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Unsettling the Self: the Paradoxes of Narrative Identity in Christian Testimonial Practice

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Born-again conversion offers the paradoxical promise of self-transcending self-transformation, which takes narrative form when converts attempt to recount their experiences: how to tell a story of self-transformation, in which oneself is neither the author nor the agent of change? Existing scholarship suggests that conversion narratives work insofar as they resolve underlying paradoxes and stitch together a sense of coherent selfhood. This paper tacks in the opposite direction: the analysis focuses on the tendencies of conversion narratives to blur, blend and double over categorical bounds of selfhood, highlighting paradoxes rather than looking for their resolution. The paper contends, therefore, that conversion narrative practices facilitate converts' experience of conversion, not only insofar as they resolve paradox and stitch together coherent identity, but also insofar as they cultivate ephemeral experiences and explorations of narrative paradoxes that are inherent to—though often hidden from—most any attempt to find and feel identity.

Key words: narrative; identity; religion; testimony.

Born-again Christian conversion offers a paradoxical promise to those who would take the leap: the promise of self-transformation the sources of which transcend the self. Surrender yourself, your decisions and your agency, to God and watch as he transforms you despite yourself. Adjudicating the ultimate veracity of this kind of divine agency is beyond the reach of social science, but this has not prevented scholars from attempting to account for dimensions of the experience of divine agency that are amenable to social scientific measure (e.g., Csordas 1994;

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Luhrman 2012; Smilde 2007; Stromberg 1993).[1] Existing scholarship on the role that conversion narratives play in cultivating experiences of self-transcending self-transformation emphasize the cohering functions of the narrative practices (Beckford 1978; Cadge and Davidman 2006; Engelke 2004; Griffin 1990; Harding 1987; Johnston 2013; Meyer 1998; Smilde 2007; Stromberg 1993). From this perspective conversion narratives *work* insofar as they resolve underlying paradoxes and achieve a semblance of coherent identity, thereby providing converts with feelings of relief from latent conflicts of self, feelings which in turn complement their salvific experiences of religious conversion. The central argument guiding this article's analysis tacks in the opposite direction: it acknowledges social demands for coherent identity that often accompany narrative practices, but it thematizes their underlying paradoxes. From the perspective that I adopt here, then, the practices of conversion narratives facilitate converts' experience of conversion, not only insofar as they stitch together coherent identity, but also insofar as they permit, even encourage, the ephemeral experience and exploration of narrative paradoxes that are inherent to—though often hidden from—most any attempt to find and feel identity.[2]

The stretching of identity between desires/demands for coherence and underlying paradox is not unique to conversion narratives; rather, conversion narratives are ideal typical accentuations of the paradoxes that underpin most any attempt to give narrative account of oneself. I begin, therefore, by situating my analysis among more general theoretical understandings of the relationship between narrative and identity. Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre offer exemplary theoretical elaborations of the kind of coherence-emphasizing perspective that defines

[1]The bulk of these analyses focus on the mental and corporal training techniques that provide practical scaffolding for believers' religious experiences. While such accounts usually incorporate both physical and mental dimensions of spiritual exercise, typically they focus their analyses on one side or the other. Luhrman (2012), in an influential example of the cognitive perspective, argues that American evangelical prayer practices constitute a kind of mental training exercise that enhances capacity for "absorption," the blurring of self-world distinctions, which help cultivate the experience of relationship with God (other important examples of the cognitive perspective include Bender 2010; James 1985 [1922]; Proudfoot 1985; Stark 1999; Taves 2009). Csordas (1994), a prominent voice of a more corporal perspective, shows how charismatic Catholic healing practices intervene on mind–body relationships in order to affect real change in embodied dispositions, physical and mental ailments (other important examples of the corporal perspective include Asad 1993; Coleman 2006; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; McGuire 1990; Reinhardt 2014; Winchester 2008).

[2]This analysis focuses on conversion narrative practice, rather than conversion per se. In fact, the analysis pertains more to narrative practice generally than it does to conversion generally. I take the case of conversion narratives to ask and answer questions about the tension between paradox and coherence in narrative accounts of the self. There are implications for the experience of conversion that such narratives often describe, which I develop in the Discussion and Conclusion section. However, more general questions about conversion, different types, causes, facilitating contexts, etc. are beyond the scope of the present analysis (e.g., Gooren 2007; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Lofland and Stark 1965; Rambo 1993; Richardson 1985; Snow and Machalek 1984; Stark and Finke 2000).

most scholars' understanding of narrative identity. While some of these scholars acknowledge underlying paradoxes in the narrative–identity relationship, still they emphasize coherence of identity as the basic function and essential vocation of narrative (Calhoun 1991; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; MacIntyre 2007 [1981]; Polletta et al. 2011; Somers 1994; Taylor 1989). The analysis of testimonial practice that I pursue here inverts the emphases that scholars usually place on coherence and paradox in narrative practice. While acknowledging desires and demands for coherent identity among testimonial practitioners, I draw on Judith Butler's theoretical framework to emphasize the way that testimonial narrative practice cultivates underlying paradoxes, blurs and blends everyday categories of selfhood, the way, in other words, that testimonial practice works to unsettle identity. After explaining the methods that the article employs, I then turn to ethnographic fieldwork with a Christian businessmen's brotherhood to describe two kinds of paradox, "identity" and "reflexivity," inherent to giving narrative account of oneself and the practices of *narrative identification* and *narrative reflexivity* that these paradoxes spawn. I conclude with some reflections on the implications of the analysis for more general understandings of relationships between narrative and identity as well as those of conversion narratives and the experiences that they describe.

PARADOX AND COHERENCE IN NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF ONESELF

Narrative and Identity in Theory

The paradox of the born-again promise of self-transcending self-transformation takes narrative form when converts attempt to recount conversion experiences (Smilde 2003, 2007; Stromberg 1993). How to ascribe the agency and intention of self-transformation to a force that transcends the self? And how to tell a story of conversion that does not begin with oneself, with one's own initiative? More general theoretical examinations of the narrative foundations of identity suggest that these paradoxes—of "agency" and of "origins"—are not unique to conversion narratives, but rather are ideal typical accentuations of paradoxes that underpin most any attempt to give narrative account of oneself. The most important recent theoretical discussions of the subject suggest that personal identity is both inevitably and also elusively a narrative undertaking (Butler 2005; MacIntyre 2007.[1981]; Ricoeur 1992; Taylor 1989). Inevitable because, in Ricoeur's words, "How, indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole, if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in the form of narrative?" (1992:158). Yet ethical accounting of this sort is also elusive because the task of giving narrative account of oneself requires that the same self simultaneously incarnate the narrative roles of author, narrator, and character.

Two central paradoxes underlie narrative accounts of selfhood, which, drawing on Ricoeur (1992), I conceptualize in terms of paradoxes of *identity* and *reflexivity*. "Identity," Ricoeur reminds us, can refer both to "selfhood," e.g., the identifying distinguishing constancy of character of any given entity, and to "sameness," e.g., the identicalness of different entities. Any narration of self entails some kind of account of authorship: an account that attributes agency and accounts for singularity of selfhood. The same narration of self will also, however, demand some kind of characterological fitting: communicability requires drawing on common tropes and familiar plot lines, the substitutable, empathizable sameness that makes a narrative rendering of self recognizable to an audience of others. The sameness of character and the distinctive selfhood of authorship pull in opposing directions, but both are essential ingredients of any narrative account of self; and, in Ricoeur's estimation, it is in its dialectical back and forth mediating between these opposing poles that narrative becomes the substance of *identity* (in the double sense of the word) (Ricoeur 1992:114–28). The *reflexivity paradox*, on the other hand, pertains to the narrative dilemma that one faces in simultaneously incarnating the roles of narrator and character: giving account of oneself means that "life must be gathered together… into a singular totality," when there is nothing, with respect to one's grasp on one's own life, that can provide narrative beginning, to say nothing of ending (Ricoeur 1992:160). The fact that an expansive narrative scope of oneself is impossible does not diminish the narrative demand for comprehensive characterhood. And the fact that thorough-going comprehensive characterhood implies an absence of disintegration and splitting of selfhood does not diminish the narrational necessity for a self-dividing observational distance from oneself.

The best accounts of narrative and identity recognize that the relationship is stretched between desire/demand for coherence and underlying paradoxes that thwart any definitive narrative hold on coherent identity. The action and practice of identity, then, is in the back and forth narrative movement between compulsion for coherence and underlying paradox.

