SELF, SOCIALITY, SENSES, SPIRIT:
A PRE-DISSERTATION DIGITAL STORYTELLING LITERATURE REVIEW

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Introduction: The purpose and promise of digital storytelling

In the context of my research and that of many of the scholars I will survey in this review, digital storytelling refers to the facilitated group process of creating and sharing short autobiographical videos that explore one or more significant moments in the life of the storyteller(s). A particular implementation of a workshop-based approach to this practice was developed in large part by Joe Lambert and a network of collaborators practicing first as the San Francisco Digital Media Center, then as the Center for Digital Storytelling, and finally (since 2015) as StoryCenter. Lambert's *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* (2012) serves as a thorough introduction for would-be facilitators as well as a helpful overview of the history and purposes of the practice, to which I will refer with proper nouns, i.e., Digital Storytelling, which produces Digital Stories.

I treat Digital Storytelling as a methodological (and Digital Stories as a generic) point of departure in support of a more flexible approach to the reflection-stimulating, collaborative creation of multimodal narrative artifacts. I will use the term "digital storytelling" (no capitals) to refer to this broader act of creating more genre-flexible "digital story" artifacts. Of course, what is true of Digital Storytelling will often be true of digital storytelling as well. Indeed, my reading of the D/digital S/storytelling literature is that several of the most frequently cited articles,

including those that have been most influential on my thinking (Hull & Katz, 2006; Pleasants, 2008), take a more flexible approach, at least to facilitation and sometimes also to genre (e.g., Hull & Nelson, 2005). Nevertheless, I believe it is consistent to treat these related uses similarly, as well as to position both in ways that acknowledge their "family relationship" to other practices of meaning- and media-making.

A Digital Story is a short autobiographical video, typically not more than three minutes, comprising the following components layered or woven together:

- **narration** recorded from reading aloud a script of 250-375 words;
- **images**, preferably photos or other stills rather than moving images, "to create a relaxed visual pace against the narration" (p. 37);
- **visual effects** such as crossfades, pan and zoom (aka "Ken Burns"), and title text; and
- (possibly) a **soundtrack**, i.e., "music or ambient sound to add meaning and impact to the story" (p. 37).

These conventions of genre and format—as well as the structured, community-based practices by which Digital Storytellers collaboratively craft their stories—are a matter of careful design intended to support slow, multisensory reflection, design, and authoring. For StoryCenter, the primary unit of narrative and indeed experience is the *moment*, so the process first of exploring meanings and then of making media is in some sense all directed toward helping storytellers go deep in their reflection on a single, personally meaningful event rather than constructing a more sweeping autobiographical vision integrating many moments.[1]

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[1] From my perspective as a religious educator, this point is especially important; it differentiates a spiritual practice of digital storytelling from the rather more prevalent activity of spiritual autobiography. The latter practice is intended to help tellers "describe[] the patterns, themes, and motifs by which [they] recognize the flow of [their] li[ves]" (Episcopal Diocese of Iowa, 2005, p. 5). As such, writing a spiritual

This review surveys and marshalls relevant literature to advance several interrelated claims that together warrant[2] the program of narrative and participatory multimodal ethnographic research I have proposed to examine digital storytelling in a faith-adjacent foster youth mentoring nonprofit. The claims are as follows:

- Self – Digital storytelling practices support individual identity development as participants find, represent, and integrate moments of personal change.
- Sociality – Digital storytelling practices convene community through participants' cosmopolitan encounter, empathetic engagement, and flexible interdependence.
- Senses – Digital storytelling practices interweave multisensory experience and multimodal expression to mediate and negotiate spatial and temporal boundaries.
- Spirit – Digital storytelling practices create sacred space through embodied ritual encounter oriented toward healing and hope.

I will organize the review according to the broad contours of the former claims (self and sociality), interspersing relevant commentary in support of the latter (senses and spirit). In the course of developing and connecting these claims, I will explore relevant theories of narrative, community, and communication; situate these understandings of digital storytelling according to the particular needs of faith and faith-adjacent contexts and especially of supporting foster youth; and identify appropriate research methodologies for registering and representing the impact I believe these practices can have.

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autobiography is a valuable complementary practice, but it runs the risk of spreading the reflection too thin, of leaving valuable experiential dimensions of particular occurrences under-explored. As in talk therapy or spiritual direction, the facilitator's role in digital storytelling is often to challenge the participant to slow down, to ask critical questions, to dig deeper—always with the hope that the participant will discover new insights and connections.

[2] Rather than motivate or describe, which together I take to be the complementary tasks of the proposal.

