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Broken Narratives in the Immigrant Folktale

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Abstract: Folktales contain a life-force embedded within their structure. Life narratives are carried along in an autobiographical form as folktales are transmitted from one generation to another. This autobiographical nature of folktales inspires the unique approach of narrative identity in understanding the construction of a meaningful self-identity. Growing up, my mother would tell me Turkish Arab folktales. Today, I realise not only the impact they have had on my life but also on my mother's. One folktale, which I title *The Angel*, when contextualised in accordance with the storyteller's (my mother's) life, produces some dazzling insights into the reason behind the telling. *The Angel* is embedded in the life histories of my grandmother and mother and is abundant with insight into their life-worlds. The experience of the fragmentation caused by migration and the choices made has turned *The Angel* into a 'broken narrative'. Their life story is the driving force behind the telling of the folktale and can be a touchstone for children who seek to locate themselves within the narratives of significant others and broader social structures.

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Migrant stories are worth telling and worth hearing. Their narratives create a sense of history, a sense of the past, and construct a framework within which future generations can orient themselves. An understanding of the past helps individuals to locate themselves within history and culture, whence they can construct a self-identity narrative that connects the past to the present.

This article demonstrates how a folktale – passed down through three generations of women: from my grandmother to my mother to me – becomes a 'broken narrative' through the migration life-course. This folktale – which I call *The Angel* – has moral and ethical meanings that are implicitly linked to the life-world of the teller and transmitted to the listener. Reality exists through this interactive (social) production and performance, as stories constitute a dialectical relationship between the teller and listener, influencing how storyteller and listener understand themselves and how others perceive them. Telling stories is an inter-subjective experience and can be an autobiographical account. The performance of the storyteller is motivated by life experiences which become embedded in the plot. The folktale, in its telling and being listened to, is a 'dialogic performance' that shapes and constructs the narrative (Riessman 2008: 105-140). The contextualisation of the story is essential for conveying the motivations and reasons for its telling. The storyteller's identity is intertwined with the plot and transmitted through the story in a two-way dialogic process where the narrative is interactively produced and performed between the teller and listener (Riessman 2008: 9, 105, 109).

Narrative Identity, Memory and Performance

Identity is constructed dialogically through conversation and interaction. Expressed narrative brings coherence to an otherwise incoherent narrative and can provide an orientation towards an understanding of the self. But this does not mean that the result is absolute or complete; rather, it is always evolving and changing. The notion that life histories are a chronological puzzle to be put in order and presented as 'objective fact' has been contested by authors who see every story as positioned and complex (Brockmeier and Harré 2001: 46; Hyvärinen et al. 2010). To recall a life story is to remember the dialogical and intersubjective other; the people, the places, the time of day, the weather, the smells; it is to encapsulate the embodied experience.

Identity is constructed through narrative memory. Remembering the past connects us to history, and that remembering forms a tradition. Tradition relies on repetition and transmission. The layering, transmission and innovation of life stories by subsequent generations keep stories alive (Ricoeur 1991: 25). Parents transmit their memories to the next generation and so on. Arnold Zable argues that we tend to 'forget that the immigrant experience is our own ancestors' experience replayed anew' and this forgetting makes it imperative that life narratives are continuously 're-imagined' (2006: 18-20). Walter Benjamin conveys that to be truly submerged in the storyteller's art, the listener must enter into a state of relaxation (2007 [1955]: 91). The listener then forms an affinity with the story by integrating it into his or her own experiences. When this occurs, the listener commits the tale to memory and is more likely to pass on the story to others (2007 [1955]: 91).

Narrative identity and memory rely on the two-way dialogic interaction of the teller and listener. The 'web-like' delicacy of storytelling entrances the listeners as they lose themselves in the narrative. They become self-forgetful and are taken deeper into the narrative (Benjamin 2007 [1955]: 91). For example, stories can personalise the ordeal of suffering, giving the listener a lesson in empathy (Kearney 2002: 62-63). The catharsis of remembering and articulating the past incorporates a sense of relief which is transmitted to the listener, who re-lives (re-imagines) the experience of the teller. The listener then transmits his or her empathy to the teller – there is a 'two-way' interaction between the teller and listener (Riessman 2008: 109). This narrative interaction becomes a therapeutic, inter-subjective process, wherein the imagination of the teller and listener intertwine.

