**Narrating Trauma: Judith Butler on**

**Narrative Coherence and the Politics of Self-Narration**

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Narrative coherence is considered as paramount within various dominant discourses, and is seen as empowering traumatised individuals by giving them more control over their lives. However, when subjected to closer scrutiny, the possibility of narrative coherence in life writing becomes open to critique on multiple levels. The article turns to the work of Judith Butler to show how her account of vulnerable subjectivity and relationality problematises the possibility of the subject’s giving a coherent narrative account of itself. Butler’s ideas can be seen as incompatible with or unable to explain the need for narrative coherence expressed by various trauma survivors. Rather than undermine any notion of narrative coherence, this article argues that Butler’s account of self-narration challenges the over-emphasis placed on a conception of self-narration based on mastery, unity and coherence. The article turns to the narratives of sexual trauma by Alice Sebold and Susan Brison to show how narrative coherence functions in legal and political contexts of testifying as a possibly hegemonic norm that circumscribes how trauma is narrated by facilitating certain forms of self-narration while silencing other forms of narrating oneself. The article concludes by arguing that a reading of Butler’s work on self-narration in relation to insights derived from trauma theory on the difficulties of narrating life after trauma enables a critical ethico-political analysis of hegemonic norms and practices that are currently operating on the activity of traumatic life writing.

Keywords: critique, Judith Butler, narrative coherence, relationality, self-narration, trauma

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Narrating one’s life is made all the more complicated in the aftermath of traumatic incidents. Trauma theorists refer to the urgent need felt by traumatised individuals to be able to narrate their life in a *coherent* way in order to counter the shattering effect of traumatic incidents and restore psychic stability. Trauma narratives are governed by discourses of psychological well-being, and particular forms of trauma narratives are privileged over others in form and in content. Narratives considered as ‘failed stories’ are side-lined while individuals unable to articulate their story are ignored. The exponential growth of ‘success stories’ of recovery and the boom in trauma memoirs attest to this (Gilmore 2001, 1-3). Narrative coherence is considered as paramount within mental health discourses, seen as empowering traumatised individuals by giving them more control over their own lives. This sense of control contributes to reinstating the subject as the master and sole author of its life narrative instead of continuing to suffer from the debilitating effects of trauma. This impulse toward control and coherence is understandable in the context of how trauma disempowers the individual by disabling one’s sense of agency. However, when subjected to closer scrutiny, the possibility of narrative coherence in life writing becomes open to critique.

Judith Butler’s account of subjectivity presents the human subject as fundamentally constituted through its relations to others (2004a). This relationality counters the subject’s autonomy and its ability to have full knowledge of itself, and who can authoritatively construct a narrative about oneself. Accepting that subjectivity is fundamentally constituted in a relational way challenges the pretension that the ability to give a coherent and stable account of oneself depends solely on oneself. This is because the self is not one’s own artifact but emerges and is negotiated – sometimes uneasily – through one’s engagement with others and social conditions beyond one’s choosing. Butler’s ideas can therefore be seen as incompatible or unable to explain the need for narrative coherence expressed by various trauma survivors. However, this article argues that rather than undermine any notion of self-narrative coherence, Butler’s account of self-narration challenges the over-emphasis placed on a conception of self-narration based on mastery, unity and coherence.

This article progresses by first explaining the relation between trauma and narrative in terms of a rupture. It is argued that dominant therapeutic discourses respond to this rupture by emphasising the importance of survivors’ restoration of mastery over one’s narrative, which is manifested through a recovery of narrative coherence. In the second part, I argue that Butler’s work on self-narration problematises the possibility of the subject’s giving a coherent narrative account of itself. Through Butler’s work, narrative coherence in self-narration and life writing is presented as philosophically problematic as it does not account for the extent to which the relational constitution of subjectivity can undermine confident self-coherence. Coherent self-narration is shown to be a privileged norm, and that such privileging is open to contestation and critique. In the third part of the article, I turn to written narratives of sexual trauma, namely by Alice Sebold and Susan Brison, to show how the norm of narrative coherence functions in legal and political contexts of testifying. The fourth part of the article consequently suggests that a critical consideration of narrative coherence shows that it is a possibly hegemonic norm that circumscribes how trauma is narrated by facilitating certain forms of self-narration while silencing other forms of narrating oneself. The article concludes by arguing that a reading of Butler’s work on self-narration in relation to insights derived from trauma theory on the difficulties of narrating life after trauma enables a critical ethico-political analysis of hegemonic norms and practices that are currently operating on the activity of traumatic life writing.

# Narrating Trauma

“I will always miss myself as I was” (Scherer 1992, 179, quoted in Brison 1999, 39), “I died in Vietnam” (Shay 1994, 180, quoted in Brison 1999, 39), “I died in Auschwitz, but no one knows it” (Delbo 1995, 267, quoted in Brison 1997, 12). These are some of the ways in which survivors describe themselves in the aftermath of trauma. If one considers the original medical meaning of the term ‘trauma’, it connotes a break, a laceration, or a shattering in the physical body. Although the term ‘trauma’ is now used more frequently in reference to the psychological realm, the meaning of trauma as something which destroys a presumed unity remains. Trauma is understood as that which ruptures and undoes the self, stripping the self of its familiar dwelling in the world, and reveals a painful fragmentation at the heart of subjectivity. One’s self and one’s relations to others are undone after trauma, leaving the survivor with the difficult task of recovering a sense of self, remaking one’s world, and rediscovering meaningful attachments to others. Judith Herman, author of the classic work *Trauma and Recovery*, describes trauma in this way:

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis. The damage to relational life is not a secondary effect of trauma (1992, 51).

