THE DIGITAL STORY:

GIVING VOICE TO THE UNHEARD IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

A REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY VOICE PROJECT

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CMSi
CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT
SCHOOL *of* COMMUNICATION
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NINA SHAPIRO-PERL, PHD
WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY BRIGID MAHER,
AMBERLY ALENE ELLIS,
AND MAREK CABRERA

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Digital Story: Giving Voice to the Unheard in Washington, D.C.

In 2008, with the support of the American University School of Communication, the AU Anthropology Department, and the Surdna Foundation, American University began a community storytelling initiative, the Community Voice Project (CVP). Under the leadership of SOC Dean Emeritus Larry Kirkman, Professors Nina Shapiro-Perl and Angie Chuang set out to capture stories of the unseen and unheard Washington, D.C., through filmmaking and reporting, while helping a new generation of social documentarians through a training process.

Over the past decade, the Community Voice Project, directed by AU School of Communication Filmmaker-in-Residence Nina Shapiro-Perl, has produced more than 80 films and digital stories. These stories, created in collaboration with over 25 community organizations, have brought the voice and visibility of underserved groups to the public while providing students and community members with transformative and practical experiences.

About the Center for Media & Social Impact

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) at American University's School of Communication, based in Washington, D.C., is a research center and innovation lab that creates, studies and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary, entertainment and public media, CMSI bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners who work across media production, media impact, public policy and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and research, convenes conferences and events and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter. www.cmsimpact.org.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nina Shapiro-Perl

Nina Shapiro-Perl is a filmmaker, anthropologist and teacher who for 35 years has been documenting the lives of working people across the US. From 2008-2017, she served as Filmmaker in Residence at American University teaching documentary film and digital storytelling and founding the Community Voice Project (http://cmsimpact.org/community-voice- project/) which produced over 80 films for 25 non-profit organizations in Greater Washington. Before joining the faculty at American University, she worked for twenty years directing the Video Services Department and Greenhouse Cultural Program for the Service Employees International Union. Nina earned her doctorate from the University of Connecticut as a social anthropologist. Her first job outside academia was as a writer and producer at Maryland Public Television. More recently, her film Through the Eye of the Needle, documents the art and story of Holocaust survivor and artist Esther Nisenthal Krinitz http://artandremembrance.org/our-work/film/ winning numerous awards. Her latest film, Landscape of Power: Freedom and Slavery in the Great Dismal Swamp carries to the public a story of agency, resistance and resilience among escaped slaves living in swamp communities for more than 200 years https://vimeo.com/134317981.

After living on the East Coast all her life, Nina recently moved to the Bay Area to be near her children and grandchildren and continue film and digital storytelling work. She has since joined the board of StoryCenter, https://www.storycenter.org, formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling.

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"In a world of uncertainty, insecurity, anonymity, and mean-spiritedness, our partner organizations create safe places where healing and connectedness become the norm rather than the exception. My students' films provide these community organizations with new ways of communicating their work using media they might otherwise not afford, while providing students with documentary filmmaking experience in the real world. It's a rich partnership in the truest sense of the word."

– Nina Shapiro-Perl, Founder of Community Voice Project

INSPIRATION FOR THE COMMUNITY VOICE PROJECT

In the introduction to his path-breaking book, *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, Joe Lambert (2009) contextualizes the art of storytelling:

All of the contemporary movements of change—from slow and local food movement… to yoga and meditation… to community arts and storywork in a million permutations… are all responses to globalization. The more we share the stress and strain of a corporate monoculture based on greed and accumulation, the more we want a gentle authenticity of experience. The more we search for authenticity, the more we turn our attention away from the siren call of bland uniformity, and we search for something individuated. And the way to hear those stories is not to change channels, or surf the machine-made media, but to listen to our own stories, our own hearts, and the stories of our rich local communities (p. xv).

This has meant exploring larger social issues from an anthropological perspective and then particularizing the process through individual stories, both complex and nuanced. For filmmakers it has meant, for example, capturing the healthcare crisis and the routinization of care from the point of view of an ICU nurse—stretched to the point of exhaustion after a 12-hour shift, working short-handed. This may also mean understanding the story of immigration reform through the eyes of a janitor—separated from her children for 16 years, living through photographs, and messages on her answering machine. It has meant seeking out and telling stories that document the lived experience of people who are marginalized and dismissed, suffering and fighting back against the coarse rule of capitalism. These are stories, as Arlene Goldbard (2005) says, that support resistance, connection, and possibility.

In this work, many documentary filmmakers follow the traditional methods of researching a topic, finding subjects, recording in-depth interviews, capturing their daily lives on film, constructing a storyline, writing the treatment or script, editing and pacing the film, selecting the music, and telling the story, all through the subject's own words and/or a narrator's recorded or on-camera narration. As an alternative, the digital story uses a non-traditional methodology.

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WHAT IS A DIGITAL STORY?