In order for the dialogic interaction to occur, the folktale is physically performed, not merely retold. Walter Ong writes that people give meaning to words by the performance of them:

> Human beings communicate in countless ways, making use of all their senses, touch, taste, smell, and especially sight, as well as hearing. Some non-oral communication is exceedingly rich – gesture, for example (2005 [1982]: 6-7).

Going beyond Ong's understanding of oral discourse as an agonistic performance, Catherine Riessman stresses the reciprocity, the two-way dialogic process at work in the telling and listening: 'The speaker's experiential involvement engages the listener emotionally, creating a "two way narrative contract between teller and audience"' (2008: 109). When the story is told, the narrator utilises her skill of evocative storytelling through things such as mimic imagery, facial expressions, vocal inflection and gestures. The storyteller embodies the tale and re-enacts the scenario (Abu-Lughod 1993: 2). Such vivid performance helps the teller provide the

listener with what Ong calls 'normal full existential contexts' (2005 [1982]: 38). These include such contexts as background and circumstances of the teller's life; things which personalise the folktale. This helps the listener participate in the story as it was experienced by the teller.

Fiction Becomes Reality

Narratives can become analogies between story and event (Bruner 1984: 3). Storytelling can function as a didactic lesson in regards to a particular act or misdemeanour. Anthropologist Keith Basso uses the example of Apache moral narratives to show how a story can transcend time and place, and 'stalk' the listener through its connection to certain geographical landmarks (1984: 43; 1996: 37-70). He describes a young Apache girl who, being somewhat disconnected from her traditional community, behaves inappropriately at a ceremony. Weeks later, her grandmother tells her a story about an Apache who behaves like a white man and his subsequent misfortune, in the hope that the young girl will understand her transgression and learn from her mistake (Basso 1984: 38-41). Reality becomes fiction and the fictional world becomes reality when a particular description is made analogous to real life. Edward Bruner notes that the

> narrative becomes a powerful corrective that works on a person's mind, so much so that many years later, whenever the person passes by the particular geographical place associated with the narrative, he or she is reminded of the previous transgression (1984: 3).

Moral tales can transcend time and place and can permeate every aspect of life. Narrative evokes living experience and 'the very structure of human acting and suffering' (Ricoeur 1991: 28). Stories are recounted from true life but are also part of the imagination; the *reality* of fictive narration should not be discounted. Similarly, Michael Jackson notes that narratives disengaged from time and space still retain a connection to reality (1982: 56-57). The narrative surpasses time and space and 'captures the thoughts, feelings, associations, and recollections' of the listener (Jackson 1982: 57).

Immigrant Narratives and Children of Migrants

Although the children of migrants do not encounter the hardships of their parents, they encounter the challenge of maintaining their family's culture and tradition within the new dominant culture. Stuart Hall argues that identities 'undergo constant transformation' and that cultural identity 'belongs to the future as much as to the past' (Hall 1990: 25). This statement can be applied to the challenge of children of migrants; for them, public and private space becomes tensioned. They must juggle the pressures of mainstream society with sometimes conflicting familial and cultural obligations and expectations. Through the articulation of a life narrative, the agent gains a sense of where they have been and where they are going. This is significant in the life of children of migrants in the construction of the self and identity.

Stories of migration suggest a 'consciousness of origin' (Papastergiadis 2000: 23), that is to say, migrant narratives evoke a nostalgic tie to their homeland. The pain of displacement can be so profound for migrants that they feel unable to transmit their own life histories to their children (Delcriox 2000: 187), leaving the latter to discover by their own means where they belong, and with an *inherited* sense of displacement

(Zable 2006: iii). Understanding can be built from learning about the sufferings of those who have been pushed to the margins. One of the ways this understanding can be built is by hearing about the life narratives of those who have experienced and endured the migration process. Migrants suffer the emotional and psychological effects of being alienated from and isolated in the host community (Delcriox 2000: 187). Consequently, children of migrants struggle in their social construction of identity. Catherine Delcroix argues that one of the risks for the families of ethnic minorities 'is the failure of their children to be integrated and their tendency to drift away from mainstream society' (2000: 81). When family narratives are absent from the lives of children they struggle in their search for identity. Hall argues that 'identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past' (1990: 225). If younger generations are able to acknowledge their own and others' narrative identities and histories, then they may be better able to appreciate and position themselves in these narratives.

As a child of a migrant family I live with no real connection to my parents' homeland. This leaves me with a sense of disconnection from past generations – a fragmented idea of my family and history. This lack of, or limited, connection minimises my opportunity to construct cultural links with my parent's country of origin.

