

When Narrative is Impossible: Difficult Knowledge, Storytelling, and Ethical Practice in Narrative Research and Pedagogy in Music Education

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Stories impel us to grapple with the humanity of another. Using story to recount experience, however, raises both challenges and questions. This paper explores the complexities that arise when narrative researchers attempt to render stories of trauma. I draw upon what Deborah Britzman (1998) calls “difficult knowledge” to explore what encounters with stories of trauma may produce, and I consider both the potential of narrative research and the pedagogical potential of both stories and music to facilitate wrestling with difficult knowledge. I grapple with two related questions: 1) What considerations should be taken into account to engage ethically in narrative research, particularly narratives that emanate from trauma or that include stories of trauma? and 2) What considerations should be taken into account when sharing stories of trauma as an educator? I then consider both the impossibility of representation within narrative in light of difficult knowledge, and further examine how Delbo’s (1995/2014) “useless knowledge” unsettles straightforward understandings of difficult knowledge in pedagogy and in research. Finally, I explore implications for researchers and educators, followed by an examination of a politics of refusal in telling, representing, or engaging with story.

Keywords: *music education, difficult knowledge, trauma, narrative research, useless knowledge*

Narrative inquiry provides a tool to understand experience. Encountering stories of lived experiences impels us to grapple with the humanity of another. Experience, however, sometimes remains elusive, particularly when it involves trauma. Individuals who have experienced trauma cannot necessarily narrate their experiences, as traumatic experiences sometimes remain at the level of the unconscious and may fail to integrate within an individual’s “general stream of experience” (Dewey 1934/2005 cited in Hess and Bradley 2020, 431). Moreover, narrating a traumatic experience may re-traumatize the teller, adding

further complications. Recounting experience, then, is often far from straightforward.

In this special issue on narrative in music education, I explore the complexities that occur when narrative researchers attempt to bring to light stories of trauma that contain what Britzman (1998) calls “difficult knowledge.” I begin with a brief exploration of narrative research and then characterize “difficult knowledge” (Britzman 1998) to explore what the encounter with difficult knowledge may produce. Subsequently, I consider the potential of narrative research to facilitate wrestling with difficult knowledge exposed in stories of trauma. I explore narrative research as a possible pedagogical tool for wrestling with the full humanity of individuals. I consider both the impossibility of representation within narrative research, given the manner in which difficult knowledge operates, as well as the way that Delbo’s (1995/2014) “useless knowledge” unsettles straightforward understandings of how we may employ difficult knowledge in pedagogy and in research. In the final section, I explore possible implications for researchers and educators, followed by an examination of the importance of a politics of refusal as a means to refuse to tell, represent, or otherwise engage with a story.

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) offer the following definition of narrative inquiry:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (375)

An earlier definition also emphasizes the understanding of experience:

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people’s lives, both individual and social. (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 20)

Inherently relational, narrative inquiry, then, focuses on experience as a phenomenon under examination. Clandinin and Connelly root their work on narrative inquiry in educational philosopher John Dewey’s theory of experience—specifically

his two criteria of experience, interaction and continuity. They define interaction as the sociality element of experience—the interaction with the physical and social world (Connelly and Clandinin 2006)—while continuity accounts for the ways in which a person moves forward from past experiences to present and future experiences (temporality) (Connelly and Clandinin 2006).

Traumatic experiences, however, often do not cohere easily as stories. Caruth (1996) writes that “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Survivors of trauma may have limited access to the original events and instead become hyper-attuned and reactive to situations, people, or circumstances that feel similar in some way to the trauma. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identify interaction as the sociality element of experience, yet traumatic experience may cause disruptions, harms, or deep wounds in interaction or may fundamentally change what interaction means to the person who lived through the traumatic experience. The element of temporality may also be ruptured. People who share stories of traumatic experiences do not necessarily offer straightforward accounts of a situation, and temporality does not definitively follow a past-present-future trajectory; individuals who have experienced trauma may find themselves repeating past traumas in the present, for example (Caruth 1995, 1996). Trauma then can fundamentally alter Dewey’s criteria of experience (Clandinin and Connelly 2006). Rooting narrative inquiry in Dewey’s theory of experience may not elucidate a clear trajectory for addressing trauma that emerges in research or pedagogy. While Dewey may have opened the door for traumatic experience to be present, his theory fails to account for the disordered nature of trauma—its often lack of coherence and its failure to conform to a chronological timeline (Hess and Bradley 2020).

What happens in narrative research when the story resists coherence? When the chronology is necessarily mixed up? What happens when a story of trauma cannot be easily expressed in research? What occurs when trauma influences content that is “missing or not logically developed” within stories told by research participants (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002, 332)? How do researchers and pedagogues work with the stories that include accounts of trauma in ways that do them justice? What ethics shape restorying traumatic experience? How do we tell a story that contains “difficult knowledge” (Britzman 1998)?

Narrative scholars adhere to strong ethical guidelines and have accounted for stories that may not cohere. Clandinin and Murphy (2009) assert:

We do agree that narrative texts need not cohere; in fact, the seduction of coherence—coherence in the narrative text itself, and the imposition of coherence by the researcher on his or her own experience and on those of the participants—is an aspect of narrative research to be wary of when producing our research texts. (600–601)

The writing of narrative research then need not always produce coherent stories. In fact, they note that researchers should be cautious if they feel drawn to make stories coherent. Clandinin et al. (2016) argue:

As part of a narrative conceptualization of experience, we say that people live and tell stories; that is, we understand people live out stories and tell stories of that living. Although we can make this sound like a linear process of living and then telling, the nature of experience is less clear, as tellings shape livings and livings shape tellings in iterative ways. (22)

Their acknowledgment that experience may not be linear and cohesive becomes important when considering what it might mean to render accounts of traumatic experience in narrative research. In fact, Webster and Mertova (2007) assert that narrative inquiry has the “capacity to deal with the issues of human centredness and complexity in a holistic and sensitive manner” (24). They identify a “critical event” in the life of an individual based on the impact it has on the storyteller (74). Such events cause change in that person’s life. They further assert that critical events may have a traumatic component (74). While they acknowledge the potential for negative critical events, they choose to focus on positive critical events in their volume. As such, they provide limited guidance for navigating stories of trauma in narrative inquiry.

Etherington (2003b) acknowledges the challenges of conducting a narrative inquiry that involves traumatic stories. Her edited volume offers a collection of stories of childhood trauma. She cites the difficulty in her introduction: “Making a coherent narrative out of experiences of childhood trauma is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks we can set ourselves and this is exactly what I set out to do through the creation of this book” (Etherington 2003a, 9). In discussing her contribution to the book in a chapter with her own story, she affirms:

I can only tell what is consciously known to me. As the reader you might discover some of what may remain unknown to me about my life through the language I use to tell my stories, just as the language used by other authors may have been

revealing in ways they did not know. Language shapes and reveals our experience (Walsh 1996). (Etherington 2003a, 18)

Trauma often remains elusive from consciousness, as Etherington notes here. While the ethical commitments of narrative research remain strong, they perhaps fail to account for participants who struggle to tell their stories, particularly stories of trauma. In this article, I consider the complexities of what may occur when stories contain difficult knowledge. I draw on scholarship that takes a psychoanalytic approach to education to offer a perspective on the complexity of both narrative research and the use of story in pedagogy.

