

INTRODUCTION: SUBVERSIVE STORIES AND THE CRITIQUE OF EMPATHY

In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.

—Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

Storytelling promises to make meaning out of raw experiences; to transcend suffering; to offer warnings, advice, and other guidance; to provide a means for traveling beyond the personal; and to provide inspiration, entertainment, and new frames of reference to both tellers and listeners.¹ I understand all of these possibilities as the promises, rather than the functions, of storytelling. They tell us not so much about what storytelling does as about the claims that can be made for it. As the stories I examine here demonstrate, the farther stories and storytelling travel from the experiences they recount, the more they promise. And stories almost always travel. The representation of experience in stories is often inadequate, failing the promise to represent and understand experience, but this failed promise, or in positive terms, the almost fulfilled promise, nonetheless provides a compelling process for making meaning of everyday life experience.²

Sometimes, of course, storytelling fulfills its promise. Storytelling receives credit for making meaning or condemnation for appropriating meaning, praise for representing the unimaginable, or criticism for misrepresentation. The question is, what pushes storytelling to its limits? When does storytelling as making meaning become storytelling as misrepresentation and misappropriation? One answer may be in the connection between misrepresentation and misappropriation as separate but connected ethical complaints. These two fault lines, the land mines of criticism in storytelling in everyday life, both crack open when stories travel.

The center of my study of stories that travel is what I call “small-world stories.” These stories of coincidental meetings are familiar both in literature, from the epic to the novel, and in personal narratives told in everyday life. In

literature as in everyday life, small-world stories can be a trope, moving the plot from behind, or the substance of an inquiry about destiny, foreclosing the plot from in front. In either case, small-world stories are about travels, and they are stories that travel, reports told by and to people not necessarily present in the experience the stories recount. They provide one example of how storytelling works and, specifically, how telling our stories beyond their original context or telling other people's stories pushes the limits of storytelling.

Small-world stories are about coincidences, but not all coincidence stories claim the world as small. My friend and colleague Ned Lebow's story is the kind of small-world story that is about fate and destiny. He has published a version of his personal story (1999), but he told me a slightly different version, which I will tell here. To tell someone else's story is either to provide news or to make an example of it; here, I tell the story as a profound example of a story about making meaning out of raw experience and as an example of a story that has traveled, and continues to travel, with this telling. I heard Ned Lebow's story the first time I met him, in a conversation that was itself about mutual connections, a small-world conversation that led to his small-world story. I told Lebow that my aunt had been a Jewish child in hiding in France throughout World War II. In 1942, the Nazis rounded up Jewish immigrants in Paris and deported them to death camps. Lebow told me that he, too, had been born in Paris and that his mother, also a Jewish immigrant, had been deported in 1942. But he learned this story retrospectively. All he knew growing up was that he had been adopted as a baby from a particular New York Jewish adoption agency. The story he has been able to put together is that his mother and he, then an infant, were rounded up and sent with the other Jewish immigrants to a stadium on the outskirts of Paris. As they were being taken to the trains to be sent to the death camps, a woman threw her baby to one of the policemen as she was being led away. The policeman defied orders and arranged for several children to be saved. The children were handed over to a group of French-born Jewish women who arranged their complicated and difficult, but ultimately safe, passage to a New York adoption agency. Lebow's American parents adopted him as an infant from that very same agency, in 1942. The scarcity of infants at the agency at that time suggests the likelihood that he was one of the newly arrived French Jewish children. As an adult, not many years ago, he met Paulette Fink, one of the French Jewish women who had arranged to smuggle the children out of France, and she told him the story. Lebow believes that he was very likely the baby thrown from the death camp train by his mother to the kind French policeman.

There are many stories here: the story of the baby thrown off the deportation train into the arms of a policeman who arranged his safe harbor; the story

of the French woman who survived the war to be able to tell the story of smuggling children out of France; the story of Lebow as an adult meeting the French woman and hearing what might be his own story; Lebow's adoption story; and the more general story of the deportation of foreign-born Jews in Paris. The story is Lebow's but not only Lebow's. It is a personal story, but like all Holocaust stories, its magnitude is greater than the personal. He sees the story as revealing the best of human nature in the face of the worst of human nature, the Holocaust, during which people risked their lives to save a group of children. The story is his, but at the same time, it is a story that cannot belong to him, in part because Ned Lebow depends on the stories of Paulette Fink, the adoption agency, the French policeman, and his parents, and in part because it cannot depend on his mother's story. In other words, his story intersects with other people's stories and at the same time points to missing stories. This juxtaposition between the intersections and the absences, among history, memory, and trauma, pushes the limits of storytelling.

When stories travel beyond their original tellers and contexts, they often bear a trace or track a connection to that origin. Lebow traces his story through a multidimensional vortex rather than a linear chronology. The planes of places and times (the New York adoption agency, Paris, the deportation camp in 1942, the journey taken by refugee children from Paris to New York) and people (his mother, Paulette Fink, the policeman, his parents) coincide to produce the story, and yet they remain pieces, fragments linked by fragile traces and marked by traumatic absences.

Storytelling is pushed to its limits both by the use of a particular story beyond the context of the experience it represents and by the use of a personal story to represent a collective experience. In each of the following chapters, I examine instances of stories pushed to these two limits. I understand the first as the problem of entitlement and the second as the problem of the allegorical.³ Entitlement and allegory can be described formally, at the interactional and sociolinguistic levels of conversational analysis. It is the intersection of the two limits that produces what I see as the greatest complexity and the greatest source of both the promise of storytelling and its condemnation. We ask, who has the right to tell a story, who is entitled to it? And we ask, is this representation a sufficient, adequate, accurate, or appropriate rendering of experience? Ethical questions of ownership overlap with cultural conventions for representing experience. This model of entitlement begins with the rights accorded firsthand experience: individuals have firsthand knowledge that grants them a privileged position as knowers and a legitimate stake in the interpretation of their own experiences. Competing with this premise is the historiographical view that privileges the distant knower who has perspective and, by virtue of

less or different stakes in the interpretation, the possibility of objectivity. Further complicating the disputed virtues of subjectivity or objectivity and the rights they accrue, however, is the use of stories to represent not just individual, but collective, experience. The more a story represents a generalized, shared, or even human experience, the higher the stakes in asserting or challenging illegitimacy. What raises the stakes is the claim that the truth that the story represents is not only factual, representing events that actually happened, but also true in the larger sense of conveying a true understanding of human experience. The process in which the personal or the particular story acquires that larger meaning is quite complex. It is in the process of transvaluing the personal to the more than personal (human, shared, universal) that stories often make or break their promises. In this book, I describe empathy as one process of transvaluation compromised by both allegory and entitlement. Empathy is the act of understanding others across time, space, or any difference in experience.⁴ Although empathy holds out a great, perhaps the greatest, promise of storytelling, it is at the same time a destabilizing element in storytelling.⁵ Empathy relies on, but also destabilizes, the association among persons and their experiences. It destabilizes entitlement by creating the possibility that people can legitimately retell each other's stories. It destabilizes meaning from the personal to the allegorical. When a personal story is used allegorically, as representative, typical, or stereotypical of a situation, entitlement claims are one way to challenge the allegory. The use of entitlement claims to challenge sentimentalizing allegories sometimes undermines empathy and the possibility of understanding across differences in experience. Often, entitlement claims are alibis for a failure of empathy. My goal in this book is to understand the promises of narrative, especially as those promises are produced by uses of allegory and entitlement, and to provide a critique of empathy at the site of the failed promises.

