PART III

SEXUALITY, GENDER, VIOLENCE AND EVERYDAY LIFE
TELLING SEXUAL STORIES
IN A LATE MODERN WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the making of 'stories' from a symbolic interactionist perspective, and raises a series of questions which need to be addressed. Taking a specific case, that of 'sexual stories,' the paper considers the prominence of such tellings in the modern world and provides an analysis of one kind of emerging sexual story—those of 'sexual suffering and survival' which highlight the lesbian and gay experience of 'coming out,' and the rape 'survivor' process. The paper suggests some generic gestures of modern sexual story telling and concludes with a discussion of how new narratives of sexuality may be emerging in a late modern society.

The Modern Western World has become cluttered with sexual stories. Every modern invention—mass print, the camera, film, video, the telephone, even the computer—has helped
provide a veritable erotropic landscape to millions of lives. From the psychopathological babblings of Krafft Ebbian ‘freaks’ to the inner musings of Freudian patients, research has provided its share of sexual stories. But it goes much further: from the latest paperback books revealing the stories of Women Who Love Too Much to Dr. Ruth’s tele-advice programs (Norwood 1985; Simonds 1992; White 1992); from the public tales told to Donahue and Oprah in full frontal television to those of a Nancy Zigemeyer writing her ‘rape story’ for the latest media ‘docudrama’ (Carbaugh 1988; Masciarelli 1991; Zigemeyer 1992); from the glaring spotlight placed on an Anita Hill (cf. Morrison 1992) or Magic Johnson to the personal narratives of ‘coming out gay’ and ‘breaking the silence,’ a grand message keeps being shouted: tell about your sex.

Tell about your sexual behaviour, your identity your dreams your desires, your fantasies, your diseases. Tell about your desire for a person of the same sex, your desire for young children, your desire to masturbate, your desire to cross dress, your desire to be beaten, and your desire not to have sex. Tell about your sexual dysfunction, your orgasm problems, your sexual addictions. Give your narrative of living with AIDS, and more. Once outside the world of formal story telling, we are all being enjoined to do it daily to each other. The truth of our lives lies in better communication. An experience, once noticed, simply has to be slotted into the ceaseless narrating of life. We have become the sexual story telling, confessional society.¹

Until very recently, almost all of these have been taken as signs of truth: they have been presumed to tell us something about our essential sexual natures. When Oprah declared on a special issue of her television program that ‘I’m a survivor of child abuse,’ it was heard by many as saying something essential about her life. It was taken as the truth. Likewise, in the world of social science research, the modernist quest for truth has been especially strong. Research will tell us what we really do through orgasmic book keeping; tell us who we really are through our identity struggles; tease us back to our essential sexual nature: historical tales, psychodynamic tales, survey tales, dream tales, agony tales, ‘recovery’ tales, film and video tales, medical tales. This has been the age of the sexual story as sign of the truth. But it is clear that something much more than the discovery of the truth is going on here. This paper seeks to establish ‘sexual story telling’ as a problem for analysis in its own right. An example form an early research project of mine may help clarify what is the issue.

RESEARCHING SEXUAL STORIES

In the late 1970s, I was involved in a funded research project which gathered the life stories of a number of people who perceived themselves as sexually different. The aim was to gather life stories and to examine experiences previously always considered individualistic—even clinical, and to place them in a sociological frame (ESRC 1979). About fifty interviews took place but the data was never published. It has however remained a haunting presence. To provide an idea of the research, here is one of the briefest vignettes.² What might the following mean?

I travel to the North of England where I meet a young man in his early twenties in a hotel lobby. We go to my hotel room, and he tells me in enormous detail of his fascination with feet, shoes and stockings; and of his desire to be trod upon by women in high heels. As this happens, he fantasises a dagger being plunged into his stomach. It is a long story, which takes me through his childhood memories of this and the ‘driven’ nature of this ‘single’ adult life. I record the conversation, and respond very sympathetically to him: he seems a nice enough man. Back at my university, the tape is transcribed and makes fascinating reading. The secretary names him Harry (a pseudonym: but interestingly her husband is also called Harry!). This transcript is sent to Harry, who comments profusely on it. A short correspondence is set up, and I send him a copy of a key book in this field: The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe. For the past ten years, the transcript and its commentary sits in my filing cabinet. I have lost contact with him.