Defining and Exploring “Difficult Knowledge”

“Difficult knowledge” (Britzman 1998) emerges from experiences of trauma. Stories can encompass difficult knowledge or representations of traumas. Difficult knowledge can present in multiple ways. First, the person who has experienced trauma holds difficult knowledge about their experience. Difficult knowledge may then manifest in the story that someone who is traumatized tells. Second, those who hear or read this story then will perhaps encounter difficult knowledge through its recounting, which may also elicit the difficult knowledge readers hold from their own past experiences of trauma.

Britzman raises questions about how difficult knowledge is represented, the complexity and challenge inherent in its representation in a curricular context, and the psychological dynamics that occur in the pedagogical encounter in the presence of such representations. Drawing upon Britzman (1998) and Garrett (2011), Lange and Young (2019) write: “difficult knowledge is engaging critically with both narratives of historical traumas such as genocide, slavery, and forms of social hatred and questions of equity, democracy and human rights” (20). Similar to research encounters with difficult knowledge, pedagogical encounters with difficult knowledge involve intense grappling—with trauma, with social breakdowns, with the nature of humanity, with challenging and sometimes contradictory emotions, and with resistance.

Difficult Knowledge and Trauma

Difficult knowledge, then, involves trauma—both the trauma embedded in the knowledge encountered and also potentially what Britzman (1998) calls “the war

within” (119) or the experiences that all individuals bring to their various encounters and that manifest psychologically. Encounters with stories, whether through pedagogical relationships, music derived from experiences of trauma, or through engagement with narratives or narrative research, potentially become encounters with trauma, depending on which stories are shared by the tellers and the perspectives of those who hear, receive, or grapple with those stories. Such encounters may be unpredictable and may unsettle long-held beliefs or assumptions. In some instances, learning “involves trauma, and ... education is the terrain of emotions that form and are formed by difficult knowledge” (Guthrie 2016, 428).

Engaging traumatic material pedagogically and through research risks having the traumatic event or narrative taken up in ways that perhaps defy pedagogical or researcher intentions. Moreover, the risk that someone’s pain may not disturb or unsettle others who encounter it (Britzman 2000, 38) may lead to hesitancy on the part of the person who has experienced the pain—the pedagogue, researcher, or participant—to share the story of trauma with others who may fail to understand or not be receptive to discomfort, unsettling, and grappling. This failure to understand may also occur when the experience represented in the narrative resonates too deeply with the listener’s or reader’s own pain. Britzman asserts:

To study the difficulty of others is actually to study how one comes to relate to the conditions of difficulty expressed, as opposed to somehow attempt to reacquire the felt experience of the other. To be receptive to the difficulties of the other is not the same as feeling another’s pain, itself impossible, because at first, when confronted with expressions of pain, one tries to attach by imagining how one would feel in similar conditions. This imaginary move, sometimes mistaken as empathy, is closer to the reenactment of “almost falling” and, hence, still within the confines of the narcissistic impulse to control and judge. (Britzman 2000, 38)

Encounters with difficult knowledge, whether in research or pedagogy, produce unpredictable possibilities. When attempting to “feel another’s pain,” one may perhaps fail to truly grapple with the pain, and indeed, the humanity of another.

Grappling with an Individuals’ Humanity

Engagement with difficult knowledge through story encourages wrestling with humanity while simultaneously troubling what seem to be uncomplicated theories of learning (Britzman 1998). How, as students, pedagogues, and researchers, do we begin to “understand” stories that emerge from genocide, hatred, aggression, and state-sanctioned violence? How do we wrestle with narratives when refusal to

understand how such atrocities have occurred is the only ethical possibility, or when understanding is obscene (Lanzmann 1995)? How do we nonetheless engage with knowledges that emerge from such traumas?

Sigmund Freud (1919/1918) identifies two dynamics of learning that may be useful when considering what the pedagogical encounter affords: *learning about* and *learning from*. Britzman (1998) notes:

Whereas learning about an event or experience focuses upon the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might even say, a detachment) between the learner and what is to be learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight. (Britzman 1998, 117 citing Freud 1919/1918, 173)

Unlike the distance possible when one *learns about*, *learning from* “requires the learner’s attachment to, and implication in, knowledge” (Britzman 1998, 117). When studying historical trauma and present issues of justice, which are often tied to stories of trauma, *learning from* positions learners as beginning to understand our own relationship to and implication in this difficult knowledge. “Learning from,” she writes, “demands both the patience with the incommensurability of understanding and an interest in tolerating the ways meaning becomes, for the learner, broken, and lost, exceeding the affirmations of rationality, consciousness, and consolation” (118). Making meaning from difficult knowledge must pass through the “incommensurability of understanding” and one’s own psychological “war within.”

The Inherent Resistance to Encountering Difficult Knowledge

Given the discomfort that encounters with difficult knowledge produce, resistance to difficult knowledge is extremely common (Britzman 1998, Pitt and Britzman 2003, Lange and Young 2019). Engaging with difficult knowledge can be challenging unto itself, but becomes further complicated for narrative researchers, readers, teachers, and students when it unlocks “the war within” (Britzman 1998, 119)—the psychological remnants of past experiences with trauma. Because grappling with difficult knowledge involves the intense encounter with both the Self and the Other, such encounters may force individuals to question long-held beliefs and ways of knowing. Pitt and Britzman (2003) write: “[Freud] began to understand resistance as a defense mounted by the ego so that the ego might continue to enjoy its carefully crafted and, in many ways, useful symptoms” (769). When encounters

with difficult knowledge unsettle previous ways of knowing and being, individuals may resist such knowledge in order to maintain previous schemas (or self-stories) for understanding the world. Holding firmly to one's "undisturbed present" (Britzman 1998, 118), learners may resist knowledge that refuses to assimilate to one's current ways of knowing. Such learning remains at the level of *learning about* and maintains distance between the learner and the difficult knowledge. Moreover, coming face to face with knowledge that contravenes one's way of knowing may provoke both resistance and a "working through" of resistance:

Freud's second order of learning—learning from difficult knowledge—suggests the psychic time of learning as one in which the confronted self vacillates, sometimes violently and sometimes passively, sometimes imperceptibly and sometimes shockingly, between resistance as symptom and the working through of resistance. (Britzman 1998, 118–19)

Stories of trauma, stories of difficult knowledge, are often stories of aggression. Britzman (1998) urges educators to "attend carefully to what the study of aggression might open" (119) in efforts to prompt a *learning from*. Not only, she observes, are encounters with aggression difficult for students, such experiences may also evoke for educators previous experiences that contain difficult knowledge. Educators, researchers, and students alike have a "war within" constituted from the psychological effects of our different experiences; encounters with the aggressions from the outside world may prompt complex responses in all participants in an educational setting. Educators and researchers alike must expect resistance and be aware of our own resistance as we encounter difficult knowledge.

