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Analyzing the Social Life of Personal Experience Stories

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My approach to the study of the social life of stories is anchored in the ethnography of speaking research agenda (Hymes, 1962, 1974). The central underlying assumption within this approach is that the use of speech forms is grounded in local meanings and subject to local norms and rules of production and interpretation. Thus, the goal of theorizing within this perspective is to provide a framework for in-depth explorations of the culturally named and/or recognized discursive forms and speech activities that make up the speech economies of particular societies (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974/1989; Philipsen, 1992). These explorations focus on the ways in which discursive activities and their linguistic products—such as stories, arguments, greetings, interruptions, apologies, intonation patterns, and stylistic choices, to name but a few—are organized in relation to the different dimensions of their contexts of use. Empirical studies of the deployment of such discursive forms in actual social settings, and the ways in which they interrelate over time in a given society, can provide insights into the workings of social change as well as suggest possibilities for comparative social analysis.

For some time now, researchers have recognized the ubiquity and centrality of storytelling in a wide range of formal and informal social settings and cultural contexts (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1997; Linde, 1993; Shuman, 1986, 2005).

Whether explicitly or implicitly, a good deal of this scholarly interest in the exploration of stories as naturally occurring discursive forms has followed the ethnography of speaking agenda by drawing attention to localized rules and norms for storytelling and story interpretation. Within this perspective, storytelling is studied as a socially and culturally situated performance rather than as an abstracted textual product. The empirical study of storytelling as a situated performance requires attention to two interrelated dimensions of context—the concrete social context of the storytelling occasion and the broader cultural context in which it is embedded. The questions that motivate such inquiry relate to the sociocultural conditions that ground the dynamic, often collaborative enactment of storytelling performances in the flow of discourse as well as the social functions stories perform on particular occasions.

Dell Hymes' (1972) heuristic framework for the study of speech events as demarcated moments in the flow of talk can assist us in the exploration of storytelling as a performance. The elements of this framework, captured in the SPEAKING acronym—setting, participants, ends, act, key, instrument, norms, genre—specify the central dimensions of context and form that jointly give meaning, shape, and credence to particular speech utterances. As various scholars have shown (e.g., Bauman, 1986; Briggs, 1988), this heuristic framework is helpful in studying storytelling as a particular verbal genre whose enactment—like that of all speech genres—is governed by norms of appropriateness relating to contextual dimensions of speech activities. While this framework as a whole can serve as a point of reference for the analysis of naturally occurring storytelling performances, each given study will tend to highlight particularly salient dimensions of the sociocultural context in the particular case.

As I will try to argue more generally, and demonstrate by addressing specific case studies, a close analysis of any particular storytelling performance calls attention to some subset of the dimensions brought together in Hymes' (1972) framework. At times, the analytic focus may be on the spatio-temporal dimensions of the setting in which the performance takes place, or on participants' storytelling rights and duties as they relate to narrative authority and credibility, or on the storytellers' goals (e.g., informing) and the societal functions served by their stories (e.g. creating a shared evidentiary base for building social solidarity), or on the tone (or key) in which the story is told (e.g., reverential vs. ironic), and so on. The approach I wish to illustrate here offers an interpretive reading of carefully selected storytelling occasions in terms of the formal, functional, and contextual dimensions of verbal action captured in this framework.

The discursive occasions thus selected are often those whose study can engage larger questions of cultural analysis as well as offer insights into the role storytelling plays in processes of identity construction and cultural change. Thus, in what follows I will discuss the social life of stories with reference to examples taken from three ethnographic research projects I have conducted in Israel over the past 25 years—a study of local heritage museums, a study of late night radio programs, and a study of soldiers' testimonial narratives in the context of protest. In all of them, storytelling is a central, naturally occurring activity that is deeply embedded in the flow of social exchange. The stories I focus on in all three studies are personal experience stories (Langellier, 1989) that are narrated in a public arena. As such, they play a central role in the construction and presentation of personal identities, often employing a rhetoric of self-justification that is grounded in particular value orientations and points of view.

In narrating their personal experiences, narrators-cum-protagonists do not only construct cognitively coherent accounts that help make sense of life events as temporally ordered, causally linked, and psychologically motivated. They also evaluate actions and choices, presenting a storified self that invites story recipients to probe the moral dimensions of human experience (Ochs & Capps, 1996, 2001). In each of these cases, minimally, the shared configuration of elements to be explored includes genre (story), setting (straddling the personal and public realms), participants (narrator-protagonist and generalized audiences), and ends (information, problem-solving, construction of individual and communal identities). In each of these cases, too, the descriptive elaboration and analysis of the localized forms and meanings as discussed in terms of these elements is mobilized in addressing more encompassing questions that arise out of site-specific analyses of the contours of storytelling activities.