This vignette could be multiplied many times; each interview had its own character. Many a tale was told. While what they all said is important, a decade later I want to raise different questions.

What, for instance, brought me to seek out a man who wanted to talk about his ‘unusual’ sexual life? Why should I, in the name of Holy Social Science, want to coax anyone to tell me about their sexual lives? What brought him to the hotel room to tell me all about it? How could he produce such stories, and how did my ‘tolerant’ responses actively encourage him to tell a certain sort of story—he could sense very early on that I was not going to be shocked or censorious in any way. But surely that made him say certain things rather than others? And to leave endless undetected absences? How much of his story was a performance of a dress rehearsal he had practiced many times in solitude before, and was now presenting to me? What was the relationship of my transcribed interview to his
actual life? And how was I to write about it? In his voice, or in my voice, or in his voice through my voice? And then, once read by others—including me and him—what multiple interpretations is it open to? Or is there perhaps a correct reading which would finally establish the truth of such foot fetishists? What would it do to him once published? And indeed, what has it done to him since it has not been published? And so it goes on. The questions proliferate.

In the above, I am standing on the edge of the fourth wave of ethnography (Johnson and Altheide 1990), where the ‘stories from the field’ are not mere external resources, but topics of self reflection and investigation in their own right. They can no longer be taken as transparent and unproblematic in their search for truth. I am part of this social process, which can be seen as one more manifestation of the increasing self awareness which some social scientists are already facing, and which others will eventually be forced to confront (cf. Denzin 1989, 1990; Van Maanen 1988). Just what was I doing? I was getting stories that were made possible through the wider culture (they could not easily have been said at other times); that performed certain functions in the lives of their tellers; that indeed had certain consequences for the social worlds in which they lived. Indeed, while my questions are about sexual stories, these problems are surely present in all research. The power of the metaphor of storytelling and narrative has recently become a seductive one in the social sciences (cf. McCall 1990; Richardson 1990); so that instead of taking stories mentioned above as givens—as providing rays of real truth on lives—the task has increasingly become one of producing a sociology of stories. The question becomes how such an activity may now be approached.

**STORY TELLING AS SYMBOLIC INTERACTION**

The idea that culture may be viewed as stories, that the social world is a text, that society is a discourse or that lives are narratives have all become contemporary commonplace of social science. Much of this analysis draws heavily from a canon of well known ‘deconstructionists’: Foucault, Barthes, Baudrillard and the rest (e.g., Foucault 1979). But it has signposted a very unsociological turn in which sociologists no longer see society as their central concern but instead reduce it to a text, a narrative, a story, even a simulacrum. My concerns are very different: elsewhere I have sketched an approach to stories which is more sociological, drawing as it does from the renewal of interest in the symbolic interactionist inheritance of Herbert Blumer (Blumer 1969; Plummer 1990; cf. Denzin 1992). Here, social life may be viewed as a vast web of joint actions, of which storytelling is a part. Society is constituted through a ceaseless stream of interacting people piecing together their separate lines of activity. “Everywhere we look in a human society we see people engaging in forms of joint action” (Blumer 1969, p. 70). People may be seen as engaging in fitting together lines of activity around ‘stories,’ and sexual stories in all their forms are part of this. People are engaged in making stories and consuming stories in a fragile encoding/decoding process (Hall 1980) involving criss-crossing lines of joint activity where there is no clear center; a social world full of negotiations and ambiguities, and lodged in an emergent flow of power.

**Story telling actions** involve some folk as producers of sexual stories. Some are storytellers, turning themselves into social, sexual objects. They write lengthy autobiographies exploring their inner sexual natures. They produce voluminous correspondence or diaries which display the minutiae of their erotic lives. They are compelled to explain ‘who they really are’ to their lawyers and doctors, their psychiatrists and counsellors, their teachers and radio interviewers. They provide stories for sociologists, oral histories for oral historians, case studies for psychologists and clinicians, and good copy for chat show hosts and hostesses. They even, and more complexly, perform their stories: in drag, on a stage, in a movie. Others may be seen as coxers: their line of activity is to seduce stories out of people. They become listeners and questioners; they probe, interview, interrogate and sometimes just simply clasp their hands, smile and listen. They are the Kinseys, the Freuds, the Shere Hites and even the parents demanding to know what their child has been up to. It was me doing my research.