I argue that encounters with difficult knowledge can indeed occur through research or pedagogy; in fact, they are often interwoven. In the remainder of this paper, I wrestle with two important and related questions: 1) What considerations should be taken into account to engage ethically in narrative research, particularly narratives that emanate from trauma or that include stories of trauma? and 2) What considerations should be taken into account to share stories of trauma as an educator? Both of these questions speak explicitly to ethical concerns that may emerge when engaging with difficult knowledge in any of the manifestations described above. I take up these questions both separately and as interwoven.

The Potential of Narrative Research: Grappling with Complexity and Difficult Knowledge

As a research methodology, narrative inquiry requires researchers to grapple with stories. To do so entails considering how the stories came to be, how the stories are linked to experience, and how the storytellers use the story to represent the meaning they are making from their own experiences. Subsequently, researchers must determine whether, how, and what of the narrative to make public in a research text. Narrative research holds the potential to communicate difficult knowledge, particularly when engaging stories of trauma and injustice. Social justice researchers in music education often seek to ensure that underrepresented voices enter the discourse (see Talbot 2018 for example), and narrative is one means of doing so. In fact, Barrett and Stauffer (2009a) note:

Within the narrative community, the desire to represent unheard and marginalised voices runs strong; however, in narrative inquiry, responsibility to the individuals participating demands more than a compensatory impulse, more than providing an opportunity for voices to be heard. (22)

While people with underrepresented voices may not necessarily have experienced trauma, accounting for those who have becomes important to unsettling dominant discourses in music education. Jeananne Nichols (2013), for example, offers Rie's story of a transgender student who deeply relied on her musical experiences during her transition. Rie was ultimately forced out of public education due to her difference. Her story holds difficult knowledge—knowledge that Nichols attempts to render so that music educators may come to understand some of the challenges and traumas faced by trans students. The 2013 article powerfully communicates the story of an underrepresented demographic in music education. In later writing, Nichols shares how she wrestled with ethics in the telling of Rie's story (Nichols 2016). She outlines some dilemmas of practice related to narrative research and clearly defines the distinction between researching *with* Rie versus *researching* Rie (444). Nichols further explains how she worried about Rie becoming the object of her gaze (444). The 2016 article offers a window into the ethical dilemmas of narrative research when stories involve difficult knowledge.

Latasha Thomas-Durrell's (2019) dissertation provides another example of narrative research engaging with difficult knowledge. Thomas-Durrell drew on her own experience as a Black, queer woman who had previously taught music in the

“Bible Belt” to wonder how similarly positioned music educators navigated their sexual identity at the intersection of race, religion, and geography. The title of her study, “Like a Double, Triple Hate,” described the multiple oppressions that one participant expressed. As a researcher, Thomas-Durrell had to grapple with and ultimately render difficult knowledge. A reading of her dissertation puts readers in a position to wrestle with the effects of, and their potential complicity in, multiple intersecting oppressions on three music educators and others who are similarly positioned. Upon engaging, readers may also be prompted to consider the nuances of resilience in the face of oppression.

Music educators, students, and scholars who encounter difficult knowledge in narrative accounts may be compelled to grapple with another’s humanity, with their pain. They may further experience discomfort, as such stories may unsettle long-held beliefs, epistemologies, and taken-for-granted knowledge, or resonate deeply with their own difficult experiences. Experiencing such discomfort may lead individuals to refuse to hear the story or staunchly defend their beliefs and ways of knowing. Conversely, individuals may embrace encounters with difficult knowledge, again dependent on their own particular backgrounds, prior experiences, and social or political beliefs.

These responses to narratives of trauma do not necessarily consider the conditions that shaped the narrative research or the research encounter. Why have particular voices been elevated? Have researchers employed what Britzman (2000) calls a “strategy of inciting identification” (29)? (Do researchers intend for readers to identify with the person in the story?) What larger agenda shapes the sharing of particular stories? How or in what ways do narrative inquirers consider what it might mean for the reader to encounter difficult knowledge in narrative research? Narrative research presents a profound opportunity to facilitate an encounter with the humanity of another—perhaps a voice not readily celebrated or acknowledged in music education. As a research methodology, narrative research can hold difficult knowledge and present a means to unsettle dominant narratives and prevailing epistemologies in music education. Clandinin (2009) observes the following about the narrative research shared in Barrett and Stauffer (2009b):

From reading across the narrative accounts, across the representations of the lives, I began to sense the dominant narrative of music education and to sense the possibilities that Barrett and Stauffer see for shifting the dominant narrative of music education. As I awakened to my own stories of music and the absence of

music education in my life, I wondered how many stories of music are silenced or kept secret as the dominant narrative shapes the landscape. (202)

Dominant narratives, such as the White, Eurocentric focus of postsecondary education and curriculum, may be unsettled with a narrative glimpse into the lives of individuals who resist such dominant structures. When narrative researchers put different voices forward, however, the conditions that shape both the engagement in the research as well as the research itself become important considerations in creating encounters that unsettle and provoke.

Difficult Knowledge as Pedagogical: Music, Story, and Listening

After researchers create narrative accounts that include difficult knowledge, encountering these experiences in written form affords opportunities for readers to grapple with these stories, the difficult knowledge inherent in them, and the difficult knowledge they may produce. In narratives, readers find lives represented in all of their complexity, difficulty, and pain. Stories of trauma can also come to readers in various forms and formats—in diaries, first-person accounts, musical works, and literary non-fiction. These different forms can hold difficult knowledge and present it in a way that the encounter with humanity becomes part of what the account does. Britzman's (1998) final chapter centers engagement with the diary of Anne Frank as an opportunity to grapple with difficult knowledge. As a single story that potentially represents the voices or stories of many, the pedagogical and curricular encounter with Anne Frank has the potential to unsettle both understandings about the world and ways of knowing. Britzman (2000) explores the work of mourning and engaging with experiences of profound loss in learning, such as that encountered in the Anne Frank diary. Britzman asks:

How might a psychoanalytically inflected theory of learning from the reception of difficult and traumatic events inform the ways teachers and students are participants in relation to understanding profound loss? Another dimension is more specific and involves an exploration of whether the idealization of any figure, as a strategy of inciting identification, can allow insight into the conditions that invoke the urge and weight of idealization, the psychological needs that animate identification and its limits, and the intimate work, indeed the difficulties, of confronting what it means in the learner's present to respond to the questions of loss the diary continues to pose. (Britzman 2000, 28–29)

The encounter with Anne Frank through her diary, with Rie through her story, or with the participants in Thomas-Durrell's dissertation through their narratives, requires further consideration, particularly when engaged in an education context. When pedagogues put forward a single story, what psychological dynamics are at play? When educators aim for identification with particular voices, as Britzman suggests above, which relations animate this effort? How can educators consider the conditions that shape the lifting of particular voices as well as reflect on what the encounter might mean for today's students? The encounter with Anne Frank, or any of the other narratives described above, is an encounter with difficult knowledge; however, such encounters do not produce consistent or predictable results, given the diversity of experiences that learners bring to each curricular opportunity. Staging an educational encounter with this type of material requires consideration of both the conditions behind the privileging of particular stories and the dynamics of interplay between the difficult knowledge and the students.

