

REPLY TO MARK LANCE, ÁSTA, AND MARYA SCHECHTMAN

Hilde Lindemann

MANY THANKS to my commentators, who expand on my ideas, fill in some missing gaps, and gently correct my blunders in “Counter the Counterstory.”¹ They all, in one way or another, press down on my overoptimistic assessment of reasons to hope that counterstories will prevail in the end. Mark Lance focuses on the institution of stock characters, highlighting some of the pressure points and vulnerable joints where there is a possibility of social pushback against invidious master narratives. Ásta helpfully argues that more is needed to dismantle a master narrative than pointing to its falsity—she rightly points out that hermeneutical resources to describe the harmful phenomena are necessary, as is the need to recognize the systematicity of the oppression, to attend to the ideological apparatuses and techniques that maintain the status quo. Marya Schechtman, too, reflects on the difficulties of creating the conditions for successful counterstories. She points out that those who accept a master narrative are not a monolithic group. Some buy into it wholeheartedly, others are made uncomfortable by their privilege but distract themselves using methods of assimilation, and others with infiltrated consciousness believe it anyway. So, successfully dismantling the master narrative depends on to which group those whom the counterstory is aimed at belong.

Let me start my reply with Lance’s paper, as he takes up the concept of stock characters that must begin any discussion of master narratives and counterstories. He highlights some “vulnerable joints and pressure points” where resistance to oppressive narratives employing stock characters has the best chance of succeeding, and then illustrates some of the forms of resistance.² His point that stock characters are not taken up literally is exactly right—when we consistently or momentarily identify people via stock characters we do it inexplicitly, out of habit. Also worth noting is Lance’s observation that some stock characters

1 Lindemann, “Counter the Counterstory.”

2 Lance, “Counterstories, Stock Characters, and Varieties of Narrative Resistance,” 300.

are important because of the rules they are supposed to act by, while for others what matters is their characteristics. Let me add that the strength of still other characters is their relationships—the Virgin Mary, for example, or Romeo and Juliet—and for yet others, like Judas, what matters is a single deed.

Important to note here is that any stock character depends on, cannot exist without, a specific form of life. It is within that form of life that the practice of holding and letting go takes place and so, as Lance points out, if the form of life disappears, that particular character can no longer be inhabited. Where the form of life is damaging—think of the antebellum South—it is good that the character can no longer exist. This, I think, is one of the pressure points Lance is referring to: here, chipping away at the form of life may be a better form of resistance than merely telling counterstories, although such narratives may and do assist in that chipping.

I was particularly taken by a throwaway line in Lance's discussion of ACT UP. He is absolutely right that public performance counts as narrative. The suffrage movement in England, for instance, often employed the figure of Joan of Arc on a white horse to lead its parades, while suffragettes chained themselves to the fence outside Parliament as they enacted the bondage that disenfranchisement creates. Indeed, it has been argued that feminist theater itself has its roots in suffragist demonstrations. The idea was always to shift understandings of what the narratively constructed identities of the players are, whether as gay men, black people, disabled people, Native Americans, or women.

Of equal interest in the ACT UP discussion is the possibility of clashing counterstories, as his examples of the prettified story of compassion for the dying as opposed to ACT UP's story of "Everyone loves a dying fag!" attest. Certainly some counterstories are better than others. The ones that see certain people in a group as exceptional (the Tuskegee Airmen, for example) might liberate those people but do nothing for the rest of the group. Counterstories that pathologize specific individuals rather than portray them as moral pervers, as has happened to gay and trans people, nevertheless belittle them and take away their dignity (hence the "dying fag" criticism). Lance has offered a thoughtful reflection on all this, and I thank him.

Ásta's redubbing the countering of counterstories as "ideological absorption" is an apt reminder of how the *policing* mechanism of oppressive ideologies works.³ I, ever the optimist, contented myself with placing hope on the falsity of oppressive master narratives as the reason why they are vulnerable to attack. To this Ásta, more gently than I deserve, suggests that pointing out such falsity is only a first step, and that much more, presumably because of the policing, is

3 Ásta, "Ideological Absorption and Countertechniques," 310.

needed if the counterstory is ultimately to succeed. She is right, of course. Merely pinning one's faith on the belief that unmasking the falsehood is enough is naive. Perhaps only an academic would be so foolish.

It is in her discussion of the #MeToo movement that Ásta lays out what more is required. Having the hermeneutical resources to name the injustice is certainly, as she says, key. For example, it was not until Catharine MacKinnon and others hit on the term "sexual harassment" for the repeated, relatively minor sexual liberties men were taking with women in the workplace that people had a way to speak of and understand the injustice inflicted in this way. Marital rape is another such term, as is mansplaining. But this naming is not confined merely to the original injustice—it also extends to techniques of ideological absorption, as Kate Manne deftly shows by popularizing the term "himpathy."

