**DISSERTATION PROPOSAL:**

**MAKING MEANING MAKING MEDIA IN A**

**MULTIPLY-STORIED FAITH-ADJACENT COMMUNITY**

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*Communion with others, elusive and fleeting though it may be, constitutes the greatest potentiality of narrative.* (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 31)

## Moment[1]: (Re-)weaving the Tapestry

I enter the conference room in the group home at the outskirts of town a few minutes after Hannah, the co-director of Tapestry,[2] has begun leading the organization's newest class of potential mentors in a free-writing exercise. Hannah's co-director, Sam, is away at a foster care event in another Western U.S. city, so Hannah is flying solo for this, their largest-ever training. Earlier she had asked me to stand at the locked front door to admit and orient new arrivals. I write my name at the center of the pre-drawn circle on my piece of construction paper, then peek around the full table at my neighbors' sheets—all but one of eighteen chairs is occupied—to see if I can infer enough about the exercise to avoid making her repeat the instructions.

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[1] At the risk of over-explaining a rhetorical strategy meant to embody the storyteller's dictum "show, don't tell": The four "moments" in this proposal leverage ethnographic data from my pilot study and preliminary engagement at my full study site. Each moment richly illustrates the ideas and phenomena relevant to the subsequent section with which it is paired. They also embody my conviction that to narrate an ethnographic encounter is to both organize and document complex analytical understandings of an event and its associated meanings to participants.

[2] This and all proper nouns pertaining to my research partners and participants are pseudonyms that either I have assigned or the participants themselves have chosen.

After another minute or two, Hannah invites the volunteer to her left to begin the process of sharing: names, "why you're here today," and some of the items we've been writing in the space surrounding our circles, which describe for the group "what your world looks like." In past conversations, Hannah has told me that the organization's volunteers are mostly young professional transplants, recently arrived for intense new jobs. They're often lonely themselves, she said, and they may bring with them other personal experiences that specially equip them to, as she says now to the group, "resonate with your youth." One trainee talks about having been in the area long enough to start "putting down roots" and giving back to the community in a concrete way. Another, herself adopted from Korea as a child, tells the story of having started an adoption-oriented student service group in college, because her large Midwestern university had "Quidditch, but no adoption [outreach]."

Although the room bears the marks of an institutional system intent on teaching and reteaching participants about trauma and its world-shaping effects on foster youth, the five-hour training convened by Tapestry is a day more of sharing stories and practicing the organization's values than it is of receiving instruction per se about how to support young people's healing and identity development. After the world-circle activity is complete, Hannah unloads a blue backpack with objects she uses to tell a Montessori-style story[3] about Tapestry's four guiding principles: hope, presence, recreation, and communion. For example, the artifacts she places on the table next to the "presence" placard is an articulated wooden figure (upper left in Figure 1):

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[3] That is, she describes the journey mentors will take with their youth by associating particular practices and values with small symbolic manipulatives that "stand in" for the various ideas. Although her presentation lacks a Montessori lesson's invitation and temporal space to engage in a tactile way with the manipulatives, the objects remain on display throughout the day, and I'm not the only participant who approaches the table for a closer look during the first break time.

"You have what you need to be a mentor. Bring your full self. You don't need to do or be anything special."



**Figure 1:** Artifacts Hannah used to tell the "guiding principles" story.

These pedagogies and practices are both familiar and strange to me. Hannah was a seminary classmate of mine, and she and Sam have adopted common moves from their training as pastors in the Mainline Protestant tradition we serve. The backpack activity, I confirm in a debrief after the event, reflects Hannah's training in Godly Play (Berryman, 2009), a pervasive and well-respected story-based curriculum used for experiential religious education with elementary-aged children in traditional congregations. The various empathetic listening activities we engage in pairs and trios throughout the day might well have been pulled directly from Hannah or Sam's experience in Clinical Pastoral Education, the chaplaincy internship nearly all ministers complete, usually in hospitals.

But Sam and Hannah are not shepherding a congregation or training lay ministers, not any more, at least not as such. They left their previous city and a healthy and vibrant church there in order to found Tapestry. Like many of their colleagues in faith-based schools, community organizations, and healthcare systems, they bring values and practices from their faith tradition to bear on a non-sectarian mission of healing nurture, spiritual support, and whole-person development. In her spiritual-but-not-religious Godly Play story, Hannah explains Tapestry's (pun-intended) value of recreation: how *through simple, fun activities* like shooting baskets or playing Uno, mentor teams help Tapestry foster youth to *re-create* a sense of normalcy and safety. Though I don't ask her, I assume that Hannah has in mind here as well a religious understanding of "new creation," how through God's blessing human beings can experience healing, transformation, and abundant life.
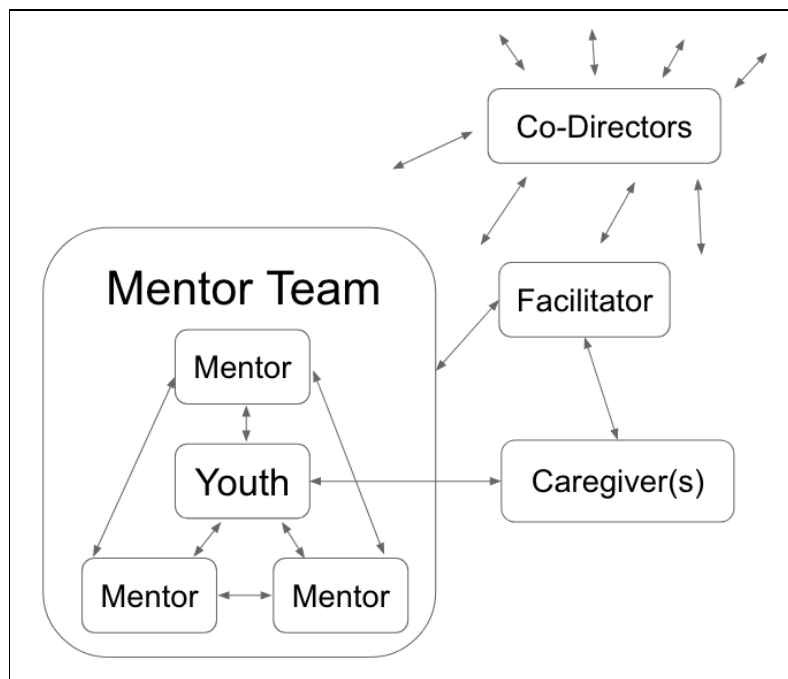


**Figure 2:** Tapestry's team-based mentoring model.

I know for sure that a religious understanding of "communion" undergirds Tapestry's communitarian model of support for youth and mentor teams alike. As she removes from the backpack a children's toy with an interconnected configuration of gears that spin together (lower left in Figure 1), she explicitly names the religious ritual of communion and the sense of togetherness it forms as the symbol and inspiration for how the organization structures its work. "We want you to never feel alone in this work," she says. "You'll have many layers of support." My narrative and multimodal ethnographic study of Tapestry will seek, in part, to understand and document how this religiously diverse community organization appropriates (in a positive sense) the values and practices of participants' religious and spiritual traditions in order to support the developmental objectives of healing and growth for both foster youth and the adults who serve them.

