

RESISTANT NARRATIVES / RESISTING NARRATIVE: A CRAFT TALK

Suzanne Scanlon

PART ONE: Time & Language

Once upon a time I had a baby. I was living in Chicago with my then-husband, and many days that first year, not working. Not teaching, not writing, being with the baby. I remember these days as magical but of course they were also often boring, frustrating, exhausting. Sometimes when the baby woke up, that stretch between his second nap and dinner time, before my then-husband would arrive home, the baby and I would take a walk. We lived in the Andersonville neighborhood of Chicago and so we walked down Clark street. Often we would stop in my favorite bookstore, *Women and Children First*.

We went to the children's section first, of course, where not only were there baby books but there were toys - a toy piano, toy trucks - my then-baby would play for hours in that section -

Some days, while the baby played, I tried to remember that I was writer, which is a reader, and it was that way that I found the newly published journals of Susan Sontag, which I read eagerly, not forgetting the baby but, rather, remembering my self.

Somewhere in those journals, Susan Sontag wrote notes from a recent conversation she'd had with her poet and pal - she wrote:

Brodsky says the only true subjects are time and language.

The poet Joseph Brodsky was her friend, and she jotted down these words of his she wanted to remember - it is thrilling to read her journals, full of notes and fragments like this, memories, ideas, imperatives. An artist, a mind, always at work. It thrilled me especially to read these fragments before they were formed into a formal shape, as in her searing essays - particularly because in those early baby that was what I wrote - fragments.

Time and Language.

So maybe that's what I mean by Resistant Narratives - or Resisting Narrative, as I come to alternately title this talk.

Sometimes the resistance in writing might be to language itself - to a narrative - to the limits of a self as a fixed thing.

A narrative, like a self, is never fixed.

Sometimes we write to resist the silences or the erasures that grow up around a self- a self in a family, in a country, in a body.

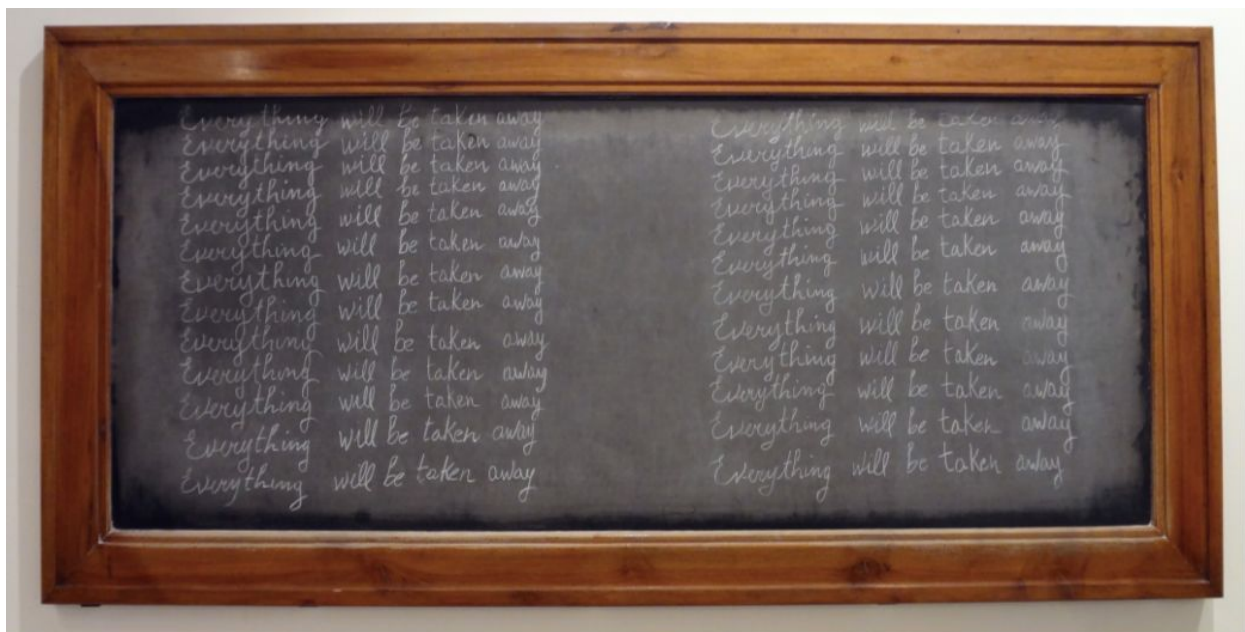
And sometimes, yes, we write to resist Time - Brodsky's *other true subject* - Time.

As Tobias Wolff once pointed out, *Time is your enemy in almost everything in this life - but it is your friend in Writing.*

Time - yes, always, what is this desire to write, to put pen to paper, to put words in certain order, to make various meaning, to create an identity or identities out of fragments -- a play for, if not immortality, than other totalities - what do I want to do but write against the tug of mortality - aging, disease, death.