Most of these accounts emphasize coherence: they acknowledge the kinds of underlying paradoxes that Ricoeur identifies, but still they understand the essential vocation of narrative selfhood to be one of coherent identity.[3]

[3]A recent flurry of sociological analyses focus mostly on the social side of narrative practices, the way in which narrative is put to collective use in order to frame issues, build movements, and construct group identity (Braunstein 2012; Davis 2002; Dillon 1996; Ewick and Silbey 1995; Ganz 2009; Moon 2012; Polletta et al. 2011; Polletta and Lee 2006; Reissman 2008; Somers 1994; Tilly 2002). Another more philosophically inspired line of narrative analysis establishes the narrative foundations of selfhood (Calhoun 1991; Ezzy 1998; Giddens 1991; Illouz 2008; MacIntyre 1981; Ochs and Capps 1996; Ricoeur 1992; Taylor 1989).

MacIntyre 2007 [1981]) and Taylor (1989) have formulated the most influential coherence-emphasizing theoretical perspectives.[4] Despite the fact that both MacIntyre and Taylor find underlying paradoxes of identity and reflexivity in narrative accounts of selfhood, for both authors the essential vocation of such accounts remains one of unification. Unity of ethical selfhood is, in MacIntyre's understanding, split by an identity paradox, a unity of "authorship"—the narrative alignment of one's actions with one's own intentions—that never quite aligns with unity of "character"—the narrative adjustment of others' expectations to one's actions. Nevertheless, *unification*, the increasing alignment and adjustment of authorship and characterhood is, in MacIntyre's view, the essence of ethical selfhood (2007 [1981]:213–5). A similar identity paradox animates Taylor's (1989) understanding of narrative accounts of self: on the one hand, the ability to provide an answer for oneself to the question "Who?" rests in the distinguishing, singularizing authorial capacity to "be able to answer for oneself… to know where one stands, what one wants to answer" (29); at the same time, "One is a self only among other selves," and a distinguishing stand of ethical selfhood is made on the grounds of an orientation to the good that can only be found in relation and reference to "certain interlocutors… [and] 'webs of interoluction'"[5] (35–36).

Both MacIntyre and Taylor also insist that the unification of ethical selfhood also has comprehensive narrative reach, that it is a birth to death affair, which unearths the reflexivity paradox of self-narration: how one can adopt a narrational perspective on oneself that encompasses one's own beginning and end? Neither author, however, leaves the reflexivity paradox open, as Ricoeur does. For MacIntyre, the narrator of self plays a responding and reacting role to the character of self, i.e., it is the events of one's life and the regard of others on those events that, like it or not, constitute the unifying locus of ethical selfhood.[6]

[4]I develop MacIntyre and Taylor's frameworks here because their theoretical accounts explicitly and directly address the question of the relationship between narrative and identity. Reflexivity figures prominently in their theories, but the principal theoretical aim is to conceptualize the narrative–identity relationship. A number of related theoretical accounts invert this emphasis, which is to say that they examine the reflexivity–identity relationship and narrative figures into their analyses only insofar as it furthers this principal aim (e.g., Beck et al. 2003; Giddens 1991; Mead 1934). That said, I would argue that most of these reflexivity–identity theories share the identity-cohering emphasis that MacIntyre and Taylor develop. Giddens and Beck show how modernity makes such coherence increasingly challenging, demanding a more concerted and innovating kind of reflexivity, but the task of reflexivity for these theorists too remains one of coherence. To find Butler's equivalent, i.e., an examination of the reflexivity–identity relationship that emphasizes reflexivity's role in generating (rather than resolving) paradox and fragmentation, one could look elsewhere in her own work or to that of Foucault (Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1990).

[5]"My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question Who I am. And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers" (35).

[6]"To be the subject of a narrative that runs from one's birth to one's death is, I remarked earlier, to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life… Thus personal identity is just that, identity presupposed by the unity of the character which the unity of a narrative requires" (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]:217–8).

Where MacIntyre finds the unifying force of narrative identity on the character side of the reflexive divide in narrative selfhood, Taylor finds it on the narrator side. Taylor would likely agree with MacIntyre's (2007 [1981]:205) assessment that, "To be the subject of a narrative that runs from one's birth to one's death… [is] to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life," but he would place a different kind of emphasis on what it means to be *accountable*. To be accountable, from Taylor's perspective, is to be able to give an account, to be able to present oneself, ones actions, and experiences—theoretically from birth to death—in coherent unified form, and that kind of unity of self, for Taylor, comes primarily from within, from one's own struggles with and territory gained in relationship to a self-defining good.[7]

Judith Butler (2005) finds, in her examination of narrative accounts of self, the same kinds of paradoxes of identity and reflexivity that feature in Ricoeur, MacIntyre, and Taylor's accounts; however, her understanding of the relationship between paradox and coherence in narrative identity is an inversion of those of Taylor and MacIntyre. Where Taylor and MacIntyre acknowledge underlying paradoxes but emphasize narrative identity's essentially cohering function, Butler acknowledges social demands for coherent identity but emphasizes the inevitable paradoxes that underpin any attempt to respond to such requests. The identity paradox, as Butler describes it, does not give way to unification of ethical selfhood, as it does for MacIntyre and Taylor. Rather the double demand of identity, singularity and substitutability, inherently and interminably pull in opposing directions: "I will, to some degree, have to make myself substitutable in order to make myself recognizable. The narrative authority of the 'I' must give way to the perspective and temporality of a set of norms that contest the singularity of my story" (2005:37). Similarly, for Butler, the reflexivity paradox does not close the gap between detached comprehensive observation and engaged incarnation of narrative action in the way that it ultimately does for MacIntyre and Taylor. It fuels fabulation more than it does unification: "The 'I' can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to a state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one's own emergence as a subject who can know… I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know" (Butler 2005:39). While the paradoxes of narrative identity are, from such a perspective definitive, they

[7]Taylor acknowledges the kind of ethical characterhood that MacIntyre emphasizes: "The question Who? Is asked to place someone as a potential interlocutor in a society of interlocutors… To be someone who qualifies as a potential object of this question is to be such an interlocutor among others, someone with one's own standpoint or one's own role, who can speak for him/herself" (29). The posing of the question, however, does not furnish the answer, and it is the responding, the ability to answer—for oneself in relation to one's own understanding of the good, that, in Taylor's view, unifies selfhood: "But to be able to answer for oneself is to know where one stands, what one wants to answer… and this orientation, once attained, defines where you answer from, hence your identity" (29).

are also generative—they give way to narrative practices that do not resolve underlying paradoxes but are nevertheless animated by them.

Coherence and Paradox in Conversion Narrative Practice

Conversion narrative scholarship tends to adopt theoretical perspectives similar to those of MacIntyre and Taylor, which is to say that they acknowledge paradoxes that inhere in attempts to give narrative account to conversion experience, but they emphasize a basic paradox-overcoming, identity-cohering function in conversion narrative practices (Beckford 1978; Cadge and Davidman 2006; Engelke 2004; Griffin 1990; Harding 1987; Johnston 2013; Meyer 1998; Smilde 2007; Stromberg 1993). Stromberg, for example, argues that the identity paradox, the narrative necessity to account for individual singularity while also rendering oneself substitutable and recognizable, is an apparent surface-level contradiction that in fact fosters the forging of a deeper and more enduring coherence of identity. Conversion narratives ask their practitioners "to establish some connection between the language of Evangelical Christianity and their own immediate situations," such that they learn to narrate their action in the metaphors and symbols of Evangelical Christianity (Stromberg 1993:11). In addition to rendering a particular story communicable to a community, Stromberg argues, the knitting together of everyday life and biblical metaphor provides converts with a narrative means of accessing preconscious aims and desires. The metaphor, then, serves a dual function in Stromberg's understanding of conversion narratives: it bridges the gap between Evangelical selfhood and sameness; and in the bridge-building act "something becomes articulable that was previously hidden," which allows the convert to "integrate unacknowledged purposes into a socially construable project" (13, 30).

Similarly, Smilde (2003, 2007) suggests that an "instrumental paradox" haunts most any attempt to give narrative account to conversion: although a particular belief might have positive effects on one's person, one cannot *decide* to believe for those reasons or it ceases to be a belief. Any conversion narrative, therefore, has to locate its origins outside of and prior to such a calculating, choosing, deciding self. Smilde, like Stromberg, argues that conversion narratives invite believers into relationships with metaphor that both overcome narrative paradox and integrate selfhood. Converts learn to look for the beginnings of their conversion story outside of the acting, choosing self. They learn to look for the canonical (biblical) in particular circumstances and events of their lives; they learn to see the sources of their struggles—addiction, poverty, disease, and character—in supernatural terms, which paves the way for any resolution to be understood equally supernaturally; and they learn to rediscover God's agency in past events. These techniques give converts narrative origins of conversion that skirt the "instrumental paradox" at the same time that they also provide believers with a new set of conceptual

tools to reimagine and resolve old conflicts and discordances of self (Smilde 2007:142–52).