I want, on the one hand, to observe what happens when stories stray beyond the personal and are therefore subject to challenges of entitlement (that's my story, not yours) and, on the other, to investigate the allegorical as a place where people recognize themselves in each other's stories. How do stories change when people empathize with others' experiences? What do stories that purport to be more than personal look like, and where do they potentially trivialize or otherwise distort experiences? What happens when the empathizer understands something quite different from the person who suffered the experience? And what insights can be gained by trying to describe all of this using the sociolinguistic tools of conversational analysis? On the face of it, the idea that we recognize stories as belonging to someone other than the teller is an obvious observation. At the same time, the concept of people telling other people's stories provides a lens for viewing the pervasive use of the per-

sonal story to represent both the core of all human experience and the vast difference between people's experiences. My goal is neither to privilege the personal nor to suggest a caution against telling other people's stories. Quite the contrary, I begin with the premise that we do tell each other's stories and that this is the great promise that storytelling offers. I suggest that conversational storytelling has developed culturally specific critiques of empathy and that empathy and its critiques are part of the ethics of narrative.

Storytelling is an aspect of the ordinary. In face-to-face communication in everyday life, people tell each other stories about experiences, whose ownership they negotiate. Storytelling has been touted as a healing art or as a means for transforming oppressive conditions by creating an opportunity for suppressed voices to be heard (or for creating opportunities to listen to those voices). Very often, inspiration, redemption, emancipation, even subversion, require the appropriation of others' stories. The process of appropriation depends on stories traveling beyond their owners, beyond the personal, and beyond the claim to experience. This is not in itself troubling, nor do I dispute the redemptive or emancipatory possibilities of storytelling. In listening to or even retelling other people's stories, narrators become witnesses to others' experiences, and storytelling provides some hope for understanding across differences. But I propose a caution. The appropriation of stories can create voyeurs rather than witnesses and can foreclose meaning rather than open lines of inquiry and understanding. Appropriation can use one person's tragedy to serve as another's inspiration and preserve, rather than subvert, oppressive situations. Storytelling offers as one of its greatest promises the possibility of empathy, of understanding others. Empathy is one way that understanding can travel back toward the experience to recover the distance stories create when they are far from experience. Empathy offers the possibility of understanding across space and time, but it rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer. If it provides inspiration, it is more often for those in the privileged position of empathizer rather than empathized. Storytelling needs a critique of empathy to remain a process of negotiating, rather than defending, meaning. The critique of empathy, and the recognition of the inevitably failed promises of storytelling, avoids an unchallenged shift in the ownership of experience and interpretation to whoever happens to be telling the story and instead insists on obligations between tellers, listeners, and the stories they borrow.

This book charts a course between the local and the global, the private and the public, the personal and the political, the everyday and the extraordinary. Each of these coupled terms and its histories is useful for exploring what Gayatri Spivak has termed "the experience of the impossible," an aporia that discloses itself in the unresolved and yet formalized relationship be-

tween the two terms (1999: 426). The seemingly fixed association between the paired terms in a binary relationship creates a reification. With many other scholars, I am working this reification, using it as a place from which to think and reconceptualize.⁶ I situate my discussions within other discussions of these categories, though where others have focused on contested public narratives, I draw attention to the role of personal narratives in the public sphere.⁷ My work addresses how personal narratives are appropriated in political processes, toward political action. Chapter 5, for example, considers the use of personal stories in fund-raising appeals.

Storytelling is pervasive in ordinary conversations. This pervasiveness, along with storytelling's appearance in public, highly formal, or less ordinary discourses grant it the status of being simultaneously a localizing and a universalizing means for representing experience. In this book, I focus on the most ordinary and localizing of storytelling processes. Storytelling is about particular people and their unique experiences. When stories travel beyond their owners, however, by way of storytelling, in ordinary conversation, and in works of fiction, the messages they convey are larger than an individual incident or an individual life. In everyday life, the circumstances in which stories travel beyond their owners and beyond the content of shared experiences can be a source of great concern and a site for negotiation of the ownership of meaning. When stories stay with their owners, people who share experiences can attempt to produce shared interpretations. Access to meaning is controlled by access to stories. But stories very rarely stay with their owners. In fact, what might be the most compelling feature of storytelling is the possibility that its power to transfer and transform will change the meaning of experience.

This book is an effort to trace the routes stories travel in order to understand better how personal stories acquire more-than-personal meaning. If there is a trend today toward the personal, or toward increasing use of the personal to claim access to diverse realities, it is an insistence on the personal at a moment of dispersion, diaspora, and reterritorialization. Put another way, personal stories and their assumed groundedness in local experience have acquired higher status, or at least greater interest, precisely at a time when their tellers are traveling out of their locales, away from their origins.

Although stories frequently travel with their tellers, just as often the stories travel independently. Stories that travel have always accrued value as they travel, and both fiction and history are, by definition, genres in which stories travel separately from their owners. Customarily, such stories are severed from a particular teller, and their successful independence relies in part on the story's ability to stand alone and to represent more than an individual experience.

The personal, conversational stories I analyze in the following chapters still

bear traces of their owners and sometimes include specific attribution to a teller or experience. The trace is a construction, a frame used to make claims of ownership. Sometimes the trace story recounts a link lost, erased, obscured, or reconfigured. In fiction and history, when stories gain this independence from their tellers, they are evaluated by different criteria, whether aesthetic, as in the case of fiction, or by measures of verifiability, in the case of history. In contrast, storytelling in everyday life is connected to the relations between tellers and listeners, whether told by the person who endured or enjoyed the experience or by new tellers in new contexts. Storytelling in everyday life is measured by sincerity. In fact, this is so true as to be the grounds on which storytelling in everyday life is disparaged. To describe a work of art as “merely” confessional is to argue that in substituting the sincere for the aesthetic, the work fails to transcend the personal and become art.⁸

Whether in published collections intended to be inspirational, in junk mail intended to persuade the recipient to be sympathetic and charitable, or in conversations that either make the ordinary extraordinary or make the extraordinary seem less singular and isolating, stories that travel far from their owners often insist that the particular experiences of a particular person might be applicable to other particular persons in their different, but equally particular, situations. This might be unremarkable were it not for the complaints made by people whose stories are borrowed, appropriated, and transformed. If global communication makes possible new ways for stories to travel from their owners and still retain traces of ownership, it also makes possible greater awareness of violations and misappropriation and new avenues for mobilizing a defense against them.

I divide my discussion of the travels of stories beyond their owners and contexts into three areas of inquiry. First, I consider the problem of ownership itself: what it means to lay claim to an experience and its representations, and on what grounds misappropriations are perceived and challenged. The specific cases I examine, from breaches of confidentiality to colonization, are part of a larger discussion of the ownership of storytelling as the management of cultural and personal territory, which I discuss as the problem of entitlement.