One way in which the work of restoration happens is through narratives. It is known that narratives occupy a central role in how humans make sense of their selves, other selves, and the world (Sarbin 1986; Bruner 1987; Polkinghorne 1991;). One’s self-narrative is one of the things that collapses after trauma; indeed, trauma survivors are said to suffer from “narrative wreckage” (Frank 1995, 53-73; Crossley 2000, 56-57). Although the practice of narrating trauma is not a straightforward one, it is considered as a unilaterally positive one in the psychological sciences (Brison 1999, 50n.5; Jirek 2017). The survivor’s ability to narrate in words the traumatic episode, and to more or less integrate the episode within a life story, is seen as a sign of agency whereby the survivor can exercise some form of control and mastery over the traumatic episode.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The narrative reconstruction of the self after trauma is a topic that raises a number of multi-disciplinary questions, ranging from philosophical concerns to issues in the psychological sciences, sociology and literary or narrative theory.[[2]](#endnote-2) A critical analysis of the narration of trauma must necessarily draw on insights derived from these various fields of study. One must also consider the forms of narration that are treated more favourably or are more socially privileged. This privileging pertains, for example, to certain notions that are favoured, such as subjectivity defined in terms of autonomy and coherence. More critically, and this will be done in later sections, such an analysis identifies power relations that serve to fossilise these notions as hegemonic norms, and uncovers how these norms operate in broader political and legal contexts, and how the effects of these norms can be resisted.[[3]](#endnote-3)

# Judith Butler on Relationality and Self-Narration

Judith Butler proposes an account of subjectivity based on the notion of vulnerability. Vulnerability is the state of being open to injury, of being susceptible to being wounded. Although associated more with her post-2004 work, Butler wrote of linguistic vulnerability in an earlier text, *Excitable Speech* (1997). There, she refers to how humans are dependent upon linguistic categories that name subjects and bring them into being as socially intelligible agents. These speech acts exceed the individual, and point to a frame of reference that is beyond one’s grasp. Linguistic vulnerability exposes us to interpellations[[4]](#endnote-4) upon which one is dependent for social recognisability. Individuals are vulnerable to interpellations that name them irrespective of their choosing, and upon which they are dependent in order to make sense of themselves and the world; yet, in their perpetuation, these same interpellations can also be or become painful or intolerable.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler develops further the notion of vulnerability. Written in the wake of 9/11, she considers vulnerability as an inarguable dimension of life (2004a, 19). This dimension of life consists of one’s exposure to violence and one’s vulnerability to loss. Butler claims that by describing this inarguable dimension of life, she is not trying to describe a universally shared human condition. This is because such losses and violence are experienced differently in different locations and histories. However, she claims that the experience of loss, particularly the experience of losing somebody “we have had, that we have desired and loved”, seems to be a shareable experience in such a way that “[l]oss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all” (2004a, 20).[[5]](#endnote-5)

Butler’s discussion of vulnerability is framed in opposition to an account of political life that is built upon the presumption of autonomy. Instead of autonomous, Butler theorises subjectivity as fundamentally dependent. One is dependent upon others, and identity is constituted precisely through the relations upon which one is dependent. It is through the grief that follows a loss that one becomes increasingly aware of the way in which one is relationally constituted. When one loses another, it is not a matter of two clearly distinct agents who related together and now no longer do so. Rather, the subject is constituted through that attachment to another in such a way that when one loses another, one also loses a part of oneself (Butler 2004a, 22). Hence, one is not only done (that is, constituted) by one’s relations to others, but also undone by them: “One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage to for a while, but despite one’s best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel” (24). In its vulnerability, the subject is given over to a sociality that exceeds it, and to relations that it not always can choose: “we are from the start, and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own” (Butler 2004b, 22). Being given over in this way leaves us “vulnerable to [a] range of touch … that includes the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support for our lives, at the other” (23).

Butler’s account of subjectivity emphasises the ways in which one’s life is necessarily implicated in the lives of others. This entanglement is not always within one’s choosing, and marks the subject as vulnerable. This vulnerability troubles self-narration and exposes its limits since it counters the idea of an autonomous subject who has full knowledge of oneself, and who can authoritatively construct a narrative about oneself. As she writes, “I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must” (Butler 2004a, 23). Echoing Foucault’s statement, “discourse is not life; its time is not yours” (Foucault 1991, 72, quoted in Butler 2005, 36), Butler holds that the public nature of discourse interrupts the activity of giving an account of oneself in the same way that the formative character of norms and relations exceed the self, dispossessing the subject from its autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Butler, then, does not ascribe to the subject the power to dictate freely and completely one’s own story about who one is or how one came to be so: “this narrative will be disoriented by what is not mine, or mine alone. … The narrative authority of the “I” must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story” (Butler 2005, 37). Transparent self-knowledge becomes a complicated idea. It is not only the case that one does not know *enough* about oneself, as if moreknowledge would do the trick, but rather that full self-knowledge is structurally impossible: “The ‘I’ can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one’s own emergence as a subject who can know” (37). One cannot, therefore, simultaneously be a subject while ‘looking back’ and articulating one’s points of origin. In various instances in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler suggests that there is something in the process of offering a narrative account of oneself that corresponds to fiction. Referring to the possibility of self-narration in light of the impossibility of accounting for the conditions of the self’s emergence, she writes that “[n]arration is surely possible under such circumstances, but it is, as Thomas Keenan [1997] has pointed out [in *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics*], surely fabulous” (Butler 2005, 37). Furthermore, referring to the powerlessness of the self with regard to recovering its origins, Butler maintains that “[t]he irrecoverability of an original referent does not destroy narrative; it produces it ‘in a fictional direction,’ as Lacan would say” (37). In light of this, she writes, “I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know” (39). Later in the same text, Butler reiterates this point when she writes that the fact that “there is no final or adequate narrative reconstruction of the prehistory of the speaking ‘I’ does not mean we cannot narrate it; it only means that at the moment when we narrate we become speculative philosophers or fiction writers” (78).

