasing the deadly and unevenly catastrophic, and also stirring the aesthetic imagination for what else might be possible.

This remarkable theoretical/methodological assemblage of critical narrative thinkers offers thoughtful and careful paths for scholars to consider how to “be of use”—in times when despair is high, sense of helplessness weighs heavy, when justice seems beyond words or logics or clever metaphors, democracy seems to be waning, when simply bearing witness feels lame. I have read all the essays, seeking to cull narrative convictions in crisis; to distill what these writers are asking us to take seriously about our obligations to write in “revolting times”.

My old friend Greene (2007), existential philosopher extraordinaire, in an essay called *Imagination and the healing arts*, distinguished between experiences that are anesthetic—numbing, and those that are aesthetic—provocative and wide-awakening. The writers in this volume indulge us to write-in-crisis, with narrative convictions, and toward aesthetic provocation.

## 2. To Destabilize, Historicize and Racialize the “Object” of Inquiry

As you enter these texts you will notice that the presumed “object” of inquiry—COVID-19 shape shifts. Across the pages, COVID-19 is a trickster that attacks, destabilizes, disfigures, reveals the social order, obscures as much, shape shifts into a political artifice, and unleashes a flood of avarice, greed, evil, violence, sweet yearnings and freedom dreams. It is, of course, intersectional.

So we arrive at our first narrative conviction—no matter what the topic—critical narrative scholars have a response-ability to destabilize the “construct” or “question” under scrutiny; leave it open, let it breathe like a good wine; listen closely to the nuances; consider what is being foreclosed by this seemingly open question. Take COVID-19—if we singularize the crisis we obscure the tentacles COVID-19 ensnared with housing struggles, physical and mental health, racial injustice, policing, child protective services, schooling, immigration anxieties . . . We must complicate, racialize and gender, historicize and render intersectional, the “thing”—in this case the COVID-19 crisis—that seems so clear, so shared, so universal, so containable. If we keep the “thing” a “thing”—as psychologists like to do when we operationalize or replicate—we literally sever the tendrils of class, race, gender, disability, immigration status that attach, expand and mutate the shape of the crisis, and the aftermath. When researching morbid symptoms or any downstream “outcome”, we must leave ourselves open to how constructs transform depending on history, context, struggles . . . This very theoretical and epistemic openness anchors researchers in an accountability dynamic with the communities we accompany in our scholarship.

The scholars gathered in this volume know well the need to destabilize, and open, the crisis as it bled into every sphere of public and intimate life. Throughout the volume, you will read about these wildly diverse embodiments, antecedents and aftermath of the virus. You will hear how privilege encased the virus, and how poverty/communities under siege were sacrificed, a breeding ground without state protection. COVID-19 metastasized, for some, into resentment against women, immigrants, communities of color; COVID-19 accompanied the endless video looping of the state sponsored murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and marked a(nother) moment of racial uprising, in the U.S. and globally, pouring into streets, demanding justice. At the same time, COVID-19 also sparked sweet solidarities in a range of spaces, on-line and in person: within queer communities, among those long ill/activist/HIV positive/experienced with mutual aid, across generations in the same household.

The narratives reproduced in this volume, and the accompanying analyses, sketch this landscape of COVID’s ravages and ruptures; make visible how COVID-19 disoriented us all but hitchhiked relentlessly and dug into those already most vulnerable; how it surprised

us with new understandings and new confusions; how we bore witness to structural racism/classism/misogyny perhaps previously unnoticed or known too well; how new identities/relationships/households/labor arrangements materialized.

During the COVID-19 era, new forms of interdependence were glaringly on display: dangerous and loving interdependencies. In these narratives, thanks to the thoughtful and delicate analytic hands of the writers, we can hear how lives are inter-laced; stories are braided; fears are shared and activism is mobilized. We are invited to listen to the soft deposits of yearning and refusals; that is, whispers of “no, we will not succumb” and “yes, we stand together”. These articles testify to bumpy but collective survivance embraced in struggle. Therefore, we come to our second conviction.

