STORYTELLING, SELF, SOCIETY, *3*(2), 135–155
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Poverty and Storytelling in Higher Education: Telling "The Missing Story of Ourselves"

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Storytelling in higher education allows us—as poor, single-mother students—to create crossing points where we transgress boundaries, reinventing ourselves, and sharing enlarged, plural views of human experience, and meaning. Through our nationally touring exhibit and storytelling installation, entitled "The Missing Story of Ourselves: Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education," we work to transform private and idiosyncratic experiences into public meanings in an effort to render our shared world newly intelligible. In challenging student audiences to think from the lives of others, de-naturalize and de-stabilize social hierarchies, and produce more community-accountable and thus more ethical, and inclusive thought, we illustrate that telling "missing" stories in colleges and universities meshes with and parallels the most central and pivotal goals of a liberal education.

> Until the missing story of ourselves is told, nothing besides told can suffice us/We shall go on quietly craving it/In the missing story of ourselves can be found all other missing stories. (Laura Riding Jackson, 1973: 111)

We are five intergenerationally poor women, single mothers, and scholars—of a variety of racial, ethnic, and sexual identities and ages—committed to thinking clearly about the power of stories and storytelling in our lives, our scholarship, and our activism. We are not traditional scholars with a home for our stories, theories, and analysis; indeed our presence as a whole in academe is an anomaly. Yet as poor, single-mother students in the United States, in an era of unabashedly mean-spirited and punitive post-welfare reform policy and practice, we recognize that we have been positioned through dominant stories as abject, as what Georgio Agamben calls "*homo sacer*," people with no value, the "enemy within" (qtd. in Skegges:178). As a result, we are well aware that our very survival depends

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upon our abilities to contest dominant public narratives, to resist ubiquitous stories that result in our continuing devaluation, objectification, and erasure and to use our extraordinary access to higher education to counter—privately and publicly—with the "missing story of ourselves."[1]

Three out of the five of us are women of color, four out of five of us dropped out of high school by age 16, all but one of us had children "out of wedlock," we have each been "welfare dependent" single mothers, and we have all been non-traditional students, balancing full-time, minimum-wage work, school, and family care. In fact, our collective desire to understand the complex operations of representation, identity, and storytelling played itself out (ironically) at an elite and prestigious private college, but also in state universities and community colleges, coffee houses, abandoned storefront classrooms, our homes both in and out of "the projects," and on a few occasions in a county jail cell.[2]

In the past two decades, public images of the alleged pathology and degradation of poor women and their children have proliferated in the United States. In the media, through legislation and embedded in public policy, profoundly poor single mothers have been yoked to stories of "brood sows," "Welfare Queens," "unfit parents who view their children as nothing more than increases in welfare checks," "alligators," and "wolves who eat their young" ("Right's Cornering" 11). As many scholars have noted, these stories rest on and reproduce racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist assumptions and understandings of poor women. Further, these often repeated representations underscore and are employed to justify punitive policy, as in the case of 1996 welfare reform and reauthorization in 2002. These policy decisions have a real, material impact on our lives. Welfare reform regulations and programs determine that we work but cannot pay our rent or feed our children properly, that we are unable to have our teeth repaired or afford heat, that we give up our right to privacy, and labor protections, that we cannot earn educational degrees with which we might be able to alleviate the pain of material poverty (Adair, 2001). Policy breaks and mutilates our bodies, homes, children, and we fear, our futures.

We have also witnessed and paid a steep price as stories of our pathology and degradation have increasingly been produced, disseminated, and guarded by experts, theorists, and academics. Most often in higher education, as in the larger world, our lives and experiences have been reduced to little more than the object of scholarly investigation as we are spoken for and about, while denied a voice in venues of power and authority. The increased and alarming absence of poor women in academe as a result of 1996 welfare reform legislation and reauthorization in 2002 (Adair, 2001); class erasure and neglect in feminist studies (Adair, 2002); cooptation in working class studies (Adair, 2005a); demands for objectivity and distance when it comes to representations and theories of the experience of poverty; public and academic censure; fear, embarrassment and shame; and the widespread judgment that to articulate poverty class scholarship

from a first-person perspective is a contradiction in terms (Adair, 2005b), too often prohibit even the possibility of first-hand accounts and critiques of the experiences and perspectives of poor women. Despite our commitment to both accessing higher education and impacting public policy, we have not been invited; indeed for the most part we have been prohibited, from joining in on these pivotal conversations. As a result our stories go untold in the larger world; they remain missing from the public arena, hidden from popular view, and absent in academe, to our great peril.