Story and the Self

Reflection, agency, and emplotment in narrative theory

The third of Lambert's seven steps of Digital Storytelling is called "finding the moment." This act of remembering, reflecting, and ultimately analyzing is central both to storytelling practice and to my approach to narrative and ethnographic inquiry. Lambert's (2012) development of this idea begins as follows:

> at some moment in your life, change came to you or you went towards change. As you become clear about the meaning of your story, you can bring your story to life, by taking us into that moment of change. But out of the sequence of events in your narrative, which event best shows how you came to new insight, what forced you into a new perspective about the subject[?] I have a writing prompt[:] start a sentence with "The phone rang …" and talk about a time when the phone rang and you heard news that changed you forever. (p. 59)

The conviction that stories can help us both identify and represent insights connected to experiences of change is shared among multiple narrative theorists. In particular, Bruner (1994) describes narrators' moves "towards change" (in Lambert's terms) as demonstrating an *agency* that is widely present in autobiographical storytelling. He contrasts this agency with a less common reciprocal characteristic: victimicity (Lambert: "change came to you"). In both cases, the storyteller is making a claim about circumstances, the actor's (or respondent's) engagement with them, and some resulting impact. Whatever the relationship between circumstance and protagonist, the stories of self that tellers deem worth sharing, "though they may be linked to things happening 'outside,' are finally attributed to a happening 'inside' – a new belief, new courage, moral disgust, 'having had enough.' They are thickly agentive" (Bruner, 1994, p. 50).

Thus, Bruner claims the remembering self actively shapes these autobiographical accounts. The question of their strict historicity should not distract from their value as "psychic reality": "we do better to consider them as preternaturally clear instances of narrative construction that have the function of helping the teller clarify his or her Self-concept" (p. 50). Such a view of autobiographical storytelling roots us in understandings of self in which identities are multiple and negotiated rather than singular and essentialized (Lewis & Moje, 2003; Pleasants, 2008; Orsatti & Riemer, 2015). In other words, it's more accurate to think of an autobiographical story as interpretive rather than straightforwardly expository. A story is as much a theory of change as it is a simple baring of the soul. In my view, this understanding should also commit us to a constructivist research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). At least in narrative inquiry and possibly well beyond it, it's an act of appropriate and ethical epistemological humility to assume a symmetry of knowledge-producing leverage between the interpretations storytellers construct as story and the interpretations researchers construct as, say, ethnography or case study or grounded theory.

What Bruner describes in this autobiographical context as a process of narrative construction, Ricœur (1991) develops somewhat more generally (via Aristotle) as emplotment. Aristotle observed that to compose μῦθος (fable or narrative) is a dynamic and synthetic operation, a gathering or collecting[3]. The meaning produced in storytelling happens through the "putting-into-the-form-of-a-plot" that "consists mainly in the selection and arrangement of the events and actions encountered" (p. 3). Emplotment is how, in a first-person storytelling context, we isolate an occurence of significance from among our memories of lived experience: "no

[3] We might even call it, in the parlance of the new media ecology and with an eye toward subsequent practices in the digital storytelling process, a kind of *curation*.

action is a beginning except in a story that it inaugurates … no action constitutes a middle unless it instantiates a change in fortune … no action, taken in itself, constitutes an end except insofar as it concludes a course of action" (p. 3). A story does not tell itself. No listing of events is comprehensive or straightforwardly correct a priori. And the place to begin, pivot, or conclude a story arc depends upon the "intelligible" wholeness we wish to communicate, the collection of actions and details we wish to be "taken together" by our audience (p. 4) as a coherent, reflexive exploration of an experience of change.

Taken together, Bruner's view of autobiographical storytelling as a kind of narratively embodied theory of personal change and Ricœur's structural analysis of emplotment as construction-through-selection are particularly appropriate theoretical tools for understanding one aspect of how digital storytelling mediates individual participants' identity work. Consider how Lambert (2012) continues his account of "finding the moment":

> … Ironically, while the "phone rang" might seem like the best moment to land the story in a specific event, it might be a month or a year later, when you are making toast, or driving to work, or any number of otherwise mundane moments of quiet reflection, when the full weight of what happened finally comes to clarity … Whether the storyteller became aware of it at the time or in reflection, we want to help them find the moment of change *that best represents the insight that they want to convey* (p. 59, italics mine)

StoryCenter's creative constraints on word count and running time force participants to make their theory of change concise and concrete, to slowly and purposefully[4] choose a couple of moments (and later a couple of photographs) from a life's worth of possibilities. In so doing, storytellers refine and represent an understanding of self-in-formation that cannot be reduced to a contextless "moral of the story" (Taylor, 2016, p. 292), but rather depends on the *stuff* of the

[4] This aspect of multimodal design seems to be the primary warrant for Hess (Hess, Gallagher, & Turpin, 2014) locating Digital Storytelling as part of a larger movement to "reclaim and retrieve practices such as contemplation and meditation, stillness and embodied prayer" (p. 231; relatedly Hess, 2012).

story to give the theory of change an anchor in lived experience (for the storyteller) and the possibility of genuine empathy (for the audience). I will return to and develop the latter insight in the section on sociality.

Moments of change and/as agentive identity development in ethnographic storytelling research

Among the half-dozen or so most-cited articles about digital storytelling, and certainly the most important to my perspective, is Hull and Katz's (2006) piece attending to agency, identity, and personal change at DUSTY (Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth), a Bay Area out-of-school community-based technology and education program. The authors build on Bruner's account account of turning points in autobiographical narrative and how examples of this phenomenon, in their words, "serve as emblems or tropes for how one thinks of one's life as a whole" (p. 45). The youth and young adult case studies the researchers share draw on ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts, and multimedia storytelling artifacts. The accounts take the form of research narratives built around agentive turning points they observed in the course of the activity.