### 3. Challenging the Dominant Story

Years ago, in El Salvador, Jesuit priest/activist/scholar/liberation theologian [Martín-Baró \(1994\)](#) argued that the project of social inquiry must be to challenge the dominant story; to contest the narratives circulated by the state and elites; to recover and honor the silenced/buried/suppressed stories of the people, percolating in the margins. He framed this as “liberation psychology”—a sister to liberation theology.

Here, I suggest a second narrative conviction: our obligation to gather/analyze/co-construct narratives that challenge dominant lies, to listen carefully and gently for the critique, to make public the private issues that penetrate bodies and minds in shame and silence, and to theorize the quiet and bold gestures toward resistance.

In this volume, the “challenge” can be read at multiple levels. Scholars including Corinne Squire, Anne Phoenix, Wendy Luttrell and the NYC Collective, and Jill Bradbury spend time and language in their articles curating narratives of refusal and speaking back through interviews, social media, braided narratives (Bradbury) and participatory surveys/interviews. In their articles they animate the soft and loud deposits of refusal; everyday people’s claims to dignity and justice, and the smothered desires of those who have been unheard.

At the same time, but at another scale, Mastoureh Fathi, Mark Davis and Catarina Kinnvall and Amit Singh theorize and deconstruct the duplicitous nature and stickiness of state-sponsored ideologies and fantasies, designed to deflect, delude and deny; to shift blame, avoid accountabilities and torque public rage away from the state or racial capitalism. Both layers of narrative challenge are crucial to the project of unraveling dominant stories.

**Speaking Back in Braided Tongues:** Corinne Squire presents narrative accounts of persons living through dual pandemics, with HIV, enacting “strong attempts to resist, restore and reconstruct” their citizenships, mapping what Squire calls “citizenly technologies”. While these bold re-articulations of self do not deny that significant assaults on health, economic and psychosocial “citizenship” endured in austerity regimes, they do speak through what the author calls “histories of dissent”—up against a savage machine of racial capitalism, heterosexism, anti-disability policies and attempts to render them structurally “disposable”. And yet through Squire’s piece, like so many others, we hear rage-ful and joy-ful reassertions of what Sara Ahmed would call “willful subjects” ([Ahmed 2014](#))—insisting on being heard with dignity and collective power.

Like Squire, Anne Phoenix traces and analyses a stunning splash of online racialized accounts of COVID-19 posted on social media, as “intertextual narratives that protest against racism and call for resistance to the racisms they identify”. While the posters she is working with do “not overtly position themselves as calling for change, their narratives . . . resist current configurations . . . ” Phoenix models for us how we listen for/theorize “hidden transcripts of resistance” ([Scott 1990](#)) as she animates the braiding of loss and desire, the suturing of rage and demand when she writes: “the transformational conjunctions . . . have inspired and re-inspired pain, anger and narratives of resistance to the inequities the conjunctions have exposed . . . producing new political narratives that can inspire hope and new social understandings”.

In a third enactment of what I am calling braided narratives, with stunningly creative design of online participatory surveys and in-depth interviews with NYC Parents Speaking Out, in English, Spanish and Chinese, Wendy Luttrell and colleagues gathered narratives from a broad base of NYC parents/guardians cataloguing their joys/concerns/experiences/insights and incites during the early days of lock down, staccato moments of school openings and closings, dreary days of remote learning, and hearing what their children were—and were not learning. In an innovative methodological twist, each respondent could add questions to the on-line survey to which the next “generation” of respondents could reply. Through their parent/educator collective, Luttrell and colleagues present in this essay both a portrait of consensus stories—remarkably popular commitments to radical education, and they present narrative sketches of parenting blues and creativities. Analytically, across languages, boroughs and methods, Luttrell et al. retrieve a set of threads that connect, us all, in our very different circumstances, as a shared experience, attentive to significant variation and enduring power inequities.