Stromberg and Smilde's empirical analyses of conversion narrative and identity follow in MacIntyre and Taylor's theoretical footsteps. Both Stromberg and Smilde acknowledge that narrative does not have exclusively cohering and unifying effects on personal identity. Still, both authors understand the relationship between narrative and identity to be *primarily* one of coherence. Paradoxes of agency and origins ("identity" and "reflexivity" in my terminology) animate conversion narratives' fundamentally identity-cohering functions—in particular in the metaphorical work that such narrative practices require. Stromberg understands the metaphorical work of conversion narratives in psychoanalytic terms—resolving unconscious aims—while Smilde understands it in the pragmatic terms of "imaginative rationality." For both authors, however, conversion narratives *work*—facilitate the experience of conversion that they describe—insofar as they stitch together coherent narrative identity, insofar as they integrate "unacknowledged purposes" (Stromberg 1993:30) and cohere divided selves (Smilde 2003:322).[8]

Where Stromberg and Smilde acknowledge underlying paradoxes in conversion narrative practices but argue that conversion narratives *work*—i.e., contribute to the feeling and experience of self-transcending self-transformation—insofar as they provide narrative means of resolving these paradoxes and stitching together some coherent sense of selfhood, Butler provides theoretical foundation and justification for moving in the opposite analytical direction. In the approach that I adopt here, I treat the paradoxical dimensions of conversion narratives, not as exceptional or unique to conversion, but rather illustrative, ideal typical accentuations of the paradoxes that underpin most any attempt to give narrative account of oneself. Such an approach suggests a thesis about the relationship between narrative, identity, and religious experience that is an inversion of the one that Stromberg and Smilde propose: rather than looking for the narrative foundations of religious experience in the overcoming of exceptional paradox, the resolution of aberrant inner conflicts in a narrative stitching together of coherent selfhood, I want to suggest instead looking for the narrative foundations of religious experience in the way conversion narrative practices invite and encourage ephemeral experiences of, and experimentation with, narrative paradoxes, which underpin most any attempt to give account of oneself. From this perspective, narrative contributes to the experience of the processes that it describes insofar as

[8]Undoubtedly conversion narratives never entirely integrate this paradoxical split in selfhood, but, to the extent that they do stitch together coherent narrative identity, this, for both authors, is what constitutes the experience of conversion, of self-transcending self-transformation: "The self-transformation associated with the conversion occurs as a result of changing embodied aims into articulable intentions… This movement has the effect of producing a sense of transformation because it draws a new part of the subject's experience into the realm of self" (Stromberg 1993:29).

it cultivates a different kind of relationship to oneself, one that tends away from society's demands for coherence, one that blurs and doubles over the conventional categorical bounds of selfhood, one that thematizes, rather than attempting to resolve, paradox. Finally, if we admit Butler's general understanding of what giving account of oneself entails, we can also surmise that conversion narratives' cultivation of blurred, doubled over relationship to the categorical bounds of selfhood complement the feelings of "liberation" or "rebirth" often attributed to the experiences those narratives describe, insofar as they release the self from society's insistent and impossible demands to give account of oneself, or at least provide oneself with some momentary wiggle room therein.

These paradoxes of identity and reflexivity, inherent to the task of giving account of oneself, give way to narrative practices, which, without resolving the underlying paradoxes, are nevertheless animated by them. The identity paradox, narrative identity's double demand to account for singularity of self while also rendering oneself substitutable in order that the account be recognized, animates practices of *narrative identification*. "Identification" carries the same ambivalence as its root word "identity": identification refers to processes by which one names, distinguishes, singles oneself out; and it refers to processes by which one sees and recognizes oneself in another (Butler 1993).[9] Insofar as narrative identification furnishes opportunities for seeing oneself in another, it is, in part, a source of coherence, one of the important mechanisms by which social, political, cultural movements/organizations cultivate a sense of coherent collective identity (Braunstein 2012; Ganz 2009; Polletta et al. 2011; Polletta and Lee 2006; Somers 1994; Tilly 2002). However, narrative identification is also unsettling of identity, as seeing oneself in another sits paradoxically alongside the singularity of selfhood toward which identity also aspires. "Identifications," as Butler (1993:105) puts it, are "ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitations, they unsettle the I; they are the sedimentation of the 'we' in the constitution of any I, the structuring present of alterity in the very formulation of the I." Narrative identification facilitates the recognition of oneself in another at the same time that it lodges a feeling of otherness in oneself.

The reflexivity paradox—narrative identity's demand that one adopt a distant and comprehensive narrator's perspective on a character of narrative action that is also one and the same simultaneous self—animates practices of

[9]That identification blurs categorical lines between self and other is a central idea in both psychoanalysis and rhetoric, and Butler draws from both disciplines. Identification, seeing oneself in one's father and/or mother, is of course in Freud's view the original ego-constituting act, but for Freud identification is ambivalent, it constitutes the ego–object relations at the same time that it enables all kinds of phantasmagorical ego–object distinction blurring (Freud 1949 [1922]:65). Burke (1969:21) understands the self-other relationship of identification, as a rhetorical process, in equally ambivalent terms: "In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus, he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another."

narrative reflexivity. Telling stories about oneself is, of course, a ubiquitous feature of human living, such that the reflexive splitting of self into simultaneous narrator and character of narrative action is, at one level, an inevitable and constant feature of everyday life of most any sort. This reflexive split, however, takes on a different character when it becomes part of a systematic practice: a systematic narrative practice of the self entails a concerted splitting of the self into subject and object of narrative action, one that pays attention to, experiments with and intervenes on the division of self into simultaneous narrator and character.[10] On the one hand, narrative identity's comprehensive reach, and the reflexive self-splitting that reflecting and intervening on one's own narrative identity requires, renders conceivable and desirable projects of ethical unification of selfhood (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]; Taylor 1989). On the other hand, such ethical unification, reconciliation of character and narrator accounts of selfhood, entails oneself accounting for the conditions of possibility for the very self doing the accounting, an inherent paradox that leaves the gap between narrator and character self ultimately unbridgeable and makes the ethical unification of selfhood an inherently phantasmal endeavor (Butler 2005:39).

In examining processes of *narrative identification* and *narrative reflexivity* in Christian testimonial practice, I do not wish to discount the notion that coherence of identity is an important part of the aims and workings of such narrative practices of selfhood. Nevertheless, in the analysis that follows I focus on the dimensions of the narrative practice that release participants, however fleetingly, from everyday categorical bounds and demands of coherent selfhood and allow, even encourage, them to ephemerally experience and explore narrative

[10]This article's analysis focuses on *narrative* reflexivity, the way in which persons make themselves the simultaneous subject and object of narrative action, simultaneous narrators and characters in narrative accounts of themselves. The analysis raises a number of questions about the way that the argument connects with arguments that other scholars have made about the use of other kinds of techniques of reflexivity in other kinds of identity projects, other ways, in other words, that persons make themselves the simultaneous subjects and objects of relatively methodical intervention as they attempt to ask and answer the question, "Who am I?" Many such analyses adopt a Swidler (1986) culture as tool kit approach, that shows how actors actively negotiate, mix, and innovate around the *symbolic* boundaries and meaningful content of categories like race, class, gender, religiosity, and morality (e.g., Bender 2010; Besecke 2001; Brenneman 2011; Flores 2014; Lamont 1992; O'Brien 2015; Smith 1998; Swidler 2001; Wilkins 2008). Still others adopt some combination of Bourdieu's conceptualization of the habitus and/or Foucualt's understanding of discursive techniques of power-knowledge to show how actors reflexively make their *embodied* selves the simultaneous subjects and objects of methodical intervention around the question "Who am I?" (Asad 1993; Coleman 2006; Csordas 1994; Gerber 2012; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Reinhardt 2014; Winchester 2008). Clearly these different techniques of reflexivity—we can call them narrative, symbolic, and embodied reflexivity—are, in reality, intertwined in different kinds of complex configurations; and one of the foci of my ongoing work is to show how narrative reflexivity relates to these other kinds of reflexivity in GNBB testimonial practice. The question is, however, too vast for me to adequately address in this article.

paradoxes that underpin everyday categories of identity, ephemeral experiences that, in turn, complement believers' experience of conversion.