Another major group are the consumers: their line of activity is to consume these stories, or more benignly, to interpret and make sense of them all. These are the viewers who watch the documentary of a paedophile life on prime time TV and find themselves in an imagined community of the like minded; the bookworms who consume the self-help guides for *Women Who Love Too Much* and find their true self being harboured within the text (cf. Simons 1992);
they are the women hearing or seeing the stories in the media on rape. Again, such readings are social processes and just how these ‘readers’ interpret the story is a key to understanding stories and building ‘audience ethnography’ (cf. Morley 1992).

All these people—tellers, coaxers, consumers—are engaged in a stream of story actions, and tellsers may become consumers, coaxers may become tellers, consumers may become coaxers. At the center of much of this action, often (but not always) emerges the story products: the social objects (texts) which harbour the meanings that have to be handled through interaction. These congeal or freeze already preconstituted moments of a life from the producer or storyteller and the coaxer and await the handling of a consumer. The meanings of stories are hence never fixed but emerge out of a ceaselessly changing stream of interaction between producers and readers in shifting contexts and social worlds. They may, of course, become habitualised. But always and everywhere meaning is a problematic emergent that is contextually based. It is never simply and abstracted text, discourse or narrative.

There is no space in this article to develop a full symbolic interactionist account of stories, but it does raise a great many important issues. (cf. Plummer 1990, 1995; see also Bruner 1987; Denzin 1989; McCadams 1985; Spence 1982). For instance it asks the nature of stories. What generic forms do stories take? How are they organised? What are the sexual metaphors we live by? It asks about the making of stories. How did the story emerge historically? How do people socially construct their stories, and what functions might such stories serve in their lives? It questions the consumption of stories. How might a reader interpret a text? What role might the story play in the consumers life? It looks at the flow of joint actions. What are the links between the story and the flow of production and consumption?

And it then examines the links between stories and the wider social worlds. What too are the contextual conditions for stories to be told and for stories to be received? What brings people to give voice to this story at this historical moment? Other questions might focus upon the role of such stories in the political process (cf. Fraser 1989; Young 1991). And, finally, a symbolic interactionist account of stories would ask about the criteria of truth which may be applied to stories? What is the link between stories and the life? How may the relativist impasse be avoided?

I address these questions elsewhere, and locate them in a stream of political actions (Plummer 1995). Here I will examine just one limited question concerned with one pattern of sexual storytelling that I have found in my research—that of the personal sexual narrative—and suggest how such stories are the products of social change.

‘SUFFERING, COMING OUT AND SURVIVING STORIES AS A GENERIC PLOT: THE MODERNIST QUEST

One task for the sociologist is to listen to stories until a generic pattern may be detected from many disparate tellings. Genre and generic social processes intertwine: an underlying form may be suggested. And indeed, over the years, from fieldwork, interviews and reading, I have heard the elements of an emerging generic personal narrative of ‘coming out’ over and over again.

There have been many attempts to fit stories into a cluster of generic plots. Elsbree suggests five such plots: taking a journey; engaging in a contest; enduring suffering; pursuing consumption; establishing a home. It is not difficult to see much sexual story telling crystalizing into such themes. Most apparent, and possibly because of my own life story and that of some of my research subjects, are the lesbian and gay ‘coming out stories.’ Here are men and women engaged on a journey of discovery to be true to their inner self. The titles of anthologies reveal this: The Lesbian Path; Lesbian Crossroads; The Coming Out Stories. Frequently this voyage starts with some early recollection that “I was different,” and then proceeds to explore for years and years why this is so. Terrible sufferings are recounted: of sexual desire, of secrecy, of solitaryness, of shame. An enemy is created and a contest ensues: parents, friends and ultimately the whole homophobic, heterosexist, patriarchal, racist, classist and unbearable ‘straight’ world. In some stories, it is powerfully contested; in others, it forms a silent backdrop for the suffering. Slowly the “true” nature of ones being is revealed: ‘I am gay,’ ‘I am lesbian.’ And from this, the task is on to make this inner being more and more the outer being. Consumption may occur. And, despite further difficulties along the way, if one is lucky one will arrive home: coming out, taking on a strong identity, becoming part of a community (e.g., Curtis 1988; Hall Carpenter Archives 1989a, 1989b; Lesbian History