**Whither religious education?**

I don't yet know if Hannah and Sam consider themselves religious educators. I believe they are. Moreover, I believe they embody an especially promising model for what that role might look like in the future. Indeed, these are challenging and exciting times for religious educators and faith leaders more generally. On the side of challenge are a number of interrelated trends that are upsetting the long-time status quo for what is perhaps the most common (and certainly the oldest) mode of religious education: congregation/community-based religious education explicitly and primarily intended to pass on religious tradition and belief and to develop and strengthen individual and corporate religious identity. This mode is sometimes called "confessional" religious education, named for the creeds and confessions that different

Christian traditions have taken as foundational and often used in a gatekeeping role to define who's in and who's out.[4] Tan (2009) calls this mode "teaching *for* commitment" and helpfully contrasts it with "teaching *about* commitment," a phenomenological or secular religious studies approach, and "teaching *from* commitment," an interfaith or cosmopolitan approach (p. 209, emphasis mine; cf. Hansen, 2017; Ghiloni, 2017; Oliver, 2018a).

Confessional religious education in the United States is in decline because congregations are struggling. Churches, synagogues, and other religious communities have experienced the same declines in participation as have other spheres of American life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Putnam, 2000; Pew Research Center, 2015). Significant quantitative and qualitative studies have shown the effects of this decline on religious affiliation and identity, particularly among younger age cohorts. Chief among these changes is a greatly increased likelihood that individuals incorporate a range of (possibly religiously diverse) practices and beliefs while at the same time *not* considering themselves to be traditionally observant or to be a member of a particular faith or denomination (Smith & Snell, 2009; Wuthnow, 2010; Gortner, 2013; Drescher, 2016). Against that backdrop, Foster (2012) traces and reconstructs the historical path whereby Mainline Protestants in particular "systematically dismantled their educational infrastructure" for supporting congregation-based confessional religious education (p. 6). Wimberly (2010) tells a similar story about the turn away from supporting intentional Christian education initiatives in African American churches.

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[4] Regarding the development of this understanding of (Christian) religious identity, see MacCulloch's (2005) account of the most relevant period of Christian history. My positionality as a member and leader in a U.S.-centric, Mainline Protestant denomination shapes my language and theoretical understandings of religious practice and belief in ways I will endeavor to make as transparent as possible.

Mostly these choices were bound up with financial pressures that accompanied organizational decline. However, these continuing changes also represent growing consensus among confessional religious educators that age-segregated, instructionist education practices are no longer serving congregations and individual learners particularly well, if indeed they ever did. Here is where the challenges, hopefully framed, begin to look like exciting opportunities as well. In the Christian theological traditions, themes of death leading to new life tend to resonate strongly and broadly. It seems to me that the death knells of "Sunday school as we know it" have planted the seeds of exciting new life. As more and more congregations come to terms with the reality that their current approaches to supporting faith formation[5] of children and adults are not working well, and as the number of regular participants in these programs and in church activities generally continues to diminish, leaders are beginning to think more creatively and adaptively. They are expanding their understanding of the potential participants in their religious education activities, the purposes of those activities, and the models and movements in education more broadly from which religious educators can draw inspiration and guidance.

The research-driven changes that have already begun to take hold in mainstream religious education practices involve a shift away from instructionist pedagogies and "siloed" classroom experiences[6] primarily for young people to more learner-centered, experiential, situated, and

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[5] "Faith formation," "spiritual/religious formation," and "Christian formation" have all gained in popularity as normative labels for the task of confessional religious education precisely to avoid the narrow connotations of a "schooling" model. I will use the terms more or less interchangeably with "religious education," partly because in academic circles the latter is still de rigueur.

[6] Even where age-segregated classrooms are common, the pedagogies within them are shifting away from instructionism. Perhaps the most compelling example of this phenomenon is the increasing popularity of the aforementioned Montessori-inspired approaches to the religious and spiritual formation of very young people. Among Mainline Protestants, Jerome Berryman has been the leader in both theory and practice (Stewart & Berryman, 1988; Berryman, 2009; Berryman, 2012; Berryman, 2013). Pearson's (2016) recent non-scientific but substantial survey (n = 895) of practicing religious educators provides strong evidence that Berryman's Godly Play is the most popular children's religious education program in my own

intergenerational approaches. The teacher trainer who in my judgment has done more than any other to lead these changes is Roman Catholic educator/consultant John Roberto. As publisher of *Lifelong Faith Journal* and convener (and co-author/editor) of a series of collaborative research and design events (and related books), Roberto has built a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) among a denominationally diverse (though predominantly white[7]) group of religious educators gathered around the following principles:

- congregation-based faith formation should support and be supplemented by at-home and online learning experiences that extend religious reflection and commitment to situated, everyday, "lifewide" setting and activities (Kehrwald, Roberto, Roehlkepartain, & Roehlkepartain, 2016; Roberto, 2015a);

- intergenerational learning experiences are at least as valuable as age-segregated experiences and likely much more valuable (Amidei, Merhaut, & Roberto, 2014);

- design thinking and scenario planning should inform development of the next generation of religious education practices and models (Roberto, 2012; Roberto, 2015a); and

denomination. Roman Catholic and Quaker religious educators have developed similar programs (Cavalletti, 1992; Gobbi & Cavalletti, 1998; Friends General Conference, 2014).

[7] As I survey the list that follows, I notice that many of these correctives parallel the recommendations of—but have not benefited from significant intellectual engagement with—the literatures of equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), or the funds of knowledge tradition (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). I hope that this study of a racially and religiously diverse community that seeks to both center youth participants and engage them as knowledge producers will expose a broader group of my colleagues to the benefits of these pedagogical stances—especially amid ongoing work in my and other Mainline Protestant traditions to address our complicity in perpetuating racial and socioeconomic injustice (e.g., Episcopal Church, 2017).

- in our more secular and more religiously diverse society, religious educators must

  broaden the intended scope of their work beyond their immediate congregations

  (Roberto, 2015a; Roberto, 2015b).[8]

 Religious education scholar Mary Hess, who is also Roman Catholic but teaches at a

Lutheran seminary, also advocates for work in this final vein, an orientation toward Tan's

"teaching *from* commitment" rather than "teaching *for* commitment":

> Can we embody religious education that educates within and for specific religious
> communities, but also and concurrently with and for people who are not part of religious
> communities? Can we reach people who might have very little interest in, or perhaps
> even hostility towards, religious institutions? I fear that until and unless religious
> communities can communicate – in all the rich senses of that word – our integral and
> inextricable commitments to relationship across, among, within, between and amidst
> various kinds of difference, we will lose even more ground with a generation of people
> growing to consciousness within the rich and varied landscapes of the US. (2016, p. 1)

Notice how Hess frames the imperative to expand the circle of participation in religious

education both in terms of Christians' "inextricable commitments to relationship across …

difference" and as a matter of avoiding "losing ground," which I interpret to mean both further

numerical decline in membership as well as a growing sense of institutional mistrust. This

balancing act exemplifies a cosmopolitan ethos, both advocating for a particular way of believing

and belonging but also accepting and even celebrating that others choose to do so differently or

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[8] The place where Roberto's teaching and consulting has intersected with my own is in our conviction that networked publics (Ito et al., 2009; Rainie & Wellman, 2012) are fruitful, hybrid sites of religious expression and practice for those who are traditionally religiously affiliated and often those who are not (Drescher, 2011; Campbell, 2012; Pew, 2014; Anderson, 2015). In parallel with my dissertation work, I have been collaborating with seminary colleagues to adapt ministry preparatory and professional development curricula to better reflect this reality (Oliver & Williams-Duncan, 2018; Oliver, 2019a; Oliver & Kimball, 2019a; Oliver & Kimball, 2019b; Oliver, Williams-Duncan, & Kimball, 2019), using what Price-Dennis calls digital (or 21st-century) literacies pedagogy (e.g., Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2015). This "digital literacies for ministry" research trajectory has sometimes included curriculum-based work in digital storytelling (see especially Fentress-Williams & Williams-Duncan, 2015).