The use of Anne Frank's diary in pedagogy offers an opportunity to think about the ways that difficult knowledge may become pedagogical, including stories recounted in narrative research. Teacher educators, for example, may use Rie's story (Nichols 2013) to help preservice teachers wrestle with the experiences of a trans student in school in an effort to ensure that they will have thought through how they might support trans students before entering the classroom as practicing teachers. Rie's story, in this case, becomes a teaching tool that draws upon difficult knowledge to hopefully produce a welcoming school environment for trans students. Engaging with Thomas-Durrell's (2019) dissertation requires coming to recognize the complexities, oppressions, and barriers Black LGBTQ educators face when teaching in the Bible Belt region of the U.S. When educators wrestle with these narratives, these stories may compel them to consider both the way that oppression operates and the importance of considering intersectionality—or the intersecting identities that lead to multiple axes of oppression.¹ Stories that contain difficult knowledge may serve to help educators see oppression, and perhaps act to resist it, when it manifests similarly in the future. Such stories may encourage the *learning from* that Britzman (1998) describes (117–18).

Using narrative research pedagogically, however, may lead individuals to engage in what bell hooks (1992) calls “eating the Other.” The processes that become suspect in “eating the Other” include the commodification and consumption of the Other. Therefore, challenging commodification and consumption when sharing

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narrative accounts of people who have experienced oppression and trauma becomes an important ethical question. When stories shared contain difficult knowledge, critiquing how these stories are taken up by educator and student audiences can help challenge any exploitative practices related to storytelling, narrating, teaching, and researching. Educators must thus attend carefully to how they include such narrative accounts of trauma in their pedagogy.

Like narrative research and stories, music can communicate themes of trauma and difficult histories. Music, too, may offer an encounter with difficult knowledge, including opportunities to attend to silences in narratives—what remains unsaid or perhaps impossible to say. Acknowledging this potential, Britzman (1998) writes that “artists return to education difficult knowledge” (61). As an example, Teryl Dobbs (2013) writes about the difficult knowledge that audiences encounter when they engage with *Brundibár*—a children’s operetta by Hans Krása with a libretto by Adolf Hoffmeister that was performed by the children in Theresienstadt, a hybrid concentration camp and ghetto during the Holocaust. The operetta features children Aninka and Pipíček raised by a single mother. She is sick and needs milk, and the children work to raise money by singing in the marketplace. They encounter the evil organ grinder (Brundibár) and prevail over him with the help of children and animals. The theme of children triumphing over evil carried heavy symbolism at the time of the Holocaust, although the operetta does not explicitly name Hitler or the Third Reich. Dobbs argues that “experiencing the operetta allows us the possibility to figuratively recall the singing of those whom it is impossible to hear” (157). Many of the children who performed in Theresienstadt were murdered—their voices silenced. She names engagement with *Brundibár* as “an act of secondary witnessing” (158). The work calls on the listener to hear the silences—what is left unsaid in the storytelling. Music, in this case, demands a different kind of listening to content that comprises difficult knowledge. The storyline itself does not explicitly name the circumstances of the performers; rather, it is left to the audience to hear the real story through the symbolism. The operetta also serves as pedagogy; it teaches the well-worn dictum of “never again” through making audiences directly answerable to music that emerged from the trauma of Theresienstadt. These ideas are not communicated explicitly, but the work calls on audiences to listen deeply for the trauma in the silences. While *Brundibár* is a story of triumph over evil, the fact that very few of the original performers survived the Holocaust belies a different reality—one to which committed listeners must attend.

Drawing on Razack's (2007) work, however, Dobbs strongly critiques empathy as a goal for engagement with the difficult knowledge that *Brundibár* communicates:

Requesting students to empathize with those whose voices were assaultively silenced is profoundly troubling as imagining another's pain or trauma is impossible. What emerges is a simulacrum belonging only to the imaginer while simultaneously erasing the other. Empathy as such is psychically and ethically bankrupt, obliterating again those annihilated in the Shoah. Such practices continue the silencing of Brundibár's others, perpetuating their erasure. (Dobbs 2013, 163)

Engagement with difficult knowledge through music or with stories in narrative research then requires careful attention to ethics. Dobbs concludes:

As a site of resistance inviting us to consider complex approaches and receptions to it, Brundibár provides a space for its participants to interrogate their assumptions regarding ethical subjectivity and empathic attunement. Attention to both is required at learning's psychical level; engaging with Brundibár requires its participants to engage with the experiences of the other, construct their own meanings from those experiences, and interrogate their learning from suffering and injustice. (173)

She argues that when this attention to ethical subjectivity and empathic attunement occurs, then "Brundibár and, by extension, music education can become a transformative space that encourages silenced voices to sing, and a space where those voices are heard" (173).

Music, then, particularly music derived from experiences of trauma and that retell those stories, presents an opportunity to engage with difficult knowledge and traumatic material and to facilitate a different kind of deep, attentive listening. Like the diary of Anne Frank, *Brundibár* encourages an encounter with the traumatic past through story. While the operetta is not explicitly a narrative, engaging with *Brundibár* involves grappling with the stories of those in Theresienstadt and listening for those who can no longer speak (or sing). Yet like narrative, particularly narratives of trauma, *Brundibár* communicates a story far more complex than the plot of the operetta tells. It explicitly requires wrestling with the silences—the loss through murder of the majority of performers. When educators draw upon stories recounted in Anne Frank's diary, *Brundibár*, and narrative research such as Nichols' (2013) and Thomas-Durrell's (2019) studies to encourage engagement with difficult knowledge, students may come to grapple with the humanity of the people they encounter. Yet when doing so, attending to the dangers of empathy,

commodification, and consumption may help educators monitor such engagements for ethical challenges inherent in these stories.

Making Narrative Research Stutter: The Impossibility of Representation

In his book, *The Responsible Methodologist: Inquiry, Truth-Telling, and Social Justice*, Aaron Kuntz (2015) works to “make methodology ‘stutter’” (15)—to unsettle the certainty of methodology to further center issues of ethics. Significantly, Barrett and Stauffer (2009b) chose “troubling certainty” as the subtitle for their text on narrative inquiry. Kuntz raises ethical questions for research that trouble dominant research paradigms and urge the reconsideration of research practice. In accounting for difficult knowledge in narrative research, how might such ethical considerations make narrative methodology “stutter”? Can narrative truly hold and represent difficult knowledge? What might it mean to genuinely represent an experience? What is lost in the process of restorying someone’s experience? What happens when researchers feel compelled to shape the incoherent into a coherent form?

Participants in narrative research may hold back parts of their stories—perhaps for reasons of privacy, perhaps because they are capitulating to what they feel that the researcher wants to hear, or perhaps because aspects of their story are inaccessible even to their own consciousness (Caruth 1995, 1996). Individuals can rarely render traumatic experiences, for example, in a coherent storied form. Yet, narrative as a form of representation requires some degree of coherence.