Importantly for Luttrell et al., like Phoenix and Squire, even as their research opened with COVID, respondents pivoted to conversations and questions about white supremacy, racial dynamics and racialized state violence in and around schools. Luttrell et al. report that a full 77% agreed that “schools should teach about the damages of white supremacy” and “about the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement”. In this on line survey, it is evident that the catastrophic reach of the “virus” swelled far beyond COVID—stretching toward the structural and social enactments of racism affecting children in and out of schools. Luttrell and colleagues close their essay with a question: “How do we create the conditions to meet parents’ desires . . . to protect Black children’s innocence while also preparing them to survive and struggle?” And they respond with conviction: “We ally with children, parents, teachers, communities, school, educational and social policy. [This] political imperative is an open question about how, not if or why”.

With a shared ethical and rhetorical commitment to writing/teaching/theorizing “between”, Jill Bradbury, teaching and writing in South Africa, introduces a powerful praxis of braided narratives. While her work will be addressed more extensively below, the epistemic commitments woven into her article Learning to Resist, Resisting to Learn, writing in dialogue, melting the boundaries of knowledge making, rendering porous the membranes that link/separate learning and living, sit in sweet resonance beside Squire, Phoenix and Luttrell et al.:

*My narrative as a teacher is told in dialogue with the stories of students, with the textual traditions of narrative and other psychosocial theories, in inter disciplinary creative conversation with colleagues, and with voices from the remarkable real-time political and social commentary in the global media space. This approach instantiates one of the primary provocations of the pandemic to my pedagogical practice: to render the boundaries between sources of knowledge and forms of knowledge-making, between theory and practice, between learning and living, more porous. The macro-politics of the global crisis are here concentrated in a seemingly insignificant educational space . . . [animating] the (im)possibilities for resistance in the “multiple micropolitical practices” of daily activism of interventions in and on the world we inhabit . . . in tune with the present but resisting its murderous tendencies”. (p. 423)*

Across wildly different contexts but in a shared historic moment, in New York, Johannesburg and London, these researchers take up the work of narrative doulas attending exquisitely to how narratives are produced, how they are labored and delivered, how they enter the fresh (!) air of the political arena; comforting, turning and supporting the birth of new complex, bloody and joyful narratives, re-telling what was/is/might be.

While Phoenix, Luttrell, Squire and Bradbury escorted us to hear/see/feel/appreciate the resistance and indulge our desire to feel the vibrant refusals and creative resistance and livingness of marginalized communities, the articles authored by Fathi, Davis and Kinnvall and Singh do a different kind of narrative labor: they unpack dominant, state-sponsored

ideologies mobilized, with a vengeance, to smother or seduce the resistance. And this part of the story we have an obligation to chronicle as well.

**Deconstructing State Lies:** While it is crucial to listen, attentively and closely, to the narratives of those impacted, to document the flesh piercing “morbid symptoms” in our midst, and the joy of resistance, a few of these writers also turn our attention to state sponsored/circulated discourses designed to instill amnesia, encourage us to not-see, and dedicated to re-present racialized/classed struggles as individualized concerns or “choices”.

Mark Davis, in writing “Live with the virus” accomplishes two entwined narrative ends. First, he interrogates a far too familiar trope as he decries state mandates to “live with the virus” as an ideological attempt to induce “pandemic amnesia” and “erasure of critical reflection”, (not ironically) accompanied by material cuts in state sponsored health research. But second, Davis also theorizes the brilliance of community survivance despite state-sponsored betrayal (Vizenor 2008) as he draws on the “affective biopolitics [mobilized] in the service of community-built health sustaining commons”—evidenced by those who have long embodied health risks only worsened by COVID-19. Davis makes visible the rich forms of mutual aid already practiced, for decades, in historically “excluded communities” and calls forth the wisdom marinating in those quarters to build a health-sustaining commons nourished with capillaries of “vital interdependence”.

Still stretching COVID-19 well beyond its epidemic borders, Mastoureh Fathi turns over COVID gaze toward the devastating housing inequities confronted by migrants exacerbated by the virus. Fathi draws on critical geographies to interrogate how migrants are housed and unhoused in Europe—before COVID-19, during and since. She unpacks how this multi-headed crisis of immigration, racism, housing inequities and COVID-19 has been officially re-cast and swept away until the language of “choice”. Fathi introduces, instead, a new critical construct “unhome” to be deployed as an “analytical concept—a place where one is forced to stay . . . devoid of emotional attachments”.