A digital story is a three- to five-minute video narrative, written and directed by a first-time filmmaker that combines one's recorded voice, still and moving images, music, and other art into a short digital film. There is transformational potential in this evolving method of filmmaking—participatory filmmaking—where the subject of the film is actually the lead participant in the production. Where the power dynamic shifts from the traditional documentary model and, with the help of a trained practitioner, the subject tells his or her own story and learns digital storytelling skills in the process (Hill, 2008).

Traditional documentary filmmaking serves to privilege the role of the director to shape the story. Here, the director—either alone or collaborating with others—writes the treatment, conducts the interviews, forms the story arc, selects the locations to shoot, supervises the shooting, selects photographs or other archival materials, selects the interview segments to be used, oversees the editing, and oversees the music. Overall, the director shapes the look and feel of the film and, at its root, decides on the film's intention and meaning. Most importantly, the director decides whose words or voices will be used to tell the story. The whole process can take several months to several years, depending on a host of factors and choices.

The digital story is a form of documentary filmmaking. But in the digital story, the storyteller shapes and tells the story. In place of high-tech cameras and months-long production, the subjects of the digital story craft their own deeply felt five-minute stories with simple photographs and images in a digital format that is highly flexible. These stories can be created in the space of an intense three-day workshop as developed by StoryCenter (formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling) (www. storycenter.org) or adapted in a series of workshops or classes stretched over days and weeks.

In a film classroom application of this method, students create their own digital stories over a four-week period and then assist community storytellers in creating their stories over the course of nine weeks. The method is the same for both students and community storytellers. Through a facilitated story circle, the participant is helped to "find" his or her story. With support, the community storytellers then write, visualize, and edit the 250-word story; a process that enables the subject to get to know their own story better. Through this, one comes to understand oneself better, while creating a tool that can be used with family, friends, community, and the wider social world to tell a story from one's life in one's own, authentic voice. The digital story is also a creative tool for public knowledge and action. It is a way for an audience to see and hear—in a short, powerful form and in their own words— from members of a community who are too often unseen and unheard.

THE DIGITAL STORYTELLING LANDSCAPE

Within the larger digital/participatory storytelling landscape, the Community Voice Project contributes to a growing movement which seeks to transform traditional storytelling processes into a means to involve and record the stories of marginalized communities. It most closely follows the method developed by the Center for Digital Storytelling in Berkeley, California.

Since its inception, it has assisted over 20,000 individuals and 1,000 organizations worldwide, using the method of digital storytelling. (StoryCenter, 2017, www.storycenter.org). The Community Voice Project aligns itself with many other efforts that have preceded it and followed it, such as the Community Voice Method introduced by Gabriel Cumming, PhD, and Carla Norwood PhD, in 2001. The Cumming and Norwood method has been used to engage thousands of participants to embark on creating dialogue concerning critical resource management issues that are faced by their communities. By combining stakeholder interviews, qualitative analysis, film production, mapping, and deliberative public meetings, they have transformed storytelling into an effective medium to confront real time issues within communities. Other similar participatory storytelling initiatives include:

- The Community Voices program at the Center for Community Health Education

Research and Service in Boston: This initiative uses professionals in the arts, education, research, and service to train participants to become their own storytellers through a storytelling technique called "Photovoice" (CCHERS, 2017).

•Photovoice is a community based participatory research method that incorporates photography, writing, and social action as a way for participants to document their own experiences. By combining research, writing, and photographs, the student participants of the Community Voices program are able to create a final collective photo essay that will then be shared with the public. To aid in the process, the participants of the program are taught by experts in health, photography, journalism, and community advocacy (Wang, C., & Burris, 1997).

- StoryCorps, developed in 2003 by David Isay may be perhaps the best-known participatory storytelling

practice in the United States. It is dedicated to collecting, sharing, and preserving people's stories and has recorded more than 60,000 interviews among more than 100,000 participants across the United States. Its award–winning work has been archived in the Library of Congress and published in numerous books including "Listening is an Act of Love" (Isay, 2007).

- unseenamerica is another initiative developed by Esther Cohen at 1199/SEIU's Bread and Roses Cultural Project, where workers are trained in photography and take pictures and write short pieces to explain the world they see (Bread & Roses Cultural Project, 2006).

Many other projects, too numerous to mention, have been developed to train community members to tell their own stories. They reflect the growing movement to shift the story out of the hands of professional

filmmakers, writers, and photographers and into the hands of the storytellers themselves.

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Digital storytelling at its best is a two-way process of connection and transformation for both the community storyteller and the student/witness/collaborator. As a form of participatory filmmaking, it provides the opportunity for both parties to cross the social divides of class, race, ethnicity, neighborhood, age, gender, and sexual orientation, and meet each other as people.