Maybe I was reading Sontag's journals to resist the truth of loss, her death - and maybe I was resisting the loss of the self I'd been before the baby was born, or the way time changed after the baby was born - the loss of this baby *in this chicken costume* who existed for one beautiful, exhausting moment - who soon enough would become a boy, a little boy and then a big boy. And maybe it was a newfound awareness of Time - that very true cliché that watching a baby and a child grow up meant that I could see and feel more vividly than ever that Life was about losing everything - that the only constant in life is change. Impermanence.

Adrien Piper -



Susan Sontag spoke of the great project of literature as freedom:

To have access to literature, world literature, was to escape the prison of national vanity, of philistinism, of compulsory provincialism, of inane schooling, of imperfect destinies and bad luck. Literature was the passport to enter a larger life; that is, the zone of freedom. Literature was

freedom. Especially in a time when the values of reading and inwardness are so strenuously challenged, literature is freedom.

Who hasn't had an imperfect destiny? Bad luck? Inane schooling? Not to speak of the prison of national vanity, and all the other prisons.

Despite our contemporary focus on gratitude - it is true that life is, well, imperfect.

Reading is a way of resisting. Reading is another way we change, shape, challenge our narratives.

Of course we should not take our reading for granted -

*Recently *The New Jim Crow*, a 2010 book by Michelle Alexander, appeared on Banned Book lists for inmates in state correctional facilities. After the ACLU challenged the ban, New Jersey officials said they'll lift ban. The ban was particularly troubling because New Jersey had the country's widest disparity between white and black incarceration rates.*

I know nothing about the importance of reading or writing in a state correctional facility, but I do know how institutionalization inspires reading.

Like many women, I've done my time in institutions, been disciplined and contained by systems of refinement and rehabilitation.

When I began writing in journals and notebooks, I did not have a voice or did not think I had a voice with any validity, so I learned to be a reader. That was the way, before writing, that I made meaning of my experience. Early on, I saw that the narratives of the world were lacking, at best. And I knew silence would kill me. I deliberately sought out the resistant voices of women writers.

I discovered Marguerite Duras, whose told and retold story of her own coming of age in French colonized Vietnam, an affair she had that was so fraught with racial, gender, and colonialist weight, a story that she would spend her lifetime trying to tell - to understand - to turn into meaning.

And Mary Gordon, whose debut novel, *Final Payments*, was the story of a young Catholic woman coming of age without a father -- a process that resists the silences of Irish Catholicism, the schizophrenia of being female, as Chris Kraus would later describe it in her resistant narrative, the novel *I Love Dick*.

And Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, a novel in which the doctor narrator allows a young disenfranchised woman to speak for herself - to tell the story of imperfect destiny (to put it mildly) that led her to an Egyptian prison. A story of rape, and abandonment, and misogyny - a story that incarceration erases.

These are just a few examples of the art and literature that made me who I am, that made me understand the project of literature as *the passport to enter a larger life*, a living narrative, a resistant narrative of identity, which I am always revising, refining, extending and reshaping.

When I wrote *Promising Young Women*, I'd become oppressed by the story of my so-called mental illness, a narrative that had dogged me since college, when I was institutionalized after a suicide attempt. A short term hospitalization led to years long in a state hospital system that, I am very very lucky to report, I escaped, recovered and rejoined some society of functioning adults.

If it wasn't for literature, for reading and writing, I don't think I would have survived those years.

Here is how I began the novel-in-stories which I wrote about those years of my institutionals:

Ever since I heard Don Reakes say that the beauty contestant deserved to be raped by Mike Tyson, I wanted him dead.

The narrator, Lizzie, is in a psychiatric ward, writing in her notebook. The aura of rape culture, or an impossible world is present even there, in this supposed asylum, the city bleeds through. Lizzie's project is one of resistance, and I do believe that my life in those years was a giant Resistance - a performance of the NO that is literature's project. The No that is an act of love.

Anne Boyer's *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* begins with an essay titled "No":

History is full of people who just didn't. They said no thank you, turned away, escaped to the lesert, lived in barrels, burned down their own houses, killed their rapists, pushed away dinner, meditated into the light . . .

What is the power of this refusal? Boyer goes on to ask, finding the history of literature in this enormous resistant gesture:

*There is a lot of room for a meaning inside a "no" spoken in tremendous logic of a refused order of the world. Poetry's **no can protect a potential yes-** or more precisely, poetry's no is the one that can protect the hell yeah, or every hell yeahs's variations.*

This is why Eileen Myles speaks of NO as a loving act - a protective move, a creative act. I think that as an artist, a wrItter, our job is to say No - to take the limited narratives and to fuck with them, write back to them and around them and through them. Mess them up. Rewrite these stories, over and over again, if necessary. Some of my favorite writers seem to writ the same story, in different iterations, their entire lives - Marguerite Duras, Jamaica Kincaid. This very act of repetition - of recursive return and reiteration is an act of resistance - a way of saying that one story will not do, that we need to keep telling this story, finding new perspectives, new ways in to this story.

