Telling Stories

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Reflection and Self-Disclosure from the Small Stories Perspective: A Study of Identity Claims in Interview and Conversational Data

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In this chapter, I examine the close association of reflection (henceforth R) and self-disclosure (S-D) within biographical studies with the storyteller’s explicit, and by extension “evaluative,” ascriptions and statements about self (cf. Bamberg, in press). In other words, how do tellers propositionalize about their lives? The association of R and S-D is part and parcel of certain assumptions, in particular that, in order for tellers to reflect on their lives and selves and to open up (self-disclose) to an interviewer, they must have a critical distance from the reported events and be given the opportunity to piece them together in a life story within an interview situation (cf. Freeman 2006).

Thus, once storytellers start talking about their internal states and feelings, likes and dislikes, and themselves as being “X” or “Y,” analysts take those statements to be signals of “who” they are in a more or less “continuous” or “stable” way, and also of what value social identities (e.g., gender, class, ethnicity) have for them. As we will see below, this association has not been without its critique. However, my aim here is to take it on board and interrogate its validity and applicability to a corpus of both interview and conversational stories. Specifically, I examine self-ascriptions and other-ascriptions, assessments/characterizations, and categorizations of the kind that social science interview analysts tend to focus upon, what I call self-identity claims and other-identity claims. To do so, however, I align with the assumptions, concerns, and tools of small stories research, as I outline them below. My questions are: How do the occurrence and sequential management of identity claims differ in the interview versus the conversational narrative data? What interactional actions do identity claims perform in each environment? And what do such differences tell us about the ways in which tellers do self? Finally, what are the implications of such differences for the ways in which R and S-D have been conceptualized with the biographical studies paradigm?
Small Stories Research

In recent work, my colleagues and I have proposed small stories (Georgakopoulou 2006, 2007; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) as an alternative to canonical narrative studies that sets out to include certain underrepresented activities in the focal concerns of narrative and identity analysis. Space restrictions here do not allow the discussion of the definition and identification of small stories (but see Georgakopoulou 2007, chap. 2). Here, however, I briefly list the four main points of divergence of small stories from biographical work assumptions:

1. Emphasis on breaking news, stories of the future, and hypothetical and shared events in contrast to the emphasis on stories of past, personal, nonshared events. This was the starting point of small stories research, namely, the frequency and salience of certain types of stories that departed from the Labovian prototype of past, personal experience told in nonshared stories in conversational settings (Labov 1972). In particular, in my study of Greek female adolescents (Georgakopoulou 2007), stories of projected events were by far the most salient type of conversational story.

2. Emphasis on interactional, co-constructional aspects as opposed to a focus on representational aspects. My suggestion here is that the commonly found bias within narrative interview research in favor of the representational aspects of the stories and the claims in them (cf. Atkinson and Delamont 2006) may be over-stating them as self-construction resources as well as skewing the ways in which they are intimately linked with the interview as talk-in-interaction. We have shown (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2008), instead, that storytellings are integrally connected with their local interactional context and therefore should not be taken as unmediated or authentic records of self.

3. Emphasis on other-identity claims as opposed to self-identity claims. This suggests that the excessive emphasis on stories and statements about self in interview situations underestimates the wealth of identity work done when the focus is on discursive representations of others (see Georgakopoulou 2007, chap. 5).

4. Emphasis on the historicity of stories versus the view of stories as a single event. As I have shown (Georgakopoulou 2007), storytelling events among intimates draw irrevocably on lived and/or shared experience. Stories of shared events are thus part of a trajectory, an interactional history that can be drawn upon argumentatively; for example, claims and views based on this history may be accepted, contested, refashioned, and the like. This is normally obscured in interview narratives, where primacy is given to the single event and the researcher’s extrapolation of dominant discourses at play from that event.