not at all. Indeed, the project seems, in a religious way, to rise to Appiah's challenge "to take minds and hearts formed over the long millennia of living in local troops and equip them with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become" (2008, p. 88). While inspiring in its mission and ambition, Hess's vision in particular will require significant creativity and adaptation, especially for confessional religious educators who are unlikely to be experienced teaching *from* rather than *for* conviction and with diverse and pluralistic audiences in non-traditional religious education spaces. How can religious educators convene these spaces? How can we "hold on loosely" to our confessional commitments in order to represent our faiths well but nevertheless engage those who think differently? And if we get educators and learners in rooms together under these conditions, *what should they actually do together?* These are some of the questions motivating my study, and they lead me to a particular question that I will bring to my research with this organization:

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**RQ1 – The Community:**

How do Tapestry and its members negotiate and interweave spiritual, relational, and educational practices to construct shared meanings and spaces, and what do these processes tell us about the future of religious community and formation?

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**Moment: Exploring identity and spirituality at St. Sebastian's**

Six months earlier and several thousand miles away, I was sitting in an assistant pastor's comfy and colorful office. It was Day 2 of the pilot study that provided my first formal

opportunity to engage with young people in digital storytelling practices and to develop embodied understandings about its role in negotiating identity and community. Sitting on the couch with two other first-year day camp counselors, Veronica returned to a theme I was hearing for the third time in the first couple days of our digital storytelling project: that the experience of camp had changed this year (i.e., 2018). When I asked them to say more, the trio zeroed in on the new responsibilities they had now as counselors. Lauren spoke about the importance of being role models for the kids, who like these counselors are children of first-generation Latinx immigrants living in a working-class East Coast suburb. Veronica spoke about the responsibility of getting campers safely to the park. I asked if this sense of responsibility was a new feeling for them, but all three said it's a common experience from their home life, caring for siblings and cousins.

Both of these responsibilities, being a role model and attending to campers' safety, were represented for the participants by a photo Dylan had taken, which we started to call the "rules" photo (Figure 3). In it, Keith, the assistant director, speaks to campers about what rules they will need to follow before an activity can begin or continue. I had seen a similar rules session during camp observations the day before. As our week together continued, I noticed that this photo in particular took on a placeholding role. There was a taken-for-granted understanding that *this* photo formally represented the rules/safety dimension of camp and that that dimension needed to be in the video we were creating together, which would explore the story of their journey from campers to counselors.

**Figure 3.** Keith explains the rules before an activity, to keep everybody safe. Photo by Dylan.

This process of "audiencing" (Lutrell, 2010) particularly meaningful photos for the group often proved fruitful during our time together. The first photo Lauren shared (Figure 4) became the jumping-off point for nuanced and concrete reflections on the emotional and spiritual dimensions of what it means to be a counselor. It shows a camper, Juliet, reading a *Junie B. Jones* book. What's somewhat difficult to grasp spatially is that Juliet and Lauren are both up on the stage of the church's large multipurpose hall, and Juliet is actually leaning on Lauren's lap. When I asked if the two have a good relationship, Lauren told me that Juliet is new this year so she (Lauren) has been "sticking around her, like, helping her around."

This exchange immediately prompted both Lauren and Veronica to tell a story about a past counselor who played a similar role for them:

> *Veronica:* I remember when I was a child … in my first year here I was really nervous cuz I didn't know any of these people. And the first counselor in that time was Emma. … [S]he helped me out and I realized that she was a nice kind person so I got stuck to her, and, like, I'm a little upset that she left …

*Lauren:* My first encounter with Emma was at the park. I was on, like, this, like, little game and I needed someone to like spin me. So I was just sitting there bored and she, like, spoke to me in Spanish and she's like "Do you need help?" And I was like, yeah, but I was like so nervous just coming here for the first time.

This pattern was pretty common during our time together: a photo would occasion an explanation of some phenomenon of camp culture, often with the sharing of memories. Sometimes this "historical consciousness" merely took note of the way a particular tradition had developed. Other times, like this one, the photographs prompted a kind of ethical reasoning I thought of as empathy-across-time. In this mode of reasoning about their current practices, the memory of having had a particular experience as a camper in the past affected the way they behave *toward* the campers as counselors today. As Pahl notes in her analysis of a different media-enriched research project: "Past selves are placed within the present as the 'ensemble' of resources [artifacts] is assembled" (2012, p. 212).



**Figure 4.** Lauren literally supporting Juliet, just as Emma had previously supported her. Photo by Lauren.

Like the rules photo, the picture of Lauren and Juliet became, at least for me and I think for the others, a kind of icon of what I started calling Lauren's "camp persona."[9] After hearing another story or two painting this picture of Lauren as unofficial camp nurturer, I tried out the idea with her:

> *Kyle:* I'm getting the sense that, like, that you are a very supportive person. Is that … am I getting that right?

> *Lauren:* My mom gets really mad about it too because she says I put others' needs before mine ...  I'm just that type of person.

Dylan and Veronica also each had ideas about their own persona: Dylan a kind of logistical point man, Veronica a role-flexible example-setter helping campers and counselors alike mark the appropriate times to be serious and times to have fun.

In these brief conversations convened around participants' personally meaningful photographs, we began the process not just of assembling their narrative of personal and collective transformation, but also of representing the rituals and values—the spirituality practiced if not necessarily named as such—shared by participants in the St. Sebastian's Church non-sectarian day camp. Over the course of another couple days, the trio would articulate not just the importance of fun and friends for their own sake, but the way these and other elements and practices work together to form the camp as a community where "You are cared for, respected and you won't be forgotten" (final story script). Perhaps even more significantly for their development, the counselors explored their own embodied contributions to this culture of caring.

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[9] For a summary of the rich ways camp experiences support youth identity development, see Garst, Brown, and Bialeschki (2011). In particular, the authors discuss camp as a site both of identity revision and, for staff, of learning to honestly and confidently show forth one's "true self."

**Digital storytelling in faith-adjacent settings**

As religious educators reflect on what kind of learning to facilitate via new roles, in new contexts, and with new participants, one promising approach is digital storytelling. As proposed and practiced by Bay Area nonprofit StoryCenter, digital storytelling takes the everyday and the extraordinary life experiences of participants as a starting-point for self-reflective and self-authored meaning making that builds toward the production of short, simple, narrative videos. At the same time, it is a practice conducted in small groups of fellow storytellers. As such, we can can understand it as contributing to what Hess (2017) elsewhere calls a "community of communities" approach to religious education (p. 35), where grappling with difference is as important as coming to understand oneself and one's own community.

Like others who have been inspired by StoryCenter's practice (especially Hull & Katz, 2006; Pleasants, 2008), I take StoryCenter founder Joe Lambert's (2012) guidance about genre and method as a departure point for a somewhat more flexible understanding of multimodal, multimedia, collaborative storytelling. Digital storytelling both according to Lambert and in this broader sense cultivates relationship across difference by convening what Luttrell (2010) calls audiencings and what Ackermann (2017) calls "conversation with artifacts," during which "[p]eople 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" (p. 4). It's a powerful experience to move back and forth between creator and audience. This role flexibility is especially important to a genre that incorporates the semiotic affordances of collaging and remixing. Even in the process of "writing" our own multimodal texts, we are constantly "reading" potential constituent components (photographs, musical selections, etc.) that we and

sometimes others have produced in times and places both immediate and distant to the present storymaking in progress. Digital storytelling is a space to be heard and a space to hear—and hopefully also to be understood and to understand.