The constraints of a five-minute story encourage the storyteller to go deep, quickly, adding to the story's power. As Jean Burgess (2006), a researcher of cultural participation in new media contexts says:

Economy is a core principle of this aesthetic. The philosophy behind this economy is that formal constraints create the ideal condition for the production of elegant, high-impact stories by *people with little or no experience, with minimal intervention by the workshop facilitators. Digital stories are in general marked by sincerity, warmth, and humanity…. And cultural studies researchers often don't know what to say about them. This is because for too long we have been interrupting the ordinary voice, speaking instead of listening (pp. 207-209).*

To be sure, the traditional–style documentary can shed light onto people in the shadows or onto a problem that goes unnamed or unnoticed. But, the participatory approach to documentary storytelling does something the traditional documentary does not: That is, it enables the subject to get to know his or her own story better, and tell it more succinctly. Through the process of digital storytelling, one's story can become a source of empowerment and self-knowledge to share with a wider public, while the storyteller develops skills in the process.

It is a powerful tool to hear the stories of community residents whose voices have been silenced, whose lives have been erased from the mainstream. It is these people— Washingtonians of different neighborhoods, backgrounds, and histories— who tell their stories with the assistance of American University students. They have been encouraged to think about their lives and focus on a transformative event that they then sculpt into a digital story. The story circle is that place where the work begins. As discussed below, the story circle is the site where the process of breaking down the social barriers that divide us starts, transforming the storyteller and the witness/facilitator alike.

The Community Voice Project

After 20 years as a filmmaker for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Nina Shapiro-Perl began teaching documentary storytelling at American University. She began with a class of anthropology and film students who worked in teams to create short documentary–style films for non-profit organizations in the area. Through her work in the labor movement and in her travels across the country over the course of two decades, Shapiro-Perl met scores of social justice activists working in nonprofits, essential to their communities, with little or no media to tell their organizations' stories—and with no time, money, or expertise to produce the work. Her intention was to match this need with the film student's perennial search for subject matter and the anthropology student's yearning to have their research find a public audience.

Shapiro Perl's goal was to

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take students beyond the comforts of classes in Northwest Washington, D.C. to the "the other Washington." That is, to go beyond the ivory towers, beyond the monumental buildings of the nation's capital, and, through filmmaking, explore instead the parallel universe of people struggling with poverty, degraded environments, poor health and poor schools, violence, and homelessness. According to a report published in September 2012 by the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, using data from the 2010 Census, the District of Columbia has the third-highest level of income inequality in the nation. The average income of the top 20 percent is $259,000. That is 29 times the average income of the bottom 20 percent ($9,100). The District has one of the highest rates of poverty in the nation and this is felt the hardest by Latinos and African-Americans (Lazare & Rivers, 2012).

THE METHOD AND IMPACT OF THE COMMUNITY VOICE PROJECT

The community storytelling project was created with the intention of illuminating the other Washington by telling the stories of people in their own words. The project set out to uncover such stories and in the process humanize rather than demonize the poor, working class, and immigrant communities in this acutely segregated and unequal city.

"The other," references the construct developed by Edward Said of demonization and dehumanization of one group by another in order to justify domination. Said (1978)

noted how the dominant group emphasized the perceived weakness of marginalized groups as a way of stressing the alleged strength of those in positions of power. The cultural "essences" seem immutable, as they have been enhanced and embellished poetically and rhetorically for a long time, even though the truths are illusions (Said, 65-67).

Students in Shapiro-Perl's Documentary Storytelling course produced 31 short documentary-style films for non-profit organizations in Greater Washington. The subjects ranged from gentrification, to HIV/AIDS, to immigrant workers' organizing, to homelessness, to veterans suffering from PTSD. Students consulted with the directors of the non-profits to determine the kind of storytelling that the organization needed and to identify people served by the organization who could help tell that story. Every effort was made to have students engage in deep interviewing to be able to tell the organization's story through the voices of the people it served.

Part of this involved working with the Anacostia Community Museum, located in Southeast Washington—a historically marginalized, largely African American community plagued by poverty, unemployment, and violence. As part of the Museum's Community Documentation Initiative, the Community Voice Project completed several successful short documentary-style films together. A year into the collaboration, the museum was presented with the idea of creating digital stories. Upon viewing some examples, the museum was soon convinced to experiment with this method. Shortly after, American University

would develop a digital storytelling class taught by Shapiro-Perl.

In the fall of 2010, 15 students spent the first five weeks of the semester creating their own digital stories, learning first-hand the method and the difficulty of telling one's own story. The process began with the story circle, where students come face to face with their own story… and with each other It is a time when the professor/facilitator creates a safe space and an opportunity for each individual to speak for five minutes— uninterrupted—and for others to listen. The storyteller then has five minutes to receive respectful feedback from the facilitator (and other students, if time permits) before the focus moves to the next student.