Data and Methods

This chapter is based on data collected for a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council titled Urban Classroom Culture and Interaction, 2005–8. The project employed the methods of ethnographic sociolinguistics and collected data from
a group of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds in a comprehensive school in London by means of participant-observation, radio-microphones (180 hours in total), interviews, and retrospective participant commentary on extracts from the radio-microphone recordings and video recordings. We also drew on school policy and media documents to set this in a wider context. Overall, we employed a multifaceted methodology so as to capture the sociospatial orientations of the phenomena under study, that is, who orients to what, where, how, and why. Also, a goal was to capitalize on the relative strength and exigencies of each method in order to chart individuals’ identity profiles across time and space. For instance, whereas the radio-microphone recordings of spontaneous interaction were crucial to our interest in the ways in which aspects of the participants’ social identities were intricately interwoven in everyday social interaction and life at school, the interviews and playback sessions allowed us to access the hitherto unvoiced and to ask about issues that informants did not routinely talk about in everyday activity.

The data for this chapter come from the audio-recorded interactions (in the classroom) and interview of one of our nine focal participants, who we call Nadia. When the recordings started, Nadia was fourteen years old. Her native language is English, and she describes her background as mixed race. Her mother is mixed-race South African, and her father is Armenian. Nadia is a leading member of the girls’ popular group and an academically strong student who nonetheless, as we will see, finds “school a bit boring” (for a detailed profile of Nadia, see Georgakopoulou 2008). I focus on Nadia and the other female students’ conversations and interviews with the aim of exploring how they locally report (e.g., as stories) their popular culture and new media engagement, ranging from mobile telephone calls and text-messaging to songs and soap operas, personal computers, the Internet, electronic games, fashion, and body care. I also document the kinds of metarepresentations and metadiscourses (e.g., on ethnicity, youth, gender, and schooling) that participants draw upon when asked to reflect on this engagement and on other issues of analytical importance.

Analysis: Nadia’s Stories about One “Sweet Talker” and Two “Annoying” Teachers

In our analysis of conversational and interview stories, we did not set out to privilege small stories. Our aim was, however, to ensure that our analytic lens paid due attention to them and did not fail to capture them alongside the full-fledged stories. Small stories are abundant in the classroom data (on average, there are eight stories per period) and occur amid other activities, so they are in tune with people attending to many things simultaneously. Yet they are clearly marked with certain framing devices (e.g., addressee-oriented questions such as “Did I tell you?” and temporal adverbials such as “yesterday”). They also tend to become focal topics, in that they would be taken up again, if momentarily exited from (e.g., when students have to orient to the classroom agenda), with minimal marking. We can see how Nadia signals return to the story in the data at hand in lines 35 and 36 below, with the marker “anyways” and with the reference “he” (instead of a full name, i.e., Adam): “Anyways yea:h he text me yesterday.”
Small stories told in the classroom typically involve reports of recent mediated interactions with boys (e.g., on the internet site MSN, by texting, which I call breaking news). The sheer act of a boy making contact is tellable in these cases; it is the interaction (who said what and how) that therefore becomes the crux of event-ness in the reports. Breaking news frequently leads to small stories of projected events (projections); these involve (near) future encounters with the men-talked-about, and the telling of both is interspersed with references to shared events.

The data at hand come from a narrative event that comprised two interlocked breaking news stories both told by Nadia during a mathematics period. Both stories involve reports of mediated interactions with two boys/suitors the day before. When telling them, Nadia sits at a small table in the back corner of the classroom with Lisa and Shenice. The first story (called “Adam the Sweet Talker”), an excerpt from which I will analyze here, involves a reported texting communication between Nadia and Adam. In the space of eleven minutes, the story is disengaged and reengaged four times but remains focal. It also typically leads to a projection in which Nadia and her interlocutors Lisa and Shenice plan a face-to-face meeting between Nadia and Adam the following week. Here, I concentrate on the first 131 lines of the story.

Moving to the stories from Nadia’s interview, first, I need to note that the interviews were not specifically designed to elicit stories. In one-to-one sessions that lasted for more than one hour, the researcher asked the key informants for their thoughts on issues that were of analytical importance for the project: popularity, school, status in class, friendships, uses of new technologies, and music. Yet numerous stories occurred in the participants’ interviews, both full-fledged and small stories, albeit ones that were very different from those occurring in the classroom. In particular, breaking news, projections, and stories of shared events were virtually absent, while generic and habitual stories figured very prominently. Numerous analysts (e.g., Baynham 2005; Reissman 2002) have stressed the importance and frequency of such stories in interviews, and they have argued for the need to view them as narrative data and include them in the analysis. The boundaries between habitual and generic stories are far from sharp and well delineated, and a full discussion is outside the scope of this chapter. Broadly speaking, I take it that though both recount events that are typical, in that they have happened or do happen, over and over again, generic stories present an absence of specific characters and are normally recounted with referential choices such as “you” or “one” that represent generalized actors.