Language, too, may miss much of what the participant recognizes as important in a particular experience. Even though narrative researchers continually circle back to participants to affirm that they have captured the essence of what was communicated, language still may not fully describe the nature of the experience. Pitt and Britzman (2003) observe:

This methodology offers a new tension to educational studies by bringing to bear on participant narratives the very problem of narrating experience and by asking what conditions or structures the narrative impulse. This linguistic turn in qualitative research is now known as “the crisis of representation” in that the adequacy of language to capture experience is considered an effect of discourse rather than a reflection of that experience. (756)

Can language adequately capture difficult knowledge? Is it possible to render experience with all of its complexities, sensations, and emotions into language? Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997) notes the limits of language to recount emotional data, dream data, sensual data, and response data. Is narrative in fact impossible when trauma or difficult knowledge is part of the story?

In a quest for ethical representation, Sean Powell (2020) affirms:

The search for authenticity is abandoned as the researcher lives in the uncomfortable knowing that voice can never speak a total, coherent truth. Participants cannot be essentialized as a representative of a group because they cannot (re)present themselves to others or themselves in a stable, historical manner. Rather than glossing over the messiness and complexity of trying to allow a coherent subject to speak for herself, we lean into this impossibility. (141)

What might it look like, then, to lean into this impossibility? The acknowledgment that representation remains an impossibility perhaps allows researchers to deeply consider the ethical questions that arise when stories, particularly stories of trauma or difficult knowledge, resist coherence.

Considering education and, indeed, research from a psychoanalytic perspective introduces additional complexities to this crisis of representation.

While a narrative is made from a specific context, the affective force of what precisely is represented in narrative may derive from other scenes and from unresolved psychical conflicts. This is the dynamic of transference where one makes sense of new situations through the imperatives of older conflicts. (Pitt and Britzman 2003, 759)

We all bring affective experiences to new situations based upon what we have previously experienced or encountered. This type of transference operates continually in human experience. Pitt and Britzman (2003) continue:

In this view, representation is a compromise, an attempt to ward off crisis, because constructions are made from an argument between *the wish for coherence and the anxiety over what coherence excludes* (Bass, 2001; Kristeva, 2000b; Little, 1990). All of these qualities suggest an interpretive paradox at the heart of psychoanalytic inquiry: interpretation makes narrative, but there is also something within narrative that resists its own interpretation. There can be no original moment in research that gives birth to interpretation even as we must use narratives as the force of interpretive research. (Pitt and Britzman 2003, 759, emphasis added)

Making narratives coherent, then, can fail to capture affective responses to experiences or the ineffable—what cannot be rendered in words. Interpretation begets narrative, but narrative itself stutters under the weight of affect and transference.

The psychoanalytic pervades all retelling. How individuals recount their experiences in interviews relates intimately to their relationships to previous and perhaps similar or even dissimilar experiences. Transference is a common human response and a way that individuals make sense of their worlds by drawing on the familiar. To capture a narrative moment, then, always already relates to what has come before, and interpretation may fail to account for the complexity of any experience rendered in narrative form.

Further complicating these matters, teaching and learning in or with narrative forms does not account for what Pitt and Britzman (2003) call “phantasies”² that shape the narration of experience

Learning is uncannily organized by repetition of past investments and conflicts—or, in short hand, new editions of old conflicts—projected onto present experiences, people, and events. Transference poses intimate problems for representing learning (Britzman and Pitt, 1996) because presentations of learning are still imbued with phantasies and are not yet representations. (Pitt and Britzman 2003, 761)

“If learning begins with efforts to sustain one’s continuity—through familiarity—the transference represents something of one’s unresolved conflicts that remain obscured until acknowledgement of the emotional experience of knowledge itself can be symbolized” (Pitt and Britzman 2003, 761). The recounting of narrative in narrative research requires coherence and continuity. Restorying experiences as shared by participants does not necessarily allow room for incoherence and discontinuity. Yet experience is often incoherent and discontinuous. The question then becomes how can researchers, as well as educators who choose to use narrative accounts in pedagogy, represent this incoherence.

This crisis of representation makes narrative methodology stutter (Kuntz 2015) and forces a reconsideration of research practice. If considering difficult knowledge and the impossibility, or at least partiality, of representation, then something in this impossibility or partiality urges grappling. A partial representation of a difficult story perhaps requires more attention, not less, so that audiences and readers can attend to the exclusions. Rather than dismissing narrative or narrative methodology as an impossibility, we might learn to read for the silences, the exclusions. What is left unsaid in the narrative as rendered? Where does the affect live? The emotion? The sensation? Following the possibilities that engagement with music presents, can we attune ourselves to listen, as Dobbs (2013) urges, for the silences as well as the sounds? Such deep and attentive listening may allow us

to grapple with the complexities of humanity as we consider what cannot be said, what cannot be represented.

Useless Knowledge

Charlotte Delbo's (1995/2014) concept of *useless knowledge* adds a further complication to this crisis of representation in narrative research and the use of story in pedagogy, particularly stories of trauma. Delbo was a French resistance fighter who survived Auschwitz. Delbo insisted that those who encounter the suffering of others must resist the temptation to redeem suffering—to understand it as valuable for some reason. She deems the knowledge gained by extreme suffering as “useless” or knowledge that cannot be put to use in life. The decision that there is nothing to be gained from extreme suffering can only be made by the person who has suffered and not an outsider. Jennifer Geddes (2003) and Sherene Razack (2004, 2007) have both taken up Delbo's (1995/2014) concept of useless knowledge. Extreme suffering is the type of difficult knowledge that devastates human beings. Razack (2004) notes, “No good can come of it and those who did not suffer cannot redeem themselves through coming to share this knowledge” (166). In other words, the human tendency when encountering the extreme suffering of another is to try to redeem it, to make it good for something (Geddes 2003, Razack 2004)—a lesson learned or a strength gained (learning about).

The problem for narrative research is three-fold: first, narrative researchers face a temptation to understand suffering as good for something; second, researchers may attempt to render an experience that is, in fact, impossible to understand; and third, researchers may ultimately co-opt the pain of someone else. Moreover, asking narrative research to hold difficult knowledge that participants themselves might deem as “useless” may reinscribe dominant power relations between researchers and participants and further marginalize participants' suffering through efforts to redeem it or make use of it. These issues also manifest in pedagogy, and I point to these pedagogical problems alongside concerns about ethical research practice below.

First, in working with participants to render a story of extreme suffering, researchers may be tempted to find use for a horrendous experience—a way to make it meaningful. Geddes (2003) insists: “Only the sufferer herself can make use of her own suffering or can deem the knowledge gained from suffering useful; an outsider doing so imposes meaning onto the suffering of another” (Geddes 2003, 111).

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Outsiders cannot decide that suffering is useful or useless. As a researcher, to redeem the suffering, or to find a use for it or a lesson from it, perhaps negates the extremity of the suffering experienced. What right has a researcher to deem suffering as an important experience for an individual—to give it a purpose when it had none? How does this temptation complicate the research process? The same danger occurs in pedagogy. Educators might ask themselves whether they seek to find a redemptive lesson from the suffering when they choose to share a story of trauma or oppression for pedagogical use. Are educators somehow redeeming the suffering for classroom use? While these questions remain difficult to answer, both researchers and pedagogues must sit with them when engaging with stories of trauma and narratives of extreme suffering that may encompass useless knowledge for the person at the center of the story or the teller.