We are also five extraordinarily fortunate poor, single mothers. Despite contemporary public and educational policy designed to prohibit us from doing so, we have benefited enormously from access to higher education in an era when most poor women have not. We realize at an intimate level that stories have the power to transform the worldviews of individuals and communities. It is from our positions of liminality as both despised poor single "welfare mothers" and privileged academics that we create, share, and celebrate our own stories of identity and experience through storytelling.

Three years ago, we dedicated ourselves to dismantling and then re-telling our own stories, pushing back against those explanatory narratives that have devalued, and ultimately harmed us, through a nationally touring exhibit entitled *The Missing Story of Ourselves: Poverty and the Promise of Higher Education*. Our installation includes complex, first person views of what poverty and resistance through higher education look like from the inside out. This work allows us to delineate and map our own lives and values as well as to offer insights into larger ethical questions of human value and community. We have responded to the challenge of finding and sharing our own voices and collective identity through "The Missing Story of Ourselves" by speaking together—personally, analytically, theoretically, and creatively—with students in higher education engaged in the process of world and community building, in an effort to assure a crucial plurality and diversity of perspectives and representations.

Five or six times each year we meet with hundreds of college students, faculty, and administrators to share alternative visions of our lives and value to the culture, in a storytelling installation of the same name, that accompanies our narrative and photographic exhibit. We believe that storytelling in higher education is a crucial and productive strategy for transforming private into public meanings. The stories that we share with students emanate from our own experiences in the world; they allow us to consider the potential for resistance inherent in self-conscious acts of narrative reclamation, and to push against widespread, reductive, and popular stories that misrepresent, physically punish, and silence us. We tell ourselves and others stories as if our very lives depended upon it, because indeed, they do.

In telling our stories, higher education becomes a space where our individual experiences and identities are transformed in ways that make them real and

recognizable to students who for the most part have not shared our experiences. Sociologically, our encounters become crossing points, places where we transgress boundaries by working with our student listeners as collaborators. In the process we are able to reinvent ourselves and begin to create a shared, enlarged, and plural view of human experience and meaning. Here storytelling also becomes the locus of social critique, allowing us active agency in the construction of our own meanings and interpretations. At myriad levels, this flux and movement supports the goals of higher education by demonstrating the degree to which identity and experience are culturally mediated and socially situated, simultaneously positioning Truth and Knowledge as relative to where we situate ourselves, and as geographically, culturally, politically, and materially bound.

In telling unexpected and unsettling stories of our lives and of the process and fruits of higher education, and in exposing the operations of ideology through which our value (or lack of) has traditionally been determined and disseminated, we hope to interrupt that closed circuit that would otherwise mark and guarantee our place as "other" in cultural, social, and legal matrixes. The stories and images in our hour-long presentation reframe cultural understandings of poor, single mother scholars for ourselves, and our student listeners, building community while countering ruling interpretations and dominant visions of our lack of value both in and out of academe.

TELLING STORIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the past year we have shared our stories with generous and engaged student audiences at Lafayette College; Meredith College; Williams College; Georgetown University; Sarah Lawrence College; The University of Washington, Seattle; St. Louis University; Columbia University; SUNY Stonybrook; and Hamilton College.[3] On each occasion we have left the comfort of our homes to build a new but uncanny kind of home, fostering the development of a nascent community with subtly altered visions and values. Telling stories to students in academe allows us to render our shared world newly intelligible while challenging students to think from other's lives, de-naturalize, and destabilize social hierarchies, and produce more community-accountable and thus more ethical and inclusive thought. In the process it becomes clear that our stories and the telling of stories in higher education mesh perfectly with the most important goals of a liberal education.

In citing the shared goals of liberal education, The Association of American Colleges and Universities advocates for an experience both in and out of the classroom that empowers students with broad knowledge and transferable skills, and offers a strong sense of values, ethics, and civic engagement. Further,

the AAC& U contends that liberal education "develops intellectual and ethical capacities, expands cultural and societal horizons, and cultivates democratic and global knowledge and engagement, in an effort to produce thoughtful, committed, and socially responsible graduates" (Schneider and Schoenberg, iii).

Carol Geary Schneider and Robert Schoenberg further explain in *Contemporary Understandings of Liberal Education*, that the consensus of these goals across academe, necessarily involves a movement toward pluralistic, collaborative, experiential, and integrative modes of learning (Schneider and Schoenberg, ix). Finally, the goals of critical and analytical thinking at the college level involve recognition that knowledge is always contextually, geographically, culturally, socially, and materially constructed and bound. An exposure to the "knowledge" and experiences of others both models and substantiates this expanding world view as it fosters an awareness of the processes through which dominant knowledge is formed, patrolled, and potentially resisted.