For Hull and Katz, as in my pilot study (Oliver, 2018b), storytelling *about* storytelling is itself an act of data analysis that complements close readings of participants' artifacts. In the case of their featured young adult participant, Randy, they chronicle his "intensive acts of self-articulation and self-construction … that signaled an awareness and exercise of social power and that indexed him as a legitimate and artful author" (p. 56). Looming particularly large in this narrative is the moment when Randy shares, to highly positive reception, his poem

"Lyfe-N-Rhyme"[5], and then transcends its original significations through "interweaving or juxtaposition" of music and especially of images: "Randy was able to decontextualize and recontextualize his performed discourse, processes linked to the construction and assumption of authority" (p. 57).

Similarly, for their youth participant, Dara, they present a narrative of a "confident author and active community participant" at DUSTY, in fairly stark contrast to "her sometimes meek and discontented school identity" (p. 61). In Dara's case, a turning point moment in the researchers' understanding came in a moment where they met a teacher clearly surprised by (and callously responsive to) the quality of Dara's storytelling in contrast to her apparent lack of effort in the classroom:

> Mr. W., with his arm wrapped around Dara's shoulder, told [DUSTY staff] that he was surprised at Dara's story because she never did any work in his classroom. No homework, no schoolwork, nothing. A student walking by joined in with 'nope, never.' Dara appeared uncomfortable and looked like she wanted to cry. [The DUSTY coordinator] smiled and put an arm around Dara. She told Dara that they could work on it together" (p. 62).

One hopes, of course, that this particular incident may have served as a turning point both for the surprised researchers in their understanding of Dara's experience[6] as well as for her teacher, Mr. W., who had perhaps been given an opportunity to see his student's disengagement in a new light. In any event, the function of surprise in this moment underscores the power of a

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[5] See also Hull and Nelson (2005) for a more thorough multimodal analysis. The authors conclude that the power of multimodal representation and expression lies in "the relationships between and among different, copresent modes" (p. 224), not as simple layering but as a more complex orchestration or braiding.

[6] The tension between her in- and out-of-school identities becomes a point of subsequent analytic focus, as the authors trace Dara's "selective and strategic" appropriation of a fictional character's dislike of homework and school (p. 64).

turning-point analytic in studying educational experience. Surprise is almost always an experience of expectation mismatch suggesting that a change has perhaps taken place.

To be clear: in both these cases, the turning points in question are identified *by the researchers* and presented in a story *about participants' engagement with digital storytelling practices*. Here turning points (as data) and "finding the moment" (as an analytical procedure) are engaged independently from, but not unrelatedly to, the development of personal theories of change advanced by the participant-storytellers themselves in the course of their identity-negotiating storywork. We should expect the account of an attentive and empathetic ethnographer to follow and reflect the storytellers' own accounts.

I believe this parallelism or symmetry is due to what Edward (not Jerome) Bruner (1997) called the "implicit narrative structure" of ethnography (p. 264). According to Bruner, ethnographic analysis and representation is not inappropriately understood as "a story we tell about the peoples we study" (p. 264). He goes on to argue that the story is really coauthored[7], both because "informants contribute data to the text" (p. 272) and, significantly, because "ethnographer and informant come to share the same narratives" (p. 272), at least partially. In ethnographies *of* storytelling, it would of course be problematic if the researcher's story failed to share / capture / recount / interpolate the narrative of the participants. My discussion in the proposal of Pink's (2011, 2015) development of sensory ethnography stresses this empathetic and ultimately collaborative dimension. Likewise, Kim (2015) sees part of the promise of digital storytelling for narrative inquiry as residing in the very concrete and specific ways the

[7] This collaborative spirit is especially clear in a research pedagogies ethnographic framework, where the story of the learning activity is coauthored, in part, because the trajectory of the learning activity itself is the subject of mutual negotiation (Wissman, Staples, Vasudevan, & Nichols, 2015).

researcher's story can engage with participants' stories directly, as data. Conversely, when a researcher-facilitator presents digital storytelling to participants as the construction of narrative to represent personal change, we see an example of how "sharing the same narratives" goes the other way, i.e., the researcher's story (framing the engagement with the activity) shapes the participant's story (through their subsequent engagement with the process so framed).

Once we have noticed the parallel operation (i.e., for both research and participant) of turning points for understanding the storytelling process, we begin to see it at work in the writing of other researchers studying digital storytelling via ethnographic methods. Although Hull and Katz (2006) make this lens the most explicit, I believe the implicit logic is quite widespread. For example, in Pleasants' (2008) study of digital storytelling in a community literacy context, the operation of the centrifugal and centripetal "forces" her Bakhtinian lens is attentive to are strategically applied in service of "uniquely fashioned construction" of identity. These moments of construction stand in opposition to tempting "*static* caricatures" (p. 210, italics mine). In short, the strategic use of language by Pleasants' participants serves to propel their narratives toward newly identified and claimed identity articulations and appropriations.

Alexandra (2008) presents an ethnographic account of community-based study of digital storytelling as part of a university-nonprofit collaboration supporting and advocating for migrants living in Dublin, Ireland. She claims, "through the act of getting her words down on paper and editing her story in a way in which she had full control" a participant named Edwina "gained a greater sense of agency and power over a story of circumstances beyond her control" (p. 108). The various process moments Alexandra recounts indeed capture this evolution of

Edwina's change in orientation to her circumstances, in ways that of course recall Bruner's observation that victimicity can be recast as agency.