At a first glance, then, one may say that theoretical elaborations that emphasise, if not promote, the opacity of the self to itself, such as Butler’s, do not really help to ease matters for individuals seeking narrative coherence in their lives. Unfair critics may argue that a negative portrayal of narrative coherence amounts to a dangerous postmodern flirtation with fragmentation or an insensitive celebration of non-closure. Michele Crossley, for example, equates the wariness expressed about narrative coherence with a celebration of shattered identities and incoherent self-narratives, and seems to concur that such a position “displays a radical insensitivity and is difficult to reconcile with the feelings of terror and pain that accompany the personal fragmentation often experienced by patients entering therapy” (2003, 290). Catharine MacKinnon too has harshly criticised the fancy for a fragmented self that she sees in the work of ‘postmodernists’ such as Butler and Rosi Braidotti; as she writes, “Postmodernists ought to have to confront the human pain of the ideas they think are so much fun” (2000, 707). The need for narrative coherence is expressed by various traumatised individuals seeking to rebuild their life after a traumatic incident, individuals who do not and cannot ‘afford’ to relish in any virtues that can be associated with a fragmented subjectivity. On this account, there is absolutely no positive potential seen in enduring incoherence; rather, incoherence is seen as entailing only painful repercussions.

One definitely must pay heed to the negative repercussions of a felt sense of incoherence that follows traumatic events. Although she sheds doubt over the possibility of constructing an authoritative account of oneself, thus contesting the merits of phenomenological and hermeneutical accounts of narrative selfhood, Butler does not deny the importance of giving a narrative account of oneself: “We can surely still tell our stories, and there will be many reasons to do precisely that” (2005, 37). These various reasons for which one can tell a story about oneself range from a narcissistic self-absorption to, more interestingly, a need. Sometimes, the possibility to give a coherent account of oneself is not a whimsical matter, but rather a matter of necessity, of need. Some people, such as traumatised individuals, may feel compelled to give an account of their traumatic experience precisely in order to reestablish the coherence and bearability of their lives.

Butler recognises that traumatised subjects might feel the need to coherently narrate one’s life. As she writes:

[L]earning to construct a narrative is a crucial practice, especially when discontinuous bits of experience remain dissociated from one another by virtue of traumatic conditions. And I do not mean to undervalue the importance of narrative work in the reconstruction of a life that otherwise suffers from fragmentation and discontinuity. The suffering that belongs to conditions of dissociation should not be underestimated (2005, 52).

Yet, despite this, Butler does not concede that the solution can be found in putting one’s faith in a conception of self-narration based on self-mastery, unity and coherence: “Conditions of hyper-mastery … are no more salutary than conditions of radical fragmentation” (52). This is because such a conception amounts to a denial of the fundamental fragmentation that results from the impingement on the subject by others and by social norms. Butler does not consider narrative incoherence as a failure of the fantastical subject who is in complete control over oneself, but as a mark of the precariousness of life whereby the subject is given over to a sociality that is beyond its grasp, and to social relations that tie it to others beyond its choosing. This vulnerable exposure, “[t]his fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away,” she writes (2004a, xii). Rather than a matter with which we must try to make do, in this same vulnerability, in its recognition and apprehension, lies an ethical potential: “perhaps, an ethics based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness about ourselves” (2005, 40-41).[[6]](#endnote-6)

It is this ethical potential that is lost in the tendency of strands of trauma therapy to rush toward narrative coherence. This tendency can be viewed critically as a prejudice toward narrative coherence within mental health discourses; an assumption, with normative implications, on the possibility of a unitary non-fragmented subject. Butler identifies this normative prejudice when she writes that one “can never provide the account of [one]self that both certain forms of morality and some models of mental health require, namely, that the self deliver itself in coherent narrative form” (2005, 79). She argues that a coherent and united narrative of oneself is also the aim of several strands of psychoanalytic thought and practice: “some have argued that the normative goal of psychoanalysis is to permit the client to tell a single and coherent story about herself that will satisfy the wish to know herself” (51). There are exceptions to this tendency; her use (2005) of other variations of psychoanalytic thinking, such as the work of Jean Laplanche, is an attempt to think of subjectivity through psychoanalysis without aiming toward unity and appropriation.

# Rape and the Politics of Self-Narration

The privileging of narrative coherence is not a tendency that happens solely in philosophical thinking. Narrative coherence functions as a norm that has an effect on how narratives are socially received and valued. A critical study of narrative coherence, then, shows how this norm manifests itself socially, and which of its operations can be politically contestable. This part of the article discusses written narratives of sexual violence survivors, namely by Alice Sebold and Susan Brison, that highlight this potentially problematic privileging of narrative coherence. Reading these examples alongside the critique of narrative coherence presented through Butler’s work opens up a critical space that considers the politics of self-narration with a view to examine and transform the forms that self-narration can take.