CASE SELECTION AND METHODS

Giving testimony is a widespread evangelical Christian conversion narrative practice; and it is a fruitful place to examine underlying paradoxes in narrative accounts of selfhood. Because testimonies tend to recount relative sudden and profound self-transformations, the sources and forces of which transcend the recounting self, they highlight the agency and origins problems that all narrative accounts of self negotiate, narrative problems that I conceptualize above in terms of paradoxes of identity and reflexivity. Giving testimony is, for Christians, a simultaneously evangelical and ethical narrative practice: testimony is an essential tool for saving souls/recruiting members; and testimony is also an ethical instrument that one can use to reflect upon, account for and exhort oneself. In the empirical discussion of testimonial practice that follows it will become apparent that these two different aims of testimonial practice correspond to the two different modes of narrative identity unsettling that are the focus of this article. *Narrative identification* is an essential ingredient of the evangelical (saving/recruiting) force of testimony. *Narrative reflexivity*, on the other hand, is a key enabling and fueling ingredient of testimonial practice as an ethical instrument for examining and exhorting, reflecting and experimenting on oneself. Narrative identification and narrative reflexivity are perhaps especially prominent features of the Christian practice of giving testimony, but more general theoretical accounts would lead us to suspect them to be prominent features of most any narrative practice of the self (Butler 2005; Ricoeur 1992).[11]

The Good News Businessmen's Brotherhood (GNBB),[12] is well suited to the study of testimony, as the practice is the cornerstone of the organization's activities. GNBB is originally an American organization and a prominent actor in the spreading of charismatic Christianity from Pentecostalism to other Christian denominations in the United States throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

[11]The ideas that guide this article's analysis have their origins in fieldwork, such that the methods that I use here are close to those established in the grounded theory tradition (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Nevertheless, the methodological approach that I employ builds on a growing body of work that seeks to systematize a middle way in between the inductive approach of grounded theory and the theory-driven approach of the extended case method (Lichterman and Reed 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). While the original insights came from fieldwork, they prompted back and forth dialogue between my field notes on testimonial practice—including brothers' discussions amongst each other about the workings of identification and how best to narrate oneself into a testimonial character plot line—and Butler and Riceour's theoretical discussions of paradoxes of identity and reflexivity in narrative accounts of oneself.

[12]I have given the organization and its members pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

GNBB-Mexico, like its American counterpart, is a nondenominational lay organization that relies on testimony, the recounting of personal narratives of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the details of everyday life, as its members seek to spread invitations into personal relationship with God. In fact, giving testimony constitutes the bulk of the brotherhood's organizational activity: members invite friends, family members, colleagues, and neighbors to attend businessmen's meetings, where they will dine for free and learn how the Brotherhood has transformed the lives of its members. And the invitations that they extend are extreme in their nondenominationality, in part because they span a Catholic-Protestant divide that remains particularly fraught in Mexico. GNBB is not a church, and brothers persistently remind their audiences—and one another—of why it is that their fellowship transcends conventional "religion": GNBB is a lay organization that meets in hotels and restaurants and invites guests into potent personal relationships with God, which, as they describe it, exist independently from any particular religious affiliation or doctrine.[13] Members invite friends, family members, colleagues, and neighbors to attend businessmen's meetings, where they will dine for free and learn how the Brotherhood has transformed the lives of its members. Without paid staff, the brotherhood runs on the donation of time and money of its estimated 5,000 members in some 150 local chapters around Mexico.

I spent 18 months, in 2011–2012, doing ethnographic fieldwork with GNBB. Throughout my fieldwork with GNBB I openly introduced myself as an agnostic sociologist interested in doing participant observation for research purposes; and I did far more observing than participating—although I received frequent invitations, I never assumed an active role inside the organization. I attended weekly dinners and weekly planning/training meetings in two different chapters (four meetings a week) in Mexico City. I also attended three national conventions, five leadership training sessions and a matrimonial retreat. I accompanied brothers on roughly 50 different visits to schools, small businesses, police stations, government offices, where they go to deliver a particularly "secular" version of their message, an activity that they refer to in their powerpoint language as "*Eventos*

[13]The overwhelming majority of Mexicans have a connection to Christianity of one sort or another, such that the invitation into personal relationship with God "independent of religious affiliation" is understood to refer to a relationship that disregards Protestant-Catholic divisions. Brothers attend GNBB meetings during the week and go to the church of their choosing on Sundays, and over half of Good News brothers are Catholic. For Catholic participants, then, the brotherhood offers an opportunity to discover a different kind of relationship with God, to learn to pray in the same way that one chats with a close friend, to explore a personal relationship with God that is of a very Protestant sort but which does not require leaving the Catholic Church, which in Mexico can fracture families and communities. The "religionless" invitation, however, is more than ecumenical nondenominationalism. GNBB brothers distinguish their activity from conventional religion as part of a claim to supernatural efficacy: the defining characteristic of their practice is a potent this-worldly relationship with the Holy Spirit that transcends the details of ritual, denomination, and doctrine.

Xtrategicos." And I went along on five different weeklong evangelizing excursions, or "*Xtramuros*," in four different cities. During meetings I would jot notes and then afterwards would fill these out into more extensive field notes in a journal; and the following day I would write up syntheses on the computer. I refer to both the raw notes and the syntheses as I reconstruct the ethnography. I also conducted 72 in-depth semi-structured interviews with leaders and rank and file members of the organization.

NARRATIVE UNSETTLING OF IDENTITY IN CHRISTIAN TESTIMONIAL PRACTICE

Narrative Identification: The Blurring and Blending of Self/Other Distinctions

How does testimony *work*? How does it acquire potency for its practitioners? On a chilly Saturday morning in February members of one of the Mexico City chapters of the Good News Businessmen's Brotherhood gathered at the residence of Diego, regional director of the organization, for their annual Advanced Leadership Training Seminar(y)[14]; and during a session on "testimony" brothers posed this question for themselves. The resulting conversation was an unusual moment of deliberate collective reflection about the practice that is the cornerstone of their brotherly activity. For brothers, of course, testimony is potent to the extent that the Holy Spirit infuses the story and its teller, but during seminar(y) training sessions they fill out this explanation with complimentary explanations that draw on popular science and their own experience.

Alfonso, chapter president, led the session, and he began by offering his brothers an explanation as to why testimony plays such a central role in their organization. His explanation mixed revelation with a kind of everyday scientific rationale: "This was the revelation that (GNBB founder) Tatum Tate had about how to reach working people … But there are also scientific studies that show that the best way to reach a person's subconscious is through metaphors—or parables, testimonies." Testimony, Alfonso suggests, is a kind of metaphor that allows the speaker to connect with the listener's less-than-conscious self. "We identify with situations, problems that happen to us in day to day life, and this gives us another option, another method to consider." This rather ordinary description of the metaphorical workings of testimony captures the ambivalent task of narrative identification. Testimonial identification, when it works, mixes the familiar with the unfamiliar, such that the brother-to-be recognizes

[14]*Semanario Avanzado de Entranamiento de Lideres* (*SAEL*); "seminario" means boh seminar and seminary in Spanish and fits well with the GNBB blend of businessmen with PowerPoint presentations and spiritual training.

himself in the testimony at the same that it represents something new, "another option, another method to consider." The familiar recognition of oneself in another, in whom one also sees a fundamental otherness, this paradoxical mixture of distinctive selfhood and replicable sameness, can generate uncanny, strangely familiar kinds of feelings for those who find themselves taken by testimonial encounter.

Most of the GNBB dinner guests—and nearly all those that stay—are in the throes of deep emotional turmoil when they are invited to their first businessmen's dinner. And sometimes it happens that one of the brothers delivers a testimony that bears uncanny resemblance to the story the guest is living. It is a common testimonial trope for brothers to talk about arriving at their first dinner, sitting down and listening to the testimonies and then looking around the room to see who might know the details of their private life, how they might have orchestrated, customized, rigged the testimony. At the end of these stories the brother knows no one and so is taken by the idea that the encounter, as guests are always told at the beginning of the dinner, was indeed prepared especially for him—without anyone's prior knowledge. If the speaker can establish the link of identification through a problem, struggle, conflict of self that he shares with the listener, then he can take the listener with him as he narrates his overcoming, giving the listener the opportunity to metaphorically, imaginatively feel the possibility of life without a crippling struggle with alcohol, depression, anger, debt, resentment, guilt, etc. And sometimes this too works. Two or three times over the course of most dinner meetings the MC and the testimony-givers mention to their first-time guests that, "leaving the doors of this restaurant this evening, your life will never again be the same." Outside of the link of identification that allows a listener to enter into the testimonies being delivered, this suggestion sounds silly and more often than not it provokes an incredulous smile and the guest never comes back. On occasion, however, the suggestion resonates—either in the moment or looking back after the fact—and this first dinner and the testimonies delivered there become for the brother the moment when he felt the reality of an imagined alternative life. It is when this sort of conjunction of selves happens in testimonial encounters that brothers are likely to be born.