Finally, moving to the pernicious intersection of state power and popular culture, Catarina Kinnvall and Amit Singh have crafted an elegant essay, “Resisting Hindutva: Popular culture, the COVID crisis and fantasy-narratives of gendered bodies in India”. In this article, Kinnvall and Singh remind readers to beware the strategic maneuvers of state/elite/ideological commitments permeating popular culture to feed and massify denial and pseudoscience. Kinnvall and Singh alert us to “fantasy narratives” drip fed and circulated through “traditional, digital media discourses as well as popular culture,” designed to “counteract resistance”—anchored in nostalgic representations of motherhood and seductive pseudoscience, able to “nativize an ontological security crisis” traveling through bodies, families, communities and nation states during the COVID-19 years. This essay is a crucial addition to the volume, stretching the narrative convictions from morbid symptoms, through resistance and then back to mutated, culturally pervasive forms of hegemonic control through popular media. We are reminded that it is crucial to document the often disturbing mo(u)ning after.

#### **4. A Minor, but Crucial Conviction: To Theorize the (Very) Dark**

Tereza Capelos, Ellen Nield and Mikko Salmela interrupt—with dignity—the powerful stories of solidarity, desire and vital interdependence seasoning this volume to remind us of the importance of listening to the dark, vicious rhetorics of resentment, marinating and fortifying through toxic masculinity across the COVID years. By analyzing right wing online discussions among young Korean men, we can hear how they “transmute grievances” into affects, identities and behaviors aligned with misogyny, anti-woman, anti-military and anti-globalization rants; we hear these men frozen in the bile of projection and accusations of “stolen” selves. While this piece is difficult to want to read, and we might want to wish this were a small, idiosyncratic, ethnographically specific case—but I fear these dynamics of toxic masculinity are as fast-growing and rapidly circulating and contaminating as the original virus. We are indebted to Capelos et al. for confronting our

desire to make small this massive global and rising assault; that is, to attend closely to the rapidly accumulating and coagulating streams of toxicity building up in our midst.

### 5. Embrace Our Irresistible Entanglements: A Conviction of Heart, Soul, Community and Science

Feminist philosopher of science Karen Barad studies physics. She argues that “objects, processes and agencies of observation do not merely co-exist in interactive relation to another. They are formed through intra-action. They are mutually constituted” (Barad 2007, p. 199).

Barad is drawing on physics but her work stretches gracefully into social sciences, insisting that we recognize our thick interdependencies; that we theorize relations “between” people, and between humans and non-humans, as “intra-actions” and not inter-actions. This insight/incite is a radical contestation of the historic and hegemonic individualism of traditional psychology.

Perhaps the most elegant enactment of entanglement as epistemic justice/theory and methods, is written by Jill Bradbury, in her stunning piece, *Learning to Resist and Resisting to Learn*. In this article Bradbury offers an elegant analytic/writing genre of sweet and knotty entanglements, stitching narratives of auto-ethnography and memoir with writings by her students, and emails/texts from colleagues, on a South African campus where questions about COVID quickly metabolized to demands for racial justice and against white supremacy.

Bradbury is herself always a compelling guide to the “betweens”: in teaching/learning, space/time travel, memory/imagination, and Self/Other. She theorizes and narrates these affective and political hyphens deliberately and aesthetically. Bradbury takes us back and slows us down, holding our hands as we all remember the optimism aroused when reading Arundhati Roy’s early 2020 promise of the pandemic as a portal; her warning that we not ‘drag the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas . . . ’ that we ready ourselves to “imagine another world” (Roy 2020). And then Bradbury, now entangled with readers’ emotions, reminds us that soon thereafter we were assaulted institutionally and politically by “anxious attempts to realign strange and estranging conditions with the world as a we knew it and strategies of containment and control”. Bradbury ends the piece with an email or text exchange among colleagues who formed a commons for/with/beside one another, where someone wrote: “Wow! When we think together! The beauty that emerges!” (if you are moved by entangled methods, please find a new book by Nishida 2022).