The facilitator asks questions to help the storyteller find a moment of transformation in their narrative, around which they can sculpt their story—enough to start writing a first draft. The stories unfold: a mother's schizophrenia, an emotionally distant father, the death of grandparent, a rape in freshman year, the paralysis of a close friend, coming out to a family member, etc. The stories tumble out among students who barely know each other. These are often stories that people didn't expect to tell; stories that people felt empowered to tell when they heard the risks others were taking. With tears and laughter, stories flowed, going beyond social divides of race, ethnicity, gender, age, and style with which the students started. The room shifted, and class dynamics changed from then on.

Students observed these changes, writing about them in their journals. People started

seeing each other in a new light. For the next four weeks, students attended class and worked on their own to finish their stories. In the fifth week, the final digital stories were screened and discussed. It was a watershed for classmates to witness how each story had grown and changed from the story circle barely four weeks before. The students' stories went beyond race, gender, ethnicity, social class, and national origin. Rather, they were nuanced, complex narratives that lived inside wider social constructions.

The storytelling process began anew the following week when small groups of students met in a story circle with community members selected by the Anacostia Community Museum – a plan that was arranged in advance with the Museum.

In the first digital storytelling effort with the Museum, students assisted 11 public artists from Southeast Washington in creating stories from their lives, using photographs, family documents, community archives, and their own voices to create first-person narratives.

These community artists ranged from mixed-media artists and photographers to tattoo artists and spiritual singers. In one digital story, tattoo artist Charles "Coco" Bayron speaks of growing up in his Bronx neighborhood where apartment buildings went up in flames all the time, and you never knew if your building was next. "We used to carry our family pictures with us just in case… Tattoos are like that. They're something nobody can take away. I think a lot of people are getting into tattooing to hold onto something," Coco says in his digital story. When asked to reflect on the digital project, Coco said: "It was a good experience. It showed me an appreciation for where I've been in my life, where I came from."
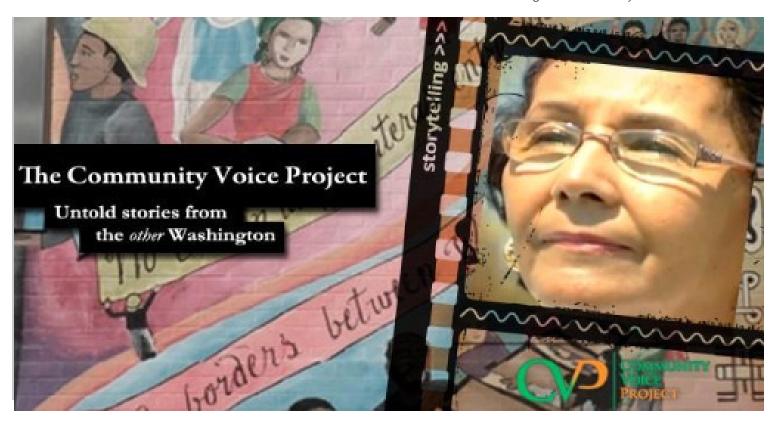
The Anacostia Community Museum included Coco's digital story in an exhibition on "Creativity in the Community" and said the digital stories yielded new information about their community. As Sharon Reinckens, Deputy Director of the Anacostia

Community Museum explains:

While the Museum worked with one of the artists particularly closely in particular, Charles "Coco" Bayron, visiting him a number of times and conducting an oral history interview, it was not until he had the opportunity to author his own story (my emphasis) that he directly connected his art of tattooing to a critical need to preserve family memory and identity in the face of ongoing loss (personal communication, November 12, 2014).

These stories affected not only the storytellers but the students— as audience, as collaborator, as witness. This was reflected in the journals that students were required to keep to record their thoughts and feelings over the course of the semester. After working with a community artist who had suffered much in his life, one student wrote:

The digital stories we are working on are an act of re-humanization, not only for the storyteller but for the witness. I can say that having been both storyteller

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and witness, I now have new tools and empowerment at my fingertips to resist desensitization to others' suffering, and to the desensitization I have imposed on myself, in regards to my own trauma. In meeting Dante (a pseudonym) for the first time… I felt like I was breathing clean air. I was finally able to feel connection to another's suffering... a feeling I have not felt since high school. (A.H)

The Museum wanted to do more. In Fall 2011, a new class of students worked with local residents along the Anacostia River on an Urban Waterways project with the Museum called "Reclaiming the Edge." The Anacostia River has notoriously been a site of environmental neglect (Williams, 2001). But, as the digital stories show, it has also inspired hopes and dreams, culture and community. Again, the Museum included many of these digital stories in its exhibit.

Members of the Community Voice Project that explored the Anacostia River provided many thoughts on relationships to our local waterways that realized many of the themes presented by the curators in the exhibition "Reclaiming the Edge." The perspectives on the waterways were explored in stories that talked of the river as a mode of transportation, as a muse for an artist, a salvation for an addicted and destructive lifestyle, and as a way for urban kids to find the natural world. (S. Reinckens, personal communication, November 12, 2014)

One story by environmental activist Brenda Richardson documents her experience growing up along the Anacostia River…but never going into it. For the first time, she links the anxieties she faced as a young single parent—both financial and social—to her fears about the water. In her digital story she describes her first trip in a canoe:

I was so frightened of the river, yet found some solace... As I listened to the swish of the paddles… I felt this amazing healing sensation…. Through this experience I began to see things through a very different lens. I learned that the Anacostia River, even with all its problems, was a source of healing for a people who have been forsaken and ignored in our nation's capital.