Because our stories are both theoretical and intensely personal they allow us to connect both to those few non-traditional students in our audiences who share and rejoice in the telling of our/their stories, and to the vast majority of traditional students in higher education who have very different experiences and views than those of poor single mothers. Our stories and the images that accompany them are performative, evoking engagement, and interaction with both verbal and non-verbal cues. Reading the contradictions of traditional, mainstream stories of our pathology as they are juxtaposed against our intellectual, verbal, and bodily presences creates a complex understanding of women, poverty, and higher education. On the other hand, we suggest that other mainstream, more privileged, and static verbal and written accounts dangerously reduce the complexity of our experiences and identities to rote, superficial and fungible tropes and repeat simple, reductive, and ubiquitous types.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt adroitly explored the process and potential of storytelling. Specifically interested in the telling of stories of the lives of Holocaust survivors, for Arendt storytelling is never simply a matter of creating either social or personal meaning. Rather, she claims that storytelling is the "subjective in-between process through which multiple, private, idiosyncratic thoughts, and experiences are de-individualized" by being selected and sorted in ways that make them understandable to others. Arendt sees this transformation of the private into the public as crucial to an ethical and enlarged understanding of the world and the lives of others. In her analysis, storytelling is central—physically and conceptually—to the complex process through which humans produce and reproduce meanings and connections to others in the world. For Arendt, storytelling allows us to work with others to facilitate the shaping of individual, personal experience into collectively viable, and discernable forms of knowledge and meaning that are "real and recognizable to others" (182–184).

Contemporary theorist Michael Jackson adds that the "narrative imaginary" of storytelling involves the interplay of intersubjective and intrapsychic discourses that speak to both teller and listener. In other words, "while storytelling makes sociality possible, it is equally vital to the illusory, self-protective, self justifying activity of individual minds" (23). Storytelling mediates relations with experiences and identities that extend beyond us as individuals. In our installation, as storytellers we cross, breach, and blur boundaries that demarcate crucial political and ethical spaces in our everyday lives as we work with student listeners to create a world to which we all belong. For Jackson, this interplay of lives and stories constitute meaning:

> Our lives are stories. Were it not for stories, our lives would be unimaginable. Stories make it possible for us to overcome our separateness, to find common ground, and common cause. Stories enable us to fuse the world within and the world without. In this way we gain some purchase over events that confounded us, humbled us and left us helpless. In telling a story we renew our faith that the world is within our grasp. (245)

Perhaps it is for this reason that both Arendt and Jackson believe that storytelling is particularly suited to the struggle of socially and culturally marginalized individuals and groups. Theorist Shari Stone-Mediatore agrees that the stories of those whose understandings have been "systematically occluded by dominant discursive logic" (and yet who both participate in the dominant culture and are marginalized by it) are particularly and perhaps uniquely suited to the task. She explains that these hybrid narratives have the potential to "throw new light on the structures of historical reality and historical knowledge (9)," open up spaces for alternative identities, "recast identity as heterogeneous, socially conditioned, and strategically located (8)," and provide the insight required to reinterpret and reevaluate the systems that structure our world (11). In addition to exposing the "situated and narrative character" of thinking, stories from the margin offer the possibility of "more historically sensitive, engaged, experience-attentive, community rooted, and innovative storytelling" (Stone Mediatore, 11).

In the final analysis, Stone-Mediatore concludes that scholars and members of the community benefit from engaged-readings of the stories of others, and the activism they inspire. Thinking from and engaging with other's lives, she argues, can allow us to "critically test the prejudices that underlie narrative norms and that are perpetuated by powerful knowledge producing institutions." She adds that, "on-going and serious engagement with such stories is the only way to keep knowledge production accountable to those outside ruling institutions and to sustain democratic communities" (191).

We make these intense human connections with students in higher education committed to expanding their understanding of and commitment to others in an effort to expose contradictions, to reshape shared truths, and to reinforce crucial

critical thinking and analytic skills in an intense and engaged forum. We hope that the passionate articulation of our experience-oriented stories, as Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith say of stories of human rights claims, "unsettle[s] public discourses about the national past, generating public debate, and exposing gaps and fissures" that are not obvious in dominant ideologies and official "objective" productions of knowledge (83). In reflecting the tensions and contradictions of our lived experience we also hope that our stories will "find connection to readers who might acknowledge our claims and eventually engage with the story, the teller" and the telling (Schaffer and Smith, 23).