The particular storytelling occasions I have selected for intensive study in the projects I address here all speak to broader issues that are central to our understanding of storytelling as a dynamic, collaborative activity that is central to contemporary life. Specifically, they highlight the expressive role stories play in the construction of both personal and collective identities on the one hand, and in the negotiation of the contours of public settings in which ideological positions are presented and justified on the other. Indeed, taken together, these studies argue for a research agenda that explores the links between the social uses of storytelling and the social imaginaries that make up contemporary life.

Notably, the collapse of the public/private dichotomy in late-modernity finds one of its expressions in the proliferation of personal experience stories

in the public arena. Museums, the media, and social movements are all social contexts in and through which personal experience stories are routinely performed and circulated, serving as central communicative tools that express and shape public perceptions and sensibilities. The proliferation of personal experience stories in the public arena has given rise to what has been termed the *personalization* of the mass media, which colors contemporary public life (Beniger, 1987). Attention tends to shift from issues to persons, giving rise to media communities (*pseudo-communities* in Beniger's,1987, view) that are linked together through the sharing of personal stories. It also serves to turn personal feelings and dilemmas into public issues, adding a layer of concreteness and authenticity to the rationalist discussion that characterizes the idealized public sphere (Habermas, 1992).

The following consideration of the role of personal experience stories in the dynamic construction of public life foregrounds the nature of storytelling performances as personally inflected, loosely institutionalized discourses. My discussion will address issues of narrative positioning and narrative authority as they relate to the storytelling situation and will show how stories may serve as instruments of social solidarity, as tools of social protest, and as sites of identity negotiations. All of these social functions of storytelling converge into the *cultural communication* function of discourse (Philipsen, 2002), addressing a fundamental cultural concern with the individual-community dialectic. Each of the following examples of occasioned storytelling explores the role of personal stories in public arenas in its own distinctive way. Since they each represent a particular cultural moment pertaining to—broadly speaking—the same cultural world, I hope the juxtaposition of these studies will fruitfully combine an illustrative methodological goal with a quest for a more encompassing cultural understanding.

Heritage Museums as Storytelling Arenas

The establishment of heritage museums that are designed to conserve, display, and narrate local and national collective memories is a worldwide phenomenon and a well-recognized feature of the politics of contemporary cultures (Hewson, 1987; Horne, 1984; Karp & Lavine, 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). Despite the fact that museums are constructed around their display of material culture, local heritage museums and sites provide privileged occasions for storytelling about the past. In these museums and sites, the material display tends to be organized along narrative trajectories rather than around taxonomic displays. These narratives tell the stories of the nation, or the region, or the local village—both for the benefit of local

audiences (in particular, in the context of intergenerational transmission) and for the benefit of cultural outsiders as part of the tourism enterprise. Local heritage stories proliferate most notably in the context of organized tours in which groups of visitors are led along the display by museum guides who are immersed in the local history (Fine & Speer, 1985). Tour guides can be seen as institutionally ordained storytellers who are entrusted with the task of keeping alive a fund of collective tales by performing them in one-to-many, face-to-face occasions whose meaning and effectiveness is partly anchored in the setting in which they are told.

With this view of museum storytelling performances in mind, I conducted a narrative-oriented, video-based research project that focused on the storytelling performances of museum guides in Israeli Jewish settlement museums located in some collective settlements in Israel (or *kibbutzim*) in the early 1990s (Katriel, 1997). Dozens of local heritage site museums that tell and retell the story of Jewish settlement in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s have been founded in villages and *kibbutzim* around Israel since the late 1970s. The localized stories woven by the tour guides around the objects on display—mainly agricultural tools and implements as well as tools used in domestic-communal life—are woven into the larger national narrative of the diasporic Jews' "return" to the land of Israel as both a territorial mission of inhabiting the land and an agricultural mission of cultivating it. The larger collective goal of celebrating the revival of Jewish nationhood in the Jews' ancestral home—as it was envisioned in the ethos of Socialist Zionism—animates each particular story performed on the museum floor. At the same time, mundane stories about communal and agricultural life are infused with meaning as articulations of the Zionist vision of pioneering.