Second, I consider the problem of the untellable story and its possible solution: the emergence of new categories of tellability. This, like the problem of entitlement, is an ethical inquiry concerned with how norms and values are represented and negotiated in conversational storytelling. I am particularly interested in how storytelling can be a vehicle for recategorizing experience. Some stories are tellable but only if the teller is willing to live with existing categories for interpreting the experience. Narratives impose categories on experience, but people sometimes report that their experiences don't fit the

imposed category because the category unfairly judges them or insists on motivations or deserved consequences. Both storyability (what gets told) and tellability (who can tell it to whom) are constrained by how experience is categorized. But sometimes, when stories travel, they acquire new meanings and create new categorical possibilities that then travel back and make available new categories to the persons whose experiences were described.

Third, in a discussion of empathy, I turn to the question of how an individual life story acquires a more-than-personal meaning. Building on the concepts of entitlement and tellability, I look specifically at how stories taken out of context are used to create sympathy for the individual whose suffering is represented in the stories. A sympathetic response to another's situation (defined as a willingness to share an interpretation of or feel compassion for another's plight) or empathy (defined as an attempt to experience the suffering of others) always creates a relationship between a storyteller and listeners. However, this relationship, and the obligations undertaken, differs markedly depending on how far, if at all, a story travels from its owner. I suggest that empathy requires a critique, or that empathy be practiced critically. The central complaint made by people whose stories are appropriated for other contexts is the colonization of personal tragedies to mobilize others in different situations who have not suffered these tragedies. Empathy puts in place the possibility that, through the luxury of storytelling, others can indirectly experience that person's suffering for their personal or collective enlightenment without enduring those tragedies, or if they have endured tragedies, they are offered transcendence through compassion toward others.⁹ Generally, collective compassion, transcendent inspiration, and empathy are virtuous qualities, and inescapable even if not virtuous. At the same time, when these virtues are invoked without attention to the responsibilities between listeners and tellers, and especially, when people experience a violation in the misappropriation of their stories, the colonization of the mind, the imagination, and the experience creates misunderstanding and mistrust exactly at the rhetorical moment when empathy promises the opposite. I call this dimension of my discussion of storytelling the critique of empathy.

All three of these areas of inquiry—entitlement, tellability, and the critique of empathy—are part of the larger question of the relationships between tellers and listeners.¹⁰ Some of the storytelling I explore is highly contextualized; it draws on the shared understandings of tellers and listeners and shifts reference back and forth between what Katharine Young calls the storyrealm (the situation of telling) and the taleworld (the events in the story).¹¹ One way to distinguish among the points on the continuum between the variety of storytelling situations I discuss in this book would be to say that at one end the

taleworld and the storyrealm overlap to such an extent that they are barely distinguishable, and at the other end they are so distinct as to have hardly any recognizable points of similarity, hardly any mutual references between the characters and situations in the story and those listening to or telling the story.¹² However, both kinds of story are highly localized; that is, the tellers and listeners invoke a local situation. Further, even though the taleworld and storyrealm may be very distinct, in all of these storytelling situations, the relationships between tellers and listeners are paramount. The question is whether, in what ways, and to what extent the tellers and listeners acknowledge any sense of obligation to the characters in the story.

Entitlement

Throughout the book, I refer both to the larger claims made for storytelling and to the specific, localized claims made for the rights to tell a particular story or to interpret a story in a particular way. I see these two sorts of claims as linked: both are ultimately based in relationships between tellers and listeners.

The larger claims made for storytelling range from the cognitive to the social. For some (Atkinson, 1995: xii; Schank, 1990: xi), storytelling has the status of “natural” communication, a fundamental and universal way of documenting and describing experience (Coles, 1989). Sometimes, especially in the popular literature, storytelling is asserted to be a representation of either the human soul or the human brain. Just as the prehensile thumb and tool making have been used to distinguish humans from other species, so also storytelling is invoked to delineate humanity. According to this claim, humans are the only beings who can report their experiences, and storytelling is the vehicle and repository for accumulating, sorting, and making meaning out of experience. The social claims range from the observation that storytelling is a way of creating shared understanding or creating meaning out of chaos (Arendt, 1968: 104; Myerhoff, 1978: 222–23), to narrative “as a mode of thinking fully as legitimate of that of abstract logic” (Jameson, 1979: xi) to claims for storytelling as therapeutic, transformative, or subversive (Booker, 1991). From Freud’s use of “the talking cure” to contemporary uses of storytelling in self-help groups, storytelling has served a therapeutic purpose, and sometimes this purpose is essentialized; that is, the practice is conflated with the process, and narrative, rather than particular strategies for its use, is claimed to be a curative, healing practice.

Claims for storytelling as subversive often pit the narratives told in everyday life (the repressed voice of the oppressed people) against the dominant narratives of histories. In these claims, the life histories of ordinary (and es-

pecially oppressed) people are considered to be counternarratives that might undercut the discourses of those in power.¹³ Proponents of this theory demonstrate how constructedness of dominant discourses is concealed by claims of objectivity. Localized personal-experience narratives are no more real, no less constructed than universalizing dominant narratives (Frisch, 1990; Tonkin, 1992; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Portelli, 1991). However, if both the localized and the universalized narratives make essentialist claims, they do so in different ways and for different motives. Each requires a different sort of critique. The universalizing narrative, which hides its constructedness and defends its truth as universal, scientific, or verifiable, requires a critique of methodologies designed to provide objectivity. Localized narratives, insofar as they insist on the unmediated reality of firsthand experience, require a critique of the essentialism of claims for experience as real or natural.¹⁴ The promotion of personal narrative as “real” is particularly common in popular uses of local narratives that have been removed from their local contexts and that are then used to persuade or inspire distant listeners. Those uses of personal narratives make an unapologetic claim to the reality of personal experience and often an equally unapologetic display of pathos in their invocation of others’ experiences as pitiable to evoke sentimentality. Is the use of others’ stories for emancipatory purposes any different? Are the latter less suspect of essentialism because they promote emancipation rather than sentiment (and because they disavow essentialism)? The answer to these questions might be, yes, there is a difference, but if so, the difference is at least in part between the apologetic and the unapologetic use of others’ stories. In short, the difference may be a difference in how the obligations of tellers and listeners to stories are displayed through claims, apologies, promises, and disavowals.