Through trans-generational interaction, people can experience and see things from the same 'aspect' (Mannheim 1968, p. 306). Similarly, Zable argues that children of migrants 'act as intermediaries between cultures, generations and languages in transition' and through this interface they are able to 'discern the parallels that unite' and re-imagine 'various aspects of the immigrant experience' (2006: 16-17). As the generations encounter similar psychological and intellectual experiences they begin to share aspirations and see the world through each other's eyes (Mannheim 1968: 306). In the absence of these connections, other media are necessary.

Everyday conversations, narratives of life histories, songs, music and archaic stories are just some of the ways that culture can be transmitted through the generations. Greg Dening articulates that our imagination has to allow us to experience what we share with the past and to see difference at the same time (1996: 43). There are different ways in which voices of the past are to be found. Written documents can only give us a partial view of the past. In the absence of written documents voices of past people might be found in their dances, their songs, their legends, their myths, their body paint and tattoos, their carvings, their poetry, their very language (Dening 1997: 422; Dening 1996: 37). My mother's and grandmother's voices are found in *The Angel.* In listening to the folktales passed down from my grandmother I uncover the truths of their past and the metaphors of their understanding. Dening writes: 'The oral and literary relics bear a message; they inscribe language; they convey information' (1996: 42). *The Angel* is a cultural-performance and has encapsulated in its form, material and shape, expressions of meaning beyond their messages. Additionally, 'because they are cultural artifacts, they hold within themselves their ordinary significance as things that are beautiful and sacred' (Dening 1996: 42).

I have included an abridged version of the folktale told to me by my mother to illustrate the profound impact stories can have on the teller and the listener. But before we move on to this I would like to acknowledge my role in constructing the

folktale as a written narrative. In Ong's words: 'Writing can never dispense with orality' (2005[1982: 8). This story was told to me many times, in different circumstances, and is embedded in my life-world. The original telling, unlike the abridged version I use here, is long and detailed. The agonistic performance of the tale is told with elaborate gestures, vocal inflections, and facial expressions. I agree with Ong when he states: 'Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into visual field forever' (2005[1982: 12). I am aware of the tension in my role as listener in constructing the folktale. Ong also acknowledges that:

> This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality, who want literacy passionately but who also know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that is exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world. We have to die to continue living (Ong 2005[1982: 15).

The version of *The Angel* I present here can by no means replace or properly represent the oral telling. But for the purposes of this article, and word limitation, I must 'leave behind much that is exciting and deeply loved' and present *The Angel* to you in its most simplistic form.

The Angel

There is a secret fountain in the palace gardens.
Every year, this fountain is visited by twelve beautiful angel-like women, who fly from a distant land to bathe in its waters.
While strolling in the gardens a young prince comes upon the fountain.
There, the prince hears the noise of what seems to be a flock of birds.
When he looks up, he sees twelve women descending from the sky.
The prince runs into a bush and hides.
He watches as the angels remove their wings and garments and run into the fountain waters; unknown to the angels, the prince steals one of the angel's wings.
After many hours of bathing, the angels pick up their garments and wings, dress and prepare to fly away; but without her wings one angel is unable return home with her sisters.
Once all the other sisters are gone the prince emerges from hiding.
He greets the solitary angel and offers her his hand in marriage and they marry and have children; the angel's sisters can only visit her once a year.
The prince buries the angel's wings beneath the castles foundation.
As the years pass, the angel begins to yearn for her homeland and goes to see a fortune teller; the fortune teller reveals to her where her wings are hidden.
The angel retrieves her wings and returns home.
When the prince discovers that his wife is gone, he goes out in search of her.
The prince travels an immeasurable distance and ends up beneath an ancient talking tree; the tree tells him where he can find his wife and that a mythical flying creature can take him over the ocean to her.
The prince convinces this creature to fly him over the ocean on the condition that he feed the creature during the long voyage.
The prince kills three deer, cuts them into pieces and puts them in his knapsack.
They travel for many days and many nights.
Eventually, the prince runs out of meat and is forced to cut off a piece of his own flesh to feed the giant bird.
But the bird realises and does not eat the flesh and keeps it inside its mouth; no

longer requesting any meat, the creature flies with all of its strength until finally they reach dry land.
And the giant bird presents the flesh of the prince and with its enchanted powers reattaches to the prince's thigh.
The prince thanks the giant bird and they part ways.
Days, weeks and months pass, and the prince endures many harsh elements; he crosses vast deserts and climbs treacherous mountains until, finally, he reaches the angel's poor and desolate village.
There, he is arrested and locked in a prison cell waiting for his wife.
When his wife finally visits him he begs her to return home.