Tara Roeder remarks how, despite the fact that the relationship between trauma and storytelling is not ordinarily a linear one, “[r]ape victims who choose to make their stories public and/or seek redress from the justice system, however, will indeed find themselves under intense pressure to tell clear, concise, and coherent accounts of the violence they have undergone” (2015, 18). Such an analysis emphasises how traumatic self-narration is not merely a personal or individual matter because, as a dialogical activity, it is always already implicated within a socio-political context. Roeder considers the harmful effects of the institutional treatment of traumatic self-narration on victims, such as “the type of linear, cohesive narrative privileged by the legal system” (19). Discussing how narratives of rape are conducted in the legal sphere, she claims that the rape victim narrates her story over and over again: the average rape victim “gives her account of the crime 57 times to various officials before the case even lands in court” (Goldman, quoted in Roeder 2015, 19). While doing so, police, lawyers and other officials analyse the narrative for any inconsistencies, as well as read the narrative through norms surrounding rape discourse in the public sphere, such as victim-blaming and doubting. The veracity of the victim’s speech is established not just on the basis of the narrative (and the evidence, on occasions) but on how the narrative is presented and how its presentation fits within the set of cultural and legal expectations: “the rape victims are expected to perform in particular ways if they wish to be believed” (Roeder 2015, 21). Any shred of the narrative which seems not to hold water may lead to the dismissal of the victim’s narrative.

Roeder frames her analysis as a consideration of the ways in which traumatic rape testimony is institutionally regulated in order to fit a culturally sanctioned narrative. This cultural sanctioning includes the form that self-narration should take, and the conforming into the victim profile which, in the case of rape, consists of “scripts of guilt, silence, forgetting, and forgiveness often forced upon female victims of sexual violence” (21). Narrative coherence is one such preexisting schema that is valued by the legal institutions. As Andrew Taslitz (1999, 6, quoted in Roeder 2015, 22) writes, “the story of a case must be told in such a way as to satisfy a jury’s need for narrative coherence and fidelity.” This institutional and institutionalised pressure in favour of narrative coherence – *as if trauma can be so easily and conveniently amenable* – persists despite the theoretical difficulties that narrative coherence implies, let alone the well-documented difficulties that traumatised individuals face to meet these requirements of narrative coherence.

Alice Sebold ([1999] 2002, 174, quoted in Roeder 2015, 22) reflects upon this tension in *Lucky*, in which she presents her own account of how she was obliged to testify as a rape survivor while being aware of the institutional presuppositions and privileging surrounding traumatic testimony. She recounts how: “It was a shaky start to the most important story I would ever tell. I began a sentence only to trail off and begin again. And this wasn’t because I was unaware exactly what happened in the tunnel. It was saying the words out loud, knowing that it was *how* I said them that could win or lose the case.” This issue of *how* the narrative is presented highlights the performative dimension of testifying. It reveals that trauma narratives are adjudicated with criteria of success or failure, as if they are a performance or an examination. This performative dimension is foregrounded once again in the treatment of rape victims within contexts of cross-examination where rape victims are made all the more aware that narrative coherence is not just a matter pertaining to how they themselves relate to their traumatic incident, but a matter that will determine their credibility as witnesses. After testifying, a court bailiff remarked to Sebold that she was “the best rape witness I’ve ever seen on the stand” (Sebold [1999] 2002, 198), and Sebold is understandably relieved to hear so. Despite its accepted ordinariness and Sebold’s relief, this comment seems particularly in bad taste, and clearly brings out the rigid and undesirable criteria by which narratives are marked as a success or otherwise by the legal system. In another episode, Sebold recalls narrating her story to a friend, acknowledging the implicit operation of norms that allow for smoother reception of her narrative by listeners: “I told him everything I could bear to tell. I intended to tell him all the details but I couldn’t. I edited as I went, stopping at blind corners where I felt I might fall apart. *I kept the narrative linear*” ([1999] 2002, 79 [emphasis added]).

Susan Brison’s work provides a rich analysis of the narration of trauma. In her work *Aftermath* (2002), which is an account of her own experience of sexual trauma, Brison discusses the role of narratives in reconstructing a sense of self after the shattering effect of trauma. Brison (1999, 40) emphasises that, primarily, what trauma damages is one’s relational dwelling in the world: “When the trauma is of human origin and is intentionally inflicted, … it not only shatters one’s fundamental assumptions about the world and one’s safety in it, but also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity.” This characterisation goes some way to explain why several trauma survivors express the feeling of how their life and their self can never be the same way as before the traumatic episode. It also explains why trauma survivors feel the need for narrative coherence in order to restore a viable sense of self and self-narrative.

Brison’s work argues for a relational view of selfhood in light of how the self can be constructed and deconstructed through its exposure to a wider sociality: “The study of trauma, I suggest, provides support for a view of the self as fundamentally relational – vulnerable enough to be undone by violence and yet resilient enough to be reconstructed with the help of others” (1999, 40). This emphasis on relationality echoes Herman’s classic study of trauma and recovery. This is not an incidental point: on various occasions in *Aftermath*, Brison outlines her process of recovery through the recovery stages outlined by Herman (1992). For Herman, trauma ultimately is an experience that breaches one’s sense of being and persisting in the world in such a way that a human subject must reconnect successfully with others and with a wider social context if it hopes to recover from the shattering effects of trauma. As she writes: “The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (133).