The claims that scholars, journalists, or popularizers make for storytelling tell us a great deal about their understandings of the obligations stories enjoin upon tellers and listeners. The assertion that storytelling is fundamental to human experience is, at the very least, a statement about the desire to be able to describe human experiences. Also, as is true for other claims for what is “natural,” “fundamental,” or “universal,” such statements tell us that storytelling is claimed as both familiar and as exotic, and that, for all its familiarity, the pervasiveness of storytelling puzzles us. We cannot explain, either in cognitive or in social terms, the pervasiveness of storytelling, across cultural and temporal situations, nor can we explain the existence of particular forms of storytelling in particular places or periods. Consequently, we ascribe storytelling to the realm of the fundamental and natural. This claim, or promise, of narrative, to transform the inexplicable into the meaningful, describes one of narrative’s most powerful failed promises. Narrative describes an aporia between the in-

explicable and the meaningful, a place from which to think about the representation of experience. This dynamic is perhaps best understood when narratives describe experiences that cannot be made meaningful. Theodor Adorno's famous insistence that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz and Spivak's similar turn to poetry in her discussion of "the experience of the impossible" turn our attention to the significance of narrative in this moment of its failed promise to make meaning (Zuidervaart, 1991; Spivak, 1999).¹⁵

In contrast to such grandiose claims are the ways many scholars disparage storytelling in everyday life as trivial and not worthy of examination.¹⁶ (Of course, the more grandiose the claims made in popular commentary, the more they are disparaged by scholars.) Storytelling in everyday life is additionally excluded from scholarly research on the grounds that everyday-life stories are not predictable. Scientific fields, concerned with the validation of findings, and the humanities, which base the suitability of subjects of study on the question of whether they are worthy of reexamination and retextualizing, both require a subject to be predictably repeatable. According to most scholarly conventions, only the repeatable lends itself to study. Although stories told in everyday life are in some sense repeatable, and certainly storytelling situations and stories are patterned, storytelling in everyday life is also radically unrepeatable. To study only those stories or storytelling situations that appear repeatable would be to make the mistake of reinforcing the unchallenged rule that only the repeatable is worthy of study, a rule that confuses observable pattern with the unrecognized pattern that is unrepeatable. Stories that are told only once or that change when retold in different contexts also deserve our attention. As stories travel from one teller or context to another, not only do they lose some of their recognizable patterns, but their tellers and listeners also notice some patterns and overlook others. A teller's recognition of a similarity can prompt claims of misappropriation. Repeatability itself, whether as a measure of how stories change, as social rules for who has the right to use others' words, or as the reexperience of an event through telling about it, is one of the issues of this book as is the issue of how repeatability governs the use of narrative and the validity of a narrative account of an experience.

Rather than promote storytelling in everyday life as a corrective to dominant discourses, my goal is to trouble the divide between situated lives, personal stories, and contextualized productions of meaning, on one hand, and the stories that are told as grand historical narratives with global or historical contexts, on the other. In recent years, the grand historical narrative has been critiqued as inaccurate, hegemonic, or not representative, and the study of personal experience has been proposed as an alternative. My exploration concerns, among other issues, the ways in which the presentation of situated ex-

perience provides resistance to dominant narratives.¹⁷ In contrast to the claims for interest in situated knowledge for its own sake and its ability to reveal truths not revealed or concealed by the grand narratives, I suggest that what is interesting and significant about situated knowledge and situated stories is the ongoing relationship between the personal and the universal, the local narrative and the grand narrative, and the localized claim and the universalized claim.

I am not claiming to restore some otherwise denied primacy or contaminated situation for storytelling in everyday life. Although I am interested in the ways that these stories are promoted or disparaged, I am not suggesting that either position is correct or flawed. Instead, I am arguing that the general claims made for storytelling are a way of negotiating relationships between tellers and listeners, a way of demarcating a territory in which particular obligations are undertaken. Most specifically, in my study of stories and their travels, I observe how the claims made for storytelling shape and are shaped by efforts to support or subvert dominant narratives and dominant ideologies and discourses.

Although the claims made for narrative generally are tied to other disciplinary discourses or political agendas, the claims made for entitlement within storytelling events are more about protecting relationships between people than about protecting territories of discourse. For the most part, the issue of who can tell and hear which stories is a question of social relationships based on questions of ethics and accountability. In disputes about entitlement in conversational narrative, people negotiate the gaps between representation and interpretation and the challenge of finding meaning when meaning is impossible.¹⁸ I propose that better understanding of how entitlement works in highly situated conversational narrative can be useful for understanding the larger claims/promises made for narrative as a means for making meaning out of the chaos of experience and for maintaining or transforming meaning as stories travel.

Tellability

Storytelling is a highly contested site for determining norms and values. From negotiations of who can tell what, through comparisons of different versions of a story, to questions of how an experience is interpreted and what significance is attributed to it, we can observe the ways in which relationships in a story intersect with relationships between the storytellers and the listeners. Storytellers and listeners manage ethical positions within stories in both form and content; this management affects the storytelling situation and the points of intersection between story and situation, especially through the use of fram-

ing (Goffman, 1974). Storytelling imposes order on events by establishing a chronology that then becomes a way of framing and understanding experience so that not only do already-identified patterns to some extent precede and inform our narratives, but narratives also identify and impose pattern on experience.¹⁹ The chronological sequence literally orders the experience and figuratively suggests an association between the ordered, sequential narrative and unbounded, unpredictable, chaotic (seemingly not patterned) experience. Storytelling involves a desire or a willingness either to recognize pattern in experience or to impose pattern on experience. However, different sorts of patterns are formed by the negotiation of which specific experiences get made into stories, how events are framed and carved out of the flow of experience by stories, and how stories attain the status of representations of accepted social scenarios or norms. Storytelling in everyday life can be a way to make meaning out of seemingly senseless events. However, it is a mistake to define storytelling as creating meaning out of chaos when just as often storytelling creates further chaos or fails to make sense out of events. Instead, we can observe the ways in which storytelling acknowledges and invents patterns as part of a dynamic relationship between chaos and pattern.

The order that storytelling imposes on events is never neutral, although storytellers often claim that they are just telling what happened and so disavow their own intervention in framing the event. One of my goals in this book is to unpack the association between storytelling as order (that is, a sequential order of events) and stories as a way of establishing and preserving a dominant order. The order, or structure, of narrative form helps to make stories we tell recognizable. Just as folktales have a familiar structure, so do the stories we tell in everyday lives. In European folktales, for instance, if the heroine has some kind of domestic problem, then a magical being comes along to help her. Typically, the magical being also provides a warning of some sort, the heroine fails to heed the warning, and some sort of difficulty follows as a consequence of this failure. In the end, the heroine and her hero prevail, and the story ends with a royal marriage. Personal-experience narratives sometimes aspire to a similarly recognizable sequence of events. In part, talking about our experiences is a way of searching for a sequence that makes sense.

Storytelling in everyday life can be a central means for constructing world views. Narrative paradigms²⁰ that fit expectations of the way things are supposed to be frame socially accepted scenarios. Socially contested scenarios describe situations that defy an expected order of experience and contradict or interrupt predicted chronologies and expected sequences of events. To make sense of unexpected events, things that don't fit into available paradigms, tellers may either take exception to the available stories or attempt to create

new scenarios. These two moves operate at different levels of analysis. The first, in which tellers challenge available narratives as not accurately portraying their experiences, focuses on what counts as the event.²¹ In the second move, tellers and their listeners, focusing on how an event is interpreted, reconceptualize their experiences into new paradigms. Asserting the validity of one story, or one version of a story, can be a way of undercutting or devaluing the status of another.

Even when not explicitly stated as a personal opinion or a moral lesson, stories contain evaluative commentary intended to persuade the listener to accept a particular interpretation of what happened. In Hilde Nelson's terms, narrative plays a role in moral life (1997: viii). Each of the following examples describes the reshaping of a narrative category to conform to moral positions.²² The concepts of typified narratives, paradigm shifts, substituted versions, and shared narrative are tools for exploring the possibility of counternarratives, or potentially subversive, stories.²³ Underlying the controversies over the acceptability of one version or one paradigm over another are controversies about the larger messages these stories convey.