### 6. Radical Hope and the Obligation to Write

In the early days of COVID-19, an essay circulated within psychology, written collaboratively by critical race psychologists Mosley et al. (2020) coining the term Radical Hope as form of livingness and as an epistemic/methodological commitment. Mosley et al. were nudging practitioners, teachers and scholars to address oppression and resistance, to theorize history and imagination, and to take seriously our contributions to individual and collective well-being, fueled by radical hope.

With this prompt, we come to our final narrative conviction embedded in this volume: Radical hope and the obligation to write. Two articles speak eloquently to the question: What have we learned within the COVID-19 blues that might move us toward more just, inclusive commons?

In an(other) truly elegant and provocatively aesthetic research design, Kesi Mahendran et al. have unearthed what we perhaps might hope for: there seems to be a strong global desire for a border-free world. Taking seriously this finding, Mahendran and colleagues—in a gesture toward answer-ability—encourage a radical turn by psychologists obsessed with rising nationalisms. They invite “scholars [who] are preoccupied with xenophobic nationalism and the rise of nationalistic forms of populism and are actively engaged in studying this.” to turn away from “the protectionism tensions that are likely to increase during the

austerities of post-pandemic recovery” and engage instead in “directly investigating the public’s narratives of and engagement with multilateralism and how this relates to their ideals about the world, their worldviews and increasingly their planetviews”. Mahendran and colleagues implore scholars to stop fetishizing (and naturalizing) the desire to separate/build walls/exclude/protect Self against Others, and instead that we explore a popular (if submerged) desire for border free world, and explore empirically how such a rich, inclusive planetview might evolve from/against multilateralism.

With a similar ethic, and analytic eye on radical hope, Jim McAuley and Paul Nesbitt-Larking combine narrative and thematic analysis drawn from Canadian Periodicals Index, when they foreshadow what might lay ahead. Scouring a range of data sources, they suggest that just maybe we may be on the cusp of: “A renaissance in rationality and evidence-based science; a return to social equality and equity, including wage equity and guaranteed incomes; a reimagining of the interventionist state in response to crises in economy, society, the welfare state, and social order; a reorientation to the local and communitarian, with reference in particular to solidaristic mutual aid, community animation, local sourcing and craft production; and the reinvention of democracy through deeply participation and deliberative dialogical decision making”. While they acknowledge the Right wing rants of the Canadian Convoy, they sketch a prefigured future . . . “Those who anticipated a return to pre-pandemic normality may be shocked to find that many of the previous systems, structures, norms, markets and employment are no longer there to return to”.

This volume of essays reads like a painful love letter to solidarity studies, animating in vibrant detail our interdependence in livingness, in danger and in method. I surrender then to Toni Morrison who tells us “There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. This is how civilizations heal”.

And so, to Antonio Gramsci, almost a century later, we regret that we find ourselves surrounded indeed and still with morbid systems; and to Toni Morrison, thank you for the courage, insisting on our obligation to write (Gramsci 1971). Authors of these stunning articles have gifted us with a complex and deliciously unstable framing of COVID-19, but a clear-eyed analysis of its stratified legacy. They have modelled the power of listening intently for refusals, blues and resistance, and spinning braided narratives. They have embodied and acted upon the courage to dive into the vicious discursive bile rising under our feet. They have revealed the significance of deconstructing state-talk designed to induce amnesia and austerity, and they have accompanied us on the sweet search for radically new political narratives that take seriously our yearning for the commons.

We end, then, with a new worry, a *double entendre* of narrative conviction.

In a recent interview with Bracey Sherman, from WE TESTIFY, a website dedicated to archiving and publicizing abortion stories an just after the Dodd decision hollowed Roe v. Wade, many states unleashed an avalanche of laws that could criminalize women, medical practitioners and taxi drivers who carry women across state lines. Sherman poses a new challenge to narrative doulas:

*“How do we protect storytellers?” asks Bracey Sherman. Speaking of some who have worked with We Testify, she says, “we have a number of storytellers who self-manage their abortions. I want them to be able to share their stories, and I don’t want to have to visit them in jail. (quoted in Traister 2022)*

Convictions are never fully enacted; may narrative convictions always haunt us lovingly.

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