Every time that Marco gives testimony, he talks about this feeling of serendipitous testimonial coincidence at the first dinner he attended. A soccer trainer, Marco had moved to Rio Bravo to take a job with a second tier club team after losing his job with a team in Mexico City, and after a year in Rio Bravo he lost that job too. Marco, a successful trainer who had traveled the world with his teams, now faced the prospect of returning home with no job, no money, and large credit card debts. He had long struggled with alcoholism, bouts of depression and a difficult relationship with his wife, but in this moment in Rio Bravo he falls deeper than he ever had. In the throes of suicidal thinking Marco says he got a call from a soccer referee he had recently met in Rio Bravo inviting him to a businessmen's dinner.

I went to the dinner because I was hungry… and when I went the person who was in front was talking about alcoholism, about adultery. And so I look around the room looking for the gossiper, but "no one here knows me." But the life that this guy was describing, I thought "that is my life." And when this guy tells me that his life changed, that "God, however you want to conceive of him," he says, "changed my life," I was left sitting there thinking, and if his life can change… could mine?

There is a strange sort of layering of the mechanisms of testimony when brothers talk about their experience of their first testimonial encounter as they give testimony to guests who are on their own first ride. Marco tells a story of a path of unraveling self-destruction that finally comes to a halt at a GNBB dinner when he listens to a man tell a life story that sounded just like his life and that gave him, as the man then told the story of his transformation, a potent imagined experience of another life course, "another option." Any guest who happens to attach himself to the narrative of self that Marco weaves as he narrates his struggles with alcoholism, depression, adultery, fame-seeking in the beginning of his testimony would find himself in dizzying layers of narrative mirrors when Marco gets to the point in the story of finding himself in a GNBB dinner for the first time listening to a man tell a life story that sounded just like his own. Or, rather, it would be dizzying were he to be giving it much conscious thought: part of the power of that brothers attribute to self-identification with other narratives of self is that it all happens without one being entirely aware of it or giving it much thought.

These processes of identification with other narratives of self are from the brother's perspective complimentary (though comparatively speaking relatively inconsequential) to the workings of the Holy Spirit. The message, however, is clear: "I once was sitting where you are sitting, living the life that you are living; and now I am standing in front of you no longer living the life that you are living but living a different life." Over the course of the evening, speakers extend several invitations to guests to imaginatively change places or to share narrative and give their selves space to move around in: the speaker sees in the guest memories of his own first encounter at a GNBB dinner and in so doing offers an imaginative invitation to the guest to come stand where he is standing for a little while. "I too heard them say at my first meeting 'leaving these doors your life will never be the same' and I laughed, at the time I too laughed…"; one brother or another says something like this at nearly every dinner. It is, as brothers briefly explain it to themselves in seminar(y), the combined workings of identification and metaphor at a less-than-conscious level that animates an imagined experience of a different course of life, a simultaneously familiar and distinctly other option, one that feels concrete and real at the same time that it feels like it fell from the sky.

The importance of testimonial identification is one of the reasons that Good News brothers insist on preserving the lay, business and irreligious character of their brotherhood—"ordinary everyday men in a common and ordinary world, BUT full of God's Holy Spirit." Alfonso emphasized this as he continued his explanation of testimony: "We know that for a lot of people the idea of listening to a sermon, a priest, a pastor or a spiritual guide is not appealing. All of this we

have already heard, but I want to re-emphasize it, why? Because it is so important, and so that we get stronger and when we give our testimony we give it all of our force." Alfonso's reminder about the potential power of testimony, one based on the likeness and equality—instead of the ceremonial distinction—of participants in the encounter, has two temporal dimensions, a memory of past testimonial encounter and anticipation or projection into a present testimonial encounter, and the one reinforces the other: remember the importance of equals identifying with equals, remember it in your own experience, and draw on that memory as you step into new testimonial encounters with brothers sitting where you once were sitting; let the testimonial invitation that you extend remind you of the one that you accepted and let memories of your own testimonial encounters give force and conviction to the testimonial invitations that you extend; see yourself in your brother so that he can see himself in you.

Tomás, a more recent brotherhood arrival, raised his hand and shared some contrasting memories from his own experience, provided some personal evidence for the emotional difference that identification makes.

> *When I went to churches… the person was in front transmitting a big ceremony… I never felt like I identified with them… But when I am here and listen to Juan Pablo (a fellow brother) say "I have done this, that and the other," whatever, something any one of us might say, but he tells you with honesty and sincerity, then you say "yes He does exist," for me this is what penetrates me. And when I am in a church I see a sort of formality, I see a leader distant, far away* (alejado) *from me, I am just a little speck there that doesn't mean anything, I can't ask him anything, I can't interact with him, I am simply a receptor and he is an emitter…Here in GNBB, you can say to me "I do not agree with you" but you listen to me, you are a human being, not a perfect chosen figure of God designated to transmit the message, I am simply another person who has committed mistakes and I am inviting you into something because this happened to me and you will say it with tears, as did Juan Pablo the other day. This is the difference in testimony.*

It is significant that as Tomás recreates the testimony experience at the end of this intervention the pronouns and the subject positions start swirling: "…I am inviting you into something because this happened to me and you will say it with tears, as did Juan Pablo the other day." In fact, during the GNBB dinners themselves, as guests and members listen to testimonies, there is not much interaction between speaker and listeners, little more than a Sunday church service. Listeners do not voice disagreement, they do not ask questions or make comments, nor are their opinions solicited. Interaction, dialogue, and disagreement happens during the planning meetings and training sessions, but during the dinners or other occasions of testimony-giving one person delivers while the others sit and listen. And yet listening to Juan Pablo deliver testimony feels less passive to Tomás than being in a church service where the leader is distant and Tomás feels like and insignificant speck. Tomás himself suggests in the beginning of his remarks that the difference in interaction between the church service and listening to Juan Pablo's testimony is one of identification: Tomás can see himself in Juan Pablo and so while there is little actual interaction between the two of them as Juan Pablo

speaks, Tomás' position of listener, receptor is imaginatively more active—he can see himself in Juan Pablo and his testimony becomes a narrative space where different selves imaginatively meet, swap places, blend and blur together.

Narrative identification, as brothers themselves understand and remember their own experience, is an important part of how testimony *works*. And identification works, in part, through coherence, a mechanism that helps to literally *cohere* disparate brothers into collectivity, and a mechanism that can package an invitation for a brother-to-be into "another option" that is still recognizable, and sometimes even inexplicably familiar feeling. "One is a self only among other selves," Taylor (1989:35) reminds us, "A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it." At one level we can interpret Tomás' description of the way he experiences listening to testimonies, or Marco's description of hearing a testimony for the first time and seeing himself in the speaker, as incarnations of relationships between a self and a "web of interlocutors," a basic ingredient of most any conception of narrative identity. Such an interpretation would contribute to the widely shared understanding that narrative identification coheres categories, solidifies self-other distinctions, constitutes identity; and undoubtedly such an interpretation does capture part of the way that Marco and Tomás describe their experiences with testimonial encounter. However, as brothers describe testimonial encounters, they often describe feeling a kind of startled disorientation, as they catch a glimpse of their own life in the life story of a brother. This is the feeling of surprise that prompted Marco to look around for "the gossiper," someone who knew the details of his life and conspired to orchestrate the encounter. This uncanny, strangely familiar yet definitively other, feeling that sometimes accompanies testimonial encounters is indicative of the way in which narrative identification *also* cultivates ephemeral experience of the paradox of identity, the way that it cultivates, in Butler's (1993:105) terms, "ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitations [that] unsettle the I." The double meaning of the word identity, distinctive singularity and mirror-image resemblance, suggests the paradox that it contains; and the experience of narrative identification that brothers find in testimonial encounters enables, even encourages momentarily feeling selfhood and sameness together, simultaneously, in spite of their contradiction.

Narrative Reflexivity: Self as Simultaneous Narrator and Character of Narrative Action

The startling experience of seeing one's life in the testimony of another can also serve as an invitation to adopt a testimonial perspective on one's own life. Accepting such an invitation to consider one's life in an explicitly narrative way entails a decisive, if implicit, split of selfhood into the simultaneous subject and object of narrative action, the narrator and the character, with different vantage points on the story of one's life at the same time that they are also one and the same self. Narrative practices of the self cultivate methodical reflexive

consideration of and intervention on oneself and thereby facilitate projects of ethical unification of selfhood (MacIntyre 2007 [1981]; Taylor 1989). At the same time, the gap in selfhood—between a simultaneous narrator and character of self—that narrative practices of self cultivate is ultimately unbridgeable: the comprehensive scope that the narrator perspective implies is impossible to furnish for oneself; and the unified coherence of identity that the character narrative role solicits is thwarted by the splitting of self that self-narration entails (Butler 2005; Ricoeur 1992). Narrative practices of the self, in other words, make ethical unification of selfhood conceivable and desirable at the same time that they render it ultimately unachievable. This impossibility, inevitable paradox in spite of nevertheless unshakeable aspiration for coherence, is also productive; it generates possibilities for experiencing and experimenting with one's relationship with oneself. In particular, the paradox generates two sorts of narrative practice on either side of the reflexive split, which I conceptualize together in the terms of *narrative reflexivity*.