Mary Hess (2011, 2012, 2014, 2018) has made the case to religious education researchers and practitioners that digital storytelling represents a promising activity for supporting healthy religious identity development in a changing and diverse society. I have recently situated her proposal alongside related work in the K-12 literature that takes up the challenge of cultivating an ethic of cosmopolitanism through an assortment of creative literacy practices (Oliver, 2018a). These projects (e.g., Hull & Stornaiulo, 2014; Vasudevan, Kerr, Hibbert, Fernandez, & Park, 2014; Choo, 2018; relatedly Hull & Katz, 2006; Pleasants, 2008; Price-Dennis, Holmes, & Smith, 2015) share with Hess a sophisticated understanding of the ways that personal narrative, multimodal design, and community-based authoring and performance serve to scaffold the sociocultural dynamics of self-reflection, identity negotiation, and empathy in diverse communities and settings. Digital storytelling offers participants regular and structured opportunities to, in Hansen's (2017) words, "hold their various cultural roots in one hand … and any number of new possibilities in the other hand, with these possibilities triggered for them both by the curriculum and by the constant stimulation of their peers' ways of responding to the curriculum and to what might be called the quite miraculous experience of being together day after day after day" (p. 215).

Partly due to Hess's influence, there is also a growing *religious* literature (practitioner-oriented, researcher-oriented, and sometimes both) responding in various ways to the promise of digital storytelling (McQuistion, 2007; Kaare & Lundby, 2008; Hess & Clark,
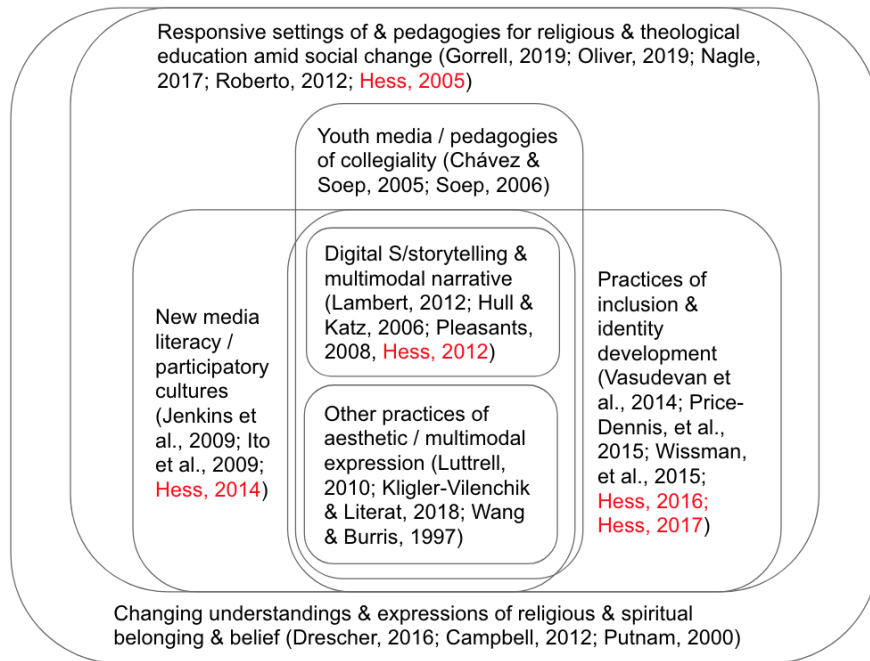
2011; Clark & Dierberg, 2013; Fentress-Williams & Williams-Duncan, 2015; Oliver, 2017;

BimBam, 2018) and to the promise of narrative in religious education more generally (e.g.,

Daniel, 2005; Wimberly, 2010; Rogers, 2011). The emphasis on group process in these and other

creative practices can help faith leaders convene diverse, inclusive learning communities—even

if the participants have not spent time together previously. An emphasis on first-person accounts

of significant life experiences relevant to a shared thematic prompt creates a supportive space for

storytellers to explore and integrate their spiritual and/or religious beliefs and practices by

reflecting on how the chosen moment has mattered to and changed them. It also helps them

cultivate personal agency both by choosing the moment(s) to narrate and by steering the creative

process and multimodal design decisions.

Nevertheless, theoretical framings of digital storytelling have only scratched the surface

of how we might think of this activity as a means of reflection and identity development in faith

and faith-adjacent settings. By "faith-adjacent" I mean a mode of activity separate from formal

religious-institutional programming and yet where religion is implicitly present through

engagement with religious leaders, use of religious facilities, exploration of spiritual identity and

practices, and the like. St. Sebastian's Camp is a faith-adjacent setting because it takes place in a

church building and has members and staff of St. Sebastian's congregation at the core of its

leadership team and as a significant minority of its campers—but no formal religious activities

take place (prayer or worship experiences, use of explicitly theological language, etc.). Tapestry

is a faith-adjacent setting because it is run by religious leaders, convened around principles

inspired by religious themes, and keen to support the spiritual development of its volunteers and

young people but is similarly agnostic or cosmopolitan about any explicitly religious outcomes

that might emerge in the course of Tapestry's shared formational experiences. Scholars have only begun to theorize digital storytelling as a spiritual or religious activity in such settings (Munro Hendry, 2007; Kaare & Lundby, 2008; Hess, 2012; Clark & Dierberg, 2013; Hess, 2014), and much of this theorizing has taken place absent close integration with thickly descriptive empirical work and multimodal representation. Part of the novel contribution of this study will be to explore and extend such theory, and to connect it with concrete digital storytelling experiences and artifacts. This point is encapsulated both in Research Question 2 and Figure 5; the latter should be read in conversation with the accompanying literature review, which discusses many of these ideas in more detail.

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**RQ2 – The Activities:**

How do a variety of collaborative digital storytelling practices (production of and discussion about audio, visual and/or textual media artifacts), and the distinctive affordances of each, help participants reflect on and make meaning about their experiences in and beyond the Tapestry community?

Responsive settings of & pedagogies for religious & theological education amid social change (Gorrell, 2019; Oliver, 2019; Nagle, 2017; Roberto, 2012; Hess, 2005)

Youth media / pedagogies of collegiality (Chávez & Soep, 2005; Soep, 2006)

New media literacy / participatory cultures (Jenkins et al., 2009; Ito et al., 2009; Hess, 2014)

Digital S/storytelling & multimodal narrative (Lambert, 2012; Hull & Katz, 2006; Pleasants, 2008, Hess, 2012)

Other practices of aesthetic / multimodal expression (Luttrell, 2010; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997)

Practices of inclusion & identity development (Vasudevan et al., 2014; Price-Dennis, et al., 2015; Wissman, et al., 2015; Hess, 2016; Hess, 2017)

Changing understandings & expressions of religious & spiritual belonging & belief (Drescher, 2016; Campbell, 2012; Putnam, 2000)

**Figure 5.** Disciplinary positioning and conceptual framing.

## Moment: "a very emotional story"

After inviting the individuals seated in the stuffy conference room to introduce themselves—Veronica, Dylan, and Lauren; my colleague Penelope; and Katherine and Sofía, who would elect not to participate—I took a deep breath and began my overview of the practice of digital storytelling. It culminated in an audiencing, as a multimodal "mentor text" (Gainer, 2013), of *Las Abuelas* (Vigran, 2012). This StoryCenter-facilitated video about food and family is almost always what I use when introducing people to the genre. The story is vivid and transporting yet technologically unremarkable; it raises questions of culture and identity in an explicit but approachable way; Vigran's voiceover is expressive but not overly affected; and the story's turning point represents a straightforward breakthrough in personal understanding. In short, I show this story because I have found it to be accessible and illustrative in a variety of

settings. And although I was aware that Vigran's Californiana heritage makes her experience of

Latinx cultural identity quite different from these potential participants' Central and South

American and Caribbean families, I nevertheless thought St. Sebastian's Camp to be an

especially positive setting in which to screen *Las Abuelas*.