In Davis's (2004) preliminary report of an afterschool study in an urban middle school setting, he reports that ethnographic data collection was originally undertaken primarily for the purposes of documenting what the researchers assumed would be a largely solo composition effort on the storytellers' part. However, what they experienced instead was a tendency for early student drafts to lack a sense of "change or consequences" in the described event: "The rendering of these kernels into a narrative emerged in a highly interactive process, a series of conversations and story drafts and revisions before the 'final' story emerged and was recorded" (n.p.). In this case, it is no surprise that turning points in "the story of the stories" were tightly bound to the discursive identification of individuals' theories of personal change. For example, a conversation between facilitator Daniel and student Noah about a "changeless" first draft serves as a turning point in the ethnographic account of Noah ultimately articulating for himself the impact on his family relationships of an experience of visiting a sick friend in the hospital, as well as a broader movement to get more serious about his studies.

A longitudinal footnote is available in this particular case, since Davis and Weinshenker (2012) re-interviewed Noah (re-pseudonymed Isaiah) six years later. Their findings point to the complex relationship between change identified in stories of self and changes actually lived in life:

> The change he had described was something he wanted to believe and knew was somehow best for him, but it was a change he was not yet able to realize in behavior. It was not until his junior year in high school, when the possibility of not graduating began to loom large – that he really began to buckle down and do what had to be done. But doing the digital story made him more aware of the choice. (pp. 67–68)

Here we see one important limitation to our tight theoretical binding of change as remembered and narrated by participant-storytellers and change as observed and narrated by researcher-storytellers. The difference is one not of reliability[8], but rather of the scope of the experience: an ethnographic project ends, eventually, but participants' lives continue on. No datum—no observation or measurement, no turn or exchange, no transcript excerpt—is an island, but neither is any collection of data a full or "complete" story of self. The experiences and understandings of our research participants are lived in time. Our encounters with them are part of larger stories (theirs and ours) that always extend beyond the scope—how much more so the reach—of our inquiry.

And yet emplotment, agency, and the ever-fluid potentialities of personal change invite us to a sort of epistemological boldness as well. Our nuanced and immersive engagement with participants, and their nuanced and immersive engagement with their own memories and self-concept, represent a rare opportunity for insight, growth, and change. The richness of the reflection that takes place in digital storytelling inquiry and the interpretive power of emplotment challenges researcher and participant[9] alike to make due with the data we have: sifting, sorting, and eventually *choosing* according to our best theories and interpretations of a comprehensible wholeness. In narrative ethnographic inquiry, emplotment is a research activity, an act of embodied and diachronic coding through which "the ability to follow a story constitutes a very sophisticated form of *understanding*" (Ricœur, 1991, p. 4, italics his). As it does in Ricœur's

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[8] Both kinds of storytellers may construct narratives that are in various ways mistaken, unaware, incomplete (Brushwood Rose, 2009).

[9] "As researchers in their own right they represent, discuss, analyze, and theorize cross-cutting themes in their lives and choose which stories to tell (and not to tell) and, even more so, which moment/experience to turn into a digital story" (Gubrium, Fiddian-Green, Lowe, DiFulvio, & Del Toro-Mejias, 2016, p. 1798)

account of the writing of history, storytelling in this sense "combines narrative coherence with conformity to the documents[10]" (p. 7). In the process, it becomes "productive" (of meaning) precisely inasmuch as it makes / crafts a cohesive claim / account / plot that "the documents may authorize or forbid but that they never contain in themselves" (p. 7). Like the storyteller, the researcher is always interpreting and interpolating, i.e., reasoning about how a couple of explicitly and meaningfully connected moments shape and inform countless others in both the past and the future.

Victimicity, agency, trauma, and integration in caring frameworks with foster youth

I will be collaborating with a nonprofit that works to support teen and pre-teen foster youth through team-based adult mentoring. As the opening anecdote from my proposal mentions, this organization and many of its partners and peers in foster care have moved toward a paradigm of trauma-informed care (Agosti, Conradi, Halladay, & Langan, 2013; Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014), largely in response to growing consensus about prevalence of traumatic experiences among children placed in care (Greeson et all, 2011). In his exploration of the biological and psychological dimensions of the roots of digital storytelling, Lambert begins with an account of the experiences that seem to hold the most power of us:

> The memories associated with our most important life lessons are inevitably those with either strong emotional encodings at the moment, as in traumas, or events involving those close to us. When we describe these events, and their meaning to our lives, we inevitably drop out of argumentation and into story. Story in this sense, works biologically to insure the total recall of those events which we have ingrained as of greatest emotional importance to us. In re-telling, we set the scene of the learning not only to help the listener have a rich context for the meaning, but also to simply return us to the sensory and emotive environment that burned the memory into our neurons. (pp. 7–8)

[10] "Documents" here being transcripts, field notes, and participant-produced artifacts for the researcher, and memories, changing circumstances, and collected artifacts for the participant.