An attempt to elucidate the social life of these storytelling performances requires attention to various levels of context. First, there is the wider societal context in which the establishment of settlement museums as settings in which rather nostalgic storytelling about Israeli pioneering days was considered both appropriate and called for. The establishment of these museums responded to the urge to reiterate the Jewish settlement narrative at a time when it became a culturally contested issue. By the late 1970s, with the growing impact of the politically controversial settlement movement in the occupied Palestinian territories, which appropriated the language and symbolism of the nation-building era, acts of settlement became divested of their pioneering aura and were no longer unquestioned emblems of Israel's pioneering past. At that time, too, the Socialist Zionist movement—including its *kibbutz* component, which was a central force in Israeli pioneering culture and society until its loss of the leadership position in the 1977 elections—was well into losing its ideological hold. Given this background,

the emergence of distinctive settings in which the Israeli settlement saga was routinely told and retold as a heroic chapter in the nation's past can be seen as a move in the politics of culture that shapes Israeli national memory. Seemingly untarnished by present-day controversies and power struggles, the performance of the past in these settlement museums constructs them as a de-politicized arena where communal and national feelings of solidarity can be invoked through the reproduction of pioneering tales.

The ideological framing of these museum tales, as well as their thematization of the communal concerns of the settlement movement, foreground their public role as articulations of the collectivity and position the individuals narrating them as tokens of a collective whole. At the same time, the personal experience stories often inserted by the guides along the tour route serve to authenticate the museum narrative through their individual signatures and embodied presence. In these museum settings, then, participants are constructed through a dynamic interplay of personal and public voices. These reflect a dialectical pattern whereby individuals and their community are mutually constituted—personal experiences become meaningful by acquiring collective significance, and collective meanings resonate in members' personal lives. This pattern, which differs from the tension-filled polarity between individual and community that characterizes Western modernity, has been identified as central to Jewish and Jewish Israeli culture (Prell-Foldes, 1980; Katriel, 1986). The significance of the communally oriented personal voice is especially salient in the case of museum tours guided by old-timers—members of the *kibbutz* founding generation, whose first person narrations are fueled by personal memories and a deeply felt urge to communicate them to younger generations.

For the old-timers whose performances formed part of my research corpus, telling the story of Jewish settlement in Palestine was not just a professional and ideological commitment, it was a highly meaningful personal mission. Old-timers were self-selected for the guiding role but could hold on to it when they were acknowledged by others as people who "had stories to tell"—that is, a fund of autobiographical anecdotes that could be woven into their performances, thereby authenticating the museum story. The personal anecdotes interspersed in the museum guides' discourse had an important role to play in establishing the old-timers as embodied emblems of the pioneering saga. They also provided real-life examples of the personal transformation that the pioneers, all newcomers to Palestine, were expected to undergo on the way to becoming Israelis (or, as they were called, New Jews). Their stories were told not only in order to invoke vivid images of the pioneering past but also as a testimony to a life well-lived, a life full of action and meaning—one that is worth remembering and retelling in the public arena.

Let me recapture such a storytelling moment by turning to the old-timer, Binyamin, a short and robust man in his eighties who was born and raised in the pre-state, Arab-dominated town of Jaffa and who was among the founders and first directors of the first vernacular settlement museum, which is located in the Israeli *kibbutz* Yif'at in the Western Jezreel Valley. Binyamin was well-known in the valley as a man who "had lots of stories to tell," as people told me again and again, and he clearly relished the opportunities the museum gave him for sharing his stories. One line of stories he particularly cherished were stories about his life as a shepherd, and he singled out the "shepherd's corner" in the museum as his favorite spot along the tour. With a grin on his face and a twinkle in his eyes, he stood in front of the display of tools and implements used by shepherds, explaining the tools' Arabic names that have seeped into shepherds' Hebrew lingo and reminiscing about his shepherd days as a young man. A black-and-white photograph showing two figures standing by a goat (named *Chumtche,* Brownie, in view of her color) invariably triggered some version of the "*Chumtche* tale." The following is an excerpt from an elaborated version of this tale told to a group of university students who visited the museum as part of my ethnography class:

> [pointing to the picture on the wall] Here am I, and here's another person, and here's a goat with whom I had friendly relations. I gave her a name. She was like my friend. I called her *Chumtche.* Why? Because she was a bit blonde, a bit of a brownie. She was very clever, she was an extraordinary goat, and she always walked first, she wouldn't let anyone walk ahead of her. . . . I fell in love with this *Chumtche,* she was my friend, and I would call her, and we would eat together, from this bag [pointing to a bag on display]. . . . And one day the herd had spread all over and I wanted to bring them together. I put the bag on the ground, took up my *nabut* [herdsman's stick, Arabic] and went off to gather the sheep. And when I put the bag on the ground, *Chumtche* came over and had a *kumsitz* [campfire party], opened the bag and ate up all the food. And you know herdsmen go out for the whole day, from morning till night, and I was young then and liked to eat a lot, and when I came back I wanted to eat and saw that my food was scattered all over. And then, of course, a hungry person is irritable, so I go angry, took hold of the *nabut* and wanted to catch her and give it to her. But she was cleverer than me. What did she do? When she saw me holding the *nabut* she went to the back of the herd and mingled with the goats and I was unable to catch her. [The story goes on to tell at considerable length how *Chumtche* disappeared and after dark was eventually found by Binyamin who discovered she had a leg injury]. So I called the doctor, he came and bandaged her leg, and I came home and got reprimanded by the wife because it was late. Go tell her that I have another love. It's quite a story, so I didn't say anything. I said, 'Work, what can I do?'