This formulation of trauma in terms of relationality brings together insights that make it amenable the most to a comparison with Butler’s views. The works of Brison and Herman can be read alongside Butler’s work, and vice-versa, with fruitful outcomes. Brison’s and Herman’s emphasis on the relational constitution of subjectivity, and the relational damage that trauma brings with it converge with Butler’s work on how the self is relationally and vulnerably given over to a broader sociality outside its choosing. The works of Brison and Herman also seem to converge with Butler’s on the concerns on the impossibility of narrative coherence and control. Herman describes a “premature demand for certainty” (1992, 180)which lead therapists to discount or trivialise patients’ traumatic experiences by forcefully imposing a demand for coherent narratives from trauma victims. She argues that a degree of uncertainty will always persist regarding basic facts in the narrative, and that this narrative ‘incoherence’ – or, rather, narrative openness – is inescapable: “In the course of reconstruction, the story may change as missing pieces as recovered. … Thus, both patient and therapist must accept the fact that they do not have complete knowledge, and they must learn to live with ambiguity while exploring at a tolerable pace” (1992, 179-180). It is interesting to read this last quote through Butler’s ideas on self-narration, informed by her views on self-opacity and the ecstatic relationality which leaves us partially blind to ourselves and each other. Moreover, Brison (2002, 116) also argues that trauma recovery highlights the impossibility of self- and narrative coherence. Referring to her long and arduous process of recovery, she writes: “Recovery no longer seems like picking up the pieces of a shattered self (or fractured narrative). It’s facing the fact that there was never a coherent self (or story) there to begin with.” This formulation is quite untypical insofar as it distances itself from the therapeutic meta-narrative of restoring self-mastery and coherence that usually shapes narratives of trauma recovery.

Conversely, Brison’s and Herman’s work on traumatic self-narration can clarify some of Butler’s contentions on narrative coherence. Narratives by trauma survivors foreground the importance of narrative coherence, stability and control in order to recover a sense of agency and empowerment. Incoherence as such is disempowering and often painful. Brison (2002, 71), for example, argues that “[i]n order to recover, a trauma survivor needs to be able to establish greater control over traumatic memories and other intrusive symptoms of PTSD, recover a sense of mastery over her environment (within reasonable limits), and be reconnected with humanity.” In no way is this an admission of the powers of individualistic mastery. Brison is precise in her theorisation when she affirms that any degree of control one achieves over one’s environment, recovery, and self-narrative will always be within limits. Moreover, “[w]hether these achievements occur depends, as I have argued, on other people” (71). Lastly, what all works emphasise is that an exaggerated and unilateral emphasis on the coherence of one’s life narrative can function as a hegemonic norm that, on the individual level, does not really improve the survivor’s well-being, and on the social level, results in a privileging of a set of stories over others. This privileging can and must be contested on multiple levels, such as the philosophical, psychological, and socio-political levels.

# Narrative Coherence and Life Writing

In this section, the notion of narrative coherence is problematised by highlighting how it is a norm to which contestable normative characteristics are associated while being excessively foregrounded in philosophical accounts of subjectivity, and also ‘spills over’ to the psychological sciences, and wider social and legal contexts. This emphasis on narrative coherence, and its imposition on traumatised individuals can be seen as propagating a skewed understanding of subjectivity, whereby normality is associated with coherence, that is, with a life that can be narrated linearly, and with the subject as active author of one’s life.

The narrative psychologist[[7]](#endnote-7) Dan McAdams engages with the problems that emerge once one closely analyses the privileged role given to narrative coherence in psychological theories and therapies. He holds that there is no necessary connection between subjectivity, normativity and coherent life stories. Reflecting on the so-called ‘narrative turn’ in psychology, whereby theorists increasingly viewed therapy as a process of forming, reforming and revising life stories, McAdams observes that the underlying approach to narration holds that it “moves (ideally) in the direction of coherence” (2006, 110). In fact, he argues, most approaches to narrative in, for example, constructivist psychology focus on how “therapists and their clients co-construct new narratives to replace disorganized or incoherent stories of self” (110). In this way, narrative coherence is equated with ‘good’ and ‘healthy’ without the necessary critical evaluation of what constitutes coherence and of whether narrative coherence is necessarily beneficial. As put by a narrative psychologist and a narrative theorist respectively: “we have to have some sense of ourselves as a unified, coherent person” (Crossley 2000, 41); “Feminism needs coherent subjects” (Waugh 1992, 194, quoted in Crossley 2000, 39, 42).