THE MISSING STORY OF OURSELVES

Arendt begins her analysis of storytelling by noting that every person is both a subject actively participating in the construction of his or her world, and a subject who must suffer as a result of actions that are beyond his or her control (23). Storytelling, she suggests, is a vital human strategy evoked in response to the melancholy generated by this disempowerment; humans share stories with each other to sustain a sense of agency in the face of disenfranchising circumstances and to make human connections and shared meaning. Jackson believes that "to reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within ones own imagination" (248). From the perspective of the storyteller then, the acts of sharing and reclamation are redemptive. Jackson adds:

> Storytelling gives us a sense that although we do not exactly determine the course of our lives we at least have a hand in defining their meaning. . . .stories are[also] redemptive not because they preserve or represent the truth of any individual life, but because they offer the perennial possibility that one see oneself as, and discovers oneself through another, despite the barriers of space, time, and difference. (250)

In making and telling our own stories we rework the narratives, tropes, and allegorical layering of stories of our pathology in order to "make life bearable," to connect to others, and to physically survive (Jackson 16). As I demonstrate in my own story, storytelling crosses and blurs the line between private and public space; at stake are our physical, material lives, and those of our children. The stories we tell are those of experiences of victimization and resistance through access to higher education enacted in and through our own bodies.

Vivyan Adair

I was raised by a poor, single, white mother who had to struggle to keep her four children, fed, sheltered, and clothed by working at a stream of dead end and demeaning jobs. As a child poverty was written onto and into my being at

the level of private and public thought and body. At an early age my body bore witness to and emitted signs of the painful devaluation carved into my flesh; that same devaluation became integral to my being in the world. In spite of my mother's heroic efforts, at an early age my brothers and sister and I were stooped, bore scars that never healed properly, and limped with feet mangled by ill-fitting, used shoes. When my frail four-year-old sister's forehead was split open by a door slammed in frustration, my mother used a small needle and thread to stitch the angry wound together on her own, leaving a story of our poverty on her very forehead. When throughout elementary school we were sent to the office for mandatory and very public yearly checkups, the school nurse sucked air through her teeth as she donned surgical gloves to check only the hair of poor children for lice. We were read as unworthy, dirty, laughable, and dangerous.

Our schoolmates laughed at our crooked and ill-serviced teeth and the way we "stank." Teachers excoriated us for our inability to concentrate in school, our "refusal to come to class prepared with proper school supplies, and our unethical behavior when we tried to take more than our allocated share of "free lunch." Whenever backpacks or library books came up missing, we were publicly interrogated and sent home to "think about our offenses," often accompanied by notes that reminded my mother that as a poor single parent she should be working twice as hard to make up for the discipline that allegedly walked out the door with my father.

Our pain and fear were ameliorated only by my young mother, who would engage us for hours in the evening with stories of her Brooklyn childhood, of our grandparents coming to the United States, of children lost and children saved, of aunts who heroically worked, cared for others, and stood up for themselves against oppressive and greedy bosses. Sitting together on a soft, worn out linoleum floor the color of faded cornflowers, in the evenings she would spin family tales of cleverness, artistry, humor, and resilience that became a part of the fabric of our own resistance.

Those stories sustained me for twenty years. But then, in the spring of 1986, I awoke in a shelter for battered women. I had four missing teeth, a broken clavicle and bruised ribs; in the small cot next to me lay my eight-month-old daughter, still traumatized by the brutalization we had suffered at the hands of her own father. With scant education and family support, few resources, and no job, I had little reason for hope.

That morning we boarded a public bus to find our way to the welfare office where I hoped against hope to secure support with which we might begin to rebuild our life together. As we somberly boarded the bus, passengers recoiled, reacting to my wrinkled, and still vaguely bloodstained clothing, unwashed hair, bruised and deformed face. I am quite sure that even my beloved and beautiful child startled them with her blank and oddly aged gaze. As I held up the line by

silently stumbling to count out my change, the bus driver looked from the infant in my arms down to the worn out shoes I had purchased at the Salvation Army a week before, shook his head, and raised his voice painstakingly enunciating his words. "Don't bother," he shouted, perhaps confusing my tattered footwear and missing teeth for a loss of hearing and/or common sense, "the welfare office is only a few stops away. Sit down and get out of the way."