> [laughter]. . . . The next day when I took her out I made another attempt, to see if she'd learned any lesson. I took the bag, walked around, and then I put it down. She was sitting next to the bag and didn't touch it. No way. She waited for me to come, and when I came, I opened the bag and we had lunch together, and she constantly wagged her tail in agreement. She's all right. So what I want to tell you with all of this is that a person who is an agriculturalist, he should love the animal he is working with. . . .[1]

Binyamin's autobiographical anecdote, told as it is in the first person, is rich in expressions of feelings and inner thoughts. It is also deeply resonant with the romanticized version of the communal-agriculturalist vision of the pioneering era in relation to which Binyamin's personal stories must be interpreted. In particular, it resonates with Binyamin's construction of Jewish settlement as potentially standing in harmony with the local Palestinian population's interests.

The very focus on shepherds and their world rather than on land cultivation draws attention to a domain of agricultural endeavor that is typically associated with local Arab populations even while it invokes biblical images of ancestor-shepherds. This double-pronged contextual framing is typical of Binyamin's complex positioning vis-à-vis both his own life story and the larger story of the Zionist enterprise. He stressed that he grew up with Arabs and empathized with their plight, fully aware that the museum itself was located close to the ruins of an Arab village destroyed in 1948, yet he also hinted about his prolonged participation in secret security endeavors. While fully embracing the celebratory mission of these museums as that of commemorating the story of Jewish settlement in the nation-building era, he was keenly aware of the many ways in which it rubs against the Palestinian version of the region's past. Trying to live with—and between—these two national tales, he once told me that he always made a point of inserting Arabic words for the objects on display—some of whose labels appeal to biblical sources—since a good many of these objects actually came from local Arab villages and served as a stark reminder that, in his words, "the museum cannot be told in one language."

Claiming to personify the Jewish pioneering ideal, Binyamin's frequent use of Arabic words, and the obvious attachment to local Arab ways expressed in his personal anecdotes, served to inflect the museum story in particular ways, blending local folklore with ideologically infused, Eurocentric, back-to-nature Zionism. In the local heritage museum he helped to establish and maintain, the personal stories he told and retold became magnified as emblems of the Israeli settlement ethos, but they were also tinged with his personal quest for a conciliatory memory. Indeed, Binyamin

both embodied and authenticated the museum's national tale through his performance of personal experience stories. In so doing, his personal inflection of this tale became magnified through its newfound public life.

Call-In Radio Programs as Storytelling Occasions

Staying with my interest in the personal-communal dialectic, and the ways in which it is played out in the public arena, my next project moved away from Israel's national commemorative enterprise to a less officially ordained performative arena—therapeutically oriented call-in programs on Israeli public radio (Katriel, 2004). Call-in radio programs of this kind, with a focus on issues of parenting and family life, have gained increasing popularity since the late 1960s. For many years, they were aired between midnight and the early hours of the morning, creating a night-time public arena in which particular radio hosts, who became identified with these programs, conversed with anonymous callers about matters of profound personal concern to them. Not surprisingly, these highly self-disclosive conversations were permeated with personal stories, mainly about personal problems and relational difficulties, which can be said to fall into the category of "distress narratives."

Like the museum tales, the stories on call-in radio are orally transmitted—but in a mediated rather than face-to-face setting. Whereas the museum tales are largely monologic in their construction, leaving only marginal space for audience participation in the form of questions and brief comments, call-in radio narratives tend to be dialogic and collaborative. Their dialogic nature does not preclude power negotiations, however. So that even though the stories obviously "belong" to the callers whose personal experiences they relate, the hosts' questions, interjections, and evaluative interpretations clearly take part in shaping the way callers eventually construct their tales. These radiophonic occasions are temporally rather than spatially organized. Participants are spatially segregated—with the host in the studio reaching out to his listeners, who are usually at home or at a night-job—yet they come together through their shared attention to on-the-air distress narratives, and the discourse surrounding them, at a given point in time. While the host and callers are active participants, they are well aware of the fact that their words carry far and wide and reach the ears of many thousands. On some occasions, the dyadic interactional structure is expanded and silent listeners are invited to call-in and join the host in addressing the initial caller's predicament, offering their own personal stories and lessons learned.