Of course, such a condensed narrative does no justice at all to the enormous complexities of sexual story telling; but I think it has a startling common ring nevertheless. It suggests a clear pattern of change: from a secretive world to a public one; from a private world to a participatory one; from a shameful world to a proud one. Yet gay and lesbian stories are not unique in this kind of story. The tales of the transvestites, transexuals, sado-masochists, paedophiles that I researched and have read about have been recounted in a strikingly similar language in the Western world over the past two decades (e.g., Jorgensen 1967; Marcus 1981). Very real pains and sufferings get condensed into narrative plots. Likewise the past two decades have heard many ‘victims’ of sexual violence tell the same ‘formal’ story (e.g., Armstrong 1976; Kelly 1988; McNaron and Morgan 1982). Here again there are voyages of discovery, sufferings, contests, consummations, ‘homes.’ Here again personal, secretive, shameful worlds get remoulded into stories that are public, participatory and proud. Most commonly, a woman—or girl, or sometimes a boy—is forced into an extraordinarily painful sexual experience which traumatises them and causes great suffering. There is shame and secrecy. But the enemy slowly becomes clear: the rapist, the abuser; the patriarchal order. The contest is on to establish how foul this abuser is. There is a journey to get out of this traumatised state—one that may start years after the event, but which cannot be completed till one recognises that “I was a victim” and now “I am a survivor.” A new life may be rebuilt, sex may become possible again, the enemy is dealt with, consummation is achieved. A new home is established—often with other survivors, or other women. This says nothing of the enormously complex personal sufferings behind such narratives; nor can it reveal that in many individual instances the stories will not fit each sub plot, but only some. But again there is a striking commonality to the tales I have read and heard to the generic one above. And more could be added. For instance, the outpourings of sexual self-help books develop very similar story lines (cf. Simonds 1992).

There are then a series of new stories emerging over the past thirty years, which may well have a similar generic form of ‘suffering, coming out and surviving.’ Elsewhere I argue that their emergence is dependent on the creation of communities that will hear the stories (e.g., gay and lesbian movements, women’s movements, therapy groups); upon shifts in communication media (paperbacking, the rise of TV, etc.), and other factors. In addition, I suggest that the stories themselves may well have historic roots in the much more classic structures of testimony, confession, conversion and redemption: age old stories. Again these are not my concerns here. What is of interest is the emergence of these new stories in recent years that manage to connect to long standing generic story-telling structures. These modern narratives may well now be said so often because they fit so readily into the broader narratives of the storytelling of our sexuality that have engulfed us over the past century or so. Not only the power of the generic story of ‘journey,’ ‘suffering,’ and ‘home’ but also the stories which metaphorise the naturalness and driveness of sex; the truth of sex; the unitary, essential, core experiences of sex which connect in some deeply patterned fashion capable of discovery; the power of sex as shaper, cause and unifier of whole lives. Sex as natural, sex as science, sex as essence. These then are all distinctly modernist takes of sexuality.

And it generates the question: will such stories survive? If stories have their time, can be heard only under specific social conditions, then will they eventually fade? Once these particular stories have been heard often and loudly, it becomes possible for them to become tired and cliched, and even face imminent death (Brown 1987). Some of them may have been said so much that they start to reach exhaustion. Many a self-reflecting lesbian must begin to ponder after a while whether their life is quite as neat as their “Coming Out” narrative of it; and likewise anyone who has heard the repetition of abuse survivors’ stories must begin to at least ponder whether the story is more artefact then reality.