The reflexive split of self into narrator and character provides oneself with some narrative wiggle room in relationship to one's identity. Narrative practices of the self cultivate possibilities for conversations between a narrating self and a character self, an observing self and a self of action; and because the two selves are also one, adjustments that are made on either side of the conversation can be felt across the divide between subject and object of narrative action. This narrative margin of maneuver is part of what makes the testimonial invitation an intriguing one, as it proposes a promising new relationship between language and life and an enticing invitation to tinker with the former in order to intervene on the latter. The freedom to tinker is, however, not unlimited, as the narrative invitation comes with certain shared understandings about what the plot should be. The testimonial plot, the one that intrigues would-be brothers as they hear it for the first time and the one that they come to learn as they start to participate, is a before and after story of transformation of self traced back to the beginnings of GNBB participation. A brother learns to inventory and document his life in terms of four thematic areas—finances, health, family, spirituality, to narrate heartfelt struggles of the past in each of these areas and to find and describe different instances of overcoming since accepting the invitation into brotherly living. "If there is an area in which you are not succeeding, don't mention it." This frequently repeated advice for giving testimony serves to encourage participation—because if brothers waited until all four areas of their life were entirely testimony-worthy the pool of available testimony-givers would shrink, and if testimony carries the promise of telling a different story about one's life in order to live the story differently the bar for beginning to speak should not be high. This piece of advice, however, also shows something about how brothers understand and work with the relationship between language and life. At least once during every weekly dinner brothers proudly proclaim themselves to be "the happiest people on earth!" (*¡la gente más feliz de la tierra!*), and as they deliver testimonies they attempt to demonstrate and

earn their organizational epithet—which means if one of their four areas of life is not as they would like it to be, best not to mention it. Behind this piece of practical advice for testimonial giving is a belief about the power of language—infused with the Holy Spirit—to transform life: "the tongue has power" (*la lengua tiene poder*), brothers frequently remind one another—both to encourage brothers to speak and to caution them to be careful as they craft their words.

The wiggle room, the narrative margin for maneuver that testimonial practice cultivates in its reflexive splitting of selfhood and its powerful tongue understanding of the relationship between language and living, can be found on both the narrator and the character side of the reflexive divide. On the character side one can emphasize, even embellish the details of everyday life events to pull them in the direction of the group sanctioned plot line, to accentuate their emotional ups and downs—for the audience (and their potentially vicarious identifying experience) and for oneself (and any desires to relive the meaning and emotions of one's own narrative arc). On the narrator side, on the other hand, one can find refuge from the tumult of everyday life events, one can find and feel a self that has relative distance from the emotional ups and downs of the everyday narrative action that constitutes one's character. In practice, narrative reflexivity for any given person always entails focus and maneuvering on both the character and narrator side of the reflexive divide. However, for the sake of highlighting the conceptual distinction, in what follows I contrast two different practitioners of testimony inside GNBB, one whose testimonial practice is particularly illustrative of attention to the character side of the reflexive divide, and another whose practice is particularly illustrative of attention to the narrator side.

Timo: Accentuating Emotional Ups and Downs in the Character of Self

The belief in a powerful tongue and the invitation to split the self into subject and object of narrative action together account for the self-transformational power brothers come to see in testimonial practice. The promise that brothers feel as they engage, equipped with potent words, in the narrative margin for maneuver between narrator and character self, carries with it a temptation to experiment with the connection between language and living, to extend the promissory reach of the connection between narrative accounts of the self and the self doing the narrative accounting. Testimony's promise of self-transformation carries with it the temptation to work with the self as character—to draw out the before and after contrasts of brotherly living—in order that interventions on the object of narrative action might also be felt in the narrating subject.

Timo, a 27-year-old up and coming GNBB leader from León Guanajuato, practices testimony in a way that throws this character-accentuating narrative reflexivity into sharp relief. Timo is a walking testimony. I never met a brother whose desire to participate in brotherhood activities and to talk about them afterward is so insatiable. Timo visits Mexico City frequently because he is a specialist of *Eventos Xtrategicos*, spiritually lined "motivational talks," in which brothers

weave testimony into secular presentations on topics like "successful habits" or "teamwork" in order to visit public schools, government offices, police stations, businesses, etc. An *Xtrategicos* appointment, however, is not necessary to have occasion to hear Timo's testimony, most any opportunity will suffice. On his way to delivering a testimony he will look for opportunities to give testimony. Timo is a good storyteller. He has a good intuitive sense for how to stylize himself as the character of the story of his life, the brotherly model for all potential brothers that every testimonial practitioner is called to be. Above all Timo knows how to deliver the details of his testimony in a way that draws out the before-and-after-Brotherhood contrasts and transmits the associated emotions.

Timo begins his testimony by talking about how he showed up at his first GNBB dinner in torn jeans, not having shaved, showered, or brushed his teeth in days, sleeping on park benches. While these things are probably true they leave an impression that is different than the one they would leave if he also said that his friend invited him to his first GNBB dinner on his birthday and so he was on a binge and hadn't been home in three days; and when he says he was sleeping on park benches, "passing out" would be an alternate word choice since he did have a bed to go home to. When I asked Maria, a friend of Timo who invited him to his first GNBB dinner, what it is like to hear Timo tell the story over and over of her inviting him to GNBB, she laughs, "it makes it seem like I invited some kind of vagabond." A little further along in his testimony Timo describes his professional life-chances transformation: before joining GNBB he was failing some of his university classes and was known around school as a good-for-nothing, "*Timo, el bueno para nada*"; after joining GNBB his grades improved dramatically and he was one of the few in his communications department to receive a scholarship to do a Master's degree. "And not long ago I got a call from one of the university administrators," Timo generally continues, "they called to tell me I had been selected for a scholarship to study at Harvard, and did I want the scholarship—'absolutely I want it!' I said." As brothers narrate the transformations of their lives since joining GNBB it is common to focus on the contrast of the before and after and to say little about the transformation process itself: before I was failing all of my classes; after I was awarded one of the few Master's scholarships for my performance. In part this is because, from their perspective, there is not all that much to explain: to talk about their own efforts and practices would be an impossible and vain attempt to give human explanation—and take credit—for what is most simply and profoundly the fruits of the Holy Spirit. However, a before/after narration of transformation of this sort, omitting or keeping vague the details and the process of transformation, also serves as a narrative technique that adds to the supernatural flavor of the story: "before I was X now I am Y and I really don't even know myself how it happened." Omitting and keeping details vague can also serve to stylize, accentuate the nature of the transformation. While Timo was offered the opportunity to do a degree at Harvard, to take another example from his testimony, he leaves you to imagine one thing and omits certain details: this is

an online program, the completion of which earns the student a nondescript certificate, rather than a BA, MA or similar professional degree. Timo does not fabricate anything (as far as I am aware) about the everyday life events that constitute his testimony, but he mentions certain details and omits others in order to accentuate, dramatize the transformation as he narrates himself as testimonial character. His testimonial trajectory suggests a before lowly beginning as a vagabond alcoholic sleeping on park benches and an after narrative arc that triumphantly concludes in Harvard scholarship. The dramatization enhances the vicarious experience of transformation for anyone in the audience who identifies with the drama; and a "powerful tongue" understanding of the way language transforms the life to which it refers means that brothers are open and available to feeling the effects themselves of the accentuations and dramatizations beyond the particular testimonial character in which they appear.

The before and after contrasts are also accentuated, not explained because these transformations of self are best communicated in heartfelt description, such that the transformation is *felt*—not explained—by the giver and any listeners who have identified with the story somewhere along the way. Timo is also good at giving emotional substance to the contrasts of his testimonial character: he describes what it was like to grow up without a father and what it feels like now to have met him, to have forgiven him and to give him big bear hugs every time he sees him; what it felt like to find out that one of his reckless flings was diagnosed with HIV, to nervously wait for the results of his own test and what it feels like to now consider that romantic love is above all an affair of lifetime commitment; what it felt like to be called "Timo el bueno para nada" and what it feels like now to have a steady job and be able to help support his mother and sister financially. Pronounced before and after contrasts, the details not necessarily precisely explained but the associated emotions effectively transmitted, this is what makes for a powerful testimony. Powerful for those in the audience who happen to identify with the story somewhere along the way, but also powerful for the brother doing the narrating, because, for him too, leaving aside the precise details and emphasizing the emotions provides opportunity to refeel the suffering of before and the escape from suffering of after, and another gratitude-filling reminder of the far-beyond-himself source of this transformation.[15]

Francisco: Finding Refuge in the Narrator of Self

Every brother who engages in testimonial practice does some kind of accentuating and stylizing of self; it is an inherent part of giving narrative account of oneself. This kind of stylization of characterhood is particularly visible for brothers like Timo, whose personalities and life events resonate with the GNBB

[15]It is not possible to know for certain, but I suspect that these testimonial opportunities to refeel the emotional contrasts of the before and the after is one of the main reasons why tearing up is such a common occurrence in giving testimony.

sanctioned born-again character plot line. Of course, the characterological fit is not equally easy for all brothers; and for those who struggle more to fit the details of their lives into the before/after, struggle/liberation-from-struggle, born-again character mold, the narrator side of the reflexive split can become a more prominent part of testimonial practice.

