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Book Review: Telling Stories to Change the World—Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims

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Telling Stories to Change the World—Global Voices on the Power of Narrative to Build Community and Make Social Justice Claims. Edited by Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani. (2008). New York: Routledge. ISBN: 0415960800 (paperback).

Reviewed by Richard Meyers, Ph.D., an instructor at American University

Perhaps the best way to describe Rickie Solinger, Madeline Fox, and Kayhan Irani's *Telling Stories to Change the World* is to say that what is embodied in a textual form is in actuality a cascading frame of stories about projects about stories that provoke further narratives (including the present review). In creating this book of stories embedded in stories, it is interesting to note that the editors' backgrounds provide an interdisciplinary foundation for what follows; one is a historian, one is a social psychologist, and one is a community arts practitioner. The theoretical threads that connect their compilation seem to hinge upon the concept of community identity, be it personal, cultural, collective and/or singular; and, the ways in which people actively engage in projects that generate activism beginning at a local level and undertaken through the medium of "storytelling." The editors' goals were to gather stories about activists in local settings who utilize storytelling as a means to further social activism within their communities. In pursuing that goal, "storytelling" is broadly defined as ways of narrating stories from different vantage points to address social issues.

The result of the editors' goal are 23 essays from across the globe, essays which, on the whole, describe the ways social justice activists, artists, and project leaders utilize stories as grassroots tactics for making social justice claims. Nineteen of the essays in the text are project based while the final four are more open ended explorations into larger thematic issues involving power and the limits of storytelling as a medium of activism or tangible policy.

Part I

In chapters one through six, we are exposed to projects that are about preservation—"Of language and environment, of history, memory, community, health, personal, and group resources" (p. 11). The first chapter is titled, "Zuni River—Shiwinan K'yawinanne Cultural Confluence." Both of the authors to this project are Zuni tribal members who worked in collaboration to write up the chapter. One is a Native Zuni speaker while the other has an M.F.A. and serves as the executive director for a non-profit organization dedicated to sacred sites protection and cultural revitalization for the tribe. The authors wish the chapter to be a challenge to globalization and also a call to action with regard to environmental justice and cultural recovery. The narrative style and writing fits well to the backgrounds of the authors. Here is a small sample, "This chapter has been collaboratively created by two writers who are linked to a high desert ecosystem and the cool midnight sky where countless generations of our grandfathers and grandmothers have dreamed and danced, prayed and fasted, and farmed and hunted in the vast lands we know as Idiwana, the Middle Place" (p. 21). Chapter four, "'Our Ancestors Danced Like This' Maya Youth Respond to Genocide through the Ancestral Arts," is similar to the subject matter of the first chapter. This segment is written by a Pinay dancer and human rights observer living in Guatemala as a Fulbright scholar. The narrative relays a story of the genesis of a social group in Guatemala called Sotz'il. Made up predominantly of youth, it infuses elements of old traditional stories about Maya relations with the original Spanish conquistadors. Aspects of the Sotz'il's artistic performances and plays narrate the survival and integrity of Maya culture. Thematically, these two chapters deal with indigenous communities trying to keep cultural elements alive and from falling victim to erasure by modern industrialized society. Unfortunately, modern society often replaces cultural identity with what is known as a "market identity" category rooted in egocentricity as opposed to the more collective tribally based indigenous cultural identities that are considered to be sociocentric.

Chapters two and three contend with topics that could be viewed thematically as representing how individuals prevent themselves and their experiences from being silenced. Chapter two is titled, "The Memory Book Project in Kampala, Uganda." This particular project and write up was made possible through analog (cassette) recordings that were then transcribed into a text submitted to the editors. In dealing with stories about surviving and coping as mothers with HIV and AIDS

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in Uganda, the taboo nature of the issue is addressed through the creation of memory books. These books are then passed along to surviving family members so that the phenomenon is not silenced. Chapter three, “Telling the Truth-How Breaking Silence Brought Redemption to One Mississippi Town,” describes the work of the Philadelphia Coalition, a group formed to heal a stigmatized and traumatic historical experience in their community. This chapter is a redemptive story that deals with the aftermath of the murders of three civil rights workers in this small rural town in 1964. The coalition’s goals are to address the silent barrier of racism that has shrouded the community since the heinous crime. Through community narratives

focused on justice, the cloudy stigma and veil of shame is shown to be slowly lifting in this town, and community engagement is centralized as essential to the healing process that has begun..