As Deborah Cameron (2000) pointed out, the therapeutic model in which these call-in radio programs are anchored is significant not because it stands apart as a cultural practice but because in therapy "commonplace presuppositions about the self and about moral conduct are made particularly explicit (because the self is the overt focus of therapeutic discourse), and these presuppositions are also quite often embodied in explicit rules for speaking" (p. 158). The insertion of distress narratives into the domain of radiophonic discourse thus creates an opportunity for the highly explicit negotiations of personal identities, norms of social conduct, and moral sentiments typical of therapeutic encounters to gain public presence and resonance. In that respect, I suggest, call-in radio programs that air and negotiate personal distress narratives—in Israel as elsewhere—function much like morality plays in earlier times: They serve as public arenas in which the concerns of personal lives and their social regulation are modeled and discussed, if not always resolved.

The dynamic nature of these radiophonic storytelling occasions comes out most clearly when the caller's storytelling performance turns into a more highly collaborative narration, to the point of changing the caller's initial narrative stance and understanding of his or her own life story. I will exemplify such a case by attending to the story of a young man who was very angry and hurt because his wife had betrayed him with his best friend.[2] He filed for divorce but then realized that he was playing into his wife's hands rather than penalizing her as this would free her to marry her lover. The host engaged the caller with some discussion concerning his feelings of anger and his hesitation about the divorce. Then, addressing the caller's presentation of himself as having been so deeply in love with his wife as to be blind to her betrayal for a long time, the host shifted the direction of the conversation by asking the caller to probe more deeply into his marriage.

He began by retracing the story of this marital relationship from the very start, asking "What did you love about her? What attracted you?" The caller answered, noting the irony of his response given the way things have turned out: "the mutual trust we had." After some reminiscing about the good times he and his wife spent together, and how these made the trust between them grow, the host continued to try and explore how their relationship developed, asking "When you look back on your relationship over the past five years, did you take an interest in her? Did you pay attention to her? Did you show you cared?" The caller conceded that during the past two years he had spent less time with his wife, attributing his diminished interest in her to the pressures of life. The caller painted a picture of an uncontrollable, inevitable routinization of the marriage. With the freshness of the romance gone, he said, "things deteriorated." The host, however, pushed for an alternative narrative line, one that attributed agency to both parties in the marriage. Not

contesting the claim as to the effect of routine on the marriage, he nevertheless suggested, "You stopped investing in the relationship, and you felt this." The caller acknowledged this with some hesitation, fumblingly explaining that he and his wife stopped having open conversations because there was little to tell—at which point the host, rejecting the caller's narrative of inexplicable marital erosion, forcefully pushed the question of responsibility, asking "And you think it's your responsibility or hers?" The caller's spontaneous response, "It's both our responsibility," marked his final acceptance of the host's proposed narrative of marital estrangement that resulted from both partners' failure to properly invest in their relationship. The host sealed the discussion by repeating, "Both your responsibilities."

In and through this dynamic process of collaborative narration, the host invited the caller to rethink the story he told himself about the dissolution of his marriage, to abandon the betrayed-husband victim role, and to take partial responsibility for what had taken place. This change of narrative trajectory was gradual and probably less than fully embraced by the caller, but it was presented for all to hear. Given the particular middle-class positioning and psychological training of the host, the public negotiation of personal stories on this occasion provided an arena for the cultivation of a particular, Westernized image of the self and social relations. The host navigated the radio encounter in such a way as to provide what he considered to be a culturally appropriate image of the self-in-relationship—a person who can look inside, verbalize his or her feelings and motivations, take responsibility for his or her conduct, and change it when necessary. This modernist stress on personal agency is congruent with the cultural accent on agency and self-making in Israeli mainstream culture (Katriel, 1986). These call-in radio programs have thus become an arena in which personal stories are mobilized not only in resolving personal predicaments but also in reconfirming a cultural model of selfhood and its relational entailments. Less overtly communal in their orientation than the museum stories discussed earlier, these radio stories focus on personal moments of conflict and distress. While thematizing the personal, however, the mass mediated radio exchanges in which these personal stories find their place serve to sustain a cultural imaginary in which a particular range of possible selves, particular assumptions about interpersonal and familial relationships, and—in some cases—a particular vision of the good and proper life are promoted. Since daytime radio talk in Israel, and call-in radio most particularly, is largely dominated by political and current affairs programming, the continued popularity of these nocturnal programs over several decades suggests that, for some Israelis, they opened up new expressive possibilities by inviting their personal voices into the public arena.