What is most important in my data, as we will see below, is that generic and habitual accounts can be sequentially contiguous and that they are frequently followed by what I call “once” stories, which serve to illustrate the pattern of events and actions recounted in the preceding generic or habitual story with the telling of one specific episode or series of events involving specific characters. These once stories typically open with the adverb once, following “like” or “for example,” which serve to emphasize the illustrative function of the story to follow. In this sense, once stories are reminiscent of the type of story that Martin and Plum (quoted by De Fina 2003, 169) called exemplum.
The Sequential Management of Identity Claims

Identity claims in both conversational and interview data are actor focused; that is, they refer to personality traits (e.g., physical appearance, modes of conduct). They are also organized relationally, with contrastive and associative relationships, so that a list of positive and negative attributes emerges. Finally, they tend to cluster together and be associated with likes and dislikes and with certain category-bound activities in plots, akin to membership categorization devices (Sacks 1992). Elsewhere, I have postulated a distinction between taleworld and storytelling identity claims and have discussed their interrelationships (Georgakopoulou 2008). Here, I single out one systematic difference in the sequential management of identity claims, that is, with regard to where they occur in relation to the story and what types of stories with which they are routinely associated. In crude terms, in the conversational data, identity claims follow the telling of stories; but in the interview data, identity claims precede the telling of stories—as shown here:

Conversational data: NARRATIVE [breaking news—references to shared events—projections] + Identity Claim

In example 1, we can see this pattern in Nadia’s first narrative:

Example 1: 1 Mathematics: 8.55—9.40 AM (identity claims are in italics)

1 N: ((excited and quietly)) oh: Adam text me yesterday 12.31 minutes ((into the lesson))
2 d’ you know what he said:?=
3 L: = Re:ally?
4 N: he was gonna come and see me (. ) yesterday
5 Mr. O: Fo:ls you haven’t got time to talk
6 N: and then I says why didn’t you?
7 he was like (. ) cos I got lost
8 he said (. ) I was gonna come down to your school
9 I was like hh ((high pitched))
10 and you never come becau:se↑↑
11 he’s like (. ) I didn’t know where I was going
12 > I was like< ((high pitched)) oh::: you’re so lovely
13 I love you (. ) oh my Go:d 12.52 minutes
35 N: Anyways yea:h 14.49 minutes
36 he text me yesterday h—
37 oh yeah (. ) I didn’t forget my phone by the way ((going through messages to find it, while teacher is taking registry)) ((further down))
46 N: I goes—he text me and he was like hey girl ((Teacher taking registry))
50 let me know when you get this
51 >I was like< who the fuck is this? ((Teacher still taking registry while Nadia is expanding on the text message))
63 N: he’s like you forgot me already (. ) it’s Adam
((Continues with the story. Teacher calling Nadia’s name in the registry))
so he said he’s gonna come next week to see me
I was like YESS!
(4) ((reading text)) yeah just cochin now
dad was on it (...) I miss you still
:o:hh he’s so sweet
((shift in tone)) but (...) I don’t like sweet talkers
(2)
do you fall↑ for sweet talk?
hmm↑
Do you fall for sweet talk?
Not really
Do you?
don’t lie to me Shenice ((Lisa interrupts to ask how “multiples” is spelled))
If a brere says one nice thing to you you’re like
((high pitched)) >oh he’s so sweet he’s so lovely<
I’ve never said that to you
Oh yes you have
like if you get chirpsed on road
like remember you called me
to tell me ’bout that time you was with Laura ((Lisa asks again about “multiples”))
I didn’t say they were (lovely)
I said they were butt ugly
Yeah I know but like
if a brere says something sweet to you
you think he’s lovely
((Teacher interrupts asking them to do their homework))
I don’t know
cos a brere has never said something sweet to me
don’t lie
I swear to God=
=sure
Not that I can remember
Dan said he loved you
that’s sweet=
=(that’s) different
How is it different
It’s different
(Okay) ((They briefly interrupt the talk to share crisps))
but innit?
do you fall for sweet talk
on a level? ((8 seconds of silence))
I’m too smart for sweet talk
The story begins with the main reportable event “oh: Adam text me yesterday” (line 1). Before Nadia pauses her narration for the first time, it recounts the mediated interaction between Adam and Nadia; it ends with an identity claim about Adam presented as a reported thought by Nadia the character: “>I was like< oh you’re so lovely” (line 12). The story is resumed in lines 35–36: “Anyways yeah he text me yesterday,” and Nadia elaborates on the already reported interaction, which she ends this time with a telling identity claim about Adam: “Oh he’s so sweet but I don’t like sweet talkers” (lines 79–80). As we will see below, this identity claim prompts a negotiation between Shenice and Nadia around the topic of falling for sweet talk, which ends with Nadia’s self-identity claim “I’m too smart for sweet talk” (line 131). The above shows how identity claims in this case follow upon the story’s reported events and (inter)action.