I look to not only my bookshelves, my spiritual teachers, but my friends, my living teachers. I asked each what the idea of Resistant Narrative meant to them.

The writer Sherman Alexie told me that what happens when we write back is we change the narrative - his essay Captivity, begins with a passage to the Native American captivity memoir of Mary Rowlandson:

Remember that when I tell you this story it will change.

Or what poet Frank Bidart wrote:

We fill preexisting forms and when we change them we change them and are changed by them.

My friend, the playwright David Adjmi at first resisted the idea of resisting narrative - I don't want to Resist Narrative, he said, I like narrative! When I asked about the structure of his plays, he admitted:

I do always toy with unraveling the narrative as I'm making it -

I asked him about the narrative moves in his play, 3C, which is a smart, painful response to the tv show Three's Company, a show containing narratives of homophobia and misogyny, which we had internalized without understanding: - Adjmi said:

3C was almost like me going to a party and hating the party and forcing myself to go until I have a nervous breakdown -

He's now writing a memoir, of which he said:

It is about how I was looking for a story for my life - and so I would like Madonna would start doing stuff and I was like what is she doing? When she changes personae, what is she doing and what does it say about reality? And she's breaking boundaries and things we say about the self is not what you thought it was. So that gave me a story or a hypothesis about how I could expand my sense of self...I would see movies and I would learn various things about life.

And we have to keep refining these cultural narratives - sometimes the narrative becomes Jews are Vermin. And sometimes the narrative becomes Women are too Emotional. Or sometimes the narrative becomes A Woman Needs a Man Like a Fish Needs a Bicycle. Or sometimes the narrative becomes Love Wins and we all have to love each other -- and there's lots of different kinds of things we receive from the culture and we refine it and we contest it, because narratives must be contested.

In one of our conversations, David told me that he had just seen Hannah Gadsby perform in Los Angeles, a show titled *Nanette*, which is now on Netflix, and I urge you to watch.

Gadsby's narrative starts with absence, erasure: I want to tell my story because I didn't have one.

Nanette, billed as comedy, becomes, as she says “her last comedy show” as she subverts the narrative of comedy in order to tell the honest story - in order to make the art to tell the story she needs to tell.

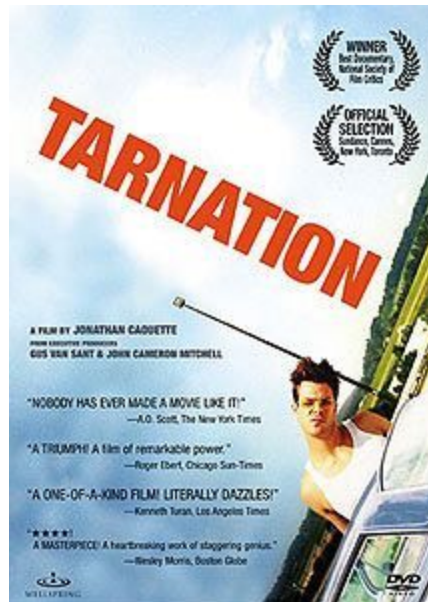
The show comes out of her awareness that the self-deprecation which made her so good at comedy, was hurting her. “Do you understand what self-deprecation means when it comes from someone who already exists in the margins?” she asks. “It’s not humility. It’s humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak, and I simply will not do that anymore.” Gadsby resists the narrative of stand up, because it is linked (she has discovered) to the very humiliation and shame she wants to reject - she resists the narrative while creating it - as Adjmi said, she unravels it as she creates it. Who was it who said that was the artist’s job: to figure out what prison you are in, and find your way out.

She realized that her story mattered - She unravels the narrative structure which has been a source of oppression.

*I never had a story because I never thought I was worth anything and basically people just left me for dead. And now I have a story and **I feel like I have to give it to somebody. I have to do something with it.***

PART TWO: Resistant Narratives / Resisting Narrative

I first encountered the phrase “resistant narrative” in an academic context. It was the theorist Michel Foucault who wrote, “Where there is power, there is resistance.” Teaching a course in Queer Literature, I taught Jonathan Caouette’s 2003 *Tarnation*, a film he composed on iMovie using home movie material he’d created since his childhood. He made the film for around 213 dollars, though it was later celebrated by Gus Van Sant, who gave it funding and distribution.