The first example, the story of Pearl Bryant, belongs to the genre of murdered-girl ballads, typically telling the story of a young woman killed by her lover. Ann Cohen has collected ballads and newspaper articles that offer versions of what happened to Pearl, a young woman found decapitated in a field outside Cincinnati (Cohen, 1973). Describing the woman as a prostitute, newspaper accounts implied that a woman of ill repute had taken too many risks and had come to a bad end. Later, the body was identified as Pearl Bryant, and the now explicit story was that she was a girl from the country (notice the switch from woman to girl), not the city, who had left home with her boyfriend, a dentist from Cincinnati, because she was pregnant with his baby, that he botched an abortion, resulting in Pearl's death, and that he cut off her head to disguise her identity and finally dumped her in a field. The dentist protested innocence, but he was convicted and hanged for the crime. The ballad version of the event, which clearly identifies Pearl as a victim and the dentist/lover as a villain, conveys a warning to young girls not to trust young men or they would face the fate of poor Pearl. Pearl Bryant's narrative was constructed by and for different media, the newspaper and the ballad broadside, each of which provides its own constraints. The newspaper story, claiming to report an incident of interest to the readers, offered the categories of prostitute or spurned pregnant lover as facts, and the newspaper does not take responsibility for the ways that those categories shape different stories and suggest interest in different "facts." The "facts" excluded or presented are, to a certain extent, determined by the category.

The identification of contested scenarios has been one of the strategies of the feminist movement. Revising sequences that don't make sense and devising scenarios that do are both ways the feminist movement has addressed the unexpected, or hitherto invisible, aspects of women's experiences. Retelling our stories is a way of reconceptualizing the categories of our lives. How one narrates an experience can make all the difference in determining whether an event is accepted as normal or criticized as immoral or in characterizing people as victims or as willing participants. In a report on how violence is translated into the "language of love" or how murder can be described as a "crime of passion," the *Utne Reader* gives the following examples: "A man guns down his former wife and her new boyfriend; reporters call it a 'love triangle.' A man shoots and kills several coworkers, among them a woman who refused to date him; the press reports a 'tragedy of spurned love.' A man kidnaps his estranged wife, rapes her, accuses her of an imaginary affair, and chokes her to death (all in front of the children); a reporter writes that he 'made love to his wife,' then strangled her when he was 'overcome with jealous passion'" (Jones, 1995: 36). All of these are contested narratives; both versions of the events claim a different category for understanding what happened. The first version of all these stories categorizes the events as crimes against women; the version attributed to reporters—and of course they are not the only ones who use these categories—categorizes the events as crimes of passion. Violence-against-women stories portray a different course of events from crimes-of-passion stories. Which category prevails depends on which events are included and which excluded, from whose perspective the events are told, and how they are described. In either case, the categories of violence against women and crimes of passion are constructions that invoke particular narrative paradigms.

Sometimes, by telling our own stories we are able to reframe experiences into new or different categories. A good example of this is the category of date rape. Only in the last decade or so has this category been accepted; before that, sexual assault had to involve a stranger, and the assumption was that a woman who had unwanted sex with someone familiar to her (and unentitled to sex with her) was at fault for getting herself into the situation in the first place. The emergent category that critiques "blaming the victim" is a result of a reevaluation of categories in which women can tell their own stories, and this contradicts the categories invoked in stories told about them. Several years ago, at a conference on Foxfire projects organized by folklorists at Ohio State University, some high school students from Zanesville, Ohio, spoke about their attempts to write about teenage pregnancy and sexuality at their school. Using Foxfire-like methods of interviewing students at the school, they proposed to write their own pamphlets to replace the ones distributed in their health classes. The project went well

until the students decided to include a section on date rape. The principal objection to the open declaration of the category, presumably on the grounds that the category was either irrelevant to the school experience or the topic was not appropriate for a school publication, and the pamphlets were never distributed. To name date rape as a problem made the rape narratives a contested paradigm. Date-rape stories place the blame on the person who imposes unwanted sex rather than on the person who protests. A date-rape story contradicts, for example, a story that depicts a woman as a tease or a story about how a woman should know ahead of time what she “has bargained for.” All of these stories are told differently. In a paper on date-rape stories written for one of my folklore courses, a student wrote about an incident in which she ended up, after an evening of drinking with friends at bars near campus, all alone with a young man whom she hardly knew at his apartment in the middle of the night. She didn’t trust him and knew the situation was dangerous, but she thought she could handle it. She felt that her alternative, to leave in the middle of the night and go out onto the street by herself and find her way home, was more dangerous. He raped her. For a long time, she blamed herself for getting herself into such a situation, until she did the research for her term paper and interviewed other women and learned that they had been in similar situations and called those situations “date rape.” For her, calling the situation “date rape” was transformative. By telling the story as a date rape, she shifted the blame from herself to the man, and a story about her poor choices and bad judgment became a story about his criminal behavior.

In both of these examples, in which narrative is used to label and relabel experiences, the acceptable paradigm depends on characterization. Pearl Bryant is either prostitute or naive small-town innocent; date rape reconfigures the characters in stories in relation to each other. These characters are not categorized by a literary typology, though in coinciding with their fate (rather than changing and coming to know themselves better through the story) they are closer to the epic hero, and in their immersion in everyday life and events, they are closer to the novel hero. Genre plays an important role here in determining the relationship between narrative and counternarrative. The story of Pearl Bryant provides a counternarrative only in the existence of a variety of versions of a single event. In stories about date rape, the character insists on a particular version of her story, and by invoking the alternative story, she creates tension between narrative and counternarrative.

Stories rarely if ever belong to a single category of experience; more often, storytelling demonstrates an awareness of multiple possible categories, some compatible, some contested, some provocative or marked, and others assumed and naturalized. My point is that the tellability of stories is in part tied to the

categories attributed to experience. Another way to understand this is to suggest a connection between Harvey Sacks's concept of "category-bound activities" and his discussion of tellability. A category-bound activity identifies individuals' actions as typical of the group of which they are members (Sacks, 1992: vol. 1, p. 180). People "monitor events by reference to 'tellability'" (Sacks, 1992: vol. 1, p. 779). Although Sacks does not pursue a connection between the two concepts, together they provide a useful understanding of the contested terrain of the categories that shape narratives. Narrative is one method for creating the connection between actions and categories.

The examples above are stories about violence against women; some are public stories, printed in newspapers or magazines or, in the case of Pearl Bryant, made into ballads. Others are the private stories told by people who knew the victims or the stories the survivors themselves tell. However, although some of the private stories report rejection of the newspaper or other publicly promoted versions of stories, the categories are not invented in the public world and imposed on the private world. Resistance may take the form of resisting public versions of stories, but this, too, is a narrative strategy. One strategy of resistance to the absence of women's perspectives and stories has been efforts to collect and publish women's stories in their own voices. But telling their own stories does not necessarily mean that those women escape the categories and labels imposed on them by dominant narratives. Resistance to dominant narratives is not a simple matter of offering the alternative of personal example. The optimism of countless books promoting personal stories as a way of providing voices for people who have not been heard is challenged by the willing appropriation of those stories in television talk shows or other media presentations that trade on the commodification of personal disclosures in public arenas. When stories travel beyond the tellers who suffered the experience, they can acquire new contexts of meaning. And if the story returns to the teller who claims to own the experience, the new interpretations of the experience can travel with it.