At the Department of Health and Human Services office, I was met with similar looks of disdain mingled with uneasy pity; only my caseworker was clear and unequivocal. It would take at least two weeks to re-open my case and process my request for assistance; I could not apply for food stamps unless I had a rent receipt in my own name (which of course I did not); and state issued medical coupons would only cover the repair of my one missing front tooth. The others—a bicuspid and two forward molars—he explained with unintended irony, were not considered medically necessary for someone "feeding at the public trough." When I started to cry, he spit out words I will never forget: "I guess you people should think about whose gonna take care of your teeth before you go making babies you can't bother to keep clean."

I was ashamed and humiliated. I became isolated, forlorn and convinced that I was alone in, and responsible for, my suffering. Internalizing these ubiquitous and inescapable stories of my own pathology the space between private body and public sign was collapsed. Continuous, multiple, and often seamless public inscription, punishing policy, and a life of unbearable material lack left me scarred, exhausted, and confused.

Once again, stories came to my aid. My resistance and reorientation were born in the space between self-loathing and my love of and respect for poor women whose bodies collectively told a very different story. I learned that I had value and strength in the throes of political activism. At first I was dragged blindly into such actions, ironically, in a protest for rent control that required, according to the organizer, just so many poor women's bodies. I became caught up in the contradiction between my body's meaning as a despised public sign and my retrieved sense of our shared communal power, knowledge, authority, and beauty.

Beginning to craft a different story of our value in the world enabled me to gather the courage to enroll in college at the age of 33 as a single mother, welfare recipient, and fragile student. While in school I studied, attended classes, worked and cared for my daughter; I worked outside of college, received minimal AFDC (welfare) grants, food stamps and Medicaid; on a regular basis I sold my plasma and engaged in paid medical experiments to pay rent and buy books; and I learned and grew. Little by little the larger social, creative, political, and material world exposed itself to me in ways that were resonant and urgent, inviting me to analyze, negotiate, articulate, and reframe systems, histories, and pathways that had previously seemed inaccessible. I began to envision myself in

a new horizon with a world of possibilities awaiting me and to share a new story of my life with myself and others in the world. The process was invigorating, restorative, and life altering for both me and my child. (Adair, 2004)

These then are stories of physical loss, deprivation, pain, and of an emerging and active resistance. When students listen to our stories they experience them at the level of the discursive and the physical, experiencing physical intimacy and intense emotion, as "phatic communion that challenges logo-centric notions of meaning" (Jackson, 28). Perhaps as a result, in our storytelling events, there is a softening and dilation of the boundary between the private space of the storytellers and the public space that normally guards and isolates listeners in academe. Students in our audience move close to one another. Sometimes they physically reach out, laughing, and crying together. Students surround and often embrace us at the end of the session. Jackson sees this energy as an "existential tension" that structures storytelling as an "intersubjective encounter; a tension between[college students] being for oneself and being for another." (28)

The very act of telling our stories to college students is transformative for us. In recovering our freedom to speak and act we begin to redress imbalances in power and concomitant injustices. As Jackson notes "in telling a story with others one reclaims some semblance of agency, recovers some sense of purpose, and comes to feel that the events that overwhelmed one from without may be brought within one's grasp" (36). He adds, "In comparing notes, exchanging views, and sharing stories, the sufferer is no longer condemned to singularity and silence and the burden of shame or guilt that was the intra-psychic price paid for one's isolation, is lifted" (59). Constructing and sharing our stories together is central to the recovery of our own senses of agency and humanity. Stories like Paulette Brown's are redemptive not because they present a "truer" or even a more accurate version of the lives of poor women, but because the act of telling and being affirmed in her story allows her to move through a porous boundary from a narrative of immobilization, frustration and reduction to one of agency, self determination, power and voice.

Paulette Brown

For years I understood and felt the gap between my own life and the ways in which I was constructed and devalued as an African American woman. As a child I was raised by poor, but loving and dedicated parents who instilled in me a great amount of self-worth. And yet, as an African American child, I was often looked down upon and devalued. Many times teachers and people with authority over my life held tightly to a very different story of who I was, making all sorts of assumptions based on stereotypes about my lack of value in the world.