Referring to attempts in a clinical setting to transform a narrative that is deemed incoherent into a coherent one, McAdams asks “[b]ut is coherence… always enough?” (117) Hence, although a coherent narrative may make more sense to a listener than an incoherent one, and may be better at “successfully integrat[ing] a life in time” (117), the therapist’s eagerness to impose coherence over an individual’s life narrative may amount to a “rush to coherence” (Josselson 2004, 125, quoted in McAdams 2006, 118). He suggests that “[l]ife is messier and more complex than the stories we tell about it” (118), indicating that the will to narrative coherence exhibits a false mastery and imposes a false unity over a narrative which demands a more subtle apprehension of the incoherence it manifests. The challenge, therefore, is to carefully differentiate between an incoherence that is actually hindering the individual’s functioning, and an incoherence that calls for attention and respect without being easily silenced, usually by pathologising it. McAdams suggests that a well-formed life narrative must necessarily attempt to give expression to a plurality of voices of the self. Contrastingly, life narratives that are made to fit “a single, dominant perspective, no matter how coherent they may seem to be, are too simplistic to be true; they fail to reflect lived experience” (119). At best, then, a life narrative that is deemed to be coherent may turn out to be disappointingly uninformative as it may not capture the intricacies that define lived experience. McAdams refers to theorists that adopt a broadly postmodern perspective to selfhood, who “argue that the modern self is bombarded with so many diverse stimuli and shifting demands that it simply cannot assume a coherent form” (120). He also refers to more forceful critics of narrative coherence, such as Peter Raggatt, who “asserts that the imposition of coherence upon modern life constitutes a hegemonic insult” (Raggatt 2006, cited in McAdams 2006, 120). McAdams maintains that closer analysis of self-narration reveals the:

[C]ultural underpinnings of narratives and *of the very concept of coherence itself*. … [A]ny consideration of narrative coherence must eventually come to terms with the characteristic assumptions regarding what kind of stories *can* and *should* be told in a given culture, what stories are understandable and valued” (2006, 123 [emphasis added]).

This “very concept of coherence itself” is analysed more closely and from a multi-disciplinary approach (beyond just the psychological sciences) in *Beyond Narrative Coherence* (Hyvärinen et al. 2010). In their introduction to the aptly-titled volume, the editors adopt a multi-disciplinary approach – from philosophy to linguistics to psychology to historiography – to critique and displace the paradigm within narrative studies that treats coherence as “a virtue…[,] the ultimate guarantor of the quality of narratives[,]… a norm for good and healthy life stories” (1). For them, this paradigm – what they call “the coherence paradigm” – is characterised by an understanding of a good narrative as one that progresses linearly, chronologically, and proceeds from a beginning to a middle to an end, thus implying closure. The function of a narrative according to this paradigm is to create coherence in experience, which is typically regarded as lacking form. This paradigm ascribes normative value to coherence by equating a coherent life narrative with a life that is lived in a more ethical way. Besides theoretically and methodologically challenging the paradigm of coherence, the editors seek to *ethically* challenge the coherence paradigm by showing how it “privileges middle-class conventionality and marginalizes the experiences of artistically creative as well as politically traumatized people” (2).

Narrative coherence should not be absolutely done away with. Its utility in particular contexts will persist; however, the important point being made is that there are several cases of narration “that do not fit into the received and dominant idea about narrative coherence,” and that they should not be made to “comply with the often implicit norms of narrative theory,” (2) themselves products of cultural and class norms. Due to the predominance of the coherence paradigm, some life narratives which do not lend themselves to easy coherence, including but not limited to trauma narratives, end up being narrated “in circumstances and settings that severely constrain the telling” (2). Such normative impositions on narration, especially when trauma narration is involved, amounts to an ethical disservice whereby the focus is placed on conformity with “preconceived narrative norms” (2), rather than listening to the actual stories. In the type of narration analysed in this article, the failure to listen to the narratives being presented by expecting traumatised individuals to perform according to the culturally-specific forms of narration at all costs makes the issue a politically contestable one. The will to narrative coherence is one of the ways in which medical and legal institutions make trauma narratives less hearable, or hearable only on their own terms, and that such a process diminishes the understanding of ethical and political responsibility. Narratives that are allegedly incoherent can offer a challenge or invitation “to listening in new and creative ways” (2). Rather than denouncing the utility of narrative coherence, the imperative question to be asked is whether narrative coherence *can* be a harmful phenomenon and, if so, how and in which contexts.

Moreover, narrative coherence has been used ideologically to legitimise certain narratives while excluding from the canon other narratives, by women or slaves, for example, that do not fit hegemonic narrative structures. The configuration of the coherent self implied by dominant discourses turns out to be “a cultural construction and an effect of gendered and racialized discourses and practices” (Hyvärinen et al. 2010, 7) that has been importantly contested by feminist and postcolonial criticisms. This shows how rather than an interest merely to displace the privileging of narrative coherence with narrative incoherence (which would simply replicate the exclusionary logic), what is being argued for is a widening of the parameters that regulate what constitutes a life narrative that can be accepted as such, that can be heard as such, and that can be responded to.[[8]](#endnote-8)

# Narrating Otherwise: The Critical Potential of Trauma Narratives

What critical potential, then, is enabled by such a critique of narrative coherence in trauma narratives? Are there, after all, any ways in which narratives of trauma can highlight the unsuitability or undesirability of norms that influence how trauma narratives are socially received, interpreted, and circulated? We more or less know what trauma disables, but can it enable anything? I must emphasise that I think that there is nothing intrinsically noble in suffering. Suffering does not raise the victim to a heightened moral standing; nor does suffering automatically make the victim an exemplary person. Ascribing to the victim a state of innocence or purity implies a moral economy that equates goodness with suffering, as if suffering cleanses. It is not a celebration of self-abnegation or an ethic of virtuous traumatisation which I wish to propose. What can be done with trauma? Such a question does not imply that trauma can be *useful*. There is no economy or utility to trauma; indeed, trauma is that which defies all such economy.