Second, when individuals, whether researchers or readers or teachers or learners, encounter the extreme suffering of others, they perhaps remain unable to truly understand such experiences. Geddes notes, “[Delbo] uses all the power she has as a writer of spare and painful prose, and yet there is a gap between her experience of extreme suffering and our ability to understand that experience” (113). The experience of severe suffering cannot readily be understood. In fact, there is somewhat of an obscenity in understanding (Lanzmann 1995). Should individuals *understand* the experiences of extreme suffering? Claude Lanzmann, the director of the French film *Shoah*, spent 11 years making this documentary on the Holocaust. He writes:

It is enough to formulate the question in simplistic terms—Why have the Jews been killed?—for the question to reveal right away its obscenity. There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of Shoah. I clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude. This blindness was for me the vital condition of creation. (Lanzmann 1995, 204)

As narrative researchers attempt to make extreme suffering visible, perhaps the field needs to consider that a project that targets understanding is both impossible and unethical. If readers come to understand extreme suffering, we may come to rationalize the purpose behind the imposition of such suffering. Not understanding such rationales for the imposition of suffering becomes imperative to ethical engagement with the pain of those who suffered. Pedagogues, too, might recognize the obscenity of understanding extreme suffering and attend to the tendency to

rationalize the purpose rather than grapple with the trauma and pain. Allowing a gap between the story recounted and the students' engagement with it perhaps allows students to recognize the impossibility of truly understanding extreme suffering and to draw closer to difficult knowledge found both in the narrative and in themselves.

Third, researchers who seek to render suffering may ultimately co-opt the pain of participants—what Razack (2007) calls “stealing the pain of Others.” Geddes (2003) writes:

As Emmanuel Lévinas (1998) notes, the only suffering we can make use of is of our own suffering; to make use of someone else's suffering is to co-opt that suffering for one's own purposes and to fail to respond to the sufferer. (111)

To continually center the question of co-optation, as researchers, requires a deep look at our motivations for sharing stories, particularly those of extreme suffering. Researchers participate in the production of knowledge. Narrative scholars aim to illuminate particular moments and instances in the lives of individuals, which contributes to knowledge about particular people in particular situations. Questioning the motivation for this knowledge production turns the gaze back on the researcher, to consider whether an element of voyeurism is at play in sharing the pain of Others. Are researchers engaging in “the pleasure of flinching?” (Razack 2007, 389 citing Sontag 2003). As an example, Razack (2004) distinguishes powerfully between the pain of the peacekeepers during The Somalia Affair (the beating to death of a Somali youth by Canadian troops in Somalia) and the pain of Somalis. She notes that onlookers to a traumatic experience “[want] to weep and to collectively remember but [do] not [want] to probe too deeply into the difference between looking on and direct suffering” (166). In rendering in narrative form the difficult knowledge of those who have suffered, researchers have a responsibility to resist co-opting Others' suffering. Researchers must also question how such sharing of narrative produces their own subjectivity. How, in other words, do researchers perform themselves when sharing stories of extreme suffering? Do researchers understand themselves as benevolent, while maintaining distance from study participants? Pedagogues, too, must examine these questions and call into question their motivations to share stories of trauma and extreme pain. In sharing these narrative accounts, do educators promote the “eating of the Other” that hooks (1992) cautions against? Challenging any commodification or consumption

alongside the question of co-optation becomes important in remaining critical of the motives behind sharing traumatic stories with students.

The matter of co-optation raises a further question in related to narrative research and its role in promotion of faculty within the academy. Research, as knowledge production,³ encompasses the main requirement for promotion for many academics. In rendering the pain of Others in narrative research, our motivation for sharing and, indeed, publishing this research becomes suspect. As researchers, do we share stories because the stories need to be heard or because *we personally* need them to be heard for the purposes of tenure and promotion?

Delbo's concept of *useless knowledge* raises these and other questions for narrative researchers and perhaps for all scholars who choose to work with those who have experienced trauma. Challenging researchers' personal motivations, and what producing narrative accounts of pain does for individuals' own subjectivities, must remain continual questions throughout the research process. Recognizing the impossibility of and perhaps the lack of ethics in understanding a story of suffering must be an important consideration. Ultimately, researchers must ask: by recounting a story of pain, are researchers, in fact, attempting to redeem suffering or give it use? These same questions apply to educators as well. When choosing to share traumatic stories, educators must remain critical of their motives and question their own subjectivity in relation to the content.

Implications for Narrative Researchers

Narrative researchers may be called at times to represent difficult knowledge through their work. The very nature of narrative research involves recounting human stories and grappling with understanding human experience through those stories. As such, there is potential within the medium of narrative research to urge audiences to wrestle with the humanity of another. Given the impossibility of fully recounting a human story in narrative alongside the complexities that Delbo's concept of useless knowledge introduces, researchers attending to stories of trauma and difficult knowledge in their work must be extremely mindful of ethical obligations and considerations that extend far beyond the ethics required by institutional ethical review boards, which still largely operate in medical science and "human subjects" models.

Following the work of Teryl Dobbs (2013), narrative researchers have an obligation to listen for and honor silences. Dobbs calls upon audiences of *Brundibár*

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to listen for the silenced voices. Researchers know that many different factors contribute to the ways that people tell stories of their experiences and what they choose to (or not to) share. Listening for those silences and acknowledging the already always partiality of narrative research perhaps becomes an important first step. Narrative research, and indeed all research, is always partial. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) likewise encourage readers to become “as alert to the stories not told as to those that are” (10). Recognizing the partiality of research is perhaps a way to acknowledge the silences. To listen in the way that Dobbs requests also requires attending to absences and to those who may no longer be present to share their story.

Beyond listening deliberately for silences, researchers can also attend to their own erasures. In recounting the story, what do researchers choose to leave out? Recounting difficult knowledge coherently in storied form, as noted, often becomes quite complicated when it emerges from trauma and the partiality at play when participants have limited access to their own experiences. When researchers seek to render a story coherently, they can purposefully attend to how they engage in the telling. What details are cut away because of the story’s messiness? Can the messiness be maintained? What is lost in the retelling for research purposes? Can researchers collectively make a decision to stop tidying away the truths and incongruities that disrupt a narrative arc—what Connelly and Clandinin (1990) call “smoothing”?

Narrative researchers can also practice listening carefully and actively resisting the urge to redeem suffering. Researchers do not need to make suffering “good for something.” Instead, they might consider what it might mean to listen and hold space for the fact that the experience shared through a participant’s story may be, for the speaker, “useless knowledge.” Razack (2004) writes, “As outsiders, Delbo’s writings tell us that we have an obligation to listen to those who have suffered, resisting the temptation to redeem suffering” (166). Instead of giving in to the temptation to find use for the suffering experienced, researchers can think about what it might mean to keep the recounted experience at the level of grappling. Rather than redeeming or lending coherence to a story that recounts difficult knowledge, researchers can think about what it means to continue to grapple with the humanity of the person sharing their experience while simultaneously thinking about what it might mean to do the same in writing for readers.