For some, like Brenda Richardson, creating a digital story can be transformative. As Joe Lambert (2013) writes, "When people experience trauma, violence and oppression, what happens is a designification of their lives. The loss of power in being brutalized reflects itself in people feeling invisible" (p. 148). There is a feeling that there is no "sign" of their existence which others in their families, their communities, their social world need to hear. Digital storytelling, Lambert (2013) continues, like all cultural work "is about resignifying people and giving them the tools to declare the value of their existence and insist on being heard" (p.148).

It was not only the storytellers like Brenda Richardson who were transformed by the experience. As Allison Arlotta, the student who worked with Brenda, wrote in her journal:

I experienced the transformational power of personal digital storytelling in two ways– once with my own story and once working with a community member to help her create her digital story. Completing my own story was a difficult and emotional process.

I chose to share a very personal story and struggled with how to communicate it... Going through this process helped me work with my community member, Brenda Richardson. Brenda was a gregarious and lively presence in our story circle and I was thrilled to be paired with her. When we first started working together, she was reticent to talk about herself. I remember her first draft being an eloquent, glowing story – but about a friend of hers. With some gentle prodding and asking the right questions, Brenda came to realize this on her own and ended up creating a beautiful, quiet story about her relationship with the Anacostia River. Through the digital storytelling experience, she was able to discover things about herself that she never knew – like the origins of many of her anxieties and the significance of environmental activism in her life. Seeing Brenda light up when she presented her story to the rest of the audience at our showcase was truly unforgettable.

In another set of digital stories with the Museum, themed around their exhibit "Twelve Years that Shook and Shaped Washington: 1963-1975," students worked with activists in the struggle for civil rights.

In one story, social worker Cecilia Johnson recounts not only the segregated city where she grew up, but how her father instilled in his daughter the need for a professional education and the necessity of protesting inequalities when the situation demanded it. As one student who assisted Cecilia with her story wrote in a reflection paper, "Discrimination, oppression and violence of the past are not the whole story. Cecilia's father passed down self-respect and the importance

of education, and took concrete steps to insure his daughter's preparation for the world" (Holly Wiencek). In reflecting on her work with Cecilia, Holly wrote that she expected Cecilia's story to be more focused on discrimination she faced growing up. But from their first meeting, Cecilia said, "My tribute to my dad is the greatest thing I can leave." "In deeply listening to her," Holly said, "I got to know Cecilia for who she really is and the story she wanted to tell." She said she realized that "a story must be focused inward for it to be honest and to have impact."

CONCLUSION

At its core, participatory storytelling is a two-way process of connection and transformation, for both the storyteller and the witness/facilitator. The story circle with the students provides the basis for the storywork students will do four weeks later with the community residents. It prepares them with the skills to "find" and then create a digital story. But it also allows them an opportunity to safely open up and

be vulnerable and recognize the weight of what they are doing. It

affords them an understanding of the power of telling one's story and the responsibility involved in assisting someone else on that journey.

As one student wrote, "Opening up to the class and making that first digital story was the most therapeutic thing I've ever done… Then, working with my community storyteller, it was amazing to see another woman tell her story of personal struggle and the journey of finding herself" (Delana Listman).

amazing to see another woman tell her story of personal struggle and the journey of finding herself" (Delana Listman).

Another student wrote, "I think the greatest thing I've learned about is the power of digital storytelling to help facilitate the emotional emancipation of any and all participants" (Tabria Lee-Noonan).

Participatory storytelling can take us into the lived experience of communities and people not often heard from, in a way that even the most sensitive traditional documentary filmmaking cannot. Because of their authenticity, these digital stories help break down a sense of "otherness" from both sides of a social divide, changing the storyteller and the witness in the process. In its place are people, in all their complexity, with nuanced narratives of life. Life shaped by wider social forces of class inequality, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., but lives inextricably woven with deeply personal experiences of trauma, pain, and loss, as well as spirituality, hope, and beauty.