Trauma reveals a heightened vulnerable exposure to a wider sociality and to a constitutive relationality. The great challenge is how one can positively regard this exposure when that same sociality and relationality turn out to be traumatic. It is not at all obvious that traumatic incidents are a gateway to a better understanding of relationality, as if trauma is just what we need in order to improve our sense of solidarity and our political discourses. In fact, as argued, trauma destroys the relational bonds of sociality, forcing the individual to retreat in the shelter of an atomised subjectivity, and this is to be respected especially when trauma breaches one’s intimate existence (Edkins 2006). A trauma victim cannot be blamed for desiring a unified sense of self and a healthy degree of mastery and agency over the direction of one’s life. Trauma stands as a constant reminder that our bodily existence potentially exposes us to unwanted violence. In reaction to the breach of violence, it is perhaps easier to rush to restore the impenetrable subject of mastery, to react violently, or to perpetuate the logic of dominating others. However, traumatic violence need not be an argument against relationality. Violence is a hurtful breach of that relationality. But the philosophical, ethical and political challenge is to find, as Butler puts it, “one of the sources of nonviolence in the capacity to grieve, to stay with the unbearable loss without converting it into destruction,” (Butler 2014) or without quickly seeking to impose coherence in one’s self-narrative in the aftermath of violence suffered in order to restore the impression of an impenetrable autonomous subject. Following Butler, I want to ask what can happen if we “stay with” the trauma a bit longer, and ask what trauma can enable despite its nature to shatter and disconnect us. One possible response to this difficult question is that trauma *can* (though it might not) enable apprehension of how one is relationally constituted and dependent upon others who can both enrich one’s life and who can do it great harm. The vulnerable exposure and incoherence at the heart of subjectivity which an admittance of relationality brings with it is often negatively portrayed; yet, as Butler shows, a greater challenge is to think of this incoherence as “an ethical resource”, radicalising our sense of ethical subjectivity and responsibility (Butler 2005, 63).

Contemporary discourses strive to maintain the solidity of a meta-narrative of strong, coherent, unitary subjects. Yet, trauma narratives can occupy another space; they can subvert fantasies of mastery and resist psychological regimes of truth and power/knowledge. This apprehension may lead us to oppose the meta-narrative of a unified coherent pre-trauma self on one hand, and on the other, a broken, shattered post-trauma self that needs to be rebuilt. Trauma narratives, then, can have a critical function even in, or especially in, their supposed incoherence. The prime aim of presenting a relational understanding of trauma and its narration in this article is not to emphasise the extent to which trauma – or, indeed, our whole life – cannot be successfully narrated and that we can only be deluded in thinking that it can be. Rather, relational understandings of trauma reveal how human subjects are constituted in relation to their relations, to incidents, and to powerful discourses that regulate suffering. Certain trauma narratives and reflections on them can counter and defy these injunctions.

This latter point is not just of philosophical relevance. Narratives exist in social circulation. This includes the presence of an audience that receives, reiterates, and restructures narratives. Certain narratives of trauma can serve as subversive counternarratives (Alcoff and Gray 1993; Ewick and Silbey 1995; Roeder 2015). Narratives, including life narratives, exist in a public sphere in which the narratives can engage with and unsettle culturally dominant perceptions and practices. As Roeder writes: “The relentless cultural transmission of all stories of sexual assault – partial, fragmented, ‘imperfect’ as they may be – is one way to confront the reality of rape and shape our knowledge of its reality. Each story of rape varies in its particulars; there is no one narrative that can contain these explosive and singular moments of disruption. Yet, placed beside each other, these experiences come to mean in a culture in which rape has always been a shaping factor, and function as a reminder of the complex power associated with not only the telling, but the hearing, of such stories” (2015, 28).

Such analyses highlight how and the extent to which certain forms of trauma narratives – such as Susan Brison’s and Alice Sebold’s, as discussed above – serve as alternative testimonies that unsettle, with difficulty, the preexisting schemas that socially shape traumatic self-narration. This is only a critical potential, rather than a necessary actuality, which is being foregrounded in trauma narratives. This potential can be quickly quenched through the co-option of survivors’ narratives by, for example, the discourses of the psychological sciences or state apparata, which neutralise this critical potential. The potential of trauma narrations can sway to subversion as easily as it can be swayed toward normalisation.

# Conclusion

This article took as its starting point the need for narrative coherence felt by trauma survivors who, in response to the shattering power of trauma, seek to narrate their life in a coherent manner in order to retain agency and control over their life story. It was shown how the notion of narrative coherence is not just a neutral concern but is a possibly hegemonic norm instated and enforced through discourses of the psychological sciences that over-emphasise the therapeutic value of narrative coherence. This tendency toward coherence was critically analysed through the work of Judith Butler, who presents the activity of self-narration as a precarious endeavor fraught with difficulties and limits. Since individuals are relationally constituted, they do not have sole authority and authorship over their life narratives and, as such, a coherent, linear and masterful self-narrative is an impossibility. This does not imply that any concern with life writing is futile. Rather, Butler’s work enables a critical consideration of the norm of narrative coherence and its effect on notions of life writing. The article considered the trauma memoirs of Alice Sebold and Susan Brison both to highlight how traumatised individuals attempt to narratively account for their life after trauma, but also to show how life writing can function critically by foregrounding possibly hegemonic factors that are bearing on the activity of self-narration. Other recent work is consolidating the critique of an over-emphasis on narrative coherence in the study of self-narratives, and the conceptual tools derived from Butler’s work is being drawn upon to conduct such critical work (Kokanović and Flore 2017).

