

Systems Storytelling Initiative

Synopsis of Community of Practice Session #2, January 20 2022

Authorship Matters

One of the key themes of systems storytelling that emerged from the first CoP meeting is that authorship matters. A key principle is that I/we stories differ from s/he/they stories. CoP members discussed the connection between stories and storytellers, highlighting tensions between insiders/outsideers in authorship, and playing with lesser-told interpretations of well-worn stories of famous and heroic leaders.

In the second CoP meeting, community members did a deeper exploration of authorship, prompted by contributions offered by CoP members Tara Roberts and Nico van Hemelryck:

Tara Roberts introduced *Into the Depths*, a project that follows a group of Black scuba divers who are dedicated to finding and documenting slave shipwrecks from the transatlantic slave trade. She emphasized that 1.8 million lives, and therefore stories, have been lost to us but have the potential to be resurfaced. The project started as a series of blog posts and expanded to include a documentary film and a 6-part podcast series hosted by National Geographic. Tara discussed how the journey inspired her to train as a scuba diver in order to join the group, both as a storyteller and as a member of the team. She explored how her identity as a Black woman and her ancestral connection to the stories were at first a source of fear and pain, but when she moved through that pain, it became an opportunity to see the humanity, experience and connection in the stories. This was a deeply personal journey, and she discovered that stories can shift when the storyteller becomes part of the story that they are telling

Nicolas van Hemelryck introduced *ALIS*, a documentary that follows a group of teenage girls who have left the streets of Bogotá, Colombia to live in a state-run boarding school. Rather than telling the single story of one girl, Nicolas and his co-director, Clare, asked the girls to imagine a fictional classmate, Alis, and tell her story. By piecing together the story of Alis, the girls are able to tell their own stories through their imaginary friend. While these stories reveal many of the brutal experiences that the girls have faced in their young lives, they also reveal innocence, humor and strength. Nicolas explained how the film took its inception when they spent time with the girls during a series of film workshops. The documentary took five years to create and shifted their former perspectives - while they initially felt pity and sadness for the girls, they were moved to inspiration and admiration through their storytelling journey.

Several areas for reflection emerged:

Authors and insider/outsider roles

Authorship is important because the author has power. As the author, you decide what to foreground and what to background, how to tie the events together, the narrative that will be told. There's a lot of personal work you also have to do. The way you tell the story changes if you're an insider-outsider.

The journey really changed me. I came to the realization that I was afraid to look at the past because it's so full of trauma and pain for Black people. I had divorced myself from that past because I was afraid of stepping into that pain and trauma. At some point during this journey, I was able to move through the fear. What I saw was that it wasn't just a history of pain and trauma. It was full of humanity and experience.

Who gets to write the story of which group? People should be the main contributors and owners of their stories. Yet I struggle with this also. Who can be allies and see us in a way we can't see ourselves?

Questions for reflection:

- What happens when a storyteller becomes part of the story they are telling?
- Is it important for storytellers to reflect on their inner journeys while they are telling stories?
- Is the author's insider/outsider status an important distinction to explore for systems storytelling?

Authorship through multiple perspectives

There's a debate around the prosocial effects of narrative. Some believe when we prioritize empathy, we end up making how a system works more invisible because we individualize the stories. Others believe that telling multiple points of view is where the real prosocial effect happens - that's how we get a better view of systems, by stitching together multiple points of view.

Entire narratives can be shaped by one perspective. That perspective may not be wrong, but it is singular - whereas the reality is narratives are quilts of stories. For example, I grew up with the narrative of the Livingstone perspective on Africa and when I first visited Zanzibar on the Eastern coast of Tanzania, a major departure point for the slave trade, I wrote a piece from that perspective. I never thought about that experience from the perspective of the men and women and children who marched across the continent to reach that point.

There just isn't much written about my stories, my heroes, my people. The most documented stories about us as Africans are stories told by Europeans.

We need to represent multiple perspectives so we get a more systemic view. Each of us has different experiences and collectively we learn a lot through them. There's still a need for someone to pull those multiple perspectives together to create the collective nature of the story.

Questions for reflection:

- How can we tell stories with multiple perspectives?
- What do we gain, and what do we lose by adding multiple perspectives to a story?
- How can we preserve a multiplicity of stories while also weaving them together to create systems stories?
- How can empathy be encouraged rather than discouraged through multiple perspectives?
- Can we create multi-perspective stories that are compelling, clear and full of meaning?

Authorship, editing and authenticity

Understanding your power as the storyteller is really important. It has to be approached with humility. It's a sacred part of the process. You need to realize you could play God and the story could turn out good or turn out bad. I was sent to record women's stories for a funder who wanted specific answers to their questions. But I just wanted to listen to the women tell their own stories and I had to find a way to make it less invasive than asking about these three things that the funder wanted to know.

There's a fine line between editing and authorship. When do you cross that line when a story is no longer someone's authentic story because we edited in that dramatic arc we want to see but that wasn't really there in how they perceive their story?

We talk about authorship sometimes through that person's strongest identity. Often it's their race, gender, sexuality. I am a Black person, yes. But I am also a woman, a daughter, a compassionate person. I am all of these pieces. If we can connect to people through their other identities, does that give us more room to be with them?

We had to think about how to convey their spirit while also building up a dramatic arc. We worked with a screenwriter and editors and co-producers and consultants and funders. In our current culture in the film and media industry, the author is the director, as though the director did it on their own. The reality is it's hard to say who the author is. It's really a team effort.

Questions for reflection:

- How can authors' stories' integrity be preserved, even when edited for dramatic effect?
- How can we allow stories to remain intact, rather than merely as an exercise in extracting information?

Authorship, trauma and healing

There's a complex tension between having an experience and the re-traumatization of telling your story.

There's growing momentum around this idea that people who have experience with an issue should tell their stories. That feels right and righteous to people in power. But sometimes authorship is not telling your story so you avoid the re-traumatization in the retelling. We had to push back on funders and say no, these people don't want to tell their stories.

Their stories are stories of pain and marginalization. But they laugh, dance, release emotions. We tried different ways of telling this story at the beginning. When we came up with the mechanism of having the girls make up stories about an imaginary girl, Alis, we knew it could work. It's hard to believe they created these stories on the spot and could make them so believable. They imagine they can be someone else in the future, that another life is possible. Will they make it? We don't know. But in our world full of crises, they give us a message: the only way to build a new reality is to imagine it first.

Questions for reflection:

- How can storytelling create opportunities for healing, rather than re-triggering trauma and pain?
- How can storytellers create safe spaces for stories, including the decision to not tell a story, or choose when and where it is told?
- Are there techniques that ensure 'safer' mechanisms in retelling stories and preserve dignity and agency?

Additional Resources

- <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/podcasts/into-the-depths?cmpid=org=ngp::mc=vanity::src=ngp::cmp=IntotheDepths::add=vanityurl>
- https://decolonizingalliance.wordpress.com/2021/04/02/writing-orally-speaking-on-the-collective-praxis-of-writing-decolonially/?utm_source=CPB&utm_medium=cms&utm_campaign=JPG15743
- [https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/into-the-depths/id1604457921?ign-itscg=80085&ign-itsct=pod show natgeo intothedepths](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/into-the-depths/id1604457921?ign-itscg=80085&ign-itsct=pod%20show%20natgeo%20intothedepths)