Francisco, for example, is not the intuitive giver of testimony that Timo is. He is a GNBB veteran of 12 years, one of the most consistent and reliable participants in one of the Mexico City chapters, and an enthusiastic participant in the brotherhood's *Xtrategicos* events—he has proudly led his fellow brothers into the halls of city government offices, police stations, and he even managed to get an appointment with one of Felipe Calderon's secretarial offices while he was president. But Francisco never talks at these events. Public speaking is not one of Francisco's gifts; he gets nervous, he tightens up, his brow furrows, he clutches one hand tightly with the other behind his back and his eyes begin scanning the floor and the ceiling, eluding contact with the eyes in the audience. Francisco may not have the same public speaking and storytelling knack that Timo does, but the bigger problem is that he has difficulty narrating himself as a GNBB character, as the object of narrative action that the brotherhood expects of him.

The first time I heard Francisco's testimony during one of the weekly dinners I had difficulty following it—Francisco speaks quickly and squeezes his syllables together, and so I wondered if others were following along more easily. At the following planning meeting, where brothers take time to discuss the previous dinner and its testimonies, I found out I was not alone. As he was about to conclude the meeting, Diego asked if there was anything else; after a moment's silence, Marcelo, a young Brazilian brother raised his hand.

> *Marcelo: I don't know if it's because I am not a native Spanish speaker, but I had a very difficult time understanding, following Francisco's testimony. He kept going back and forth and I got confused. First he said he was illiterate and then he said he was working in an office job…*
>
> *Francisco: Well I was illiterate before, but then I learned…*
> *Bruno: It wasn't your Spanish Marcelo; it was a disorganized testimony. It was very complex and back and forth and talking about one moment and then back to another and then back again. Testimonies need to be very clear and straightforward, they should follow a clear narrative structure. First you talk about what your life was like before GNBB, how you came to find GNBB, and what your life is like now.*

Alfonso then started talking about how important it is to give sufficient advance preparation to these testimonies, how it is always best to write down some notes in advance, before every testimony that one gives. I felt badly for Francisco, and I stole quick glances in his direction: his brow was furrowed, his gaze was fixed on the table in front of him, and as Alfonso started talking about preparation, Francisco opened the black folder in front of him to take out several pages full of handwritten notes—these must have been the notes he made in preparation, but he never said so nor did he say much in response to the collective constructive criticism of his testimony.

Mateo raised his hand and came closer to giving explicit voice to what had so far remained implied: "It is important that a testimony be organized because the organization of the testimony itself suggests the transformation that the person is describing." The corrective suggestions had so far focused on practical things, like preparing in advance, writing notes, giving the narrative a clear before-and-after-GNBB structure, but Timo offered one last piece of advice:

> *You know what, it's really quite simple: you have to ask God for guidance. You have to prepare in advance, but most important is to ask God for guidance and assistance, because we all know that a good testimony is one that is carried by the Holy Spirit.*

The accumulated implications of these comments about Francisco's testimony are heavy: if the narration of the transformation is disorganized then perhaps the transformation itself is not real; and if the testimony is not good, it was not carried by the Holy Spirit nor did the deliverer sufficiently seek God's guidance. Of course from the brother's perspective these two implications of Francisco's disorganized testimony, that perhaps it reflects a wobbly, uncertain, less than clear transformation of self and that perhaps it is missing the support of the Holy Spirit, are linked: evident transformation of self comes along with the palpable presence of the Holy Spirit, in one's words, posture, attitude. Furthermore, because narrating testimony and testimonial living are so intertwined the criticism and the praise of a brother's telling of his life in testimony weighs heavy—it bears more or less obliquely on the living of his life.

Timo and Francisco encountered the same testimonial invitation; they were enticed by the same transformational promise, a promise in part contained in an invitation into a different kind of narrative relationship with oneself, a practice that systematically makes the self the simultaneous subject and object of narrative action. However, where Timo thrives in the narrative fashioning of his testimonial character, Francisco stumbles. The narrative account that Francisco makes of himself, the character of his own brotherly living, does not lend itself to the kinds of before and after brotherhood contrasts that Timo finds in his own life, and so his story stops and starts and has trouble communicating the associated emotions. In an interview that I conducted with Francisco it became clear that the pattern of his lived experiences does not fit the model for GNBB testimonial structure, indeed he told me as much. Francisco found the brotherhood in Chiapas, nine years prior to my meeting him, and it quickly became an important part of the many things he was trying—AA, churches of various stripes, self-improvement seminars—to stabilize a life that he was beginning to lose a handle on. He says that that his life transformation began when he first found GNBB, began fighting his alcoholism and repairing his relationships with his children, but he had not turned the page on what was has been his most difficult struggle with himself: *mujeriego* (womanizing). "Already in the Brotherhood, I would find myself with four women in my truck… the liar (*el mentiroso*), *el*

chanclotas, the devil, however you want to call him, he is always going to attack us where we are weakest…"

Francisco decided to return to Mexico City, four years before I met him, and he says, "Here (Mexico City) is where I feel that really I arrived at a change in my life, when I began to truly face everything." Even so the self-transformation that Francisco feels he has finally begun to find in Mexico City, five years after first joining GNBB, is one that he still has difficulty fitting into the testimonies he shares with his fellow brothers. He has moved in with his niece and her family and he gets teary talking about what it means to be called grandpa by his niece's children, but this is hard to turn this into a typical narrative of success and triumph; and in an interview he tells me, "I feel the finances have not yet arrived." He continues: "Personally, with respect to finances, zero, there is no income. I have people who owe me money… and I haven't been able to get my little business going… It has even happened that some of my relatives have come up to me and handed me a copy of the want ads, as a way of saying 'get to work!'" Even his brothers in his chapter are uncomfortable with his situation; he is the treasurer of the chapter and a couple fellow brothers have grown suspicious that he is taking from the chapter coffers.

Francisco struggles, in other words, to give his testimony the before-and-after-GNBB narrative structure that his brothers suggest, to make himself the character of narrative action that the brotherhood's testimonial practice solicits from him. But Francisco does not stop giving testimony. From a brother's perspective, if he is worried about his testimonies, those that he is living and those that he is giving, the last thing he should do is to stop giving testimony. The promise of speaking differently in order to live differently that testimonial practice carries dies hard, and to stop giving testimony when one is not living the kinds of testimonies one wants to live is, from a brotherly perspective, to give up on this transformational promise and accept the draught in testimonial living as permanent. And for a brother like Francisco, who has difficulty narrating his life into the standard brotherhood character mold, the narrative reflexivity of testimonial practice, the splitting of self into the simultaneous subject and object of narrative action, carries possibilities for maneuver on the narrating, observing side of the reflexive split. The transformational promise that keeps Francisco going these days is what he calls the "tranquility of embracing the absence of tranquility": "It doesn't exist, tranquility, not in the way I want it to, but it gives me tranquility to know that it doesn't exist… and to know that I can live tranquilly in this absence of tranquility." In the turbulent narrative action of Francisco's daily life, he takes greater and more insistent narrative distance from himself, refuge in himself as observer, documenter, and narrator, simultaneously one with and adjacent to the character of the narrative. He learns to watch himself as a character of narrative action that is anything but tranquil, and in watching from a narrative distance he learns to accept and even embrace the absence of tranquility; he celebrates the feeling of tranquility that

this narrative distance from himself gives him and the satisfaction of knowing that he can live tranquilly in the absence of tranquility. This dogged testimonial perseverance becomes, for Francisco, both the effort and its fruits. When I ask whether he has been *finding* testimonies of late, supernatural fruits of his testimonial practice to remind him that he is on the right path and to give him more content for further testimony giving, Francisco's response is simple and startling: I'm still here. "With all of the attacks and mistrust I have been subject to inside the brotherhood, against all odds I am still the treasurer there; and with all the ill will and resentment with my relatives where I am living, against all odds I am still there."