In the extensive critical response to the film, one scholar described of this autobiographical film as a resistant narrative - that is, a story told as a “means of resistance” and a “tool for change”. She read *Tarnation* as an example of how autobiographical writing can be used *to interpret and re-invent identity*.

Tarnation is a collage, a structure we can use as writers. Caouette’s two most significant narrative threads explore his identity as a gay man growing up in Texas and his mother’s identity, determined by her experience in the mental health system in Texas.

It begins with the 1950s Texas childhood of his mother, Renee. A beauty as a young girl, Renee was a sought-after child model and TV-commercial star. But at age twelve she fell off a roof and for six months was paralyzed, though for no apparent physiological reason. Believing her ailment to be psychosomatic, her parents, Adolph and Rosemary, sent her for electroshock therapy twice a week for two years. Caouette contends that, far from treating a pre-existing ailment, the shock therapy pushed his mother into a lifetime of mental illness.

In my reading, Caouette's mother's narrative compels the film - it is the larger conversation of the film - one about women and institutionalization and power - it is the story her son needs to tell, the conversation he needs to have- calling into question the narratives that limited his mother's life-- beauty, model, mental patient, woman, single mother. There is a generosity to his film that feels resistant. Here is a woman long dismissed as insane, crazy, mental, pathetic, tragic, a failure etc. Here is a son who loves her, who made his own life as an artist despite her failures, who is able to see the forces that led her to be who she is today. A son who will reclaim and rewrite his identity and Renee's identity.

Not long after seeing this film, I read Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home*, another resistant narrative - the story of a young queer woman coming of age, alongside the story of that woman's closeted gay father, who killed himself (or so she reads his accidental death). *Fun Home*, which became a bestseller and, eventually, a Broadway musical, circles questions of identity, the legacy of homophobia, and power - both within and beyond a family. Bechdel builds her story on other narratives, both claiming and resisting the narratives her father celebrated - the *Great Gatsby*, Camus, Proust, Oscar Wilde- the reader is left with the sense that she needed to re-write/revisit/resist her father's story, in order to live her own. In one moving, final image, she compares her father to Daedalus and Icarus, his life allowed me to fly.

Who or what or how many of us are here today because someone else suffered or failed or lived a life limited by forces that no longer limit our lives, our identities? Take narratives of migration, so fraught and so complicated and so urgent. To understand a human life beyond a story or a number. In Sonja Livingston's brief essay, *A Thousand Mary Doyles*, she allows one Mary Doyle, whose life she knows nothing, save for the fact that she immigrated as a young woman from Ireland. Livingston's essay becomes an imaginative feat, as she takes the story of one Mary Doyle to speak for the hundreds, thousands of young women who left everything to cross the ocean to an unknown new life. The essay speaks in a new way to the specifics of Irish immigration as well as to the ongoing story of immigration, of exile and hope. It is a story to resist the easy narrative of migration, which is never easy. The essay becomes a place to make one woman's story a particular story, to honor and feel the specific horror and monumental risk of such a move.

A more recent, contemporary migrant story by a young poet considers life after arrival. In Sonia Guiñansaca, an undocumented poet who writes *Bursting of photographs* after trying to squeeze out old memories. In this poet's case, it is the narrative of DOCUMENTING a person, a human being - a narrative construction, which has informed her life, shaped it. A narrative which prevented her from seeing her grandparents for 20 years.

Whatever your background, your story or your stories, your sense of self, however shifting or varied, think about where you have or have needed to or will resist. Who is your "they" Guinansaca speaks of? Who are THEY in your life? What stories have been told about you, or your life, or your future or your past? Where have you said NO? And Why? (the No that is an act of love) What narratives, stories -

perhaps of gender, of femininity or masculinity, or nationality or race or health or illness, of family expectation - which have shaped you? And Which have you refused? Resisted? Write to that of that about that and around that. What does that resistance look like in your life? As an imaginative exercise, what would it be to say No where you have always said yes? What would it be, as Hannah Gadsby does, to unravel the narrative that has become so comfortable to you?

This is where tensions lies, for all artists, those moments when the narratives no longer fit, no longer work, where we have to unravel and reject and in the process create something new - ourselves, and indeed the world.

FURTHER READING / BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sherman Alexie “Captivity”

Adjmi, David *3C and other plays*

Sontag, Susan, *Reborn*

Caouette, Jonathan *Tarnation*

Bechdel, Alison *Fun Home*

Boyer, Anne, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*

Guinansaca, Sonia “Bursting of Photographs”

Wolff, Tobias, as quoted by Brian Kiteley in *The 3 A M Epiphany*

Gadsby, Hannah, *Nannette*

Myles, Eileen

Woman at Point Zero, Nawal El Saadawi

Final Payments, Mary Gordon

Annie John, Jamaica Kincaid

Piper, Adrien

A Thousand Mary Doyles, Sonja Livingston