Even if we have articulated a theory of personal change, it is inseparable from the story that helped us form it (Taylor, 2016). Moreover, the story itself is inseparable from the sensory impressions associated with the experience, hence the importance of "telling details" (Blumberg, 2014) in our spontaneous recall and in hearers' appreciation of our ability to "set the scene." Part of the vision of digital storytelling as a beneficial intervention in autobiographical meaning-making is the exploration of sense memory through multimodal authoring practices to move "backwards" and "forwards" in time (and probably "laterally" in space) in order to revisit and revise a moment of change. Here we see one sense of Taylor's proposal for the ultimate purpose of storytelling: to "find or devise ways of living bearably in time" (p. 319). Or as a participant in Cunsolo Willox and colleagues' (2013) study with indigenous youth put it, "We are going to sad places, but we are finding new ways through this" (p. 134).

Later, Lambert (2012) briefly surveys Jung's and Campbell's idea of "personal mythology" and its importance for both personal and social transformation:

> many of the practitioners of the concept of personal mythology found that the recounting and shaping of personal stories was precisely what enabled resiliency from earlier traumas. For those psychological practitioners and theoreticians concerned with a more inclusive democracy, it was not difficult to see how coping with the demons of systemic oppression; family dysfunction, violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse, low self-esteem, learning disorders and disabilities, general lack of agency, etc meant the project of understanding and re-framing the myths of the oppressed was central to the social project. (p. 11)

Notice that the retelling and reworking of stories here is for the purpose of resiliency through reframing. Again, narrative agency doesn't just integrate memory, it reshapes the meaning of memory to mitigate the negative impact and nurture possibilities for flourishing.

However, both the potential scope of the impact of traumatic experiences as well as the ongoing sensory relationship with those experiences significantly increase the the stakes of embodied multisensory reflection and complicates the task of storywork facilitation. Honesty and clarity on these points are critical to the ethics of digital storytelling practice with vulnerable participants who carry a high likelihood of having experienced significant personal trauma. Berntsen and Rubin believe "enhanced integration" of trauma, wherein a negative turning point "is seen as a [central] symbol for persistent themes in the person's life story" (p. 420), is in fact a maladaptive coping strategy. Since the peculiar and cruel challenge of trauma is precisely in the repeated cycle of reliving the past as if it were the present[11] (Rambo, 2010), "enhanced integration" in this sense represents at best a partial form of healing if the negative narrative remains dominantly determinative. When working with people who have experienced trauma, facilitators must of course exercise good judgment about who is emotionally ready to participate and make arrangements for appropriate emotional support throughout the process. However, they must also work with participants to actively identify relevant moments of healing and reframing [12] in order to effect Bruner's shift from victimicity to agency[13].

With proper facilitator and peer support, powerful agentive self-authoring is possible through narrative generally and digital storytelling in particular. Douthat's (2003) thematic analysis of narratives of former Tennessee foster youth identified several turning points where

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[11] I.e., instead of narrating the past with the embodied knowledge of its temporal distance from the present moment.

[12] Perhaps the most salient and urgent advice I received in this regard at my StoryCenter training was the occasional need for participant redirection, e.g., "It sounds like this experience is still pretty raw for you and might make it hard to move your story toward hope for the future. Why don't we talk about a different story you might tell this time?"

[13] Although their context of writing is somewhat different, I also appreciate Swadener and Lubeck's (1995) proposal to shift discourses from "at risk" youth to "at promise."

agency was named and claimed by young people: decisions like seeking help from authorities, making decisions about possible sites of placement, and taking refuge in activities and contexts that were personally meaningful. More relevantly to my study, StoryCenter (then the Center for Digital Storytelling) facilitated in 2005 a workshop with a group of LGTBQ+ former foster youth that was published by the Center for Lesbian Rights as a DVD and accompanying discussion guide called *Breaking the Silence.* The moments and relationships identified as making a difference in the lives of these participants include

- being listened to and truly heard (Kevin);
- getting to choose "a gay family" (Kira);
- finally experiencing respect, freedom, and privacy (Darryn); and
- finding "sanctuary" in a group home supportive of LGBTQ+ identity (George).

Particularly striking and intriguing in the context of my study, i.e., in an organization run by faith leaders and inviting explicit reflection on supportive spirituality, is how many of these stories mention religious experiences both positive and negative. Also striking is how these stories often discuss therapy, medication, and the system itself as a "trap," whereas the work of healing comes through normalizing, supportive peer and adult relationships in which touch, conversation, and ordinary moments are shared and cherished. This intriguing consensus among a small but articulate group of former foster youth adds poignance and weight to Lambert's claim (2012) that storytelling practices are urgently needed "not just on the therapist's sofa, but as acts of art and creativity" in a community setting (p. 3–4).

Although I know of no other published accounts of digital storytelling with foster youth, the digital storytelling and broader participatory video literature from the field of public health is

also helpful for understanding the potential benefits of these practices with vulnerable participant communities. For example, Wexler, Gubrium, Griffin, and DiFulvio (2013) conducted a community-based digital storytelling project in rural Alaska through which participants created 566 videos over four years at annual workshops in 12 different towns as part of a suicide-prevention initiative. They conducted brief exit surveys and interviews with a subset of participants, identifying a strong "focus on positive personal attributes" (p. 620) in the stories as well as evidence that the videos served as "artifacts for bolstering well-being in their daily lives" (p. 621).