Chapters five and six begin with the authors’ statement of position/standpoint as a context for their respective projects. Chapter five, “An Unlikely Alliance-Germans and Jews Collaborate to Teach the Lessons of the Holocaust,” begins with the following sentence: “As the daughter of Holocaust refugees, I inherited a painful and burdensome legacy from my parents” (p. 56). Chapter six, “Storytelling in SisterSong and the Voices of Feminism Project,” begins with the following: “As an African American feminist, I come from a verbal, storytelling culture with deep roots” (p. 65). Both chapters convey the complicated ways in which doctrine can silence those who need to speak up while an act of atrocity is occurring, as opposed to waiting for history to reveal its truths. In chapter six, the following quote relays themes found in both stories: “An important aspect is owning our stories, and determining if, when, why, and how they are shared. As women of color we feel that others often tell our stories for us in a colonizing way, denying us the right not only to tell our own stories but to decide what the stories mean” (p. 67). The shared theme of these chapters lies in the concept of co-construction and access to the creation of the narrative or storytelling activity. Chapter five demonstrates collaboration and co-construction in creating a new story. Chapter six articulates the reclaiming of the narrative that has been controlled and told by outsiders as a way of maintaining oppression and cultural domination over the women in the story. The notion of preserving and reclaiming permeates these chapters.

Part II

Chapters seven through fourteen describe projects that came about due to crisis, though the title of chapter seven, “The Neighborhood Story Project in New Orleans,” does not immediately identify this idea. The narrative jumps immediately into a dialogue transcription, with the “script” describing the Neighborhood Story Project and its connection to Hurricane Katrina. Similarly, Chapter eight, “A Story of a Suicide and Social Change in Contemporary China,” submerges the reader from the beginning, through describing the suicide of the project director’s grandmother, an event that is the impetus for the project. An outside political scientist whose specialty is China writes the chapter. She details the contrast in narratives between the “supposed” to be “objective” style of the writing of an academic versus the power of personal storytelling. This chapter details a magazine that gives voice to Chinese women from rural backgrounds. It achieves this voice through the medium of storytelling as a vehicle of change.

Chapters nine, eleven, and twelve are narratives about projects that convey immediacy and are compiled into storytelling phenomena. Chapter nine is titled, “Depo Diaries and the Power of Stories.” The authors depict their project well in their own words here, “Depo Diaries: A National Storytelling Project came out of our need to understand their own experiences with the adverse effects of birth control. We needed to highlight the ways that the medical community and others enforce systematic and coercive reproductive practices, relying on racist, ablest, heterosexist, and

classist assumptions” (p. 101). Depo-Provera is a form of birth control targeted at the poor and communities of color, and in this chapter are collections of stories that narrate individual women’s experiences of being put on the drug. Chapter eleven, “Our Stories, Their Decisions Voter Education Project,” demonstrates the ability that stories depicted in the medium of DVDs and digital storytelling have in bridging the gaps between government decisions at the policy level through the personal impacts felt by voters. This particular project is a prescriptive representation intended to be utilized by other community activist organizations trying to effect social change. Chapter twelve, “Drawing Attention to Darfur,” has as its focus the space of abuses known to many who follow

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human rights issues: “Darfur. One of today’s gravest man-made human rights and humanitarian crises. Named a genocide—the worst of all crimes—by the United States government, the world has stood by while Sudanese soldiers and militias have committed crimes against humanity, war crimes, and forced 3 million people to flee their homes” (p. 127). The project is written by a pediatrician turned public health physician who tells of encountering stories of atrocities through drawings from children who sought his medical care. The project compiles these stories that the children draw and are collected by the doctor to voice the atrocities to a greater audience.