The article concluded by arguing that such an analysis of traumatic self-narration bears critical philosophical, ethical, and political results. *Philosophically*, trauma narratives present a challenge to rethink subjectivity in terms of relationality; trauma is a painful reminder how an individual is never solely in control over the direction of one’s life, and that one’s familiar being in the world is a precarious dwelling that can be easily undone. This philosophical challenge implies a further *ethical* concern. One can ask whether a critical space can be opened where trauma narratives are *heard* more (Stauffer 2015). Not in the quantitative sense of a proliferation of trauma narratives; rather, as Butler asks in *Precarious Life*, what are the frames that shape “*what we can hear*” (Butler 2004a, 5) when we hear, in this case, trauma narratives? Are we able to ethically apprehend the trauma, or are only the aspirations for mastery and resilience being heard, thereby silencing the critical potential that trauma can enable? Lastly, the article raised questions on what can be made, *politically*, of trauma narratives. The stories we tell about ourselves and, as shown in this article, the way trauma is spoken about, can sway stories to the hard grip of normalising and governmental power. Narratives, including life narratives, are amenable to hegemonic shaping. Trauma narratives can be, and often are, commodified, depoliticised, and homogenised (Edkins 2003, 20-56). Yet stories can also reveal the fallibility of power, its finitude, and can present new and creative opportunities. There exists a space where trauma narratives can function critically by revealing hegemonic norms that are influencing the intelligibility of subjects and stories. In this way, life writing can function as a practice of critique. Treating self-narration as a facet of what Michel Foucault calls the politics of ourselves, which he identified as “one of the main political problems … nowadays” (Foucault 2015, 76), situates life writing in a critical position that reflects on contemporary processes of subject-formation while uncovering practices and processes that are resulting in normalised self-presentations at the expense of other expressions.

1. A shorter version of this article was presented at the *Critical Theory in the Humanities: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler* conference in Amsterdam in April 2017. I would like to thank Aaron Aquilina, Keith Pisani, David Webb and the issue editors for generous and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Thanks also to Tara Roeder for encouraging remarks while finalising the article.

 Dori Laub, a psychiatrist and child survivor of the Holocaust, observes how in the extensive studies which he conducted as co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, he came to realise that “survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell*” (1995, 63). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In philosophy, various works have considered the extent to which the self is constituted narratively, along with the implications of this (MacIntyre 1981; Ricoeur [1983] 1984; Schechtman 1996; Benhabib 1999; Strawson 2004; Poltera 2010; Hutto 2011; Meyers 2014;). In the field of the psychological sciences, the role of narratives in the formation of subjectivity, as well as the role of story-telling in therapy, have been broadly discussed (Schafer 1980; Spence 1982; Epston and White 1990; McLeod 1997; Schiff 2013). Research in the social sciences has shifted the attention to the social character of narratives, and how narratives are differentially treated in a society (Frank 1995; Plummer 1995; Raoul et al. 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The use of notions such as ‘power relations’, ‘norms’ and ‘resistance’ throughout this article is inspired by Foucault’s ‘method’, which he outlines in *The Will to Knowledge* ([1976] 1978, 92-96): “It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization. … Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. … Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter. … Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations. … Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. … [T]here is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Butler (1997, 1-6; 24-28) for her discussion of Louis Althusser’s account of ‘interpellation’ and for her account of linguistic vulnerability. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Corporeal existence further marks vulnerability. The body is both the site of agency as well as that which exposes the individual to others and to potential injury. Bodily existence is a continual reminder of how vulnerable life is: “Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident” (Butler 2009, 25). The body is the site of illness, violence and debilitation. The body is also a social site – it marks the subject as “attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, [and] at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure” (Butler 2004a, 20). Thus, although typically associated with one’s private realm, the body as a social phenomenon has a public dimension: “my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life” (26). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For more on Butler’s meaning of ‘ethics’ and the ethical import of her thought, particularly since *Giving an Account of Oneself*, see Lloyd (2015), particularly the chapters by Moya Lloyd, Catherine Mills, Sara Rushing, and Birgit Schippers. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Schiff (2013) for an extended discussion of the so-called ‘narrative turn’ that began in literary criticism and spread to other disciplines, including psychology in the 1980s. For a discussion of the pre-1980s interest in narrative in psychology, see Polkinghorne (1988, 101-124). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The idea of narrative coherence is often traced to Aristotle, who regarded good tragedy as characterised by a beginning, middle and end (Hyvärinen et al. 2010, 2). It is not the point to discuss Aristotle’s poetics here. What is open to critique, however, is the transposition of aesthetic categories that were intended for drama to the sphere of judging life narratives, especially traumatic self-narration. Theorists such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) sustain Aristotle’s emphasis on the normative aspect of narrative coherence. In response to modern individualism and its resulting moral fragmentation, he suggests that regarding life as an evolving and coherent narrative will help in overcoming the modernist dilemma. His notion of narrative identity centres on unity and coherence, disavowing any trace of complexity, contradiction and undecidability which life entails (Hyvärinen et al. 2010, 4). My counter-position to views such as MacIntyre’s is that the exaggerated focus on narrative coherence itself, and the lack of acknowledgement of the complexity of human experience and the corresponding self-narratives, including their resistance to coherence, fuels the emphasis on individualism that, in turn, further impoverishes moral language and restricts one’s ability to respond ethically. A more suitable conception of narrative identity, such as Butler’s, takes heed of narrative incoherence and its possible virtues in order to seriously consider the role that narrative interdependence and relationality has in one’s life.

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