The Critique of Empathy

Redemptive, subversive, or other liberatory claims made for narrative are based on the possibility of counternarratives. As a genre, narrative both promises to convey meaning and to provide more than one way to tell a story. I will not rehearse the well-known debates about the usefulness of narrative in historical and ethnographic research. Narrative is by now generally recognized as a rhetorical and descriptive genre shaped by both the formal and social constraints of available narratives and by tellability and the interpretive perspec-

tives of tellers and listeners. One difference between my concern and the concern of those debating the crisis of representation in anthropology and history is that those debates focus on the validity of stories as evidence. The entitlement claim, in which narratives are contested on the grounds of ownership and rights, sets up a different chain of responsibility than the claim to evidence. In the entitlement claims, narrators proclaim their interestedness. In ethnographic and historical narratives, interestedness (often confessed) is mostly regarded as a contamination of the record.²⁴ As long as stories stay with the people who have suffered the experience, the contest between narrative and counternarrative can be a question of entitlement.²⁵ In other words, the rights to entitlement and interpretation are linked; people who suffer an experience are presumed to understand it best. When stories travel far from their owners, the distant tellers and listeners can still presume to understand; empathy provides one means for understanding across disparate experiences. But empathy is a weak claim to entitlement; in fact, empathy is almost always open to critique as serving the interests of the empathizer rather than the empathized. In this section, I explore the connection between contested narratives about suffering and the critique of empathy that underlies some of those contests.

My research questions begin with stories about personal suffering that travel beyond their owners. Stories that travel beyond their owners are subject to a different sort of critique than those that remain situated. I begin by asking how ownership is claimed and what territory is included in that claim. To what extent is the ethos of personal experience unimpeachable? If the only challenge to the ethos of personal experience is credibility, how is credibility established in the narrative exchange, and how does this change as the story travels away from the persons who claim to have suffered by the experience? Is the testimony of personal suffering challenged? Here, the particular claim is important, whether “this happened to me” or “I suffered by this.”²⁶ How does the ethos of the teller, once credibility is established, help to establish ownership of the experience and the narrative? If critique is located in the empathetic reaction, is the challenge directed to entitlement? Do tellers claim empathy as justification to claim ownership of the narrative?

I am neither launching a critique of stories that travel beyond their owners nor proclaiming that certain kinds of counternarrative are subversive. Instead, I am taking as a given the fact that stories do travel beyond their owners and that tellers do claim counternarratives as emancipatory. One focus of my research is the particular claim of empathy by tellers who do not claim to have suffered an experience themselves. Empathy is always open to challenges, but at the same time, stories must travel beyond their owners to do

some kinds of cultural work. Counternarrative depends on the possibility of critique of the master narrative, and thus, to some extent, on empathy with the counternarrative. It is in this sense that subversive stories and the critique of empathy are implicitly linked. Empathy is one of the failed promises of narrative, but in that failure, it provides the possibility of critique and counternarrative, providing whatever redemptive, emancipatory, or liberatory possibilities narrative holds.

In response to Hayden White's charge that the Palestinians needed better narratives, Edward Said wrote:

The narratives have been there. They're of a different sort. I don't think there's a kind of "grand narrative": it's essentially not a Western narrative. The model of wandering and exile is available. I. F. Stone always says the Palestinians have become "the Jews of the Middle East." But that's a borrowed narrative. . . . After all, this is a narrative that always has to compete with a very powerful, already existent narrative of resurgent nationalism of the retributive kind, of the sort that one associates with Zionism. So on a lot of fronts there are formal problems. Then there's the tactical problem of where's this narrative to be formed? Because the Palestinians are locked into the Arab (so-called) narrative, and that's usually tied into oil, and the Arabian Nights, and a whole set of other myths, on the one hand. And on the other, in the West it's virtually impossible for the narrative to be located hospitably in any set of allied or counternarratives. (1990: 138)

Said seems to be arguing that the Palestinians cannot have a grand narrative and that they are trapped in local narratives that never transcend themselves. The failure to transcend the local can involve a failure of empathy, a failure of the story to travel beyond the personal experience. We can begin to understand how storytelling is used in negotiations of power by asking what makes one story tellable and another story not tellable in particular historical and social contexts.

What makes one category of narrative more available than another? Stories do not exist in isolation, and it is impossible to prevent a story from being appropriated, reinterpreted, and recategorized. A related consideration rendering stories untellable in particular situations is that some categories are unrecognizable to some listeners. Date rape is one unrecognizable category for listeners who maintain that rape occurs between strangers. The date-rape stories involve a shift in perspective from the stories of the tease or the girl who invites advances and later protests. The untellability involves a lack of recognition of the category, a "this kind of thing doesn't happen" response. Sometimes, untellable categories of storytelling are about recognized categories that are specifically excluded from conversation as topics to be avoided. The tella-

bility of these trauma narratives is compromised by the unacceptability of the events. These are stories about things that shouldn't happen, rather than about things that didn't happen.

Children dying or child abuse are good examples of the problem of narratives about things that should not happen. In the case of child abuse, some people respond by thinking that not only do these acts transgress the natural order, but also even talking about them violates what should be. It is the reification of the unthinkable as the unspeakable. Talking about children dying isn't this sort of violation, but all stories about things that shouldn't happen share a problem about how to talk about tragedies without romanticizing or somehow distancing the events from one's own experiences. The difficulty is that often we don't know how to make any sense out of tragedies—things that should not have happened—and in an effort to make sense out of what is senseless, or to make something seem all right when it feels all wrong, stories are constructed to find some thread of meaning or redemption. However, the availability of narratives is not just a matter of selecting a topic or negotiating an awkward conversational moment. Though questions of topic or situation are important for determining an accurate and appropriate match between the story and the experience, the availability of narratives also depends on larger discourse issues such as who else is using that narrative and for what persuasive purposes. On one hand, the availability of narrative is a matter of finding some way to take account of the unaccountable, and on the other, claiming a narrative as a way of understanding events is a political choice that enjoins particular obligations upon tellers and listeners. Trauma narratives foreground the possibilities of subversive stories (or counternarratives) and the necessity of a critique of empathy. Empathy is one kind of obligation, sometimes creating a possibility for understanding across differences, sometimes involving sentimentality, sometimes romanticizing tragedy as inspiration, but in any case deeply compromising the relationship between tellers and listeners.

Storytelling in everyday life is both a liberating practice that creates new narrative paradigms and a conservative practice that constrains experience into available narratives and acceptable scenarios.²⁷ The categories of the liberatory and the conservative are slippery here, however, because they do not map onto personal freedoms or constraints. The familiar and acceptable, insofar as it acknowledges a shared experience, can be a source of political coalition, and breaking out of expected or familiar categories is not in itself a form of liberation. Storytelling in everyday life is a good place to think about the social constraint, conservation, and subversion of meaning and to question the binary oppositions between public and private, conservative and liberatory, or subversive and status quo, that shape social thought. Storytelling about

personal experience in everyday life has subversive potential, but personal narrative is not of itself an antidote to the dominant narrative; just as often as it voices resistance, personal narrative appears as the vehicle for dominant ideologies. Voices speaking from the margins reinscribe the center and reinscribe their marginality precisely by calling attention to their marginality in an attempt to undermine the center.