My ability to think critically about competing stories began early in life. My father, a minister who had marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, was deeply committed to civil rights and tried to counter the racist images and stories in which we were embedded. Through histories and anecdotes of our family, played out at the kitchen table each evening, he taught me to think differently about my value as an African American child, as a thinker, and as a deserving citizen. I remember him reading sections from the book Black Voices, *and reminding me that* this *was our story. That I should never believe the publicly shared racist stories of chaos, immorality, and danger that were used to hurt, demoralize, and control our people.*

I took these stories to heart, as I became a mother, continuing on with the tradition of offering my sons a counter vision of our ethics, lives, and value. In 1996, I was working at two jobs, in an effort to care for, feed, clothe, support, and nurture my young family. At times I worked 45–60 hr per week. I was also a concerned and engaged parent and citizen, doing my best to attend parent teacher forums, organizing fund raisers for my own, and other low-income children, helping my sons with their homework and trying to provide them with important models for living and developing their own senses of identity and self-esteem. I worked, cleaned, cooked, cared, learned, and volunteered to the point of exhaustion.

Then at the age of 41, I suffered a heart attack. I had no savings, no medical insurance, and no job security. Only then did my children and I become dependent upon social services. It seemed as though I had been consumed by the public story that claimed that I was a danger to our culture and I felt as though I had no pathway, no future, no story of dignity left, with which to push back. Life looked very bleak.

Yet, to draw on a cliché, sometimes what looks like devastation ends up being a blessing in disguise. I refused to give up and instead came to understand that a college education was exactly what I wanted, needed, and would somehow secure. Refusing the stories that surrounded and diminished me, I drew deep into a reservoir of strength bequeathed to me by my parents, and entered college in the fall of 2003. In the process I began to see myself in a new story, drawing on an intergenerational sense of my capability and worth. In class, I was supported in re-claiming and proudly sharing my own story, missing so long from other versions of what it means to be an integral member of a community at the turn of the millennium.

As a result, today, despite my heart attack, I am on a new pathway. Every day as a college student I learn new skills, am exposed to new knowledge and ways of thinking, and most important, I am creating a new vision, hope, and story with energy and commitment. Access to higher education has complicated my story and provided me with a finely nuanced understanding of the relationship between stories that mark me as "Other" and my own truths

that push against larger narratives in a contest that determines our very survival.

Looking at the world and at stories critically and pushing against others' "Truths" allows me to understand the replication of power, structures of oppression and privilege, and the potential for change and growth. By engaging in critical, analytical, and creative thought I have begun to question, to think against the grain, to offer my own perspective and analysis; in other words to come to voice.

Today, I am telling my own story and I am speaking publicly so that my story can push against and maybe even counteract those larger stories that misrepresent me and my people. This process gives us the opportunity to re-claim our own lives of dignity, hard work, love, and ethics for ourselves and our loved ones; to write our own futures of strength, security and hope; and to forward our being in the world by beginning to tell the missing story of ourselves, with voices that are clear, powerful, and unafraid as they doggedly press for a hearing. (Paulette Brown, 2004)

When we carefully, provocatively share stories of our pain, anomie and brutalization and of our growth, fulfillment and newly found hope through higher education, student listeners come to engage with and experience our lives both through our words and as they are read from our very bodies. Stone-Mediatore describes the process as one through which listeners are invited into a world where "data has moral and emotional impact and in which a[new] set of options can be envisioned" (4). This is an intimate, powerful, and compelling experience of transference that, at least momentarily, physically, intellectually, and emotionally makes the student storyteller's story the student listener's own.

As Martha Nussbaum points out, competing performances of stories address listeners by invoking "play back and forth between the general and the concrete and allow them to inhabit the world of the other, to make the audience share the experience, to feel from the inside what it is like to be that" (123). Legal theorist Richard Delgado sees this physical and intellectual interplay as a deliberative process that stories solicit in order to produce "an oscillation between worlds:[the listener] moves back and forth between two worlds, the storyteller's, which the reader occupies vicariously to the extent the story is well told and rings true, and his or her own." When "his or her own" story has been constructed primarily through a dominant ideology, a disjunction occurs that causes the story listener to return to and reevaluate both the product and the process of ideology (Delgado, 2435). Ana Louise Keating describes this engagement in "to and fro movements between multiple worlds" as having the potential to illuminate all pre-existing identities, causing "crisis points where conflicting values, ideas, and beliefs converge, unsettling fixed categories of meaning" (3).