Chapters ten, thirteen, and fourteen are all stories about the interface between the performative aspects of storytelling and crisis. Chapter ten, “Immigrant Stories in the Hudson Valley,” is an ongoing project that consists of a series of interactive, bilingual theater performances with audiences of immigrants from Mexico, Columbia, Puerto Rico, Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, Belize, Paraguay, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic. All live in the Mid-Hudson Valley of New York, a semi-rural region. A project/theater company, Hudson River Playback Theatre, invites audience members to tell personal stories that sync in with each performance and actors and music so that it forms theater on the spot. “Other tellers of border-crossing stories have indicated a similar relief, consistent with the findings of trauma research that those who have undergone trauma feel a compulsion to tell their story, and that this telling is essential for healing to take place” (p. 115). Chapter thirteen, “Insan Natak-Phoenix or Dodo in Lahore,” details the work of four young people with university degrees who wished to enact change and “to do good” in Kot Lakhpat, Pakistan. They founded the Insan Foundation that performed on-the-ground plays and skits for the children and the community with a pro-human rights, anti-war stance. In time, the group was renamed Insan Natak. From what began as an initiative to help literacy and allow for grassroots performances grew an internationally renowned troupe of actors in a project that eventually ended, due to the dialectic of extending beyond the initial project goals and losing the community grounding. In tracing the rise and fall of this unique theater group, the authors define the triumph of real grassroots activism void of commercial politics and co-opted behavior.

Chapter fourteen concludes Part II with the chapter titled, “Everyone Needs to Know—Five Stories about AIDS and Art in India.” It details the patuas of West Bengal, multimedia artists who paint narrative scrolls accompanied by sung poetry. One of the authors of the chapter is a folk arts curator who wanted to revitalize the artistry of the patuas by commissioning and utilizing them in a contemporary venue. From the origins and benevolent intentions of the folk arts curator to the intersection of an American scholar’s research, and cascading to the other authors of this chapter/story, the reader sees how AIDS becomes narrated through patuas’ performances in this locale in India. Through the stories, the human connection and ability to respect and understand versus to simply take a position is an important result of their project.

In sum, the chapters in Part II depict projects that attempt to address various crises. Either by alerting the world, or one’s own community, these narratives describe projects that disseminate

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stories in ways that are reminiscent of a call to arms. This sampling of story-based projects allows us to see examples of issues that were created out of acute urgency.

Part III

Part III brings together projects that voice revolutionary and innovative ways of storytelling. Beginning with chapter fifteen, “The We That Sets Us Free—Imagining a World Without Prisons,” we are exposed to the premise that prisons are wrong. According to the author, “Prisons have colonized hearts and minds” (p. 162). The chapter challenges readers to envision a world without prisons and

infuses music and recordings of female inmates compiled into a CD. In chapter sixteen, the author describes an organization, Women Living Under Muslim Laws. This organization uses a performative act, “Great Ancestors,” to demonstrate Muslim women’s stories of dissent, dignity, freedom, and repression, stories that have recurred throughout history and that have produced common challenges.

Chapter seventeen, “Creating a Forum—LGBTQ Youth and The Home Project in Chicago,” highlights the collection of stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or queer youth who are homeless. The author describes the project’s impetus well here after narrating encounters with homeless youth: “This is how theater projects start for me. I am going about my business when a question hauls back and punches me in the gut. Or maybe it’s an idea that takes my breath away. To then create a production that shares these stories is what the Home Project does” (p. 184). Chapter eighteen, “From Storytelling to Community Development—Jahori, Afghanistan,” tells a tale from the vantage point of a man with an almost completed Ph.D. in oral tradition and community development who fled Afghanistan in 1978. He articulates that even in the face of war and numerous attempts to squelch storytelling, the “need to tell tales has not died and cannot be extinguished. . . . Storytelling, an ancient art form conveying fairy tales, folklore, legends, myths, and religious epics, has become a rare commodity and the rawi is almost extinct.” (194) The rawi are storytellers of the Hazaras, who were strategically silenced by oppressive means of cultural domination and war.