Sharon Boyer, an African American mother of a child who was murdered and a participant in Memorial to Our Lost Children, a project to create a memorial to murdered children, is particularly concerned about ways that people distance themselves from such tragedies by telling the stories as if the events could not happen to their children, as if children who get murdered are poor or black or neglected or drug users.²⁸ The group Parents of Murdered Children contradicts this stereotype; murdered children do not represent any race or class. And as Boyer said at a meeting of the group in 1994, it does not make any difference if one's child was an honor student or a drug user. She says, "The mother whose murdered child was a drug user has lost her child not once, but twice, first to drugs and then to murder." So why do we tell their story differently? Why is it different to tell a story about a drug user who was murdered? The easy answer is that the drug user who is murdered is like the tease who is raped; in such stories, the victim is, at least in part, to blame. Stories construct categories of victims, innocent saints, and evildoers. A story asking for sympathy for a drug user can be as untellable as a story asking for blame for a charming, intelligent, and handsome young man who rapes his date. One of Boyer's main efforts as a member of Parents of Murdered Children is to tell the story as she sees it. She resists the stories in newspapers as sensational. Further, she argues that because the particular facts are not at issue, the question is not from whose perspective the story is told. Nor is the issue blame and innocence. The issue is murder: an undeserved, tragic, senseless death. She cuts to the heart of the problem of untellability by refusing to permit any effort to make sense of the senseless. Constructing binary categories of blame and innocence does just that. At the same time, the formulation of the binary opposition between blame and innocence provided the parents of murdered children group with a productive site to conceptualize their shared counternarratives.

Storytelling can resist the constraints of appropriate situations as well as the constraints that label and categorize experiences. One of my students, Peggy Gerds, who had been a nurse in the Leukemia Wing at Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, collected stories from the parents of her former patients. She asked parents whose children had died to tell her their stories. (And here, "their" is deliberately ambiguous, referring both to the parents' stories

and the children's stories.) The parents welcomed the opportunity to talk about their children with Gerds. They were angry about what I am calling the untellability of tragic stories. Other people's discomfort with death, or cancer, or children dying competed with what was most important to them, which was that their children be remembered. For example, one parent told about meeting an acquaintance in the supermarket who introduced her to another person by saying, "She has two children." The parent corrected her, "No, I have three children, but one of them died of leukemia." The parents wanted and needed to remember the child and to have the child remembered by others. A story about a child dying of leukemia is sometimes untellable, and it is particularly untellable in a casual conversation such as this supermarket encounter. Mentioning the child might have created the opportunity for the story to have been told, and since the story belonged to the mother, the acquaintance was in the impossible situation of either misrepresenting the correct number of children or inappropriately introducing the story as a topic for conversation. One way to understand a society's presumed unmentionable topics is to explore the relationship between tellability and entitlement. I consider this issue extensively in my conclusion, on disability narratives.

In all of the cases I've mentioned so far, the storytellers insisted on telling their stories, even as they recognized that these stories might not be heard, understood, or considered socially appropriate. Telling untellable stories accomplishes several things for the tellers. As I mentioned, sometimes telling the story is a way of reconstructing the category of the event by taking exception to the available stories. In other cases, this recategorization of an event is a way of working against the way the story is understood by creating a new scenario. The issue for these tellers is not just telling the story but telling it in a particular way or in a particular situation. The parents of the child who died from leukemia not only want their child to be remembered, but they also want that child to be remembered in a particular way. These parents told stories about a child, who in a very short lifetime gave a great deal to the people around him, who touched many people and left his mark on the world. And that seems to be the most important story to tell. The parents of children who died from leukemia shape their claim not in terms of a narrative and a counternarrative but in terms of acknowledging a reality. Sharon Boyer and the other parents in *Parents of Murdered Children* insist on a counternarrative of all murder as tragedy to counter the narrative that constructs some children as innocent victims and others as somehow at fault, if not complicit. For these parents, the valid story is one that does not require that the child was good for the murder to be considered bad.

These two responses to tragedies work at different levels in response to

available narratives. The parents of children who died of leukemia negotiate what can be told and to whom. Their insistence on a story about a child who left a large legacy in a short time works against the story of the tragedy of cancer taking the life of a child. The parents of children who have been murdered negotiate what the story they tell means. Both kinds of story are constructed in a cultural political context in which tellability and untellability are part of particular social contexts, both the personal and immediate contexts in which the stories are told or not told in everyday life, and the public contexts in which one person's story is told as representative of a larger social situation.

Whereas the meaning of a story is always situated within a particular cultural context, the claims people make to legitimate their stories as meaningful or true often extend beyond those local contexts. This can work by countering a universal claim with a personal narrative as the exception that disproves it; by universalizing the personal experience as representative of something larger than that singular experience and therefore worthy of note; by setting the local apart from the global as meaningful only within the context of its use and as distorted when taken out of context; by representing as personal, experience that has been concealed or overlooked by the dominant discourse and then identifying the practices of exclusion used by a dominant group to protect its interests; or by identifying a general pattern of accepted discourse that renders a particular local story untellable or not meaningful within its strategies of interpretation. Each of these examples (and I will discuss all of them in detail in separate chapters) involves a different relationship between the local and whatever is larger than local. Each of them locates both the situated and the generalized a little differently and uses different names for these, and each of them has a different motivation, a different rationale for insisting on the importance of either the local situated construction or the global universalized one.

Storytelling is part of cultural modes of communication and social relationships, and no story is told *de novo*, outside of these modes and relationships. Stories are told not only to reflect on events and to communicate with particular listeners but also in response to other stories about other similar or dissimilar events and in the context of existing ideas and the entire system of communication, including who speaks to whom, about what, in what circumstances, in what form, and with what consequences.²⁹ The legitimacy of any account depends on who tells it, what is the teller's relationship to the experience, who counts as a "participant" and who counts as a "witness" (and which of those is held to be more likely to have accurate information), and how the form in which the event is recounted helps to shape the way the experience is understood. In other words, the legitimacy (import, ethical charge, or authenticity) of a story depends not only on its relationship to the experi-

ence but also on the web of interpersonal and intertextual relationships in which the story and the experience are entwined.

As Boyer and other members of her group know, the recategorization of their stories in newspapers is a marketing strategy, designed to sell more newspapers, just as the packaging of Pearl Bryant's story was designed to sell the ballad broadsheet. Repackaging is one of the ways that stories travel. On one level, this is a matter of recontextualization, providing new contexts for stories as they travel to different situations; on another level, repackaging is a particular kind of strategy in which identities are manufactured and sold in a capitalistic marketplace. Boyer and the Parents of Murdered Children object to the use of their stories in the newspapers, but when I met the group, they were attempting to repackage their own stories, as part of the Memorial to Our Lost Children project. Many such groups learn to repackage their stories to persuade a larger, removed audience to adopt a position more sympathetic to the perceptions of those who have experienced a trauma. In their book *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS*, Patti Lather and Chris Smithies describe the repackaging of HIV/AIDS stories: "One doctor says, ' . . . we live in a racist society where the health problems of whites are considered to be more important. So we have to package this disease as a threat to the white middle class to get funding for it, to get attention, to get support'" (1997: 116). Stories can belong to more than one category at a time. HIV/AIDS belongs to both "trauma" and "scandal" categories, as do the stories of murdered children. The women who participated in Lather and Smithies's study, like the Parents of Murdered Children group and many other advocacy groups, hope that telling their stories will interrupt and thus subvert the dominant narrative.

