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What are you reading?

Lindemann Nelson, H. (2001). *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*. New York: Cornell University Press.

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Although Hilde Lindemann Nelson's seminal work *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, it remains a powerful exploration of narrative resistance that is highly relevant in today's moral-political climate. In our era of post-truth politics, Lindemann's image of a continuous narrative struggle between *master narratives* and *counterstories* seems all too present.

Take the case of Liam Conejo Ramos, a five-year-old Ecuadorian boy taken into custody by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In his blue bunny hat and Spiderman backpack, pictures of the toddler's arrest immediately went viral, sparking outrage about the Trump administration's immigration crackdown. The administration, however, was quick to express its own indignation, proclaiming that ICE had acted to keep Liam safe while his 'illegal alien' father and mother 'abandoned' him by fleeing from and refusing to open the door for ICE (Homeland Security, 2026a, 2026b; U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2026). U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance asked: 'Well, what are they supposed to do? Are they supposed to let a 5-year-old child freeze to death? Are they not supposed to arrest an illegal alien in the United States of America?' (Chowdhury, 23/01/2026).

This spinning of a toddler's arrest into a narrative of safety and protection from the actions of 'illegal aliens' is a textbook example of an oppressive master narrative. In *Damaged Identities*, Lindemann (2001, pp. 106 – 107) defines this as a narrative or shared cultural understanding that identifies an individual or group as morally inferior to uphold a system of abusive power relations. While Lindemann focused on groups like nurses, Romani and transgender individuals, today's dehumanization of migrants operates on the very same narrative mechanisms. Oppressive narratives like 'the illegal alien' contort and wrap themselves around stories and images that oppose them, co-opting and explaining away resistant images and events with false yet plausible accounts (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 161).

So, how can we resist these highly absorbent, oppressive master narratives? Instead of taking on oppression as a whole, Lindemann focuses on its narrative dimension: how oppressive narratives damage the identity of marginalized groups by marking them as morally inferior (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 106). This restricts the moral agency of oppressed groups by limiting the opportunities they have access to and causing them to internalize ideas of inferiority about themselves (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, pp. xi - xii). To liberate their moral agency, therefore, oppressed groups must narratively resist and repair the damage done to their identity (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 21). According to Lindemann, a new, positive identity or counterstory can be developed, which replaces a damaging master narrative with one that commands respect (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 6). So, even though master narratives like 'the illegal alien' are good at absorbing opposition, alternative conceptions can become powerful tools for resisting them. One can try to explain away his arrest, but the sheer innocence of 5-year-old Liam Ramos and his blue bunny hat did intensify worldwide outrage about the Trump administration's treatment of migrants, fuelling community organizing and partly shifting the narrative towards migrants' humanity and right to protection.

In connecting narrative to resistance and insubordination, Lindemann explicitly sets herself apart from earlier narrative ethical work by Nussbaum, MacIntyre and the like. She rejects the idea that narrative needs to take the shape of high-brow literature or shared community narratives to make moral sense of oneself and the world (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, pp. 65 - 66). Rather, it is precisely these overarching narratives that often oppress and exclude the experiences of certain groups (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, pp. 59 - 60). Instead, Lindemann reimagines narrative from a relational feminist perspective, acknowledging its

oppressive as well as liberatory potential in shaping our identities (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 67).

To do so, Lindemann draws on the experiences of minoritized groups, following in the footsteps of other feminist authors like Iris Marion Young, Marilyn Friedman, and Marilyn Frye. By making these lived realities an essential part of her analysis, she aims to make the counterstory both an analytical tool *and* a practical asset for shaping and driving resistance (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 186). In this way, *Damaged Identities* raises the stakes of our narrative imagination, letting the ethical dimensions of personal and group identity flow into the political. Through the counterstory, Lindemann proposes a groundbreaking and unique philosophical exploration of narrative as a crossroads for identity, agency and political power: the narrative is personal, ergo, is political.

We can question, however, whether Lindemann fully succeeds in politicizing narrative as such. While the counterstory is a powerful conceptual tool, its practical scope for collective political action remains underexplored. As an activist familiar with the challenges of collective decision-making in activist and political groupings, my reading of *Damaged Identities* left me with many questions about the dynamics of collectively imagining, negotiating and divulging a counterstory. In my research, therefore, I explore these processes of counternarration more in-depth, grounding the analytical concepts of counterstory and narrative resistance in the messiness of real activist practice. Combining literature review with a co-creative qualitative study within two activist organizations, I explore how oppressed groups renegotiate their collective story in practice. As such, my research critically engages with Lindemann's analysis, developing a richer, praxis-informed concept of narrative resistance that taps into its unrealized practical potential for navigating real-world activist challenges.

Even 25 years after its first publication, *Damaged Identities* continues to speak profoundly to the cultural and political zeitgeist. Counterstories cannot end oppression point-blank, but we are moving rapidly into a time where tools to reclaim the narrative on oppressed groups' moral worth are increasingly and sorely needed. Far from questioning its current day relevance, my work aims to expand the scope of narrative resistance to our fragmented political context of scapegoating and propaganda. The politics of narrative cannot and should not be the prerogative of anti-democratic and oppressive forces. Therefore, *Damaged Identities* remains an essential read to understand the mechanisms and damage of narrative oppression, and to imagine a way towards collectively resisting, repairing, and rewriting our lived realities.

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