In our installation storytellers like Nolita Clark, who are bodily both similar to the students in our audience, and yet experientially a world apart, recount the

traces and remains of past experience. In drawing from and re-presenting her life through a narrative of the present, Nolita creates a story that helps student contemporaries consider the significance of phenomena that had remained unspoken and untheorized. As Stone-Meditore suggests;

> Such storytelling counters reductive, prejudicial thinking, not by presenting certain truths but by turning our attention to the difficult to understand, overlooked elements of our heritage, thus grounding political thinking in historical reality while highlighting the plurality, complexity, and unpredictability of the reality. Unlike claims to objective knowledge [Nolita's story] encourages a community's creative reckoning with its past and continual public exchange of stories. (127)

Nolita Clark

From a very early age, I was constructed and resisted numbers of opposing stories that have both shaped and denied my experiences in life. Studying philosophy, critical theory, and identity has enabled me to understand and push back by using language as a tool of deconstruction as well as one of self-affirmation. His rupture between lived experience and those stories others construct of us began very early in life for me. When I was two years old, I was introduced to the world of violence, abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction of my parents. My first memory of my mother was that she was drunk and broke my arm; the second was when I was so badly beaten that I was knocked unconscious. As I went to sleep, I wondered how long I would be able to survive in this world. In order to survive, even at that early age, I had to construct and comfort myself with stories of my own value and being in the world.

When my mother and I were reunited after many years, I realized that she was an alcoholic and that she would probably always be. I left home for a life of my own, but soon began to deal with my devaluation in the larger world. In May, 2000, I found out that I was pregnant, which changed me in very important ways. The cultural text of my devaluation, as written and read through public policy and welfare reform, suggests that my being a young, unmarried, and pregnant woman of color, would mark me as being a problem, illegal, immoral, or pathological. Yet the truth of my pregnancy was that it changed my life in remarkable and positive ways.

While I was pregnant I worked and went to school to earn my general education degree in a program for Native Americans. I choose a Native American school because my mother is a member of the Pottawatamie Prairie Band. When I was around other natives I felt closeness to them, as if we were fighting many of the same struggles in life. Together we created and shared our own stories born of our own experiences and not borrowed from the political agendas of

those who simply wanted to protect and increase their own power over us in the world.

I was pregnant while earning my G.E.D. I was also fighting against the stereotypes that threatened to doom my daughter and I before she was ever born. I did not want to become the bad teen mother of the narratives that surrounded me, nor did I want to turn out like my own mother, who was also very young when she became the mother of four. I wanted to script a future of hope, dignity, security, love, and fulfillment.

In January, 2001, I gave birth to a healthy baby girl and received my G.E.D. Contrary to notions about selfish and unprepared teens giving birth to uncared for babies, with my daughter's birth everything became increasingly clearer and better in my life. My beautiful daughter who is now five is caring, energetic, and a delight to be with. She is smart, respectful, and destined for success and happiness. My daughter loves me very much and looks up to me to provide her with the love and guidance she needs to be successful in life.

I realize that I owe my daughter the best that I can provide and want more than anything else in the world to be a successful, loving mother, and a strong and positive role model. The life I had growing up was full of hardships and struggle, and the fear that my daughter might have to experience the things I did at her age motivates me to get up every morning and continue on the pathway I began a few years ago. In contrast to the stories that we always hear about, becoming an unmarried teenaged mother was a positive and life enhancing experience. I share stories of self-worth, determination, fulfillment, responsibility, a connection to community and love with my young daughter on a daily basis. They are my legacy to her.

My love of and commitment to my child provided me with the vision and strength I needed to enroll in college over four years ago. This June, I graduated from Hamilton College with a degree in Philosophy. Standing proudly by my side was my wonderful and beloved daughter Marlena. I am currently working full-time and preparing for law school. The story I tell in "The Missing Story of Ourselves," and that I share here today with you, attests to the power of education that allows profoundly poor women like us to become engaged and capable communicators, lifetime learners, productive parents, and members of the community who can write and share their own stories of dignity, love, hard-work, commitment and success. (Clark, 2004)

Storytelling then is crucial to the process of re-empowerment for both the teller and the student listener. The process can work to resist and transfigure immobilization, reduction, and self-erasure; and to connect to others producing enlarged understandings of self and other in the world. Constructing, relating, and sharing stories is redemptive because it offers the possibility that we can discover and see ourselves through the stories of others despite "barriers of space, time, and difference" (Jackson, 250). Storytelling that exposes unofficial stories

of resistance can bridge a gap between individual experience and those who have no direct knowledge of the experience. In putting themselves in the place of others and displacing themselves from their customary habitus, students are able to change horizons and embrace unsettling perspectives. Storytelling may not provide them with a means of changing the world, but it does allow students an opportunity to experience a re-imagining of it. Stories like Rose Perez-Cotrich's are particularly transformative because of the violence and trauma she and her loved ones have experienced and attempted to re-narrativize through storytelling in their lives.