People who have suffered often see the media appropriations of their stories as a problem of representation: their experiences have been represented inaccurately by people who, they believe, have no right to represent because they have not experienced the trauma and cannot possibly understand. In this book, I will suggest that although the question of who is entitled to represent whose experience is a problem, the larger problem is the packaging of suffering as sentimentality. In an explanation of the organization of their book, which gave primacy to the women's texts and placed metacommentary on separate parts of the page and in intervening chapters, Lather and Smithies write, "These women deserve better than sentimentality, and part of the work of the angels is to interrupt the kind of easy empathy or 'downward directed sympathy' that readers often fall into when reading about the tragedies of others. The hope is that the very fragmentation of the book, its detours and delays, will unsettle readers into a sort of stammering knowing about the work of living with HIV/AIDS, a knowing not so sure of itself" (1997: 52). Lather and

Smithies try to avoid packaging suffering as sentimentality; they provide a critique by creating awareness of the danger of making personal stories into marketplace commodities.

People make valiant efforts to correct what they perceive to be misappropriated or inaccurate representations, and these efforts can be more or less successful in shaping public thought and perceptions and creating forums for citizen action, and in more personal therapeutic claims for knowledge or self-realization. However, even if the particular meanings attached to experience change, that does not interrupt the commodification of identities in a marketplace. Temporarily, the “good guys” can prevail in their efforts to promote a particular story, but personal identities are still made into poster children for a cause. I use the image of the poster child quite deliberately because disability is perhaps the best case for understanding how empathy works in narrative. The poster child is a real child whose real experiences are used to persuade others to care about his or her predicament. But the poster child’s narrative is overdetermined by the plea: “If you invest in this child, you invest in a narrative of hope, and possibly even triumph over adversity.” The child’s predicament must be seen as an adversity, and his or her life must be seen as unlivable. Efforts to “correct” this representation or to reappropriate it do not necessarily undermine or change the relationship of “easy empathy.” The problem is not the accuracy of representations but the relationships between listeners and tellers produced by those representations. In this book, I describe that problem, and efforts to address it, as the critique of empathy.

The critique of empathy is a place to begin to see narrative as a relationship between tellers and listeners and their cultural, political, and historical contexts. I begin with the critique of empathy in order to understand narrative in the context of the politics of memory. Narrative creates chronologies and invents origins, crystallized moments in the past made to appear more significant than ongoing life in the present. Narrative creates the person as a character who can stand for a larger human experience. Narrative invents testimony as truth, as if only the past can provide meaning for the present. I begin with the critique of empathy because it offers a way to observe what happens when stories travel from tellers who claim experiences as their own to tellers who claim stories as representative.

My focus in this book is on storytelling as communication, an approach built on research on narrative in sociolinguistics and folklore. Several different disciplines study narrative, and although their topics are similar, ranging from the formal properties of narrative to the politics of narrative, they share few conversations and there is little evidence that they are aware of each other’s work. In this study, I am primarily interested in how each of these fields

examines the way the personal narrative interrupts or subverts the dominant narrative. In literary scholarship, I find the work on what is called “trauma narrative” particularly helpful in its understanding of the ways that narratives about personal and historical trauma obligate both the listener (the person who “collected” the story) and the reader to be a witness to the account (Caruth, 1995). Trauma narratives interrupt the complacency and distance of historical narrative.

They obligate us to situate ourselves in personal relationship to the account. In other words, not only do they insist on the personal in terms of the personal experience of the person who suffered the trauma, but they also hold the witness accountable. Psychological discussion of narrative is also interested in interrupting dominant narrative to help individuals challenge what they accept out of awareness as “normal” (White, 1995). When narrative is described as a story line, the goal of therapy is to interrupt a patient’s pathological story line and replace it with a healthy one. The danger, of course, is that the dominant culture determines what counts as pathological and what counts as healthy. To some extent, this procedure reinforces, rather than interrupts, dominant narrative. At the same time, the therapeutic process of self-redefinition is at the heart of recategorizing and reshaping dominant cultural narratives. As individuals refuse their inherited narratives and replace them with revised understandings of the world, the world changes. As Arthur Frank argues, “In stories, the teller not only recovers her voice; she becomes a witness to the conditions that rob others of their voices. When any person recovers his voice, many people begin to speak through that story” (1995: xii).

Wherever sociolinguists and folklorists have been interested in the politics of narrative, they have helped to trace the conditions in which the process Frank describes occurs or is suppressed. Folklorists, interested in the ways that traditions are named, negotiated, invoked, and revised, have attended to the ways that personal narrative shapes collective cultural ideas. It is easy to oversimplify the categories of storytelling and attribute to each a social function. But we can easily make the mistake of attributing wisdom to traditional folktales, of blaming media appropriations of the personal for sensationalizing and scandalizing people’s personal traumas, or of imagining that personal stories always provide a way for persons to speak and break down the cultural barriers to understanding their experiences. More productively, by observing the travels of personal stories beyond the personal, beyond local contexts, we might recognize the multiple roles assigned to the personal.

In this book, I offer several different kinds of examples of how people construct realities through the stories they tell about their experiences. A chapter on what I call “small-world stories,” the coincidences of everyday life, looks at

the way in which coincidence or synchronicity is constructed in such stories and how these, sometimes trivial, accounts differ from stories about destiny and fate. Several chapters concern the construction of self. One chapter examines a collection of “junk mail” that uses personal stories to convince readers of the actuality and seriousness of particular social problems. The book continually moves back and forth between the ordinary stories told casually in conversation and the ways these stories can achieve larger-than-life status. Chapter 3 concerns the relation between personal stories and parables and looks at how stories in everyday life become allegorical. I suggest that we replace the idea of stories as fundamental or natural with the idea of stories as both ordinary and at the same time larger than life. This book is an examination of the strategies for negotiating the relationship between the ordinary and the allegorical.

All of the chapters in this book discuss instances of rejected and accepted stories. I refer to the accepted stories as tellable and the rejected ones as untellable. Although the stories told in everyday life are “personal” stories, because the teller either claims some personal knowledge of the events recounted or makes other claims to authority on the subject, the question of authority, in the sense of who is authorized to tell what, can always be challenged. In one sense, stories belong to the person who had the experience, but in another, stories are never unique. Instead, for a story to be understood at all, it must be recognizable as a shared experience. The recognizability of experience is evident in remarks such as “that happened to me, too,” as JoAnn Bromberg has observed.

In an examination of how political groups appropriate the same narratives for different purposes, I discuss the relationship between the story and the experience it reports. I ask, who owns the experience, and how does an individual’s experience come to represent the experiences of a group? In order to better understand how stories work and what the basic components are, I look at stories told by adolescent girls about fights. What all of those who promote the liberatory possibilities of personal narrative seem to be suggesting is that personal narrative puts the listener in a position to better understand others’ experiences. What I propose that we need, in order to understand both those claims and the failed promises of personal narrative, is a critique of empathy.