THE DRIFT TO LATE MODERN TALES

Such ponderings fit the radical doubts that are supposed to be accompanying a late modern period: for many, it seems the world can no longer be seen in straightforward, transparent terms. We are tottering to the far side of modernity (what some writers insist is postmodernity). And with this change in social worlds, we can expect that some ‘sexual stories’ will come to assume new forms. There may be newer and more diverse stories which are starting to shun unities
usually it happens from outside: the center no longer holds. The sexual life can no longer be seen to harbour an essential unitary core with an essential truth waiting to be discovered: there are only fragments—disrupting, desenting, dissolving. The hope for establishing the essential truth of our sex gives way to an awareness of differences everywhere.

These broad changes are happening both in terms of how stories are told—the shifts in modes, moods, methods; and in what is being told—the shifts in narratives, myths, metaphors. Examples are many. The rise of the new Queer Movement exemplifies a shift in content: here are men and women no longer following the blueprints of coming out stories, of clear gay and lesbian typology, of linear narrative. Instead, the New Queers break asunder traditional tales of essential gays (e.g., De Lauretis 1991; Fuss 1991). Hence sexual storytelling is changing for a few.

Some stories are becoming more and more self-conscious and reflective. No longer a straightforward description of who one is—a being a man, being gay, even being a survivor—the terms themselves become so discussed, elaborated upon, contested that they start to look like elaborate self-consciously pieced together constructions. For some men, for instance, ‘Being a man’ is no longer a simple matter of being born that way: the recent proliferation of ‘men’s stories—conservative, profeminist, Iron John, socialist, backlash, gay, black and so on (cf. Clatterbaugh 1990), make it increasingly necessary to choose and construct a story of what it means to be a man. One recent male autobiography, David Jackson’s Unmasking Masculinity (1990) exemplifies this by describing ‘autobiography as critical inquiry’. Here there is a ‘refusal to search for the true self’, a recognition of the myth of unified identity, a ‘challenging of chronological, linear sequence’, a sense of the ‘problem of voice’, and a rethinking of the relationship between past and present (Morgan 1990, pp. 5-13). Much feminist autobiography also works from such ‘late modern assumptions’. The artifice of biographical story telling becomes visible: the very act of assembling the story becomes apart of the story.

Sexual stories are also being told in less conventional forms through new means of communication bringing new strategies of telling. Telephone sex, for instance, sprouted during the 1980’s creating a new way of communicating sexual stories without direct contact. And a new literary tale accompanied it: the play Jerkers

and uniformities, reject naturalism and determinacies, seek out immanences and ironies, and ultimately find pastiche, complexities and shifting perspectives. There may be an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ of sex; the arrival of an era when ‘no orthodoxy can be adopted,’ a time when it has all been said and done; and all that is left is to ‘play with the pieces.’ Late Modern stories do not replace the modern narratives but run alongside of them, providing a dispersal of critical commentary.

Thus we can observe many sexual stories of Authority fracturing in the face of Participant Stories. The grander claims of religion and science are still clung to by many, but their claims to know the truth of our sexuality in the past is now under intense scrutiny. In the late modern period, many new voices start to get heard in their own right: abuse victims, people with AIDS, women’s recovery tales. Often such tales turn themselves into new voices of authority, and the old voices of religion and science continue to attempt to shout above the multiplicity of emerging voices (cf. Hunter 1991). But, and short of a reversion to some central authoritarian and tribal regimes, the future brings a potential for a proliferation of contested and clashing participant sexual stories.

Further, sexual stories of the Categorically Clear no longer hold, and in their place comes Stories of Deconstruction. In the late modern period, the very language we use to grasp the world comes to the fore as a problem—no longer can it be simply assumed to describe or reflect ‘reality.’ The old language is seen as cliche, straitjacketing, empty of meaning (cf. Klapp 1991). This has become the age of the sign, where language becomes increasingly problematic and where sexual stories become more and more ambiguous. Sexual storytelling becomes much more self-conscious.