In contrast, in the interview stories, the pattern is reversed:

Interview data: Identity Claim + NARRATIVE [habitual or generic story +/- or once story]

To be specific, forty-eight (out of fifty-five) stories told by Nadia were preceded by identity claims or social positions. The pattern of sequencing in these stories was as follows:

In twenty-seven stories: identity claim plus habitual story
In eleven stories: identity claim plus generic story
In eight stories: identity claim plus generic or habitual story plus once story
In two stories: identity claim plus once story

In example 2, we can see the above pattern at work in relation to Nadia’s stories about “two annoying teachers,” whom I call Mr. Harris and Mr. Templer:

Example 2

1 I: So and (.) just really about you so (.). tell me a bit about yourself=
2 N: =Ooh there’s a lot to tell °wow° um (.). I just like (.). coching with
3 my friends and listening to music really (0.5)
4 I: Ok (1)
5 N: And (.). going out (1) school is a bit boring (.). the teachers can
6 make it more interesting but they just choose not to (.).
7 especially Mr. Harris (0.5) he’s really boring
8 but (.). I suppose (.). actually I feel sorry for us next year
9 we have him for humanities as well for two years oh gosh (.)
10 I: Um why: don’t you like him as a teacher?=
11 N: =because he’s bo:ring (.). he’s like ((imitating his voice))
12 you have three minutes to do three questions it’s like OK (.).
13 when you’re half way through the question he’s like ((imitating))
14 >if you haven’t finished< you’ll get a chance to go back
15 to it (.) and then he’s like (.) a:h he’s just annoying (.). if you-
16 he - he’ll say (.). everyone work silently and
then you’re working quietly and then (1) this girl (. ) Lily (. )

she needed help (. ) and Bhadra was trying to explain to her

but she didn’t understand (. ) so I explained to her

> and then he came over and started shouting at me< just ’cause I was

trying to help her (. ) and I was like (1) you’re not a very nice person

I: OK > so you said< it’s boring (. ) so how do you think it c- could be

( . ) made more interesting =

When we get teachers like Mr. Templer it does not help (1) a:h he’s

just annoying (. ) re:ally (. ) because he moans at you a::ll the time (. )

he thinks he’s doing something good but it’s just n:ot it’s like (. ) he
goes he says stupid things that makes you think w- why did you

say that↑ who g- who (. ) who started with you for you to say that

it’s like you (. ) started the argument and then when you retaliate

he gets you in trouble y— you just can’t win (1) with him by (1)um

(. ) we’v— we then we got two form tutors (0.5) ’cause our class

was struggling (. ) Mr. Templer and Mr. Andrews (. ) everyone likes Mr.

Andrews (. ) everyone thinks he’s (. ) funny and safe and all

that (. ) but everyone kinda hates Mr. Templer ’cause he’s (. ) he’s

strict (. ) he just likes to start on people for no reason and he HE (0.5)
teachers aren’t supposed to lie just to get you into trouble but HE does

like one time (. ) Jabir had a pi- um (. ) he was on report (. )

and Jabir’s hand was on his report and he was looking that way

(. ) and Mr. Templer comes over yea:h (. ) ((Story continued))

like one time (. ) Jabir had a pi- um (. ) he was on report (. )

and Jabir’s hand was on his report and he was looking that way

(. ) and Mr. Templer comes over yea:h (. ) ((Story continued))