As stated by Professor Chap Kusimba in his introductory remarks at a community screening of digital stories, "These films demonstrate the power of an engaged community anthropology in bringing out the finest aspects of our humanity, even when those aspects are memories filled with pain and suffering that arises from alienation." This is the transformative potential of the participatory digital story—its capacity to effect personal and social change in both storyteller and witness. It allows us to listen deeply to each other, across the divides of neighborhood, class, race, and culture, allowing us to

connect as people.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNITY VOICE PROJECT STORYTELLERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT

PREPARED BY MAREK CABRERA, PHD CANDIDATE DEPT. OF ANTHROPOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This ethnographic report on the Community Voice Project was prepared with the objective of understanding the relevance of participating in the introspective process of making a digital story by hearing directly from some community storytellers who collaborated with American University students under the guidance of Professor Nina Shapiro-Perl. The attempt was to reach out not only to those individuals whose life stories were told, but also to gauge the importance of these deeply personal projects to the organizations through which these individuals were identified. Outreach was made to twenty-one individual participants and three organizational entities from October to December of 2016. Of the initial two-dozen people contacted, twelve responded positively to the request for an interview, but only eight interviews were ultimately conducted. In one case, the interviewee was both an individual storyteller himself, and a leader of one of the participating organizations. One interview was conducted over the phone over a period of twenty-five minutes, and one via email. All of the rest were conducted in person either at a public venue or at the participants' places of residence or work, in conversations ranging between two to four hours. As expected, the interview via email was direct and with few details, while the in-person ones were more deeply engaging.

METHODOLOGY

The questions sent in advance to the participants were broad in scope. This allowed for storytellers to broadly reflect on their experience in creating a digital story. Below are the initial questions emailed to participants:
• Tell us what it was like to make a digital story.
• Has your life changed in some way as a result of making your digital story?
• How widely have you shared it?
• Would you attempt to make a new one?
• Would you revise and update the one you have now?
• What reactions do you get from people with whom you share it (family, friends, work, organization)?
• Would you recommend other people to make one?

In person, these questions were rarely stated explicitly. In fact, in order to facilitate trust and rapport, I began the interviews by sharing with the participants my reflections and takeaways from their digital stories, which I always made a point to watch several times before the interview. I also tried to google my participants beforehand whenever it was clear that they had a clear presence in the public sphere. The second step in the interview process was to convey Professor Shapiro-Perl's greetings by sharing anecdotes, such as the fact that a poster with a photo of one of the participants still hangs on the Professor's office door, or the fact that their stories were screened to the whole class as a teaching moment. These initial interactions were well-received by the interviewees. I would always look for the right moments to also share my own digital story where I told them of my own troubled upbringing in Peru, and the issues associated with being raised in a racist environment.

This was of paramount importance to me personally as I was able to get their thoughts about it, and also feel and share my own feelings and reflections on growing up in a society shaped by patriarchy and racism. All those with whom I shared my story, engaged me in the kindest ways. A benefit of this approach was to open up to them as quickly as possible because we only had one chance for the interview and, again, to build rapport and demonstrate to them the importance I attach to self-analysis, which is at the core of the process of making a digital story. Connections between their stories and mine also allowed me to interpret their words and reflections about their experience making a digital story on a more personal level.

Having delved in the previous paragraphs on some aspects of the ethnographic approach I brought to the interviews, at this point I will now turn to each individual interview. The quotes will be exactly as they were conveyed, or very close to them. I did not record their voices, but I took notes during the interview, and afterwards.

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INTERVIEWS WITH COMMUNITY VOICE PROJECT STORYTELLERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC REPORT PREPARED BY MAREK CABRERA, PHD CANDIDATE DEPT. OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Bruce McNeil

Bruce McNeil is a DC-based photographer who has become well-known for his decades of work taking photos of the Anacostia River in the nation's capital. For him, making his digital story back in 2010 was "a way of sharing about me, it is always part of my exhibitions. In 2015, five years after it was made, it was played on a loop along with my still photos and it was screened for the duration of the exhibit." He shared that this was one of a few videos made about him, but that this digital story was personal. "The message of the story, and the connection with beauty is the same." After watching an online six-minute video (Watch) with tens of his impressionistic creations, it is safe to say that his statement achieves greater meaning.

Finding the parallel beauty between his final creations and the actual meaning of his life story is a powerful testament to the significance of sharing with those around us who we are. "I am late bloomer; I am 77 years old" he continued, "yet I have copies of it (the digital story) burned on CDs, and I am guilty of showing it everywhere." He also shared that in 2017 he will be the designated artist in a major project around the Anacostia River, and that he looked forward to showing it there, possibly projecting in on a large unattractive river, but I caught what the river could look in the future" he volunteered at one point and the idea of telling his life story and contribution in the community, to the wider world was clearly meaningful and practical.

Cecilia Johnson

Cecilia Johnson is a professional human resources specialist working for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and she decided to participate in the Community Voice Project and make her own digital story at the urging of her brother. This might be surprising given that for her, as she said, the "process of picking up the camera was natural." She had previously made videos for different occasions, including one for the Research Cancer Society, but this was different because she knew "it would take great courage to do this" about herself. But what made it easier for Cecilia to decide to do it was that "it was participatory, one in which I was able to give as much of what I thought was the documentary record. I wanted to do more to connect the dots about my dad and my education." "The participatory aspect is central," she continued. It "allows people to participate."