More problematically, we can also observe sexual stories of the Essence fracturing into Stories of Difference and multiplicity. As a trend this goes back well into the nineteenth century—when a recognition of perspectivism and pluralism were to be found in some writings (from James to Weber). Nevertheless the dominant stories of the past purported to discover the spiritual or scientific truths of our sexual beings. They tried to lay before us a core, a center of our sexual lives. This is still a very dominant story and it likely to remain so; but it has been increasingly punctured. Sometimes this happens from within—‘progressive religions’ want to adapt to the times, science hints at relativities, therapy finds ‘invented memories.’ But
revealed the intricacies of telephone orgasm by the mid-1980's and *Vox* by Nicholson Bakler was high on the best sellers in both the United Kingdom and the United States in early 1992. Likewise, computer sex lines now enable people to write their sexual stories all over the world to like minded people, modifying them as they go along. The Music Video has become a new erotic/pornographic form for telling sexual stories (Kaplan 1987). Indeed, stories have become increasingly visual—and a new 'visual literacy' is required to understand them. It is the story told in *Paris, Texas*, where husband and wife meet across one way mirrors to engage in the prostitution of sex talk; or the story of sex, *lies and videotapes* where the erotic interview takes the place of the erotic act. New modes of communications become new sexual stories and traditional narrative devices break down.

Other changes are happening. Late modern sexual stories are directing themselves to differential taste cultures whereby stories are told to groups which may well be less and less homogenous. The days of the truly mass market, mass culture and mass audiences are declining: many stories are told to specialised audiences (Lowenstein and Merrill 1990; Neuman 1992). Stories are also becoming increasingly 'recursive,' more dependent upon borrowings—from the mass media, and from social science—and may become even more so. Thus the stories given through paperbacks, soap operas, chat shows, docudramas, film, video, self-help manuals, therapy workshops, and music videos create resources from which to tell stories. The media itself draws upon the media to tell sexual stories—classically, Madonna's *Material Girl* drawing from Monroe's *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*, for instance—and the constant reconstruction of old film genres in Music Television. People in turn draw upon these genres in their sexual storytelling. Ideas become more and more recursive, acting back on themselves. Ideas discovered at one moment—the importance of 'rape trauma syndrome,' the idea of 'the transsexual,' the notion of 'women who love too much'—become the organising principles of our lives at a later moment. The works of Freud or a Foucault or a Feminist are consumed avidly, becoming the textual frame of many stories.

And more. Not only is the media drawn upon, the boundaries between fiction and 'reality' collapse. Fiction becomes faction. The talk show entertains us through others telling us the truth of their orgasms. The docudrama simulates the sexual story from real life and feeds it back as reality. Nancy Ziegenmeyer's rape becomes a story told on chat shows, paperbacks, serialised newspaper columns and a docudrama. Hence the boundaries between her life and the multiple media events blurs. Any other rape fiction comes to look just like her faction.

Once stories become more self-conscious, recursive, and told to distinctive audiences, the stories become more and more likely to challenge authorities and eclipse one standard telling. The multiple stories of 'gays' and 'lesbians,' for instance, simply discredit the stories of scientists, who while they can go on saying their 'scientific story of pathology' as before will have manifestly decreasing relevance to gay and lesbian lives.