For me, the folktale ends here as this is all that my mother can recall of the story. She can not remember if the angel returns to her husband and children or remains in her homeland. I will come to her reasoning as to why, but first I offer some of my thoughts. Jerome Bruner argues that although the plot itself is the 'vehicle' it does not necessarily mean it becomes the story's 'destination' (1991: 6-7). Although *The Angel* has remained in its generic form, for my mother it has become a reflection of her life story, a story yet to reach its final destination. The theme of migration in *The Angel* is now part of her life story. The form of the folktale can remain the same but the telling, or what Bruner calls the 'intentional state' (1991: 7), becomes part of the storyteller's self which is realised through the narrative.

The Angel conveys different moral and ethical meanings to its listener(s), and the intention of the storyteller varies according to the context. *The Angel* has been transmitted – as narrative memory – through the generations, from my grandmother to my mother to me. Through narrating her life histories and telling creative folk stories my mother has had a profound influence on my self-understanding as a second generation, Turkish Arab Australian. Hearing *The Angel* has allowed me to enter into the life-world of my mother and grandmother. Among many other meanings it is a migrant story. In the second-half of the story the angel returns to her 'homeland', abandoning her children and the prince. This 'return' symbolises the nature of living betwixt and between two countries. For my mother, it is a story about an imagined return. The angel leaves the new homeland and the people there with whom she has made ties. The quandary of living in-between is expressed in the second-half of the story; the prince remains her unbinding tie to the new homeland.

The story begins with an angel whose wings are stolen by a young prince. The angel remains behind while her sisters return to their homeland and, though she marries the prince and lives a life of luxury, the angel can never forget her homeland. This is analogous to the migrant experience. Regardless of whether the destination is more bounteous and affluent than the place they are leaving behind, the vision of their homeland remains resonate: 'Even long after they have emigrated and settled in lands far removed, the memory of the native land endures' (Zable 2006: 66-67). My parents left their life in Turkey in search of prosperity. But with this choice came certain consequences, as changes in circumstances and life experiences affected the intended outcome. With the intention of being away for two years, my parents left but never returned.

Caught between two worlds, migrants tend to be alienated from the local community and upon returning to their 'homeland' find that they have lost many ties with their families and friends. They tend to become demoralised when re-encountering their homeland, and their lives in the new land have been so

consumed with nostalgia for their homes that they do not realise how much home has changed (Mandel 1995: 271-273). There is often a yearning to return, and the desire to maintain a relationship with the homeland may linger in the lives and hearts of migrants (Mandel 1995, p. 266). Zable notes that 'when translated from its Greek roots, nostalgia means, literally, "the pain of longing for the return"' (2002: 74; 2006, p. 3). The nostalgia induced by the disconnection of migrants from their natal land emanates from their actions and is transmitted to the next generation. 'Nostalgia is a significant aspect of the immigrant experience' (Zable 2006: 3); this has bearing on the children of migrants, affecting their sense of self and identity. This quandary of being caught between two worlds, and the difficulty of reconciling them, mirrors the migrant experience.

The vast distance between the homeland and the adopted land produces a feeling of disconnection and dislocation. This disruption can lead to a *forgetting*. In the case of *The Angel* my mother has forgotten the ending. There are many possible explanations for this; two come to mind. One is that without continuous repetition and re-telling, stories can be lost and become fragmented. At the core of this article is the alterity experienced between and by generations of migrants and the inheritance of the migrant experience of fragmentation encountered by children of migrants. As William Faulkner put it, 'the human heart in conflict with itself'. Zable calls this fragmentation a 'rupture' (2006: ii), which, particularly for children of migrants, problematises the creation of a coherent notion of the self. This fragmentation has been observed by Jenny White in her fieldwork among Turkish migrants in Berlin (1997: 757). Applying the notion of fragmentation to the lives of migrants suggests a sense of urgency and a need to find ways of developing a connection or dialogue with past generations.

The second possibility is that because of the evolving nature of stories and their close relation to the storyteller, the story can take on an autobiographical status (Brockmeier and Medved 2010: 24). Thus, the storyteller feels a connection with the story as it relates to their real life. The narrative becomes sentient and inhabits the body of the storyteller – the storyteller and the tale co-exist.