More recently, Gubrium and colleagues (2016) conducted workshops with young Puerto Rican women engaged with various youth agencies in a New England city. The focus of the study was the health-bearing effects of participation in the process of digital storytelling. The authors reported that "a number of participants spoke of the process as helping to break the protective 'shell' of untruths they have told about themselves and others, giving them the courage to bring to light their own lived experiences" despite various forms of social stigma about sexuality and pregnancy (p. 1793). A particularly interesting result of this mixed-method study was the apparent inability of the quantitative measures to register much statistically significant impact, despite prominent benefits identified in the robust qualitative analysis of the researchers' ethnographic data. The authors argue that the

> effects of arts-based interventions cross multiple domains, including education and learning, life and technical skills, emotion skills, and social wellbeing and networking—all of which are germane as effects from the current study and escape easy analysis through narrow measures of behavior change. (p. 1798)

In my view, there is embodied, narrative wisdom at work in this assessment: the understanding that identity and agency are more subtle and complex human phenomena than are likely to be

fully captured through survey instruments. We might well expect the changes participants expressed and researchers identified qualitatively (telling the truth about their situation, making sense of past experiences, providing and receiving social support, and feeling valued for their participation) to manifest in subtle ways "a month or a year later, when … making toast, or driving to work, or any number of otherwise mundane moments … when the full weight of what happened finally comes to clarity" (Lambert, 2012, p. 59).

Stories and Sociality

Conversation as surfacing and mediating meaning amid structured group process

Thus far, I have focused the account of digital storytelling on questions of the self: memory, identity, agency, etc. Of course, we have already seen various ways that individual benefits of digital storytelling emerge in its social context, including (but certainly not limited to) the interactions of the storyteller with facilitators, peers, and other audiences. This section provides a more explicit account of the sociality at the core of what for lack of a more general term I call the pedagogy of digital storytelling—acknowledging that the learning in question is always multivalent, encompassing opportunities to develop not only self-knowledge and agency but also social skills, production skills, content knowledge about narrative as such, and more.

Early in Lambert's handbook (2012), he names the seeming magic of stories' ability to forge connections[14] and create meaning in a social context:

> Those of us that work with story know that in conversational storytelling around tables and public gatherings, stories lead to stories lead to stories. We can watch the patterns unfold as each story transforms the conversations, the meaning, and the exchange into deeper and more intimate communication. There is so much invisible power in this

[14] A previous tagline published as an "outro" graphic at the end of StoryCenter-facilitated videos was "The shortest distance between two people is a story."

> simple activity that people walk away from some gatherings feeling transformed, while having little-or-no-sense of the process that brought them there. (p. 32–33)

Without wanting to reduce this invisible mystery of human connection to a mere mechanism, I do nevertheless agree with the various accounts of digital storytelling that use forms of sociocultural theory to understand the relevant encounters (e.g., Alexandra, 2008; Nilsson, 2010; Chigona, 2013; Hess, 2014; Stephansen & Couldry, 2014; Niemi & Multisilta, 2015). We can think of the production of compelling, change-oriented digital stories in community as the object of learning in activity theory (Greeno & Engeström, 2014), or of Lambert's seven steps of Digital Storytelling as the shared practices of a situated community following Lave and Wenger (1991), albeit one in which the "novices" are likely to significantly outnumber the "experts"—and for which we wish to close the gap in our theorizing about the differences between novice and expert.[15]

For my part, I believe Lambert's centering of conversation here is useful, and I understand the shared activity in digital storytelling as a role-flexible, dynamic, iterative, series of conversations with artifacts and others. Using the language of design, Ackermann (2007) writes of conversation,

> People learn by switching roles from being producers to being critics, from being actors to being audiences, from holding the stage to moving into the background. People also zone in and out of situations to change their stance. In other words, no matter how embedded we are in a situation there comes a time when we distance ourselves to look at things from afar. Putting on a critic's hat and shifting perspectives enable us to engage our own creations as-if they had been produced by 'another' or existed independently, and then, reengage them again … [Designers] start a dialogue with a whole range of interlocutors, imaginary or 'real', to whom they address their work and from whom they borrow, or draw inspiration. (pp. 3-4, italics mine)

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[15] Perhaps it's more precise to say we want to shift the framing of what counts as learning, and help participants who may consider themselves novice storytellers to realize they are nevertheless experts on their own experience—and that their experience matters and is valued (Lyiscott, 2017).

Digital storytelling as an exercise of multimodal design in community seeks to make the relevant conversations as productive of personal and sometimes collective meaning as possible. In relatively short order, an individual storyteller may engage in such conversation by

- sharing an oral first draft of the story and receiving peer-generated, facilitator-moderated feedback;
- offering such feedback on the early drafts of their peers;
- "conversing" with cognitive (remembered) and physical (represented) artifacts of the event in question, and then iteratively with the composite artifact of the unfolding video draft itself;
- screening and then discussing more polished drafts with a facilitator, a subset of peers, the group as a whole, and possible outside audiences; and
- again offering feedback as their peers do likewise.