Ultimately, researchers can learn to recognize their limitations when it comes to understanding difficult knowledge and further notice the times where understanding may actually not be the ethical path—when the urge to understand slips toward rationalizing the pain experienced instead of seeing and hearing the Other.

By acknowledging the limitations to our knowledge of suffering due to the fact that we are outsiders, by recognizing our temptations to “redeem” suffering—to find something good that can come out of it—and by listening to those who have suffered evil in a way that reshapes our preconceptions, we begin to “see” in the way that Delbo strove to make us see. (Geddes 2003, 113)

Delbo (1995/2014) strove to make her experience felt—to help those of us who were not in Auschwitz understand what that experience might have meant. When researchers recognize their limitations as outsiders to difficult knowledge and suffering, they can center their limitations and purposefully consider what such limitations may stop them from seeing.

In addressing the implications of what it means to do narrative research, researchers can keep these considerations at the forefront of their work. The difficulties, impossibilities, and challenges that rendering difficult knowledge as narrative brings does not mean shying away from research and from stories of trauma. Rather, researchers can go into the work with the full recognition of all of these possibilities and can further acknowledge them within the text. They can make room for silences and erasures and point to them, knowing that even then, they will not find them all. Instead of presenting a story as coherent, researchers can allow for the incoherence and inconsistency that is human experience and leave narratives rife with contradictions. These contradictions, incoherences, and inconsistencies might help us all better understand human experiences—particularly difficult ones.

Implications for Pedagogy

Shifting the gaze from research to pedagogy produces some of the same concerns, but also some distinct considerations. Pedagogues who choose to have students engage with narrative accounts that contain difficult knowledge must first strongly critique their motivations for doing so. Educators must wrestle with their choice to include narrative accounts that encompass stories of trauma and difficult knowledge, as sharing such stories brings the power relations embedded in this move into stark relief. Moreover, using these stories with students may provoke

the “war within” (Britzman 1998, 119)—students’ own experiences of trauma. This move is also fraught with power. Keeping power at the forefront of considerations about difficult knowledge becomes important to examining educators’ motivations for sharing and further encouraging accountability to the story and the person behind the story.

Second, keeping in mind Razack’s (2007) critique of stealing the pain of Others remains an important consideration for the classroom. Razack’s argument allows educators to challenge whether they are co-opting pain for classroom use. hooks (1992) cautions against the practice of “eating the Other,” which means that including difficult knowledge in pedagogy further requires attending to any tendencies to commodify trauma for the sake of dominant groups or consuming the stories in a way that reinforces dominant power relations. Avoiding these tendencies remains challenging when choosing to use stories of trauma in pedagogy; educators might work to continue underscoring the humanity of the person at the center of the story and encourage students to engage with their humanity rather than considering the story as an object to be consumed for the “pleasure of flinching” (Razack 2007, 389 citing Sontag 2003). Pedagogues may again highlight the distinction between *learning about* and *learning from* and emphasize the latter (Britzman 1998, 117–18), thus implicating ourselves in the pain or oppression inflicted.

Third, Delbo’s (1995/2014) challenge about the temptation to redeem suffering also becomes important for educators who choose to include stories of trauma in their pedagogy. Teachers can challenge whether they are making a lesson out of suffering (learning about) or allowing the story to remain at the level of grappling (learning from). This point becomes particularly complex for educators, as the tendency is often to want to *learn about* something from pain. As noted earlier, engaging Rie’s story (Nichols 2013) with preservice teachers, for example, may lead to better outcomes for future trans students. Wrestling with Thomas-Durrell’s (2019) work might offer students a deeper understanding of the complexity of intersectionality and the way that different oppressions compound. In some respects, that practice involves redeeming suffering—making it good for something. These outcomes, however, perhaps result in better futures when the students who engage with these stories encounter individuals who are similarly positioned in the future and act differently than they might have prior to grappling with the narrative account. Grappling is crucial. The likelihood of acting differently occurs, I

suggest, when students have spent time wrestling with the pain and trauma they encounter through story (learning from). Perhaps by keeping Delbo's (1995/2014) consideration in mind, teachers might ensure that they do not move quickly to a message, but rather spend considerable time with the person's pain.

Fourth, listening for silences is as important in pedagogy as it is in research. Educators might encourage students to listen for absences in the stories they encounter—what is not said, what is left out. Considering the challenges that narrative researchers may have in rendering difficult knowledge, assuming exclusions in any story encountered becomes crucial to understanding the very impossibility of understanding. For example, to engage *Brundibár* in pedagogy requires grappling with voices who can no longer speak or sing their stories. Honoring these absences in stories allows students to recognize the harm enacted.

Questions and challenges for pedagogues also relate to power. Tremendous power is embedded in sharing stories of Others' pain and trauma. Teachers might be mindful of their own positionality in relation to the person in the story. If a teacher is a member of a dominant group while the person at the center of the story is minoritized, educators can ask themselves if they are reinscribing dominant power relations by sharing the story. Questions of stealing pain, commodification, co-optation, and consumption all relate to power, so challenging motivation in sharing the story becomes crucial. While it may be difficult to mitigate the power relations present, teachers can interrogate these dynamics with students to challenge any oppressive possibilities that may emerge.

Implications for Research Participants, Readers, and Researchers: The Right to Refuse

Ultimately, researchers must consider the place of refusal among participants, readers, and for themselves. When difficult or useless knowledge is at stake, refusal becomes crucial. Participants must have the ability to refuse to share particular stories. Readers, too, may need to refuse to encounter stories for varying reasons. Researchers may also feel they are not the right person to engage and work with participants who choose to share particular stories. Validating this right to refusal across different identities and roles can become part of researchers' process.

Participants' Right to Refuse

First, participants have the right to refuse to share a story. Brené Brown, a researcher in social work who researches courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy, insists that people share their stories only with those individuals who have earned the right to hear them (Brown 2010, 2012). As potential research participants consider whether to share their stories, participants can ask themselves about the presence of trust and commitment on the part of the researcher. They can make trust and significant commitment a minimum requirement for engagement with a researcher. Participants can also assess whether the researcher is devoting the time necessary to develop a relationship.

Questions of reciprocity become important in research. What might participants gain from sharing their stories? Will having their stories rendered in research form align with their agenda for recounting their experiences? If not, what can be negotiated between researchers and participants so that participants feel a sense of reciprocity and mutual respect? Participants may discover their agenda for the research during the research process itself, which makes fostering a significant relationship between participants and researchers extremely important.

When it comes to stories that contain difficult or useless knowledge, recognizing that the responsibility for sharing experiences of trauma or oppression—and the difficult knowledge inherent in them—does not lie with those who have experienced these traumas refocuses accountability onto dominant groups. Dominant groups or those who have *not* experienced particular traumas or oppressions have a responsibility to educate themselves about experiences beyond the scope of their own lives. They have the obligation to grapple with the difficult knowledge embedded in trauma and oppression, whether historical or contemporary, and examine their complicity therein. Individuals can learn from different oppressions and traumas that have occurred both historically and presently without the particulars of individuals' stories. As researchers, when we do the work to contextualize trauma and oppression for ourselves without asking for education from individuals who have firsthand experience of such traumas, we make ourselves aware of difficult knowledge and simultaneously honor participants' right to refuse engagement.