Closely linked to all of this, the content of our sexual stories may also be starting to differ. A curious change can be sensed in cult popular films like *Blue Velvet*, *Sex, Lies and Videotapes*; and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, in books like *Panic Sex*, and Bret Easton Ellis's randomly violent less than Zero; while MTV has been championed by many as the sexual embodiment of the postmodern. Dominant genres cease, realist readings end, and a multiplicity of ironic, parodic, pastiched, self-conscious and hence often unintelligible voices start being heard to be simulating sexualities. The sexual life is no longer seen as harboring an essential unitary core with an essential truth waiting to be discovered: there are only fragments—disrupted and dissimilar, dissimulating and dissipating. The sexual life as a core or essential truth fractures; fragments, slices, surfaces, a multitude of bits is what we are left with. Any sense of a Grand Story breaks down. Along with this, the old linear narratives—first this, then that—and the old causal stories—the childhood fix—break down. Identities blur and change. We may be entering a different historical period where the old identity stories that researchers heard, myself included, simply are slowly losing their grip upon narrative reconstruction. Partly this is through intensive fashionability and a desire to be 'in.' There seems to be a new need to change 'who one is' regularly. The videos of a Madonna or a Michael Jackson show identities shifting not just across videos but within the same one. Jackson's 'Black and White' provides images of constant and glittering identity shift as a man becomes a woman, a black becomes a white, an old person becomes a young person. This is part of a wider story now well documented in social science: of the Protean Self, The Mutable Self, The Homeless Mind, The Narcissistic Personality, The Saturated Self. Here identities in the late modern world are no longer
authority, harboured the truth, and discovered clear diagnostic categories. Consider the case of abuse survivors stories, or gay coming out stories. Most of this storytelling remains firmly modern in so far as: (1) it still claims to be the truth—the truth of coming out, the truth of abuse. Both the Gay and Lesbian Movement and the Womens Movement are, ironically, largely politically champions of a modernist essentialism in which essential natures are used as a basis for “identity politics”; (2) It has a conventional narrative of time and cause: such stories are usually linear and suggest antecedent factors in shaping the problems—be they genetic (as in many gay coming out stories) or psychodynamic (as in many abuse stories—cycles of violence, little girls within etc); (3) It still has some conception of Enlightenment Progress: amelioration, often via therapy, counselling or consciousness raising, is hailed as the outcome: the world seems to be developing much more optimistically than in many of the postmodern accounts; and (4) Talk is talk: what people say may be quoted as in some way mirroring the truth. The words are what they say. Coming Out is Coming Out. Abuse is Abuse. In these stories, the world of the late/postmodern is a long way off.

Yet an awareness of the shifting social conditions that make different stories possible at different times is a major outcome of this kind of analysis. Indeed, it leads directly to the question of how, in a context of social change and the emergence of a possibly late modern world, do certain kinds of sexual stories come to be heard at certain times? When does a story come into its time? When can a voice and a claim about sexuality be heard? And when do stories grow stale and make way for new ones? Lesbian and gay ‘coming out stories,’ although said, could hardly be heard before the 1970s, and even since that time, disclosure patterns have shifted (cf. Cain 1991). Likewise, the stories of the survivors of sexual abuse were not heard till the 1980s. Or even more recently, would the wildly different stories of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill have been heard at all in 1975, or 1875? (cf. Sumrall and Taylor 1992). And on a wider scale, who could imagine the performance-stories of a Prince or a Madonna being told in the 1950s, when the wiggle of an Elvis was just entering the world of possible public movements. Or what sense might an audience have made of Sex, Lies and Videotapes in 1940, even assuming it could have been made—which it couldn’t? This also leads to the linked and crucial political concern over what stories cannot be heard today. What voices, languages, metaphors, tropes are in silence? I am asking stable or fixed. In the most extreme versions of this story, we move beyond human beings (“The Death of the Subject”) and identities (the word ‘postidentitarian’ has already been invented.) (Kellner 1992). The ‘Human Being’ vanishes altogether from the story.

In late modern sexual stories, a language of excess is over present. Hyperbolic madness starts to invade the stories. We see this in the writings of the Krokers when they talk about “panic sex” and “excremental sex” (Kroker 1987 p. 181). This voice is not exactly new—there are shades of De Sade, Nietzsche, Bataille, Genet and others floating around here. But it is certainly one that disrupts the major narrative convention of our modern period. Sometimes the excess is simply a product of super-hype commercialism: the stories become glitter, glossy, high tech, commercial, consumerist. Pornography, for instance, takes on a new form. At its most extreme, we enter the world of cyborgs and posthuman ‘clades’: a world of chemical implants, programming of brain electrons, of computers matched up to persons, of electronic surveillance, of science fiction. And herein lies a clue as to another coming change. Whereas my subjects read texts to find out truths about themselves, however complex that process was, the future may bring readings that are more akin to endlessly playful/ironic layers of narratives. The texts for reading other texts are shifting ground. Indeed, just as the produced narratives start to become less coherent and more multiple, so too do the readings; they feed into each other.