We then came to the first turning point of our time together. I wasn't yet "rolling tape" on

our conversation, because the young people had not yet assented to participate in the study. My

field notes pick up the story:

> I asked if any of them might have a story of their own they might want to share in this
> style. There was a lot of silence. Eventually Veronica said that there was the story of
> being inspired by her parents coming here as immigrants … I asked about other possible
> "big moments" in people's lives and didn't get much of a response. When I probed a little
> bit, they reluctantly admitted that they weren't really very interested in doing a story in
> this style, with Veronica the first to say that, and Dylan agreeing… When I asked why
> there wasn't a lot of enthusiasm about this idea, Veronica volunteered that it [*Las
> Abuelas*] **was a very emotional story**. I asked if that seemed like kind of an intimidating
> thing to make and she said yes. I asked if making a more fun or less personal story might
> be better, and she said that there wouldn't really be much point then. I told them I
> couldn't and wouldn't force them and for a couple of moments it seemed like I might be
> planning a new pilot. (Field notes, boldface added during excerpting)

We sat for a moment of challenging silence ("well that was awkward" were Penelope's first

words after the end of the session) while my facilitation planning shifted more fully into an

improvisational mode to try and negotiate a way forward.

In the six months or so since my pilot study, I have pondered and parsed no other moment

from our time together as much as this one. Part of this preoccupation is connected to *my* story.

This moment forced me to confront the naivety of the research and pedagogical design of my

study, to say nothing of the questions of privilege, power, and cultural competency I had

anticipated but not yet inhabited in quite so visceral a way. Why had I assumed that the young

people would be interested in taking time away from the fun of camp to grapple with significant

stories and tender identity issues, in the company of a white religious authority figure with whom they had at best a fledgling relationship? For Kyle Oliver, this was the moment where I was at least partially exposed as the fraud I very much felt myself to be, forced to imagine the possibility—and, yes, the attendant paperwork—of starting my research from scratch.

Part of my interest in this moment is connected to *our* story, how this narrative rising action was resolved as we engaged in the shared negotiation of scope and focus for our project. According to this communal line of inquiry, I interpreted the interaction and what followed as a representative example of the insight and sensitivity of the research pedagogies tradition in multimodal ethnography (Wissman et al., 2015), of how good things happen when we let young people play the major role in choosing what learning activities will be personally meaningful for them to pursue. For the digital storytellers of St. Sebastian's Camp, this moment and the conversation that followed was our origin story, in which we grappled together with how and even whether to embark on the journey.

The most significant dimension of my continuing interest in this moment, however, relates to *Veronica's* story. In my original write-up, I described how Penelope suggested that watching *Las Abuelas* may have reinforced the "stress being put on immigrant families" or even participated in how "all aspects of Latino identity have been sort of non-consensually politicized in this moment" (Penelope, conversation transcript). We decided the contemplation and gravity of *Las Abuelas* had violated the de facto "camp should be fun" contract and also that the subtleties of Vigran's identity exploration weren't age-appropriate for the group as a whole.

Still, I was both impressed and a little surprised that Veronica felt comfortable sharing with the group that she could relate to the *Las Abuelas* story because "all of us here are children

of immigrants and our families went through a lot of pain and suffering." The pain and suffering of the immigrant experience *as portrayed in this digital story* is quite subtle. While Vigran reflects implicitly on the colonial history of California and explicitly on differences between her household experience and others', the overall tone of the piece is positive—if quietly so—and reflects a pride and appreciation in the author's Latinx cultural upbringing. For Veronica to call *Las Abuelas* "a very emotional story" in this way brought me up short. If anything, I sometimes worry that this particular artifact is a little too emotionally flat. I interpreted the moment through the lens of the impressive emotional intelligence I observed in Veronica throughout the week. She had picked up on some deep subtext indeed!

I now believe the story may have been more complicated. It's true that Veronica is uncommonly empathetic, surprisingly willing to be vulnerable in a group setting, and a wonderful ally to anyone seeking to lead conversations in groups of which she is a part. However, I also believe this moment and several others[10] throughout the week may bear the marks of the trauma she and her family have experienced as they grapple with the experience of undocumented immigration. I believe *Las Abuelas* was "a very emotional story" *for Veronica*, or at least it was in that particular place and time. The hesitant push-pull I observed in a usually confident and assertive young woman underscores the power of stories both to heal and to hurt, to confuse and to clarify, to trigger memories but also to transform them. I'm not at all claiming,

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[10] For example: Conversations about immigration, when it came up during our time together, consistently corresponded to a change in Veronica's affect. This was especially true during a conversation in which, after sharing about stresses her friends from immigrant families were going through, Veronica told the story of a recent ICE raid in the vicinity of her school: "I got really scared because my mom would take the bus and everything like that and she's an immigrant so like I really care about my mom. And that day I instantly called and I told her 'Oh mom be careful cuz ICE is going around and they I think they went to our school because police were around there.' And I got really scared because my I wouldn't want anything to happen to my mom."

"in this moment, Penelope and I witnessed a clear example of trauma triggering." However, this experience, and others it was connected to, underscore for me the psychological and ethical complexities of engaging in story work with young people who have experienced significant acute and chronic stressors in their daily lives.

## Narrative, trauma, and digital storytelling with vulnerable youth

To facilitate opportunities for processing identity-forming turning points and especially traumatic personal experiences is the great gift and also a significant peril of digital storytelling facilitation. Lambert (2012) describes the evolution of his thinking about the broad purposes of creative group process:

> As our work has become more and more about surfacing those stories of survivors from trauma big and small, I have come to appreciate how much storytelling is also about mucking about in the seedbed, digging up the crap that holds us down, so that the biological process of story can flourish. The real person inside us descends into our bodies as we face diminishment in our lives. We eat ourselves big, we stress and strain ourselves hard to build a shell around those losses.

> I have come to a deeper appreciation of the relationship between story and health. That the stretching, massaging, and meditating our way out of our predicaments as individuals and as societies needs to be combined with the process of telling and re-telling stories good and bad about our lives, not just on the therapist's sofa, but as acts of art and creativity. We need to stop and listen to each other's stories as daily ritual, as life process. (p. 3)

The ethical and caring dimensions of storytelling practices are a particular emphasis of StoryCenter's intensive facilitators' training. Helping others to "surface" their stories sometimes means encouraging them to dig a bit deeper, and other times to cease exploration in a particular plot of soil, at least for the time being. The therapist's sofa is usually a better place than the story circle for the first telling of a traumatizing experience, but the ritualized support of an empathetic

community of listeners can be a balm when the time is right. Moreover, facilitators can (and indeed must) help storytellers move through "stuckness" in what religious traditions might name "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4) to a place where they can imagine a better future[11] for themselves and their loved ones. Failure to do so risks worsening rather than alleviating trauma's grip on body, mind, and soul.