Each stage and iteration contains opportunities to derive new kinds of insight and create new kinds of meaning. In the context of her participatory photography work, Luttrell (2010) calls such interactions "audiencings," and she notices how the different configurations of format, participants, stage in the project, and other factors seem to yield different kinds of reflection. For example, a participatory group audiencing of photographs (i.e., young people sharing photos with each other) provided researchers an opportunity "to identify children's own categories of difference and how they were negotiating their social placements as they spoke about the people, places and things they noticed in each other's photographs" (p. 228). For example, participant Gabriel spoke about a photo of his church as a kind of gift to his mother (because "it means so

much to her") when speaking directly to researchers, but in this group session he emphasized church as the space "where he goes to 'hang with the teenagers'" (p. 228).

Notice that Luttrell's account of how the process of her project unfolded is only possible through her ethnographic methods' attendant thick description through these various audiencings. The same goes for many of the most compelling studies I have discussed (Davis, 2004; Hull & Katz, 2006; Pleasants, 2008). As Gubrium and colleagues' (2016) mixed-method study seems to suggest, we gain significant insight into the concrete workings of meaning-making processes of digital storytelling through participation, observation, and other forms of detailed attention to qualitative tracings of storytellers' work together, rather than relying primarily on pre- and post-interviews and surveys, or on the artifacts themselves. In the words of Street, Pahl, and Rowsell (2014), "an ethnographic lens gives multimodal analysis a social map (in Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran, 2016, p. 119).

Empathy, belonging, cosmopolitanism, and communion amid difference

Why do we need this social map? I take the authors' point in its original context, about its importance for understanding the situated meanings of multimodal texts. But perhaps even more importantly for the purposes of the scholarly conversations I wish to join, I will attend to the social tracings of digital storytelling in the communities I study because of my desire to better understand how this methodology binds participants together through empathetic engagement. Lambert (2012) elaborates on what motivates the *interpersonal* dimension of this particular form of creative expression:

> when I tell a story, reflecting on [a] moment in time, and reflecting on that reflection, I am not so concerned about interpretation. Perhaps I imagine my meaning is evident. While I might hope you would read something similar to me about what this story tells

> …, I am not trying to convince you … *I want you to relate my experience to your own*. Much more important is that my feeling is evident. *Unconsciously, I am sure I tell stories that I hope would endear me to you; or at least create an emotional connection between us. An intimacy*. When I am in conversation and drop into telling a story, something changes about my choice of words, about the way I describe interactions, impersonating the characters, pulling out the details, feeling, even as I recite my memories, how the actual events worked upon my psyche, how they changed me. (p. 7, italics mine)

Here Lambert identifies the stakes of participation[16]—in both digital storytelling and the broader human act of self-narrative—simultaneously and inextricably as a matter both of positing and pondering personal change theories *as well as* of deepening and diversifying new and ongoing relationships. We tell stories both to know (i.e., ourselves, hence "capturing lives") and to be known (i.e., by others, hence "creating community").

In my reading of the extensive digital storytelling scholarship[17] of U.S. religious education senior scholar Mary Hess (2011, 2012, 2014, 2018a, 2018b, 2019), the most significant and important aim of this community-based media authoring practice is empathetic engagement within and between various groups as a matter both of responding to the challenges of our deepening experiences of many kinds of diversity and as a matter of authentic religious identity—e.g., fidelity toward various religions' calls to welcome and honor the stranger. Such an emphasis is consistent with common themes in Hess's other areas of interest, including gaming (2016) and curriculum analysis and design (2017). She writes of digital storytelling as

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[16] A phrase I borrow with gratitude from interdisciplinary communication researcher Ioana Literat, to gloss her interest in participatory cultures. Lambert (2012) positions StoryCenter's practice squarely within participatory work engaging creative practice in community settings: "In virtually all human services and education fields, the idea of centering engagement with people being helped / taught / supported around their own needs, their own story, has become the dominant wisdom[,] even if in practice there is much left to be done … Just as democratic mechanisms in art have given us participatory muralism, participatory music, dance and theater processes, we are seeking a broadly applicable method for participatory media production" (p. 41).

[17] Primarily theoretical and theological, although grounded in the use of digital storytelling for teaching albeit not in empirical research per se.

inviting participants to “communal, collective, engaged … religious community” that is “present to the reality of transcendence” (2011, p. 374); as “extend[ing] [participants’] zone of intimacy” and possibly even supporting the formation of empathetic mirror neurons (2012, p. 413); as creating a “holding space” conducive to cross-categorical thinking and knowledge construction (2014, pp. 17–18); as comprising an interface for shaping “learning spaces which specifically intend respectful encounter” (2018a, p. 1); as “‘thinking through others’ as a form of liberation” (2018b, p. 10); as embodying a “relational epistemology” that is “bound into truth which no one of us can ever fully access or describe by ourselves, or in isolation from community” (2019, p. 359). More often than not, Hess is appealing to the idea that deep truth and the experience of the transcendent is only ultimately accessible in the context of a community in which everyone belongs and everyone matters. Other uses of digital storytelling in faith contexts have also attended to its potential to cultivate religious community among and beyond the group of storytellers (Clark & Dierberg, 2012) and to increase individuals’ sense of belonging by honoring their perspectives rather than solely “handing down the authoritative heritage of [religious] knowledge” (Kaare, 2008, p. 202)