Storytelling in Soldiers' Testimonial Rhetoric

As we have seen, the personal stories narrated on the floor of settlement museums are an example of one way in which personal voices serve to instantiate and authenticate the dominant, ideologically driven master-narrative of the Israeli heritage enterprise. The therapeutically oriented radio programs discussed in the previous example thematize the personal domain, using the public arena of radiophonic exchanges to magnify personal voices, insert them into the larger cultural conversation, and thus provide models for the communicative construction of personal relationships. Let's now consider soldiers' testimonial rhetoric as occasioned storytelling. Narrative material was taken from a testimonial project founded by an organization of Israeli veterans called Breaking the Silence (hence, BTS; *shovrim shtika* in Hebrew). This material similarly straddles the personal and the communal, yet it does so in its own distinctive way. The BTS organization was founded in the spring of 2002 by a group of veterans who had been recently discharged from their compulsory military service, much of which had been spent in the occupied territories of the West Bank or Gaza during the second Intifada, which broke out in the fall of 2000.

The group was defined by its testimonial goal: to expose and thereby problematize the widespread denial surrounding the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in Israeli society by forcing the Israeli public to face the human reality in the occupied territories from the point of view of the soldiers who serve there. Their particular narrative angle related to the ways in which the encounter with the reality of the occupation affected the soldiers/perpetrators themselves. A core group of veteran-activists undertook to interview soldiers who were willing to testify one-on-one, taking care not to expose their faces to the video camera because it was feared that some of these accounts could compromise their tellers. At the time of this writing, over 700 soldiers' testimonies have been collected, segments of which were disseminated in oral talks, booklets, videos, and on the group's website.[3] They are filled with detailed descriptions of routine control practices institutionalized by the Israeli occupation regime, such as maintaining curfews, manning checkpoints, conducting house searches, patrolling the streets, and so on.

A good portion of these accounts involve personal experience stories in and through which the testifying soldiers reconstructed incidents relating to their service as soldiers of the occupation, including their feelings about the role they played in them at the time and in retrospect. Notably, this storytelling project is clearly counter-hegemonic—the soldiers explicitly express their dismay at media reports that whitewash incidents in which they personally participated and which contradict the turn of events as they witnessed it

firsthand. They also point an accusatory finger at their elders for accepting such reports at face-value and refusing to probe into the reality of the occupation, thereby surrounding the young soldiers—even when they come home—with a wall of silence. At the same time, as in the case of the call-in radio distress narratives discussed earlier, by exposing soldierly transgressions that they have either committed or witnessed, they re-affirm a normative order that they feel the military, and society at large, have abandoned. Their testimonies abound with expressions of moral dismay as well as explicit affirmations of the values they grew up with, which they claim to have seen violated again and again while enforcing military control on millions of Palestinian civilians.

The following is an example of such a story; it appeared in the first testimonial booklet produced and disseminated by the group in March 2004. This was shortly after the group coalesced following the success of a photography exhibition that some of its core members launched in Tel Aviv. The exhibition brought together pictures taken by soldiers during their round of duty in the West Bank town of Hebron, where the conflict between a small group of Jewish settlers (protected by the military) and the large Palestinian population was at its peak. The soldier's story relates to an incident that took place in Hebron while he was assigned the task of enforcing a curfew, which on that occasion entailed preventing the passage of an elderly patriarch and his family to their desired destination. The head of the family, surrounded by several women and children, began to argue in a way that unsettled the narrator:

> He's not trying to weasel his way through, he really believes that one way or another he's in the right. And that confuses you. You remember that actually you're in his favor, and you would like to let him pass, and how dare he stand there in front of you proud and all. . . . Finally, the patrol shows up. And I was standing closest to him, about a meter or two from him. . . . In short, weapons are cocked, aimed with a hint, not straight at him, at his legs. . . . He was all dressed-up, wearing a suit and a *kaffia,* he looked really respectable. . . . And really the atmosphere was charged, more than usual. Then he sticks out his chest, and both his fists are tightly closed. Then I . . . my finger moves to the safety catch, and then I see his eyes are filled with tears, and he says something in Arabic, turns around, and goes. And his clan follows him. I'm not sure why this particular incident is engraved in my memory out of all the times I told people to scram when there's a curfew, but there was something so noble about him, and I felt like the scum of the earth. Like, what am I doing here? [4]