In the last chapter of Part III, Chapter nineteen, “Sins Invalid—Disability, Dancing, and Claiming Beauty,” we are exposed to what I would deem as something “new” to me and unexpected as a reader. I was drawn into the story by the following excerpt:

Like many good stories, the early threads of this one were woven over dinner, a large bowl of saffron-laced paella, steaming on the table between two good friends... We’ve both been disabled since birth, and bluntly, we’re both pretty hot, and we both humbly know it. Still, every day throughout the day we each struggle with the disconnect between what we know to be true about our beauty and the passion of our lives, and what the world seems to believe, that we are less than, undesirable, pitiable...it’s hard, to know that you have been blessed while others seem convinced you’ve been cursed (p. 202, 203).

As a reader, I was captivated by the phenomenon of “ableism versus disableism” and sexuality. This chapter’s purpose and the project as a whole appear to be about normalizing and naturalizing the exotic and erotic into a space of acceptance; yet it also invokes the realism of what isn’t discussed in normative discourse. The poetry and performance production of this group seeks to introduce a new way to storytelling.

Part IV

To frame closure to the text, the four final chapters/stories are meant to interrogate/explore the

relationship between “storytelling” and “telling truth” (p. 213). Chapter twenty, “Using Personal Narrative to Build Activist Movements,” uses the examples of renowned activists whose personal biographical stories invoked social movements. To see that large numbers of people are ideologically reachable in the format of a story disseminated to unify and aggregate people is an attribute often associated with storytelling. In chapter twenty-one, “Trafficking Trauma,” the author points out that emphasis on South Africa and trauma stories being harvested above and beyond an immediate need depicts an almost fetish for trauma and invokes the question of how to determine what is useful and what is not. It also outlines some of the ethics involved

“...the four final chapters... explore the relationship between ‘storytelling’ and ‘telling truth.’”

in intellectual property and turning collective stories of trauma into commodities of individual narratives. Chapter twenty-two, “Imagining Cuba: Storytelling and the Politics of Exile,” depicts the ways people in exile reconstitute and shape identity, almost entirely based upon storytelling. The author speaks her own truth regarding her identity, and in doing so, presents a legitimate example of the ambiguity of the Southern Floridian Cuban exiled identity. The final chapter, twenty-three, “Stories in Law,” continues along the thematic path of how stories are inherently and inevitably ambiguous and applies this to the legal realm. The author points out the ability of storytelling to disrupt or dismantle rationalizing and generalizing analytical modes of discourse within the law. All of the chapters within Part IV share in their narratives the relationship of storytelling and stories to the public sphere and greater concept of society.

As expressed in this book, and in this reader’s experience, stories are ways of invoking and referencing realities felt and imagined and lived. They bring to life the words that shape and create the ways of seeing and breathing the world around us as human beings. To be in a story and to feel the spatialized embodiment of the story surrounding you versus to be outside the story looking in and acknowledging the events occurring to the actors inside the structure are two very different vantage points. This book frames a philosophical spectrum with which one can view and interpret the internal narratives and stories within this edited compilation. It is a collection of essays that spans continents and disparate cultural spaces—Uganda, Darfur, China, Afghanistan, South Africa, New Orleans, Chicago. The book describes projects in which communities use narrative as a way to explore what a more just society might look like and what civic engagement means. These compelling accounts of resistance, hope, and vision showcase the power of the storytelling form to generate critique and collective action. They also show the humility of human connectedness.

Each chapter in this compilation can stand on its own in addition to being threaded together with the other narratives of social justice. Each author details how her or his projects were brought into reality from the abstract idea forms to the on-the-ground practical manifestations in their project deliverables. There are numerous grassroots storytelling projects out there. However, to obtain an essay written about an actual project entails the materializing of a narrative version about the project from someone willing to write it up. The storytelling projects inevitably become entextualized, and we are therefore reading a piece of literature about a storytelling phenomenon as opposed to experiencing the storytelling in the way each chapter aims to articulate as the unique attribute to the respective project. In other words, we, the readers of this compilation of stories, are reading about how activism is about reaching people through the various mediums of storytelling that do not involve reading. It is somewhat of an interesting ironic twist to the overall message of the book, one not fully addressed by the editors. Overall, the text is a valuable resource to sociolinguists, specialists to the regions mentioned, and teachers and educators of all grades and levels. It is also a practical text for community activists and anyone interested in reading about stories that aren’t couched in overly academic terms and obtuse arguments.