Cecilia's digital story is centered around her learning important lessons from her father during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s. But in the digital story, she was able to connect those lessons to the work she does today. "It validated me in terms of why I do the work I do. I am an equal opportunity specialist, social justice worker, and so it allowed me to carry the message of who I am. It is validating of everything I have done in this world." Making a digital story is a process of introspection, but sharing it is a process of becoming more transparent to those around us. "I was able to capture my development" and "showing it to family members and co-workers was a process of transparency." She continued: "People did not know that about me, but their feedback was very positive. Co-workers were not surprised because that is what I do, but family was surprised to learn the history of their grandfather, and mother growing up." The interview was conducted over the phone, lasting about twenty five minutes, but apparently the fact that Cecilia had made her digital story only a year earlier, in 2015, explains how clearly she remembered the process and how quickly she captured the intent of the interview. Cecilia also mentioned that in the year since her own digital story, she has been making videos about others, suggesting how she has learned by making her own story and now sharing the skills with others.

Jay "Jahlion" Coleman

Jay "Jahlion" Coleman is an accomplished artist and the making of his digital story coincided with a difficult period in his life. As he was creating his digital story, he was permanently separated from teaching art, his main passion, to disadvantaged chil- dren who had been institutionally diagnosed with having learning disabilities. After the episode that had legal implications that kept him from working with children, he said: "Making the video gave validity to my work and myself, and as a person in my community." "It validated me as an artist" says the

artist who goes by "Jahlion" and has painted portraits of prominent members of the community, and even a foreign president. "Doing the video allowed me to step out of my artist world… to see my world." Being able to recover from a moment that was "unfair" and the result of a "misunderstanding," by telling my story was "game changing". "Now the video is on the internet, it was posted on Facebook too, and it has been seen by more than 250 people." The honesty with which he shared his tribulation was evident during the in- person interview, just as was his passion in his digital story.

There was also another aspect of the process of making his digital story that was important to Jahlion: "Oh, Professional! Someone else took the time to recognize my work. It is not homemade: It was American University and the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum. It is institutional. Big institutions validated my work! Promotion and marketing without a budget!" He was clearly thankful to be able to reach people with "A different representation of his work, rather than a portfolio. It was a way of crossing barriers not abrasively." Jahlion indeed crossed barriers. To the question of the type of feedback he received about his digital story, he said with a smile, "Generally good feedback, especially from relatives, my grandmother, so articulate." One last observation of this four-hour long interview: Jahlion had told me that his son probably had learned something about his dad by watching the digital story, and

when the young man showed up, I asked him. The young man's answer was "no" because he had been by his side all his life, and that his father's passion was, basically, part of this young man's paradigm of life.

Brenda Richardson

This interview was conducted via email, hence its brevity. Still, her written answers to the initial questions emailed to her are very telling of her experience. Brenda Richard- son is a self-described eco-feminist who for years now has dedicated her life to the improvement of the quality of the environment surrounding the Anacostia River, and in her digital story she recounts her path to that form of activism, and her struggles as an African American single mother. Hers is an inspiring story of personal strength, love for her community, and vision of action, or praxis. These are her responses to the questionnaire:

CVP Interviewer: Tell us what it was like to make a digital story.

Brenda Richardson: This was the first time I had done something like this. It was ex- citing and interesting.

CVP Interviewer: Has your life changed in some way as a result of making your digital story?

Brenda Richardson: It did when I invited my friends out to the premiere in 2011. I don't often tell my friends about everything I do. They were intrigued and pleasantly

Brenda Richardson: Shared it with lots of folks in the environmental community in 2011 when it first came out.

CVP Interviewer: Would you attempt to make a new one?

Brenda Richardson: Yes.

CVP Interviewer: Would you revise and update the one you have now?

Brenda Richardson: No. I think I would do a new one because I am now focused on climate change and saving our public lands.

CVP Interviewer: What reactions do you get from people with whom you share it (family, friends, work, organization)?

Brenda Richardson: They are moved.

CVP Interviewer: Would you recommend other people to make one?

Brenda Richardson: Absolutely.

To a follow up email thanking her for her responses and asking her if she wanted to add anything, Brenda Richardson did not add any additional comments.

Uzikee Nelson

Uzikee Nelson is a well-known artist in Washington D.C. and beyond, and his digital story centers around an issue close to him: how African American artists do not get to tell their stories in the public spaces of the nation's

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capital. "They are invisible," he says in the first minute of the video interview that is part of his digital story. This person knows quite well what it is to tell one's stories, as it became clear to me before going into the interview for this report. "They kept bugging me from the Anacostia Museum" said the no-nonsense Uzikee Nelson to my question of why he did it. There was a story behind his initial refusal to participate in the Community Voice Project ... "It was not the first one (interview). I have been interviewed by all the newspapers and TV stations." Yet," he continued, "I knew how to make things with my hands, so in 1970 I did a piece for the NAACP. I was fired for making that piece of art, for telling my story; it was dedicated to my father." Probed again about what it meant to participate in making his digital story he responded, after several seconds of silence: "It tells you who I am, and how I got be who I am."