When the space is safe and the time is right, digital storytelling is a powerful methodology for working with people who have experienced trauma because it represents an opportunity to more fully and intentionally integrate previously unintegrated experiences, to make incremental sense of the "[f]ragments of the past [that] return in the present" (Rambo, 2010, p. 18), to engage in "the recovery of a narrative [that] is an integral part of trauma healing" (p. 21). For the purposes of creative group process, the time is right when a participant can remain in the present without the active intervention of a therapist, can explore memories of thoughts, emotions, and sensations while understanding in an embodied way that they are memories of the past and not ongoing experiences of the present (see Rothschild, 2000, pp. 155–156). This study is not an investigation of trauma per se. It will, however, require me attend to young people[12] and the storytelling process in ways that are informed by trauma theory and appropriate group facilitation practice.

Perhaps even more so than the first-generation immigrant youth I worked with in my pilot study, the foster youth served by Tapestry have been forced to live through many traumatizing experiences. In addition to the disruption of normal attachment experiences that are

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[11] We might here recall Carey's (1989) definition of communication from his ritual-informed cultural account: "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 8).
[12] And perhaps also their mentors—hence Hannah's invitation that trainees explore the dimensions of their own stories that draw them to work with foster youth.

at the core of any foster care experience (Fahlberg, 2012), one medium-sized study of older foster youth in Missouri found that nearly half had experienced physical abuse (50%), physical neglect (45%), and sexual abuse (46%) and that 14% had developed post-traumatic stress disorder (McMillen et al., 2005). In a narrative inquiry with former foster youth in a Tennessee community college, Douthat found that a characteristic struggle for her participants was the ability to exercise agency, since most important life decisions had been made for them entirely by the foster system (2013). Nicky, one of the Bay Area LGBTQ foster youth storytellers featured on the StoryCenter-produced collection "Breaking the Silence," described this experience of the foster system as a "new cage" where the manner of the abuse was changed but not ended (National Center for Lesbian Rights, 2006).

Tapestry understands and centers in their training and approach the profound impact of trauma on the developmental trajectories of foster youth and maintains a hopeful but clear-eyed understanding of how the organization's support structures can contribute to healing. Hannah and Sam make clear to Tapestry mentor teams that the organization's primary work is to help hold "safe, sacred space" for the young people, creating a sense of normalcy that may be rare for them. At first glance, it would seem that incorporating meaning-making activities like the "naming my chosen family" ritual Hannah has described to me in past conversations or the digital storytelling work we will design together represent a much more explicitly integrative intervention. However, I would note the way that Tapestry builds empathetic listening into the core of mentor training and Lambert's comment about story sharing as a matter of daily ritual. In my assessment, engaging the Tapestry foster youth in formal story work—particularly multimodal storywork where images and music can bear some of the emotional weight when

language fails (Rambo, 2010)—represents a promising and appropriate point further along a developmental and healing trajectory that begins with safety and affirmation of individual value and moves in the direction of agency- and identity-building narrative meaning making in the context of trusted community.

The foregoing discussion of Veronica's "very emotional moment," my reflections on the role I played in engaging her in the midst of it and at other times during the pilot, and the broader question of how my work as priest, facilitator, media maker, and researcher come together in these studies point, in part, to a final, auto-ethnographic research question I bring with me to this study.

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**RQ3 – The Researcher:**

As a researcher positioned at the intersection of religious education and media education, and a practitioner trained as a teacher, priest, and media producer, how do my diverse roles, experiences, and orientations shape my engagement with participants?

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**Moment: Agency, authoring & turning together in co-created space**

Thursday's story assembly work session had been devoted to selecting and sorting appropriate photographs of the St. Sebastian's Summer Camp. The trio then sequenced them according to concepts they identified and labelled using onscreen title text ("fun," "safety," "activities," etc.). All three had over the course of the afternoon taken turns editing. We watched

and discussed dozens of drafts and draft fragments. Finally Dylan declared that it was time to record the voiceover, but Veronica and Lauren were strongly against it. Like the young people in at least one other digital storytelling study (Pleasants, 2008), the group had heretofore resisted scripting the video. I decided I wasn't going to pressure them, given Lauren and Veronica's apparent firmness here—especially since Dylan had had his perspective well accounted for by being the teammate who most frequently worked the editing software.

The conversation briefly turned to other concerns, then someone went to get Denise, the camp director, for an impromptu screening. After the video played, Lauren summarized the intended takeaway:

*L:* [I]t's mostly a video of our experience going from campers from CITs to counselors.

*D:* Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Mm hmm, that was cool, that's different, that was cool.

*L (referencing computer screen):* So it's like camper.

*D:* Mm hmm.

*L:* CITs, counselors, and you guys, directors.

*D:* OK OK OK, cool. That's fun … *(To Researcher:)* So they don't actually talk in the video?

*K:* Well, we we were talking about that. That's up to—

*Pastor Elliot (from across the room):* He wants them to.

*K:* What's that?

*E:* He wants them to.

*K:* Oh, I, it's up to you guys. This is your video.

*D:* Just because. Alright. Now that you guys are explaining it to me, it makes sense. Just watching the pictures … I wouldn't have—ok, when you say 'camp generations' if you guys had been ... if you had said exactly what you just said, that would have just made it fit together for me in my mind. So think about adding just a little … it's just gonna make us understand, really, what the video is about.

From here I started a conversation about how we could proceed: formally writing a script, playing the video and improvising on mic, or even doing interviews and then identifying representative quotations to isolate and edit in. I used provisional language ("you wanna try …?", "another thing we could do …") throughout. Eventually Denise cut in:

*Denise:* Yes, sorry, I'm gonna step out. Great job guys. Consider doing that. *(Leaves)*

*Researcher:* So tell me… do you just wanna be done, or you think it's gonna be hard to do the voice, or you think you really shouldn't do the voice?

*Lauren:* I feel like in the very beginning we should say our experience from campers to CIT to counselors—

*V:* —has been an amazing experience. We look forward to more in the future—

*L:* —We look forward to assisting this camp more throughout the years.

*K:* Yeah, yeah, so you wanna just open up a word doc and just type some stuff up? I think you guys can do this. I think it'll be cool.

This scene encapsulates the complex web of influence, mutual care, pride in work, and desire for approval that had formed in our co-created storytelling space within the rhythms and structures of camp. Veronica and Lauren wanted to be done, partly to make it possible to screen the story at the counselors' talent show the next morning. However, the power of audience feedback is

always strong, even more so when it comes from a beloved authority figure. And the pastor had added a crucial piece of context for Denise, knowing from conversations with me that I find scripting and voiceover to be important but that I wasn't going to force them.

This audiencing occasioned a brief shift in the roles we had become accustomed to during our time together. Denise and Elliot, mostly outsiders to our storytelling space, briefly stepped into the circle and took on the roles of teacher-facilitator and motivator-nudger. Lauren, Veronica, and Dylan, who had been calling the editorial shots, set aside some of their autonomy in light of the audience feedback. My part was to moderate the emerging exchange of ideas, signaling to Denise that I hoped she would suggest rather than direct, and signalling to the young people that I agreed with her suggestion but would uphold their creative authority. Having observed these three all week and seen the respectful but not *overly* deferential way they interacted with Denise in ordinary moments, I am reasonably confident that if they hadn't felt compelled *by the desire to improve the story*, they would have put up a fight about having to do more work. Instead, they tackled the challenge with remarkable efficiency, "talking out" the text in the turn-taking manner suggested by the final lines of the transcript excerpt above—and finishing the script in about twenty minutes.