Francisco finds refuge in the detached observation that comes with the narrator's viewpoint on the narrative action of his everyday life. Timo looks to relive—for himself and his brothers—emotional ups and downs by attending to and accentuating his incarnation of the character perspective of his accounts of himself. In reality both men intervene on both the narrator and character side of narrative selfhood—as does anyone tasked with giving narrative account of oneself, a task that by definition solicits a double perspective of detached observation and immediate incarnation of oneself as a simultaneous subject and object of narrative action. These two facets of narrative reflexivity attest to the way that narrative practices can unsettle identity. From the perspective of Taylor, MacIntyre, and most other scholars of narrative and identity, the methodical reflexivity that narrative practices cultivate is what makes unification and coherence of identity a conceivable and desirable project. Even from their perspective, the reflexive split in selfhood never gets entirely and seamlessly stitched together into some kind of fully unified narrative identity, but still narrative practices tend toward unification, they realize themselves as ethical practices insofar as they foster coherent identity. For Butler, on the other hand, the paradox that splits narrative accounts of oneself into a simultaneous narrator and liver of narrative action runs too deep to unify narrative identity, no matter how strong the desire or compulsion to do so might be. From Butler's perspective, the ethical practice of narrative reflexivity is not in the unification and coherence of selfhood as much as it is in the splitting and doubling of a self that is both the narrator and the character of narrative action: "In the making of the story, I create myself in new form, instituting a narrative 'I' that is superadded to the 'I' whose past life I seek to tell" (Butler 2005:39). Narrative reflexivity in testimonial practice exemplifies the kind of splitting and doubling of self that Butler attributes to all kinds of attempts to give account of oneself. For illustrative purposes, I contrast Timo's intervention on the character side of narrative action with Francisco's attention to the narrator side of the reflexive divide. In practice, however, narrative reflexivity always entails attending to both sides of the reflexive divide; indeed, this is why it is a splitting and doubling of self that both provides some narrative margin for maneuver and ultimately undermines desires/demands for unified, coherent identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Over the course of this analysis I have shown how testimony *works* insofar as the narrative practice unsettles everyday categorical bounds of selfhood in two different ways: the blurring and blending of self/other distinctions and the reflexive splitting of self into the simultaneous subject and object of narrative action. While I have described these two means separately they are also connected: for brothers-to-be it is often the uncanny feeling of seeing oneself in the life story of another that serves as the invitation to adopt a different kind of narrative relationship with oneself; and when a brother makes himself the simultaneous subject and object of narrative action, pulling the strings on the character of his life story at the same time that he also observes, feels, and conveys the emotions of that narrative action, it is to the extent that a brother splits himself into the simultaneous narrator and character of his own life in this way that his testimonial selfhood becomes an effective invitation for other would be brothers to adopt a narrative relationship of the self of a similar sort. Whereas existing scholarly accounts, therefore, tend to argue that conversion narrative practices *work* insofar as they resolve underlying paradox and stitch together some semblance of coherent identity, this article's analysis of testimonial practice demonstrates that conversion narrative practices also *work* insofar as they relax demands for coherent identity, insofar as they thematize paradox and in so doing permit, and even encourage, ephemeral experience of, and experiments with, the blurring and blending of everyday categories of selfhood.

"Identity" is, of course, a hotly contested social scientific concept, with some scholars arguing that little in the contemporary social world is more salient, pervasive, and decisive than the sentiments of collective belonging and self-understanding that make up identity, while others argue that such notions of identity are so fragmented and elusive that they are in fact of little use as part of social scientific categories of analysis.[16] The aim of the present paper is not to weigh in on the relative salience of "identity," neither as a category of politics nor science. Rather, the aim is to question the identity-constituting role that all of these scholars tend to attribute to narrative. That narrative does serve to cohere personal and collective identities is not a premise that I take issue with, nor would I challenge the notion that "coherent identity" is a frequently and forcefully made social demand and a task that perhaps only narrative could plausibly meet. To argue, however, that identities are necessarily narrative in their construction is not that same as arguing that narrative is necessarily constructive of identity. The analysis I present here admits the former premise and provides evidence against the latter. In the long tradition—and the recent flurry—of scholarship on narrative and identity, analyses tend to demonstrate and catalogue the different ways in which narrative constitutes identity; often these analyses will admit underlying

[16]For a cogent summary of these positions see Brubaker and Cooper (2000).

fragmentation and paradox but still understand the basic function and essential vocation of narrative to be one of coherence, and they emphasize the ways in which narrative resolves underlying paradoxes, coheres underlying fragmentation (Avishai 2008; Calhoun 1991; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Johnston 2013; MacIntyre 2007 [1981]; Moon 2005, 2012; Ochs and Capps 1996; Polletta et al. 2011; Smilde 2007; Snow and Machalek 1984; Somers 1994; Stromberg 1993; Taylor 1989; Tilly 2002). In the analysis of testimonial practice that I present here, I invert the emphases scholars usually place on coherence and paradox in narrative practice: rather than show how narrative practices resolve underlying paradoxes and fragmentation and cobble together coherent identity, I show how testimonial narrative practice can work to thematize and cultivate underlying paradox, fragmentation, and proliferation of everyday categories of selfhood, how the narrative practice works to unsettle identity.

The suggestion that testimonial practice is potent in part for its identity-unsettling features also contributes to ongoing conversations about the possibilities and limits for social scientific description and explanation of religious experience (Bender 2010; James 1985 [1922]; Taves 2009; Yamane 2000). The analysis of the workings of testimonial practice that I offer here neither precludes nor requires the supernatural force that GNBB practitioners find therein. I do not offer this analysis of the identity-unsettling tendencies of testimonial practice in order to *explain* the experiences that Good News brothers attribute to God; the workings of the features that I describe here can be understood independently from or complimentarily to the self-transcending experiences that brothers find in relationship with God. Independent of whatever role the Holy Spirit might or might not be playing in testimony, part of the potency that practitioners find in the practice, part of the allure that they see in the invitation, lies in the way that the practice blurs distinctions between self and other and splits the self into a simultaneous narrator and character of narrative action, and in-so-doing cultivates experience of a self-transcending character of selfhood. Whether this analysis of the self-transcending tendencies of testimony as a narrative practice explains, refutes, compliments or corroborates the self-transcending experience that brothers attribute to their relationship with God is a question that I do not think social science can answer.[17]

Having assumed this ultimate uncertainty, however, there is much progress to be made in building conversation between the (emic) language of religious experience and the (etic) language of their social scientific accounts. Yamane (2000) has convincingly argued that social science does not have access to religious experience, and that narrative accounts of such experiences can only be analyzed by researchers as informants' attempts to make religious experience meaningful

[17]See Gorski and Guhin (2017) for a cogent articulation of a kind of methodological agnosticism, which, in my option, represents our best hope for progress in social scientific understandings of religious experience.

rather than as a representation of the experience itself.[18] Stories of religious experience, told to researchers or others, are of course crafted representations and not the thing itself (although this describes the relationship between language and experience in general, religious experience is not unique in this respect). Still, while we cannot treat narrative as though it were, or provided some kind of simple or direct access to, the experience it narrates, we can pursue social scientific descriptions and explanations of the experiential consequences and effects of narrative practices. That is to say, while a story about an experience gives us limited and problematic access to the experience being recounted, the conditions and techniques involved in telling a story are themselves productive of experience that is more social scientifically ascertainable. In the case of testimony, engaging in the narrative practice entails an unsettling of everyday categories of selfhood, a blurring of distinctions between self and other and a splitting of self into subject and object of narrative action, and this unsettling of identity fits with the self-transcending experience that Good News brothers describe in their relationships with God. How does it fit? Does it explain away, substantiate or compliment Good News brothers' beliefs about their relationships with God? Definitive answers to these sorts of questions will always be above my pay grade, but once we accept that ultimate uncertainty we can focus on social scientific accounts aimed at better understanding—rather than confirming or refuting—religious experience.[19] Using narratives in social science to directly describe or explain the experiences that they recount will, as Yamane suggests, always be a tenuous undertaking. Describing and analyzing the techniques and conditions involved in a narrative practice is a more promising avenue for improving social scientific understandings of relationships between narrative and religious experience.

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[18]Similarly, Taves (2009) argues that social scientists should not study "religious experience" qua religious experience, but rather they should examine the way in which experiences are made religious, mystical, sacred, etc.—*special* is the general umbrella term that Taves chooses. From this perspective, Christian testimonial practice is one such narrative means for making experience *special*.

[19]In the way that recent phenomenology-inspired anthropological accounts have done for embodiment and religious experience (e.g., Coleman 2006; Csordas 1994, 1997; Hirschkind 2006; Reinhardt 2014; Winchester 2008).

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