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In the introduction to this volume, the editors present the unifying theme of the book: the articulation of a perspective on narrative that far from identifying coherence as a main characteristic, stresses fragmentation and multiplicity as equally important to narrative theory and analysis. The objective is to show that there is a great deal of instability and fragmentation in the forms and organization of tellings, and to expose the inherent dangers of such a conception in theoretical methodological terms. The editors argue that concentrating on coherence leads to the neglect of narratives and narrative phenomena that do not fit the canon, to a bias that leads researchers to look for coherence at all costs, and to a lack of attention to the voice of populations and individuals who have been traumatized or marginalized. The contributions develop this challenge against coherence-based narrative perspectives in three different subject areas: the arts, illness, and trauma in the political context.

In Chapter 2, Maria Medved and Jens Brockmeier argue against a direct connection between mental well-being and narrative coherence, as well as against the equation of the latter with the establishment of self identity. They illustrate how the study of autobiographical narratives based on these premises leads to particularly misleading conclusions in the case of individuals whose ability to produce coherent narratives has been impaired by neurological damage. The meaning and coherence of narratives told by those individuals can only be fully appreciated when taking into account their autobiographical history, the sociocultural context in which narratives and narrators are situated, and the intersubjective context in which the stories are told.

In Chapter 3, Lars Christer Hydén emphasizes that autobiographical stories, which are overwhelmingly studied from the point of view of coherence and referential content, should be analyzed as loci for identity work in interaction. Much of the chapter is devoted to discussing phenomena that have been at the center of recent linguistic literature on identity and storytelling: the distinction between narrators and characters, the use of evaluation to convey moral stance and to negotiate identity and performance strategies. An interesting point, which would have deserved greater development, is the observation that people whose memory and communicative capacities have been impaired, such as Alzheimer’s patients, still seem to be able to manage the interactional delivery of a story and to convey their evaluation of events, even when they seem to have lost the ability to reconstruct those events in a coherent fashion.

In Chapter 4, Tarja Aaltonen uses conversation analysis and cognitive narratology to analyze storytelling in interactions involving individuals whose
communicative ability is severely impaired. She argues that the concept of “mind-reading” provided by cognitive narratology can be used to describe the ways in which storytelling is accomplished in interactions between Aphasic patients and their interlocutors.

Maria Tamboukou devotes Chapter 5 to the analysis of paintings and letters by the Welsh artist Gwen John in order to argue against a vision of narrative as characterized by the use of linear time (Chronos) and of the self as constituted in unity and continuity. Central to her analysis is the Deleuzian concept of an event as something that is not accomplished but rather opens up possibilities of interpretation and creates occasions for new self-constructions. Tamboukou shows how Gwen John uses letter writing as an elusive sense-making occasion, and how she blurs and creates different selves and positions that cannot be collapsed into unity.

Chapter 6, by Linda Sandino, focuses on life stories told by applied artists. Sandino uses Ricoeur’s conception of identity as “a dialectic between sameness (idem) and change (ipse)” (87) to analyze artists’ life stories and their identity constructions as a project in fieri, a process which is never completed. Central to the analysis is also the idea that the constitution of identity happens through the confrontation of the artist with the object s/he produces and with the work of other artists.

The authors of Chapter 7, Vilma Hanninen and Anja Koshi-Jannes, are interested in the therapeutic function of narratives, particularly life-stories told by addicts. They explore the relationship between canonical stories that are chronologically organized, have a linear development, and reflect a coherent path, and mental health. They discuss the case of an addict whose life story is not chronologically organized, presents a variety of subject positions, and does not focus on events, but on inner states. The authors argue that such strategies may reflect this individual’s present inner struggles and act as a sort of re-orientation.

In Chapter 8, Alison Stern Perez, Yishai Tobin, and Shifra Sagi propose an analysis of narratives about terrorist attacks told by Israeli bus drivers who experienced them. The authors focus on pronouns encoding agency, distance, or involvement. They argue that such “broken” stories reflect the struggle of bus drivers between living up to a societal ideal of men as heroes who do everything in their power to cope with difficult situations, and their actual behaviors and feelings in circumstances in which their lives were threatened.

In Chapter 9, one of the best in the collection, Molly Andrews discusses the challenges that trauma narratives pose to narrative theorists. She argues that theories based on the principles that narratives lend coherence to our lives and that they have a healing power with respect to human suffering not only are unable to capture and explain the struggles of those who go through
terrible experiences, but also run the risk of destroying the narrators’ individuality by transforming them into symbols of collective experiences. In her view storytelling should not be seen as a tool for healing traumas or giving coherence to lives, but as a communicative act that gives the narrators an opportunity to share their experience with others who have lived similar ones and to realize that they are not alone.

In his excellent afterword, Mark Freeman summarizes the main themes of the collection, pointing both to contradictions and strengths in the contributions. He notes (and I agree with him on this point) that, even though the authors vow to show the inadequacies of a conception of narrative that rests on coherence, most of them ultimately seem to suggest that “behind the manifest in-coherence or ‘a-coherence’ of the narratives in question a latent coherence lurks” (167). He goes on to argue that narrative is not defined by chronology and linearity in the classical sense, but rather by an “after-the-factness-, a looking-backward, that somehow binds together, however loosely” (185) the heterogeneous elements that characterize human experience. In his view, this process is what lends stories a measure of coherence and identity.

The volume adds to a growing literature that makes the case for the interactionally and contextually grounded study of narrative and against the predominance of the canonical story. As noted by Freeman, not all the contributions are completely consistent with their objective of debunking the principles of narrative coherence and self-continuity. However, the general focus of the volume is welcome especially in the field of autobiography, which is still dominated by such traditional perspectives.

Anna De Fina


Maria Tamboukou’s *Nomadic Narratives, Visual Forces* explores the visual and textual archives associated with the career and life of the Welsh artist Gwen John (1876–1939). Tamboukou’s research interest in auto/biographical narratives, along with her project of writing a genealogy of women artists, resulted in further research related to John’s letters and paintings. In particular, Tamboukou focuses on John’s letters to the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) and her friend Ursula Tyrwhitt (1878–1966).

*Nomadic Narratives, Visual Forces* takes us on a journey to explore Gwen John not only as a talented artist, but furthermore, as a passionate women in