Mr. Harris is introduced with an identity claim (“he’s really boring,” line 7). This is repeated in line 11 (“he’s boring”) and followed by a generic story (lines 11–15). Another telling identity claim (“ah he’s just annoying,” line 15) punctuates the beginning of another brief generic account (lines 15–17), which leads to a “once” story (lines 17–21), starting as: “and then this girl Lily,” line 17. In this case, the identity claim (“and I was like you’re not a very nice person,” line 21) comes to reinforce the already stated identity claims (“he’s boring, . . . he’s annoying”). In the same vein, Nadia further down utters an identity claim about Mr. Templer (“ah he’s just annoying,” lines 24–25), followed by a generic story (lines 25–30). Nadia at that point brings in Mr. Andrews as a teacher who is “funny and safe” (lines 33–34), in contrast to Mr. Templer, for whom she utters another identity claim (“he’s strict,” line 35), followed by a very brief generic account (lines 35–37) and then by a “once” story, lines 38–46: “like one time (. ) Jabir” (line 40).

Identity Claims and Co-Construction
Breaking news in the data tends to grant storytellers strong telling rights on the basis of experiential primacy, and so the actual events are not often contested. However, there is much co-construction around identity claims, particularly the telling
identity claims that are normally produced in relation to a story’s evaluation. Identity claims therefore provide spaces for co-construction between teller and interlocutors and a joint exploration of moral frames. We can see this in Nadia’s question at the end of the reported texting interaction with Adam: “Do you fall for sweet talk?” (line 82). This question immediately follows a telling identity claim (he’s so sweet) and the dislike associated with it (but I don’t like sweet talkers). This leads to an extended sequence of negotiation between Nadia and Shenice (lines 82–131), which I have analyzed in detail elsewhere (Georgakopoulou 2008).

Due to space restrictions, it suffices to say here that the sequence illustrates how identity claims may be confirmed or refuted by prior (shared) experience and may be qualified as a result. This happens with Shenice whom Nadia accuses of “lying” (line 87) about not falling for sweet talk and gradually gets her to backtrack from that statement by bringing in two hypothetical scenarios (lines 94–96, 106–7) and two references to shared events (lines 97–104, 117–21) as argumentative devices. The sequence ends with Nadia uttering a telling self-identity claim “I’m too smart for sweet talk” (line 131). In the ensuing talk, which I do not present here, Nadia defends this claim against Shenice’s challenge. Thus identity claims in the conversational stories routinely become the object of negotiation and (re)fashioning.

In contrast to this pattern, the main narratives in the interviews unfold without interruptions from the interviewer, who engages in supporting the narrative flow as an attentive, sympathetic listener. This does not imply that there is no co-construction. In fact, identity claims in the interview data serve as responses to invitations by the interviewer to the interviewee to self-report as well as to pose questions for elaboration, explanation, and justification; for example, What do you think about X? Why do you think that? In this way, they provide an account and further evidence for views already stated. We can see how the interviewer’s invitation to Nadia in line 1 (“tell me a bit about yourself”) leads to statements of likes (lines 3–4) and then to the general claim about school being boring (line 5) that is specified by the telling identity claim about Mr. Harris (“he’s really boring.” line 7). This identity claim is restated by Nadia and further accounted for by the stories that follow from line 10 onward, in response to the interviewer’s question “Um why: don’t you like him as a teacher?” (line 10).

In addition to the above, the storyteller’s identity claims are normally not contested by the interviewer, but more evidence may be requested. We can see this in the interviewer’s question in lines 22–23: “OK >so you said< it’s boring (.) so how d’ you think it c- could be (.) made more interesting?” The interviewer here latches on to the claim already offered by Nadia regarding the school and Mr. Harris. In response to her question for further elaboration then, Nadia launches a related identity claim (“he’s just annoying,” lines 24–25), this time about another teacher, Mr. Templer, and as suggested, backs the claim up with two generic stories and a once story.