Compared to some of the other stories that appear in this corpus of soldierly tales, this story narrates a minor incident. The series of events that

make up this tale is as unremarkable as can be—a party of local Palestinian residents led by a respectable-looking head of the family tried to walk down the street to their destination, they were stopped by the soldiers on guard who informed them (or reminded them) that a curfew had been declared. No direct violence erupted despite the tension in the air, the hint of threat and the arguments that invariably accompany such situations. All the soldier-witness did was enforce the curfew as instructed and as he had done many times before. The significance of the soldier's story lies not in the unfolding of the event itself but in what to him was an inexplicable emotional reaction to it. His initial discomfort about doing things he didn't like to do, as he readily attested, was compounded by a sense of confusion at facing the dignified-looking head of the family and his unspoken humiliation in front of his clan of women and children. For this soldier, the tears in the eyes of the dignified elderly man he had absolute power over turned the routine, probably boring, if not slightly irritating, task of imposing a curfew into an emotional drama. The real story here is the story behind the events—the story of the soldier's growing reflexive sense of awareness of what the curfew he enforces means to the Palestinians. It was precisely the dignified, restrained conduct of the Palestinian patriarch, which probably prevented the scene from turning into a violent one, that caught him off-guard. The discomfort he originally felt grew into a deep sense of self-loathing that led to the ultimate self-questioning that was also addressed to the occupation regime as a whole: "What am I doing here?"

Thus, while this story clearly captures a particular moment in the soldier-witness's itinerary during his round of duty in the occupied territories, his use of a self-distancing *you* and a generalizing present tense in parts of it (e.g., as in "And that confuses you") enlarges the scope and implication of this personal experience story. Indeed, not unlike the old-timer guides' storytelling in the heritage museum context, this story-fragment, edited and narrated side-by-side with others of its kind, is as much a personal story of the soldier-witness who narrated it as it is a part of a cumulative, generational narrative. In both cases, the narrators authenticate the stories they tell through their personal experiences. In this case, however, the stories do not build up a celebratory narrative of a life well-lived and of communal accomplishments; rather—sounding an unmistakably dissident voice in the public domain—they give expression to disillusionment, confusion, and moral dismay. Appealing to their privileged position as witnesses and perpetrators in the scene of occupation, their testimonies are filled with personal experience stories that attest to the impossible role their elders, steeped in the abstraction and generalizations of official military and political idioms, have assigned to them—the role of "victimized victimizers" (Katriel, 2009).

At the same time, as stated in the Breaking the Silence mission statement, their project is long-term, forward-looking, and change-oriented rather than concerned with commemoration of the past. In what is perhaps an over-optimistic youthful vision, they state that the group's goal is to sound a wakeup call to Israeli society and to help call an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Concluding Remarks

The foregoing explorations of storytelling in public settings have been motivated by an interest in what Philipsen (2002) termed the "cultural communication" function of speech, whose focus is the individual/community dialectic. This particular focus on the relational links between the personal and the public represents a fundamental assumption about the role of communication, and of storytelling more specifically, in the dynamic negotiation of identities, interpersonal relationships, and communal affiliations. The ethnographic projects I have described incorporate this focus through the conjunction of personal experience stories as a subgenre and a number of very different public arenas as the settings in which these stories are performed. In each of them, the ethnographic field is defined in terms of a particular type of speech occasion around which it is organized; and on each of these speech occasions, the storytellers' personal stories serve to authenticate the encounter and concretize the ideological claims that underpin it.

Against the background of this shared framing, I have shown how deeply contextualized storytelling performances in fact are, and I have traced different ways in which personal stories can function within the public sphere. Indeed, personal voices work differently in different public arenas. My inquiry has been guided by the ethnography of communication approach to the study of language use, which has been encapsulated in the SPEAKING acronym mentioned in the introduction, and which points to fundamental dimensions of context that govern the shape of speech events. Using the analytic categories invoked by this acronym—setting, participants, ends, act, key, and so on—I probed how these can be heuristically employed in following the interpretive threads that link the contexts in which stories are told and the meaning configurations associated with them. Indeed, as demonstrated through a range of ethnographic examples, personal voices work differently in different public arenas.

In the case of the heritage site-museums I studied, the most significant categories that came into play in trying to understand the performance of the particular stories narrated in them were those of participants (both tour

guides and museum visitors), the ideological content of the message they conveyed, the museum setting as a public institution, and the particular temporal frame of Israeli history in the 1970s and 1980s, during which time this museum, as well as others of its kind, were established. My familiarity with the troubled sociopolitical scene against which settlement museum narratives emerged during those two decades sensitized me to the ideological dimensions of their messages and directed my gaze to the highly contested nature of the values and local stories that make up the settlement museum tale and to potential differences in the ideological stances of the various storytellers and the audiences who participate in these storytelling occasions. Thus, recognizing the ideological move involved in attempts to reinscribe those particular stories in the Israeli public sphere at that particular time made me attuned to the discursive negotiations surrounding issues of narrative proximity and distance as they were revealed in the storytellers' stance and in their audiences multiple responses.