The very introspective Uzikee Nelson says he had a "wonderful and positive childhood in Mississippi" before starting a life of extensive travels all over the planet, but perhaps more importantly, to Africa. "My Africa-inspired art has an impact, positive effect. The art is in the street to give people a positive feeling toward themselves."

Given the composition of the population of Washington, his life work amounts to a monumental effort to help undo the racist history of this city. At one point in his decades of work, Uzikee said he adopted two parks and placed several pieces of his work there to begin to occupy the public spaces to tell a story, the story of African Americans.

As a personal observation about this deeply philosophical, 78 year old man, I share this: The first time we spoke on the phone he answered me with a thunderous "Who the hell are you?" I was thrilled by the challenge. After almost three hours of questions and laughs the very next day, and his showing me 20 minutes of a video he himself shot in Cuba during a visit in 2009, he bid me farewell by asking me for my phone number to stay in touch. As we parted ways after several minutes of handshakes and pleasantries on his porch, I could not stop thinking of the moment when he raised his voice during the interview so that his words could find his wife around the house: "Is it true that you too, want to make your own digital story?" Other moments when he also yelled to his wife the names of the people to whom he still wants to show his digital story also resonate. She replied from the room next door that she was taking note.

Sheila Crider

Sheila Crider is a profound thinker and abstract artist based in Washington D.C. Making a digital story for her was not an easy and immediate decision. Her digital story created some concern in terms of how to capture and interpret the thoughts and work of an abstract thinker. "It sounded interesting. When I was asked, I hesitated. What would it be about?" That was not abstract at all. "I really enjoyed making the video," she continued. "I would be taking advantage of an opportunity to reach people that I would not normally reach." Nothing abstract there. Her digital story centers around how her life led her to the coining of a deeply abstract term: Blackstraction (with a capital B). "When I thought of making the story, I thought of that word; it would be a tool about my work." She was fulfilling a central intention behind making one's digital story: putting together the events of our lives in a way that explains how we got where we are today. "My life has been an improvisation." Just as her life is an improvisation, during the interview she picked up her phone and tweeted the link to her digital story; "I just put it on Twitter."

Beyond that, Sheila has shared her digital story over the last five years via her "mailing lists (plural), linked to websites and blogs." As I was taking notes she expanded: "The feedback was very positive, maybe also because it was very succinct, clever and a good marketing tool," she said with a smile. "It was the first time I had produced something like this that I can actually promote. It was artistic." It is important to note how she uses the first person in that sentence; another important aspect of making a digital story, in terms of how much control the participant has over the content. "I had 100% control." This insightful, abstract artist has a long view of her life – "All the stuff that I did as a kid is what I am doing now, "she

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says with a mischievous smile. "To be in the screening was fun." That was a powerful testament to the power of sharing with who.

Ayize Sabater

Ayize Sabater is a deeply spiritual community leader, and revered founder of an import- ant set of charter schools, MOMIEs TLC, and others, that serve mostly African American children, in underserved communities. He participated in the making of his own digital story, but members of his organization, mostly parents of MOMIEs students, also participated in a series of stories some years later, and so in this two-pronged interview Ayize Sabater went back and forth between telling about the experience of participating, and the institutional value of having several parents of his students participate as well. His own digital story revolved around how "society as a whole will be that much better if we work with children to make an indelible imprint in that society."

His own inspiring life story connects with the life stories of the parents: "The thread of giving back connects them all, and that came to the surface" while making all the digital stories. "It was a great opportunity to share a bit of their stories. To use their lives as an opportunity to give back." Ayize Sabater is keenly aware of the power of telling one's story. "If you hit your head somewhere, and you tell that to others, they might avoid hitting themselves. For MOMIEs it is crucial to use personal stories as an empowerment mechanism."

He continued: "The people who participated are parents, and it is on the website, and it is a way to demonstrate how we engage with the community." Clearly he is speaking of the power for institutional building that can result when the life stories of different stakeholders of an organization are brought together, when they all become visible to the other.

His own video was watched 125 times on the YouTube channel, but he assures me that that does not include the many times the parents' videos were seen, or the many times all of the digital stories were screened to small groups of people, other parents, teachers and to family members. "It is extremely powerful. We all have a story to tell, the good, the ugly." Very expressively he conveys the reactions he has seen from viewers over the years: "Oh, Wow!", "I did not know that about you!" etc. Sharing one's story can have a major impact, and as he puts it: "To have people understand from whence you come." In the form of a final observation, Ayize Sabater said he was sad Professor Shapiro-Perl would not be presiding over the Community Voice Project any longer because just as the interview was approaching, he was coming up with ideas to invite her to come to MOMIEs to talk about the technique of making personal digital stories. I volunteered.

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THE DIGITAL STORY:

GIVING VOICE TO THE UNHEARD IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

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