Identity Claims and Modes of Self
As briefly shown in this chapter, our study examines focal participants’ identities and self-projects from a number of standpoints and with different data so as to chart profiles and self-projects for them over time. In light of this, I am not suggesting that we
can reduce this complex endeavor to the sequential placement of identity claims. However, I am arguing that the differences in the sequential environment and co-construction of the identity claims, as well as in the type of story to which they are related, are linked with differences in the storytellers’ modes of experience and self-presentation. To be specific, in the conversational data, the emphasis is on the recent and newsworthy, whereas in the interview data, the emphasis is on the durative and habitual and the accompanying typicality and generalizability (cf. Baynham 2005; Reissman 2002). In this respect, “once” stories that reinstate the condition of uniqueness and singularity of events suspended by generic or habitual accounts come to stress those events as being emblematic of what has already been described as typical.

This difference in the type of stories employed in each case is closely linked with the sequential placement of the stories in relation to the identity claims. In the case of the conversational stories, identity claims follow on from the plot and, in some cases, become consequential for further emplotment, whereas in the case of the interview data, it is the stories that support and provide evidence for the already-stated identity claim(s). This has implications for how identity claims are presented. In the case of the conversational data, identity claims are presented as “emerging” from—and in light of—the story and the reported events. Their joint fashioning and negotiation with the interlocutors also mean that they appear as if they were still in the making and not entirely fixed.

In contrast, in the interview data, the identity claims are presented as settled, as spaces that have been arrived at and inhabited by the storytellers. The stories that follow the identity claims thus come to account for them, whereas the stories in the conversational data that precede the identity claims come to announce them. In this sense, the self is presented as retrospective and reflected upon, whereas in the conversational stories the self is presented as prospective (i.e., “Where do I go from here?”) and in the making.

**Conclusion: Revisiting the Paradigm of Reflection and Self-Disclosure**

In this chapter I have reported connections not only between identity claims and the type of story but also between the sequential placement of stories within interviews and conversations. If we look at these findings in the light of R and S-D, we find that it is mostly the interview stories (and storytellings) that are more recognizably linked with the biographical work on R and S-D—in the sense of both doing R and S-D and doing them in ways that highlight a “measure of distance” on the teller’s part from the reported events and claims and that perpetuate an image of identity that is continuous and stable (Freeman 2006, 142).

My aim in providing evidence for this close link between R and S-D with interview stories is not to cast doubt on such stories as a valid way of understanding the social organization of experience and of making sense of self in specific environments but rather to urge further studies that will try to unpack assumptions that can be taken as inherently connected with the telling of stories in general. Unpacking assumptions here was linked with a change in the focus of inquiry; through the lens of small stories, I have included in my analysis stories that have not traditionally informed the
ideas of R and S-D and looked at the local actions that they perform in relation to the identity claims that occur in their context.

It is somewhat tempting to accept that the conceptual apparatus associated with R and S-D applies only to specific outlook on a specific set of narrative data and should thus be left behind by revisionist moves within narrative studies such as that of small stories. Conversely, there is a case for attempting to extend and redefine some of the conventional vocabulary, both in order to systematize it further and so as to facilitate the much-needed constructive dialogue between—crudely speaking—“big” and “small” stories’ analysts (cf. the plea by Freeman 2006).

In this respect, in the spirit of Ochs and Capps’s definition of narrative (2001), we can argue for a view of R and S-D not as all or nothing but as more or less de-essentialized and multidimensional concepts that come with different possibilities in different contexts. This view would allow for R to be found in the more fluid processes of exploring rather than “reifying” self and other, of meaning making through negotiation and contestation rather than through “stepping out of the flow” of the “quotidian” (Freeman 2006, 144). It would also open up the scope of S-D beyond the narrator disclosing self to the interviewer (who tends to be a stranger) to capture the more gradual revelatory process of (re)making self in connection with what is already known.

NOTES

1. The project was part of the Identities and Social Action Programme (www.identities.org.uk). The team comprised Ben Rampton (director), Caroline Dover, Alexandra Georgakopoulou, Roxy Harris, Constant Leung, and Lauren Small.

2. Transcription conventions:

// the point in a turn where the utterance of the next speaker begins to overlap
=
() speech that cannot be deciphered
(text) analyst’s guess at speech that’s hard to decipher
(( )) stage directions
(.) micropause, not timed
(1.) approximate length of a pause in seconds
CAPITALS emphasized speech
> < faster-than-normal speech
:: extended speech
? rising intonation/question

3. Space restrictions do not allow me to show here how the identity claim “I’m too smart for sweet talk” becomes consequential for the projected story that follows.

REFERENCES