Acknowledging the systematic nature of the oppression is also important. In Ásta's discussion of four of the techniques for ideological absorption I identify, she repeatedly hammers home how they each paper over, ignore, or deny the systematicity of the injustice. The concept of "face shaming" she employs here is useful, because it allows for systematic resistance to systematic injustice. As an example, a black woman approached my white daughter in a parking lot recently to tell her how much it meant to her to see my daughter's Black Lives Matter bumper sticker displayed on her car. She said it helped her feel less alone to know that at least some white people cared about her people. And Ásta is right to point out that in banding together to resist, the systematic nature of the oppression becomes visible.

It is definitely not enough to unmask the falsity of an oppressive master narrative. We need countertechniques that firmly resist the techniques of ideological absorption by refusing to allow the systemic nature of oppressions to be ignored. The real comfort here is not that master narratives are false, but that for resisters, as Ásta concludes, there is strength in numbers.

Schechtman considers how having "enough" counterstories will ultimately allow the truth to prevail.⁴ Such considerations as the political climate, social media, and celebrity involvement play a role, but Schechtman is more interested in the theoretical question of what uptake of a counterstory consists in—what success in this regard looks like.

Well, one measure of success would certainly be that a significant number of people who bought the invidious master narrative started identifying people via the counterstory instead. The difficulty is that master-narrative believers are not a homogeneous group, nor is there only one counterstory.

And here is where Schechtman makes an interesting and helpful move. First,

4 Schechtman, "It's Complicated," 316.

she notes that some people are “actively and deeply invested” in the master narrative, some subscribe to it but are uncomfortable with the privilege it yields them and distract themselves by the use of ideological absorption, and still others are harmed by it but buy into it anyway.⁵ Next she points out that counterstories too vary in different ways. So success depends on who is listening, and how hard, to what counterstory.

Some people, of course, will not listen to any counterstory no matter how shrewdly it is pitched, so there is no use wasting time on them. It therefore makes better sense to work on the uncomfortable group. The obvious strategy to employ here might seem to be to hammer away at them with repeated confrontation of undeniable truths that refute the master narrative, and in this way break down their defenses. These counterstories would target black-and-white villains, such as Jeffrey Epstein or Bill Cosby, rather than more ambiguous cases such as Al Franken, since Franken-type cases would be easier to assimilate into the master narrative by characterizing them as “not so bad,” or “He’s a comedian whose joke got out of hand.” The idea is to stay focused on what is clearly terrible, rather than what is more easily explained away. We don’t want to risk backlash, do we?

Actually, says Schechtman, we do. She quite rightly points out that resisting the Jeffrey Epsteins leaves a great deal of the master narrative untouched. It lets those who have bought into the master narrative denounce outrageous behavior without having to confront the subtler but still harmful practices of oppression. In fact, the focus on the blatant turns those bad actors into the exception, making the counterstory, like the one about the Tuskegee Airmen, stand-alones that leave everything else in place. The only difference is that here the protagonist of the counterstory is not the good guy but the bad guy. What is needed instead is to show that the bad guy’s behavior is connected quite directly to attitudes and behaviors that are dismissed as relatively harmless.

Schechtman thinks a different strategy might be employed for those with infiltrated consciousness whose identities are damaged by the very master narratives they embrace. Here, hearing their circumstances described in ways they can easily identify with might be all that is needed to switch out at least part of their worldview. I recall, for instance, chatting with a dear friend in the early 1970s who, like me, was a stay-at-home mom. She remarked in passing over our morning coffee that she did not see why, just because she took care of her son at home, she should always be the one to clean the bathroom. I had never thought about it before, but that simple observation flipped the switch for me, and from then on, my husband cleaned the bathroom too.

Schechtman also insightfully notes that to get a counterstory to succeed may

5 Schechtman, “It’s Complicated,” 317.

not be so much a matter of directly convincing those who do not accept it to see things in a different light, as of gradually and generally diluting the master narrative itself. This can take several generations, as those of us telling counterstories in the seventies taught them to our children, who are now passing them on to their own children, so that by now they are accepted as matter-of-fact truths. Here, Schechtman agrees with Ásta that it is the frequency and ubiquity of the counterstory, not the truth of it, that gives it traction, although the truth of it contributes to its ubiquity when compared to the diluted master narrative.

It is then the diffuse and dynamic power of the counterstory that provides the resources for combating the diffuse and dynamic power of the master narrative. These dynamics are going on all around us, and may give us guarded hope that resistance is *not* futile, whatever the Borg may say to the contrary. Counterstories *can* be heard. Master narratives *can* be dismantled, despite their tremendous power to assimilate. I am grateful to my commentators for saying more clearly, and developing more powerfully, the ideas I have been working out about this for years.

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