A major caution is in order here. I do not think there are many people telling stories like those I have just described. They are rare and probably belong at present to rather select (maybe elite) cultural groupings. Indeed, I have yet to meet people who would tell stories like the ones I describe, who account for their lives as being ‘post abuse’ or ‘post gay,’ for instance. But as the dominant metanarrative gets fractured, dispersed, or even eliminated, it will become easier for stories to be told in a more pastiched, potpourried, polysemic, pluralistic, and polycentric mode whereby the narrative can be assembled with a less clear driving, linear force to it.

CONCLUSION: THE TALE AND ITS TIME

Thus, however dramatic all this looks as a sign of change, most sexual stories continue in the modernist mode talking as if they had an
here questions about the conditions for the reception of stories and how this is linked to social change (cf. Bennett 1981).

My model of story telling flow as joint actions suggests several key issues. Stories can be heard when a community has been fattened up, rendered ripe and willing to hear such stories. They cannot easily be heard amongst isolated individuals: they gain a momentum from an interpretive community of support. Thus, for instance while people could ‘come out’ as gay in the 1960s and before, it really meant in isolation, to oneself, or in the disguised and furtive world of secret gay communities—the homosexual underworld as it was often then referred to. To turn it from a private, personal tale to one that can be told publicly and loudly is a task of immense political proportions. It requires a collective effort, creating spaces in the wider social order and the wider story telling spaces. Bit by bit—through the leaflet, the pamphlet, the booklet, the book, the meeting, the recording, the newspaper, the television programme, the film, the chat show and so on—the voice gains a little more space, and the claims become a little bigger (though there will always be counter claims). But if stories indeed have their time, some stories may be out of time. They may not be able to be told, having no audience ready for them.

The later modern tales I have been outlining above have at present only small audiences, and they may indeed have no future. But it may be the case that audiences are currently in the process of being “fattened up” to make such stories—both their production and reception—more and more plausible in the future.

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Telling Sexual Stories In A Late Modern World

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NOTES

1. The confessional mode of sexual story telling seems at its most acute in North America, where there are many paperbacks providing personal narratives of the sexual life and TV chat shows seem to aim at producing first hand accounts of more and more unusual sexual experiences. In Europe, the trend seems less pronounced.

2. These stories have never been published, except in the slightest of brief extracts. Their very voices became more and more worrying to me—raising too the problematic nature of all such similar research.

3. This line of reasoning will not be persuad here, but it is to be found in the writing of Judith Butler (1990) and the recent collections edited by Sue-Ellen Case (1990) and Diane Fuss (1991). There is now an elaborate body of theory known as Performance Theory (e.g., Schechner 1988). None of this, of course is now: interactionism has along interest in the theory of dramaturgy (cf. Brisset and Edgley 1990).

4. There is no space here for a full discussion of this idea. Suffice to say that the idea of ‘genre’ in film and literary theory has a resonance with the interactionist notion derived ultimately from Simmel of generic social process (cf. Prus 1987). In both instances, an underlying form is detected which works its way through specific functions. Certain stories are both genre and generic social process: the overlap is great.

5. This is derived from Elsbroe (1982) who has suggested that there are only a limited number of plots and names these five.

6. This literature is now enormous. For a valuable recent literary review see Zimmerman (1990). And for examples of such accounts see Curtis (1988); Penelope (1989); Lesbian History Group (1989).

7. High modernity is Giddens’ term (Giddens 1991). I do not believe the rupture is quite as new or quite as radical as the postmodernists do.

8. These are all well known borrowings from the writings of Lyotard, Jencks, Kellner and others!

9. There is a very substantial literature on women’s biography: see Benstock (1988) for illustrations.

10. On Visual Literacy, see Denzin (1991 p. 8) who draws upon the works of Ulmer and Altheide.

11. See the discussion of this in Simonds (1992) where she reviews readers responses to self help therapy books, many of which are about sex. There is a growing area of research in ‘audience ethnography’ see Morley (1992).

12. This literature is now enormous, and enormously recursive: it often features amongst the best selling non fiction. See for example the works of Lasch
REFERENCES
