

Mediated Narratives as Companions

Ahmet Atay

Narratives are what keep me connected and alive at this particular cultural and historical moment. Mediated stories are part of my everyday reality, as my every day has become increasingly more mediated and fragmented due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a global citizen who lives alone, I used to travel between countries and maneuver around cultures, visit home (Cyprus), and spend some time with my relatives. I was able to simultaneously belong to bigger urban and small rural settings, spending enough time in each to work, live, escape, and belong. Travelling presented opportunities for creating and exchanging stories, as well as listening to stories from home. Travelling also meant returning home and connecting with my family. Travelling has not only allowed me to return, to step into my past and aspects of my identity that come to life in that particular context, but it has also provided different ways of imagining and performing my own cultural identity. Similarly, stories as an act, performance, and exchange contribute to worldmaking, where I make sense of aspects of my identities, creating and recreating different identity performances. Since March 2020, I have been home-bound, living in a small rural Ohio town and experiencing the world around me through mediated narratives. These days, my stories are limited to and revolve around my apartment, its four walls, my cat Plum, short walks that I take to breathe, and the endless cyber-meetings I regularly attend. In this essay, I utilize my personal experiences to theorize mediated narratives as companions, friends, lifelines, and ways to experience the world.

Narratives are integral to human communication. According to Walter Fisher, “humans are essentially storytellers” (7). We use oral, written, and visual stories to communicate, make sense of who we are, explain the world around us, and archive our experiences. Donald E. Polkinghorne posits that “narrative is a form of meaning making” (36). Paul John Eakin argues that “[w]e tell stories about ourselves every day” (1). Hence, we use and embody narratives to story and represent our identities. We tell stories about home and belonging (Chawla); we tell stories about coming out (Adams); we tell stories about transnational diasporic experiences (Atay, “Digital Diasporic Experiences”; Atay, “Journey of Errors”); and we tell stories to decolonize narrative methods (Bhattacharya; Chawla). We tell stories to live.

In the last several months, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both locally and globally, all of us around the world have been more isolated than at any point in recent human history. People have experienced localized or individualized isolations due to social distancing, lockdowns, the encroaching presence of remote and online work environments, and the fear of domestic and international travel. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new borders and boundaries, restrictions, fears of movement and people, and finally, new limitations of access and face-to-face communication. I think the pandemic and our attempts to combat the harsh and deadly reality of the virus have caused new realities to emerge, such as having less human contact, even with family members and close friends. While our interactions have diminished, the pandemic simultaneously brought with it new perspectives on the role and importance of stories in our lives. As human contact deteriorated in our lives, we could turn to written and mediated stories to find solace and to feel connected. In the following narrative, I present a personal story to illuminate the ways in which narratives, particularly mediated narratives, function in the absence of mundane and routine everyday life encounters or communication. Hence, I argue that stories can function as companions.

Beginning of the Story

Since March 2020, I have chosen not to interact with people face-to-face not only to protect myself but also others, by minimizing the risk of transmission of COVID-19. As a transnational diasporic being, I teach at a small university in a small rural town in Ohio. Thus, I live away from relatively bigger cities, such as Akron, Canton, or Cleveland. I was already feeling isolated when the dark winter blanketed us early last winter. Due to high numbers of infections and deaths, we went to the shelter-in-place phase for days during late March and early April. Although the spring and then the summer arrived, fear of the virus kept my social bubble very small, and I only communicated in person with a couple of people. I was isolated and living alone in my already lonely story. I often joke that being an international student and faculty member prepared me well for these isolating conditions, as I was not always able to travel to visit my family during the breaks, due to previous personal circumstances (such as dedicating break-time to research) and geographical distances. Therefore, as a student, I was often stuck in dorm rooms or my small apartments while others were traveling to visit their families for holidays or summer breaks. I remember one cold winter when I was studying in Iowa, I spent the winter break in my dorm room. I was one of the very few students residing in a big and old Victorian-style building. It was a very cold winter often hit by snowstorms. To pass the time and cope with loneliness, I read academic books and novels and watched films and soap operas. Since I did not have a car, I was unable to drive. Instead, a friend of mine from Japan and I regularly visited a coffee shop that was only a block or two from my dorm to break the routine and socialize. At the time, I did not have a personal computer; we had to take turns using one of the two computers in the lobby. Therefore, I depended on books, films, and television to survive. In many ways, such experiences prepared me well for isolation.

I begin my story with this interlude, not to say that I survived before and can therefore do it again, but to show a pattern that persists in my life. Namely, mediated stories function as my companion in isolation or when I travel to destinations where I know practically no one. Films,

television shows, serial narratives, such as soap operas or novels, and online platforms provide continuity and connection, but they are also a way to escape, to feel less isolated and lonely. During this pandemic, as I hardly ever interact with other people in the regular sense, my only connections with them are through mediated forms. I teach my classes through Microsoft Teams, I regularly attend endless meetings on Zoom or Teams, I talk to my family on Skype, and I text with friends or communicate on Facebook messenger. They are part of the everyday stories that I create, and they are characters in my stories that I share with others. They are my mediated family members, friends, students, and colleagues.

One day resembles another when you are in isolation during a pandemic, especially if you live alone. At some point, your memory may fail you, and you cannot really remember or distinguish one day in May from another in September. You might recall the films you watched or novels you read, but your day will be blurry because you don't really have a cohesive story to tell or remember. Your soap operas or television series mark the days and help you separate one from another. This was one of those days—the story within the story.