My mother has forgotten the ending of *The Angel*. Living in Australia for over thirty years, and the passing away of her mother soon after her departure, reduced the amount of contact needed to keep the story alive. Relating to trauma testimony, Molly Andrews writes that 'there are aspects of our human experience which cannot be contained within the boundaries of a conventional narrative structure' (2010: 154). Migration and fragmentation disrupt repetition and retelling of oral stories. However, this does not render *The Angel* redundant or ineffectual. Andrews concludes that the telling itself, and its relation to others, is what allows the individual to navigate within the dialogical realm and sense an affinity with the experience of others (2010: 165). There is meaning in the forgetting. The adaptation, evolution and changing nature of oral stories is apparent in *The Angel*. How one relates a tale is unique to one's own life. The storyteller can innovate the ending and re-imagine it according to her own context. My mother laments that she has forgotten the ending of *The Angel* – as it was told to her by her mother – but remarks positively that she feels so connected to the plot that the ending of *The Angel* will remain uncertain until she finishes her own real life story. This narrator's fate is not yet sealed. If she were asked to give an ending to the story now, or ten, twenty,

thirty years ago, it is possible that, depending on her circumstances and desires, each time the ending would be different.

As the daughter of immigrants, I have inherited a fragmented family history. Never having met my grandparents, my life-world seems to be void of any direct transmission between the generations. However, what I have discovered is that the void in my ancestry can be, at least in part, filled through narrative – stories passed on from generation to generation. When my mother tells me a folktale, I engage with her in the story, as the narrative is interactively produced and performed between her, the teller, and me, the listener: 'Past actions appear as if happening in the present, for time collapses as the past and present fuse' (Riessman 2008: 109). Her past becomes my present.

The folktales I hear from my mother are told to me in different contexts, time and place and for different reasons. Each telling enables me to imagine and identify with my mother and grandmother's experiences. I enter into both their past and present, and their connection with the 'homeland', in a way, becomes mine. I cannot remember the precise setting of every telling, it is different each time. Her facial expressions and mannerisms vary. One memory I have is of my mother being angry and saying to me "come here, sit down, I'm going to tell you a story" as she ushered me towards her with an impatient hand gesture. Other times, while she was cooking, she might gossip about the daughter of a family friend and suddenly remember, and begin telling, an apt folktale. The telling of folktales is integrated in the rhythms of daily life.

The discourse of everyday life is expressed in *The Angel*: sentiments such as love, loss, mistrust and nostalgia are evoked (Abu-Lughod 1999: 186-187). These sentiments are conveyed to the listener(s) according to different social contexts and inform the listener of the moral system of the source culture. Tales of great distances separating loved ones foretell of real-life angst. The distance between Australia and Turkey makes maintaining ties with Turkey challenging. In a fragmented world, children of migrants can find cultural meaning through their parents' narratives. By entering the realm of storytelling, by learning more of their past, they obtain a clearer sense of self. Greater familiarity with life stories and fictional tales enables a greater sense of connectedness between the generations.

Conclusion

Folktales – even if they do not follow the conventional format of a beginning, middle and end – can be told in different social, cultural and temporal settings and encompass different meanings for each person. As we have seen, folktales can provide a foundation for future generations to learn about their predecessors. Such narratives – even if they are broken narratives – can have a formative influence on the generational transmission of identity.

Immigrant's life narratives transmit to their children an idea of the hardships encountered, giving the children the opportunity to re-imagine their lives in the context of what they come to know of the lives of their parents. Children of migrants often do not understand the journey their parents undertook and cannot understand why this displacement has had such a significant impact on them. Knowledge of past histories and narratives can better equip children of migrants to articulate their own experiences and identities in the context of their parents'.

Through *The Angel*, I came to learn about the life-worlds and life histories of my mother and grandmother. By imposing my own experience and impressions onto the folktale, there emerges a co-production in the interpretation of the story. My mother's own explanation, enmeshed with my own, brings a new life to the narrative. My relationship with the storyteller(s) has a fundamental influence on my identity and has helped me to locate myself within my social milieu. Stories of migration have shaped my understanding of some of the outcomes, encounters, experiences and choices made by my parents. For children of migrants the life-stories and folktales passed down from their parents can provide important connections or resources for the construction of a meaningful sense of identity. *The Angel* is a narrative embedded with my mother's and grandmother's life-worlds. When my mother tells it, it becomes for me an intangible tie to the 'homeland', a relational and cultural tie to my family, and an evolving narrative by which I live.

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