As I argue in detail in my proposal and elsewhere (Oliver, 2018a), these questions of empathy across difference and various kinds of interdependent communal belonging are deeply connected to the central ideas of cosmopolitanism (e.g., Appiah, 2008; Hansen, 2017). Here Emdin’s (2016) approach to that concept is especially useful, because it focuses on helping participants in learning spaces “feel as they they are valued and respected” by assigning roles that make everyone responsible in their own way for “ensuring that citizenship in the classroom is both enacted and extended to [all]” (p. 105). The structure of my research partner organization

is likewise structured to emphasize interdependence and the contributions of all participants; this is especially appropriate in light of the developmental challenges many foster youth face in the area of forming and negotiating healthy attachments (Fahlberg, 2012). The social practices of digital storytelling support cosmopolitan belonging by seeking and holding space for the unique perspective of each storyteller, by building trust through rotating roles of giving and receiving feedback, by working toward a the communal goal of a collective screening representing the diversity of the group to an appreciative audience, and through countless other opportunities to resonate on similar frequencies in the course of the successive conversations the process convenes.

There is precedent in the digital storytelling literature—even outside of theological and religious studies venues—for reflection on the ways these communal and communitarian experiences contribute to sense of the sacred. Whatever we mean by spirituality or spiritual practice[18], we might characterize it by exploring the difference between, say, a socio-emotional ethic of resilience and the somehow more than socio-emotional virtue of hope; between the medical outcome of cure and the spiritual outcome of healing; between convening communities of learning for the attendant benefit to individual and collective outcomes and convening them in recognition that

> "My humanity is is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons." It is not "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong. I participate. I share." (Tutu, 1999, p. 31)

[18] I find Drescher's (2016) recent account persuasive, grounded as it is in extensive ethnographic interviewing and a willingness to interpret participants' experience according to the categories they named and valued rather than reified religious labels like denominational affiliation. The most common sources of spiritual meaning Drescher identified among both those who religiously affiliate *and* those who do not were what she calls "The Four Fs of Contemporary American Spirituality" (p. 44): family, friends, food, and fido (i.e., pets). For the sake of comparison to what we might more schematically think of as a spiritual practice, prayer ranked fifth for both the religiously affiliated (23%) and unaffiliated (19%).

I set up these comparisons not to set up an opposition between the secular and the sacred but indeed to clarify that the two are closely related and that both the former and the later collections of ideas might be richly interrogated in the course of the distinctly—and also beautifully—human act of storytelling.

Thus, while I am motivated in my work by many of the same concerns as Hess and my other religious leader colleagues who have found their way to digital storytelling, for the purposes of my research in spiritually and religiously diverse communities like my partner organization, I am even more intrigued and inspired by the findings of Cunsolo Willox and colleagues (2012), who concluded,

> Stories are the outpouring of lived experiences, are ever in process, and always, already embedded within deep sets of cultures, values, epistemologies, and ontologies. Digital stories, then, can be understood as existing within this 'sacred' terrain of narrative, culture, and epistemic and ontological values, and, as such, perhaps the least we can 'do' with them—which may turn out to be the very most—is to listen, to learn, to reflect, and to trust. (pp. 142–143)

Similarly, I wish to join my voice with Hendry, who goes further to reorient and even resist prevailing discourses of the literature I have been reviewing:

> Being present in the encounter with no other purpose than attending to and being open is what makes it sacred and illuminates its potential spiritual dimensions … Thus, research becomes not a site of knowledge production but a site of communion. In this sense we become present to our relationships and interconnections with others. This shift from research as a site of production to a way of life that honors relationships deconstructs the duality of research / nonresearch, subject / object, and knower / known. Research is not a privileged site; however, our inquiries become embedded in our lives … How might the future of narrative attune us to what it means to be human? In what ways can we imagine the future of narrative that does not conceptualize "research" as separate from and having its own strategies which ultimately become reduced to method. How might we listen, trust, and have faith? (pp. 496–497)

I hope and trust the account I have been giving of digital storytelling has at least begun to paint a picture in which these statements of conviction seem like logical conclusions to this part of the story, rather than a bridge too far. Hendry's challenge to traditional research binaries is not so different from Bruner's account of ethnography and narrative. Cunsolo Willox and her colleagues have much in common not just with leaders who have spiritual formation in their job description but with social justice educators, philosophers of education, and many participants in the international, intergenerational, multifaith, multicultural community of practice that Lambert and colleagues have nurtured and inspired.

My ultimate conclusion from a thorough review of the digital storytelling literature is that researchers, practitioners, and no few students and participants have "gotten hooked" by something that is hard to put our finger on, hard to communicate to another without an impromptu screening. The intersecting planes of the self and the social have something to do with this compelling attraction, but the throughline encompasses sensuality and spirituality as well, probably much more. I agree with the largely implicit but sometimes stated conclusion that this embodied practice and others like it deserve rich qualitative attention to the production process as much as the media product, to what happens to participants along the way as much as to the new or changed understandings we come to embody at journey's end. I look forward to bringing the intuitive and the formed/forming habits that have served me well as a spiritual companion, community educator, and now novice ethnographer to bear on this intimate and mysterious form of communion.

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