November 2020

It was one of those days when you wake up to a cold morning. Your cat gently presses his paws on your nose and plays with your beard. You don't want to get out of bed and start the day because there is a full day ahead of you. You would rather curl up in bed with a good mystery novel than attend a number of meetings and teach your classes. You know that your students are tired because you are tired. They are dispersed all around the world, coming into your virtual classroom to learn and to feel that they belong to an educational community. It is clear that they are struggling to get through the semester because their emails ask for extensions on their assignments or tell you about their positive COVID-19 status. You finally convince yourself to get out of bed. You yield to your cat's demand for food and make a cup of coffee to wake

yourself up. It is cold; the grass is covered with frost. You turn up the heat in your apartment and sit in front of your computer. You check your emails and look at the news to catch up with US politics and see what is happening in Europe and at home. The latest Brexit news annoys you, and you are already fed up with the ongoing US election process. You ignore your emails because you are not ready to attend to them. You decide to watch an old film to keep you company as you eat your breakfast. You admire Ginger Rogers's acting, as she reminds you of films you watched when you were a child. When you are an only child, movies and novels become your companions. Once the film is over, you are ready at last to start the day. It is already 9:30 am.

You have a short meeting with a student who is failing your class. He cries, and you want to cry with him. You tell him that you cannot write his papers for him and that he must try a bit harder, even though the times are tough. You have another meeting at 10 am, the content of which bores you so much that you start reading and answering your emails. When that meeting is over, you log in to your next meeting. You realize that you are wearing your gray sweater to look presentable and a colorful pajama bottom. They reflect your fluctuating mood because you are overbooked with meetings, and you want to attend to your class preparation. You manage to eat your lunch while you talk to your parents on Zoom. They give you a quick update on their day. They keep you sane and provide a consistent routine. You hang up and run to your 1 pm meeting. Once the meeting is over, you teach two classes back-to-back. You plan to take a walk in between, but you've run out of time.

Once the classes are done at 5 pm, you run out of your apartment for a quick walk and to try to catch the end of the daylight. You feel cold and return home to find your cat waiting for you in the front window. He is hungry and wants to smell you as you walk in. You feed him, check and respond to your emails, and talk to your friend on the phone while preparing your dinner. He tells you that he has an evening meeting, and you both hang up. You eat your dinner while you watch one of your soap operas. You realize that you don't like Gabi, and Claire really annoys you. Gabi reminds you of one of your co-workers—maybe that's why you don't like her. You realize it is 7:30 pm, and you rush to attend

to your schoolwork. At 9 pm, you make a cup of coffee to keep you from passing out from fatigue. You tune in to watch another soap opera, and you cry over Sharon's cancer storyline. You hate health-related stories because you fear losing family members while you are away. You remember meeting Sharon as a character in the late 1990s when you were in Cyprus. You remind yourself that, in a way, you two have grown up together. She is your friend, at least that's what you think.

By 10 pm, you curl up on your couch to read your new mystery novel. It is the first in a 12-installment series. It takes place in a small Midwest town that reminds you of your own. It is a cozy mystery, so you read it to be entertained and to keep yourself company. You don't care for the characters yet, but you know that, over time, you will get to know them intimately, as the authors narrate their personal turbulences. You realize that these novels all have funny titles. You chuckle, and it wakes up your cat. He looks at you with wondering eyes while you return to your book. Incoming text messages interrupt your reading, and you briefly chat with your friends from graduate school. By 11 pm, you decide to catch up with your British soap operas. Even though you are two years behind, you hope that you can catch up. You realize how much you miss the UK and Europe, but you have no means of travel at the moment. You watch the adventures of your favorite characters. You don't like going to bed early, so you decide to watch another film. The old movies from 1940 that you choose to watch give you some consistency. You start noticing patterns among them when you watch all the films you can find from a particular year. You realize that the war in Europe influenced the stories in most of these films. The sets, patterns, fashions of the year, songs, and stories give you comfort and consistency. By 1 am, you realize that you have been looking at screens since 7:15 am, and it is time to go to bed. You curl up in your bed, listening to the blowing wind and feeling the warmth of your cat, as he sleeps next to your feet. You feel grateful that you adopted him three years ago and that he is part of your everyday narrative.

End of the Story

In the absence of face-to-face human interactions, the inability to get together with friends, and the lack of means to visit family, mediated narratives and communication with people on cyber platforms have become the way of life. Communication through cyberspace and mediated narratives became my everyday story. As the days blurred and the boundaries between workplace and personal life disappeared, increased communication with students and colleagues in cyberspace also became very taxing. In this reality, one more meeting meant another hour in front of my computer screen. Looking at the last several months collectively, I quickly realize that I don't have any stories to tell except non-stop meetings and my limited online communication with friends and family. My story is stuck between my four walls, and in the absence of human interactions in the physical sense, all I have are mediated stories that I take part in or watch every day to feel connected. Hence, mediated stories are my stories. I enjoy the stories of my favorite soap opera characters and replace my small-town living with those in mystery novels. These characters stand in as my friends, as I allow their stories to intersect with mine. They offer me an escape but also provide friendship and a sense of belonging. Mediated narratives perform the necessary function of providing me companionship and connection but also keep me alive during these isolating times.

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