### Participatory multimodal ethnography & narrative inquiry

This significant moment during the home stretch of my pilot study captures the collaborative richness that can emerge from the role flexibility that Wissman and colleagues discuss as embodied inquiry in the participatory multimodal ethnographic framework they call research pedagogies (2015). I locate this study primarily in that tradition, drawing inspiration as

well from Pink's (2015) account of sensory ethnography and Kim's (2015) understanding of narrative inquiry.

The aim of multimodal ethnography is to use the theoretical tools of social semiotics to "make visible the cultural and social practices of a particular community" (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran, 2016, p. 132). This process involves collecting, producing, and discussing artifacts in order to surface personal and shared meanings. Incorporating storytelling into this methodology is powerful because the researcher gets first-hand explanations of the meanings of artifacts while the participants leverage them as semiotic resources.

Wissman and colleagues' (2015) research pedagogies framework interrogates possibilities made present when ethnographic site(s) become research *and* teaching spaces. These scholars describe the approach according to three "grounding dimensions of inquiry" (p. 188). *Engaged participation* means "youth and adults are guided by aims that are emergent and negotiated" (p. 189). Part of how my approach creates "space to be heard" (see Lyiscott, 2017; Oliver, 2018b) is through a commitment to fostering the young people's autonomy in determining the scope and priorities of the storytelling experience. The significance of (co-)*created spaces* springs from Wissman and colleagues' conviction that adolescent literacy practices develop both "within and outside institutional boundaries" (p. 189). I take their rejection of any primacy of formal schooling settings for understanding literacy practices as analogous to my desire to privilege modes of meaning-making that extend beyond traditional forms of institutional religion (following McGuire, 2008; Campbell, 2012; Drescher, 2016). Finally, these researchers take *embodied inquiry* to "refer to how the realignment of roles and responsibilities … substantively changes the nature of the inquiry that can occur" (p. 189).

Throughout the present study, there is ample opportunity to notice and learn from the role-flexibility of the people involved.

Such a perspective is not unique to multimodal ethnography. Although Pink (2011) has questioned whether what she calls *sensory ethnography* is compatible with the theoretical framework of multimodality, the work of multimodal ethnographers and particularly the research pedagogies tradition shares with sensory ethnography an

> empathetic engagement with the practices and places that are important to the people participating in the research. And by association it does *not* therefore principally involve the collection of data *about them* that can later be analyzed. Rather it involves the production of meaning *in participation with them* through a shared activity in a shared place. (p. 270, italics hers)

For Pink (2015), such a participatory stance might include "collaborations such as producing a film, writing a song, or inventing a new recipe with one's research participants" (p. 6). In the present study, of course, the collaboration will be mediated by the processes of digital storytelling activities as well as the ongoing practices of caring and community that Tapestry convenes.

Pink (2015) goes on to describe the analytic process in sensory ethnography "as emerging at moments in the research where there are particularly intense and systematic treatments of research materials" (p. 141). She notes that these moments may or may not be temporarily removed from the ethnographic experiences themselves. Whether "in the moment" or removed from the action, "creating an analysis is not an activity that is itself isolated from 'experience' or from the researcher's embodied knowing … [A]nalysis [is] the process of *bringing together or entangling a series of things* in ways that make them mutually meaningful"—a tapestry, then,

"interweaving … memory, imagination, embodied experience, socialities, theory, power relations and more" (p. 142, emphasis mine).

What "things" are essential to such an analytic approach? An appropriate methodological orientation to a participatory endeavor of narrative meaning-making should privilege lenses that attend to participants' creative authority and engaged agency as well as to the narrative structure that underpins both the activity of digital storytelling as well as the process of ethnographic documentation. In her award-winning handbook of narrative inquiry, Kim (2015) puts it this way: "Narrative researchers try to interpret meanings through an analysis of plotlines, thematic structures, and social and cultural referents" (p. 265). I understand my role as a participatory ethnographer as both facilitating the construction of individual stories and of crafting a meta-narrative[13] that represents and interrogates the group's shared experience—the story of the stories, as it were. What I am proposing, then, is a fundamental alignment between participants' inquiry and my own: *our primary act of analysis is the critical multimodal representation of narrative.*

In their study of digital storytelling, Hull and Katz (2006) cite Bruner's research on autobiographical storytelling and its "thickly agentive" turning points (Bruner, 1994, p. 50). For Taylor (2016), the turning point is the "strong experience" that occasions the story and shapes tellers' and hearers' conclusions about its meaning (p. 308). For Ricœur (1991), the turning point is the interpretive key to how an account holds together and proves "productive" of meaning (p. 7). For Lambert (2012), it is the "moment" we search for in the story circle and scripting processes—and around which meanings will solidify, and story arcs, pivot (pp. 59–60).

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[13] I'm thinking especially here of what Edward (not Jerome) Bruner (1997) calls ethnography's "implicit narrative structure" (p. 264), which I discuss in more detail in my literature review.

Thick description of digital storytelling yields insights into the meanings of the events that have shaped the storyteller's life, as well as the media representations storytellers use to emplot (Ricœur, 1991) those meanings. In the case of an ethnographic account of a storytelling experience, the idea of a turning point also becomes an analytical tool. My pilot study (Oliver, 2018b; Oliver, 2019b; Oliver, 2019c) took as its primary unit of organization and analysis the significant turning points (some of them "moments" reproduced in this proposal) that shaped our shared experience, changing our trajectory and changing us.

**Preliminary research design decisions**

At this stage in my relationship with Tapestry and its leadership, I am not in a position to make a definitive enumeration of the design of digital storytelling activities for the youth and/or their mentors. What I have thus far determined, in conversation with Hannah and Sam, is that I will begin by "hanging out" at mentor outings of two youth I have met several times and whom Sam and Hannah believe have strong enough trust within their teams to be able to welcome a new participant to the group. I'll introduce myself as a storyteller and researcher working with Tapestry to learn more about the lives, identities, relationships, and activities of Tapestry mentor teams. Informed consent with young people and their guardians, as well as with the mentors, will take place once the appropriate relationships have been established, and I won't make any audio recordings or take any photographs until consent has taken place.

Taking my cues from the group about when the time is right, I'll begin by ask the group to tell me about what they like to do together, about outings they remember fondly, about places they've enjoyed visiting. I'll invite them to think about how they would share these stories with

others: what images, sounds, and words/phrases they would choose. In cases where the group has already shared "mentor moment" images and reflections with the Tapestry leadership team, I'll use those images as a jumping-off point. Listening for interest and enthusiasm, I'll work toward building buy-in among the teams to tackle with me on one or more subsequent outings a mini-digital storytelling activity where we work together to respond to a prompt like "what our Tapestry team means to us."

In consultation with the mentors from these teams, with Sam and Hannah, and with other appropriate conversation partners, we will then begin assessing the possibility either of a collaboratively designed digital storytelling event that would bring together multiple youth and their teams and culminate in a group screening, or of a broader roll-out of our team- and outing-based approach, or both. In the meantime, I will continue attending "all-Tapestry" events and smaller gatherings and continue meeting with Tapestry leadership.