Thus, I found that the guides' personal stories amplified the museum tale by providing embodied, illustrative testimonies of lived sentiments and ideological stances associated with the collective past from which contemporary audiences, even if aware of them, have become largely estranged. The storytellers' personal voices become, in turn, players in this contested cultural field, and they are amplified through their reinscription as exemplars in the communal and national arena of the museum as a state-sponsored cultural institution. In this setting, individual life trajectories and communally oriented values and meanings come together in and through public narrations of communally oriented personal stories.

In the case of the radiophonic setting of therapeutic call-in programs, the callers' personal distress narratives triggered a cultural conversation about interpersonal and familial relationships in which models of personhood and social conduct were publicly—if often implicitly—proposed and negotiated. In this case, the speech-event dimensions that emerged as most significant for my analysis involved participants (radio hosts and their callers), the channel (the radio as a mass-mediated oral medium), the message content that centered on personal problems, the key or overall tone of intimacy associated with the personal nature of the talk, as well as its temporal setting (night time). Given the centrality of interpersonal conflict stories in such programs, my ears were tuned into the tonalities of power negotiations between the hosts as self-identified relational experts and their distressed callers over the discursive, cultural, and moral idiom in which the callers' story was to be told. The radio encounter as a public performance thus became an interpersonal anchor for the establishment of fleeting, virtual communities that were constructed and reconstructed in and through introspective, self-disclosive,

mass-mediated collaborative storytelling. These emergent nocturnal communities, identified by and coalescing around voices of personal distress, were held together as much by the personal topics they inserted into the public sphere as by those they studiously kept out of the charged personal conversations they aired. The topics kept at bay were the hotly debated political and current affairs issues that populated daytime radio programming and that dominated Israelis' daily conversation. Indeed, as an ethnographer of Israeli life, I used this bit of cultural knowledge to posit that the exclusion of political and social issues from this particular, nocturnal Israeli radio conversation marked an attempt to demarcate as well as to model a domain of "the personal"—an attempt that confirms the dominance of collective issues by relegating such talk to that time of night when all but troubled souls are fast asleep.

The most notable of these excluded political concerns relates to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, in particular, the Israeli occupation regime in the West Bank and Gaza. This concern is at the center of the personal experience stories that are interspersed in Israeli soldiers' testimonies about their military service in those territories. In studying these stories as culturally situated performances, I have similarly appealed to salient dimensions of the speech situation in which they were told. In this case, too, the identity of the participants—the soldiers who tell the stories and the abstracted "Israeli society" to which they are addressed—are central to understanding their import. Other salient dimensions are the message content, as well as the goal of the storytelling and the genre typically employed. Like first-generation museum guides, the soldiers speak as authentic witnesses who command narrative authority. Notably, however, the particular goal of the testimonial project of the veteran group called Breaking the Silence is to subvert the silences and obfuscations of mainstream Israeli society and media rather than to amplify the official version of the Israeli occupation regime. The testimonies do so by putting the daily life of the occupation on public display through both word and image, and in ways that reflect both the Palestinians' plight and the soldiers' moral predicament. Like the call-in radio stories, the soldiers' personal stories are often distress narratives that are confessional in tone and that serve to problematize norms of social conduct and self-other relations. In their search for a moral compass, the soldiers' stories sound a clearly dissident voice.

As we see, then, each of these case studies points to some kind of social dislocation associated with the narrators' fragile positioning vis-à-vis their life trajectories. The old-timers in settlement museums invoke their personal stories in their nostalgic wrestling with the rupture between the pioneering past and the museum's present, a rupture that is both dramatized and

bridged via the museum encounter; the callers to the call-in radio programs tell stories that narrate their struggles with difficult ruptures in their interpersonal and familial relations as well as their sense of confusion vis-à-vis the social norms and expectations that guide interpersonal and familial life; and the soldiers' stories reveal a profound rupture in their sense of themselves as moral agents and in their trust in the military authorities and the wider society whom they consider responsible for their personal torment. By inserting their voices into the public arena, all of these storytellers display their willingness to either sustain or negotiate the larger significance of their personal stories, suggesting, in so doing, some of the ways in which persons and communities are dynamically constituted through the play of discourse.

Endnotes

1. Fieldwork materials, Binyamin, Yif'at, 11.8.1991. All translations from Hebrew are my own.
2. Channel B (*reshet bet*) of Israeli national radio, *Kol Israel,* 28.11.1996.
3. See the Breaking the Silence website at http://www.shovrimshtika.org/index_e.asp
4. Breaking the Silence, Hebron booklet, English version, March 2004, pp. 39–40.

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