The Reader's Right to Refuse

Readers, or audiences (when narratives are music performances) must also be able to refuse to engage with a story without having to provide a reason. While I have

encouraged the practice of grappling with pain and sitting with discomfort throughout this article, there is a line between discomfort and what could potentially be a traumatic experience. Preserving the reader's right to refuse becomes important if engaging with a story may be traumatic. In her work creating a play about land mines, Julie Salverson made the right to refuse the story essential to the endeavor:

When I accepted the Red Cross commission to meet and in some way pass on the story of land mines, I decided that this matter of the right to refuse story was critical. Deborah Britzman reminds us that when education engages with the right of refusal, what gets opened up is the territory of psychic trauma and the internal conflicts the listener brings to testimony (1998, 117). (Salverson 2000, 62)

Individuals may refuse a story because of the way that it resonates with their internal conflicts (Britzman 1998, 2000). Memory of traumatic experiences is complex; while individuals sometimes may be able to access traumatic memories, at other times those memories may be inaccessible (Caruth 1995). Even, however, when memories are impossible to fully access, they may affect behavior, including the avoidance of stories that resonate with or disrupt one's own traumatic experiences. Honoring individuals' right to refuse to engage with the story recognizes and validates their histories.

Feeling pain, or refusing to recognize the pain of others, may be closer to trauma and to the incapacity to make sense of experience than it is to the complex question of making a relation to others by acknowledging or witnessing the incommensurability of pain. (Britzman 2000, 39)

When we ask readers to engage with difficult knowledge, recognizing all that they bring to the encounter may help researchers understand why individuals might refuse to engage. Accounting for this "war within" (Britzman 1998) makes clear why refusal may be important at times.

Refusal becomes complex, however, when the difficult knowledge in fact has emerged from trauma. The refusal of difficult knowledge may become "painful to tolerate when the subjects studied are genocide, ethnic hatred, and the experiences of despair and helplessness" (Britzman 1998, 118). Balancing the needs of the individual who may need to protect herself from her own traumatic past with the need to know histories of trauma, hatred, and genocide may make refusal difficult to bear. Salverson (2000) notes, however, as readers or audiences work through their own complex and traumatic histories in encounters with testimony, that

resistance, defensiveness, and anxiety may be “signs of potential rather than evidence of pathology” (72). When researchers or educators encounter the refusal of the stories they present, we might consider these refusals as both a means of protection, as well as a beginning of the process of “working through” and respect any individual’s right to refuse. Resistance may in fact be hopeful and productive.

Researchers Refusing to Represent a Story

Researchers may also refuse to represent a story. Refusal for a researcher becomes complex because in order to refuse, an individual must have offered a story. At times, however, the positionality of the researcher in relation to the participant may feel unbalanced in terms of power. If the power dynamic feels drastically asymmetrical, a researcher might feel ill-equipped to render a story in a way that does it justice. At such times, it may be appropriate to work alongside the participant to help them find a vehicle to share their story in a way that empowers. Ideally, the research relationship involves “living alongside” (Clandinin et al. 2006). Barrett and Stauffer (2009a) define such engagement as “resonant work” that is “respectful, responsible, rigorous, and resilient” (20). Each of these elements centers the relationship with participants. If researchers find that enacting the research in this way will be impossible due to power asymmetries, refusal may be appropriate.

Second, the “war within” that Britzman (1998) describes when encountering difficult knowledge also applies to researchers doing narrative work. Clandinin et al. (2016) model the way the researcher’s own storied life becomes enmeshed in the research—the researcher’s own livings, tellings, retellings, and relivings (15, citing Clandinin and Connelly 2000, 20). Particular stories may tap into our own anxieties and traumatic pasts in ways that are difficult to set aside for the sake of the research. Honoring one’s personal resistance to particular stories may become important for taking care of ourselves. In such cases, researchers can seek professional support for their needs as well as ensure support for their would-be participants. Collectively deciding a way forward with any needed professionals may be appropriate in these instances.

Third, researchers, upon recognizing the temptation and habit to redeem suffering or make it “good for something,” may also refuse to share a story if they feel external pressure to somehow find a lesson in suffering, whether that pressure comes from a funder or from another source. Britzman (1998) notes: “The

disavowal, or the refusal to engage a traumatic perception of helplessness and loss, often pushes educators to the opposite spectrum of affect: the focus on hope and courage as the adequate lesson to be made from difficult knowledge” (119). Bar-On Cohen (2011), for example, recounts a situation in which Holocaust survivors were asked to shape their stories into a narrative compatible with “educational needs” (261). If a researcher feels pressure to render a story of hope and courage when the story that aligns with the participant’s understanding of her experience is one of suffering, then researchers would do well not to capitulate to this demand.

This right of refusal across participants, readers, and researchers becomes essential to ethical research practice. When stories express difficult knowledge, these stories require deep care and utmost respect. Difficult knowledge demands grappling with the humanity of an Other. If honoring that demand becomes impossible for reasons of power asymmetries, encounters with one’s own traumatic past, or the temptation to redeem suffering, refusal is important to the integrity of research.

Conclusion

Narrative research and pedagogy that draws upon narrative inquiry or stories encourage readers to grapple with the humanity of an Other—to listen deeply and attempt to “see” an experience in the way that participants intended. Narrative researchers and pedagogues recognize the potential of narrative, and indeed, of music, to urge consideration of the nature of humanity. In continuing to do narrative research and to engage with story through pedagogical encounters, recognizing the complexities in stories and their impossibilities or limits allows researchers and pedagogues to carefully attend to some of the challenges that emerge when stories contain difficult knowledge.

While continuing to engage with the complexities of difficult knowledge in stories and narrative accounts, researchers and pedagogues can consider not only what it might mean to recount a story but also the ethical stance of *learning from* rather than *learning about*. When individuals who have experienced intense suffering deem difficult knowledge or traumatic stories “useless,” researchers can aim to write and pedagogues can aim to teach in ways that do not create the distance that *learning about* entails, but rather in ways that aim to help readers *learn from* experiences of difficult knowledge—and perhaps understand their own implication in stories of trauma. In grappling with difficult knowledge, in attending to silences

and listening for absences, researchers and pedagogues can purposefully write and teach in ways that help readers and learners begin to comprehend that they *cannot* understand. When individuals recognize that some experiences cannot be understood, they may move to question their own complicity in those experiences and to oppose such experiences as they recur. As hate continues to manifest in both new and familiar ways, *learning from* experiences of difficult knowledge may help individuals resist similar experiences. While narrative can never fully render an experience, learning to listen for what can never be present urges a particular recognition of another's humanity.

About the Author

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Notes

¹ See Crenshaw (1989, 1991), Collins (2000, 2019), and Collins and Bilge (2016) for explanations of intersectionality.

² The word “phantasy” reflects its German origin to honor the “range of modes of fantasy that are worked with in psychoanalysis” (770).

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³ Kuntz (2015) goes so far as to consider research as an extractive process.