All these efforts will spring from the foundational desire to give Tapestry youth the opportunity to develop and express their sense of agency over their lives and their belonging in the Tapestry community (and beyond), and perhaps also to make sense of the challenging experience of their past in ways that help them imagine futures worthy of hope, futures in which they can flourish as inter-dependent individuals. In the process, mentors will have the opportunity to engage in their own reflection and identity work, as well as to better understand the ways the Tapestry mentoring experience is impacting both the youth and the adults in each group.

As I did during my pilot study, I will keep ethnographic field notes, voice memos, and biweekly reflection memos[14] throughout our time together. I will make recordings and transcribe the conversations that take place when I am with the participants—once we have completed the informed consent process. I will collect the multimodal artifacts participants create during the digital storytelling process, as well as the composite artifacts that are the completed stories themselves. I will also collect, analyze, and use as conversation starters multimodal artifacts (text, photos, and sometimes audiovisual) shared by Tapestry leadership with the public and their mentor networks via email and social media. When I am with research participants and thereafter, I will be on the alert for changes in conversational tone and creative direction, in understandings expressed and relationships enacted.[15] These will help me engage judiciously in the construction of a narrative—certainly written, and likely audio as well—that will frame my understanding of participants' stories as well as making sense of our collective experience. My objective in so doing is not just to make our story "coherent, engaging, and interesting to the reader" (Kim, 2015, p. 270) but also, in the process, to make an evidence-based argument for the difference this experience made to the people involved.

Table 1 outlines my proposed timetable for this research project. After I have defended this proposal, I will make adjustments to my already-drafted IRB paperwork and submit for

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[14] Especially as a means of exploring RQ3.

[15] Although I am just in the beginning of my study of Latour's (2005) actor-network theory (ANT), I am optimistic that his emphasis on the formation and interrelation of groups, flexibly understood rather than defined a priori as a particular de facto unit of social analysis, will be a useful tool for further clarifying the relationships dynamically enacted and negotiated in my pilot study and the ones that have formed and will form amid and beyond Tapestry's network in ways I will sometimes be privy to and participate in. This dynamic view of sociality ("no group, only group formation," to borrow one of Latour's chapter titles) seems especially relevant in light of my analytic focus on moments of change and of ANT (Latour, 2005) and participatory multimodal ethnography's (e.g., Pahl, 2006) common interest in "traces" of social practice and social relationship.

approval. By early July at the latest, I hope to spending time with the selected Tapestry mentor teams on their weekly outings, first sharing some informal storytelling exercises as we get to know each other and build new relationships, and ultimately designing more formal multimodal storytelling activities in collaboration with Hannah, Sam, and relevant team members. By September I hope we will be expanding the reach of these activities within Tapestry. It is impossible to know more until we start to try out these ideas with the young people and their mentors, making collaborative decisions and adjustments first for the young people's benefit and also in service of the research questions.

I do expect that the project will result in a media collection authored by and for the Tapestry community in support of foster youth in and possibly beyond our geographical area. I hope also to represent my ethnographic narrative of our shared experience both in traditional written research genres, including the dissertation itself, as well as in more creative, public formats. At one of my recent presentations about the pilot study (Oliver, 2019b), I debuted a pilot episode of an ethnographic podcast series I hope can continue throughout and beyond the project to foster my and others' understandings of foster youth, collaborative learning, multimodal storytelling, and spiritual and/or religious community.

**Table 1: Timeline of past and tentative future research activities**

| Time Period | Research Activity |
|---|---|
| 17 June 2018 | Pilot study IRB approval |
| 16–20 July 2018 | Pilot study activity & data collection |
| Aug.–Oct. 2018 | Pilot study analysis & writing |
| Nov.–March, 2019 | Pilot study research presentations |
| Jan.–April 2019 | Dissertation proposal & literature review writing |
| 26 April 2019 | Dissertation proposal defense |
| May–June 2019 | Dissertation IRB submission & revisions |
| July–Aug. 2019 | Preliminary mentor team visits, formal digital storytelling activity planning, informed consent process |
| Sept.–Jan. 2019 | Formal digital storytelling activities & sharing, ongoing data analysis |
| Oct 2019–April 2020 | Dissertation drafting & revision, other analytic+documentary activities |
| April–May 2020[16] | Target dissertation defense window |

**Summary**

In short, I am proposing a narrative and multimodal ethnographic study of digital storytelling in the faith-adjacent setting of a foster youth mentoring program. I have attempted in this piece to embody the convictions and approach of this dissertation research by sharing representative moments from the experience thus far:

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[16] I am in conversation with a local seminary about a possible visiting assistant professorship as the school prepares for a faculty retirement in May of 2020. Thus, I am highly motivated to stick to this timetable.

As a leader involved in discerning a meaningful future for the work of religious educators, I see in Hannah's training facilitation—and, indeed, the organization she co-founded—a model of community engagement rooted in faith values and clear developmental objectives for the youth and adults they serve. I believe my colleagues in religious education and leadership will benefit from being immersed in Tapestry's vision through multimodal representations of this multiply storied fellowship of care and healing.

As a past companion to three camp counselors exploring through media making their leadership personas and their history in community, I see in digital storytelling a promising means of explicit reflection on individual and collective identities and values. I believe teachers and mentors in many settings will benefit from a detailed, multisensory exposition of this popular but somewhat pedagogically intimidating learning activity.

As a sensitive listener and extensively trained caregiver who accompanied Veronica and her peers in confronting painful injustices with deeply personal implications, I see in creative narrative production an act of agency and healing flexible enough to support participants with different challenges and resonant enough to offer new and meaningful expressive possibilities. I believe the foster youth and mentors of Tapestry will benefit from telling their stories, and I know[17] the organization will cherish artifacts that complexly represent their work and the lives of the young people they serve.

As an ethnographer and media educator practicing my own craft and helping participants practice theirs, I see in the research pedagogies framework an opportunity for researchers and participants to share authority and shape learning and research spaces together. I believe

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[17] Indeed, this is one of the reasons they are interested in working with me.

audiences for academic research benefit when accounts of projects, and the projects themselves, are substantially shaped by the people the research is about.

Thus, it seems appropriate to me to be proposing this dissertation work with an organization (pseudonymously but aptly) named Tapestry. I expect my many roles and curiosities to be woven together with those of this thoughtful and sophisticated community organization and the people who comprise its nurturing fabric. Through our shared inquiry and creative endeavor, this project will ask,

At a time when our understandings of faith communities, educational systems, and the social safety net are all undergoing rapid and destabilizing change, I believe storytelling as a mode of learning and research commends itself by placing human relationships and human agency at the center of our attention. Tapestry's innovative model for both supporting vulnerable youth and cultivating faith-adjacent community is itself an "outward and visible sign"[18] of resilience, hope, and the positive potentialities of social change. Tapestry participants—and Tapestry as a collective—have stories that need telling, hearing, seeing, feeling, exploring. Although I cannot know for sure, recent conversations with Hannah and Sam lead me to believe the most valuable contribution of this research may prove to be its account of how co-created narrative can help forge collective identity in a community for which institutional precedents are scarce, in-person gatherings are small and partial,[19] and intra-group ties emerge more from lived relationship and shared experience than from demographic similarity or denominational affiliation.

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[18] I'm borrowing here from the Episcopal Church's definition of a sacrament, wherein material symbols like water, bread, and wine, convey spiritual power and significance.

[19] That is, they gather just a fraction of the community as a whole.

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