Rose Perez-Cotrich

I come from a family of five children. We were raised in the Bronx by a single mother who is fluent and accomplished in Spanish, but doesn't speak English very well and struggled to provide for us. Years later, I too became a single mother trying to provide for my son on my own. This is all some people would need to know about us. My mother and I would be judged and fit into a story that is told again and again in our culture. This is a story of illegal and immoral poor mothers and children. Of families destined for trouble, for prison. Of lives filled with laziness, selfishness, and stupidity. You all know the story. We have all heard it far too many times.

Yet this was *not and* is *not our story. My mother worked harder than anyone I have ever met to support us. She was stuck in dead-end and very low-wage manual labor jobs her whole life. When we looked into her face we read a very different story than the one being told over and over again in our culture. The story she told us was one of our heritage. Our strength. Our dignity and our worth. That story has sustained me against abusive powerful political stories for years.*

I promised I would do the same for my child. On April 19, 1994, I gave birth to a beautiful healthy baby boy I named Anthony. To me Anthony was a gift. We were ready to face life's challenges together. But to the welfare workers I turned to for help he was "illegitimate." The child of worthless people. To the case worker who was assigned to "investigate" my case, Anthony was a proof that I was immoral and illegal.

This case worker questioned me about the most intimate details of my son's conception. He reminded me that I gave up my right to privacy when I chose to become what he called a "burden on the state." He judged and dismissed me, lecturing that I must work full-time, so that we would not become "generational freeloaders." In order to receive help I was forced to become what the case worker considered a better mother. I had to go to work-full time at a minimum wage. At that wage I could not afford childcare. So the story of our lives took a dramatic turn for the worse.

I tried to squeeze into the state's version of a success story of "independence." I worked full-time. With no funds, I was forced to ask a male acquaintance, who was unemployed to baby-sit in exchange for a place to live. One day, annoyed at my child's normal two-year old behavior, this man snapped. He beat my child. Trying to cover up the bruises, he put my baby into a bath filled with scalding water. Anthony received third-degree burns to his lower legs and feet. He has been permanently scarred since that moment. Each year at the Shriner's hospital in Boston, he has to have painful surgeries and skin grafts. The monster that did this to my son will spend the next twenty-five years of his life in jail. Yet the welfare office continued to judge, regulate, and punish us.

Even though I was at work during that time, I was blamed for my son's abuse. While he was in agony in the Intensive Care burn unit, I was interrogated about the details of my son's abuse. Because I was a poor single parent, it was assumed that I had abused my own child. Even when it was determined who had committed this crime I was accused of not providing sufficient care for my baby. They said I put my own needs before his. That I was irresponsible for having a child without the protection of a "legal" father. The state threatened to take the child I loved, and my reason for living, away from me.

Today my son is eleven years old. He has undergone over a dozen painful surgeries to stretch his skin so that his bones can grow. He is a wonderful, intelligent, and loving young man. Everyday we work to rewrite our stories of victimization. Today while he is growing up, I am a student earning a degree in criminal justice. I also work full-time in a shelter for battered women. I am a residential coordinator helping abused women and children to survive. I help them to understand that they are not to be blamed for the violence they have suffered. I teach them to overcome their pain and to reclaim dignity and respect. Together we work against mainstream stories by creating and sharing our own stories as good and worthy mothers and people.

My story is painful to tell. I tell it to let others know that poor women care about and love their children and benefit from education. In pushing back and telling a different story in "The Missing Story of Ourselves," I want to show those with power that we are human beings with complex lives. I want to convince you students that policy decisions should be based on discussions of the difficulties and obstacles that we know so well and not on simple stories made up to punish and control us. If my story can change the mind of one future policy maker, law maker or voter or give support to one frightened, hurt, and silenced woman (as it has to me) then the effort has been more than worthwhile. (Perez-Cotrich, 2004)

When Rose re-presents the traumatic events of her life, she subverts—and models the subversion of—the power the original trauma holds to determine her experience, to name, and claim her. Violence and trauma like Rose's reduces humans to the status of isolated victim and silent, damaged object. Against a

reduction to nothingness, shame and lack, constructing and telling stories of the times through which one has survived is, according to Jackson, "to rehearse the contrast, slight as it may seem, between then and now, to clarify and bear witness to what one has salvaged and retrieved (101)." Although heart wrenching, the process begins to return power to Rose.

Without the salvation of telling our own stories to others and without listening to one another's stories, we are unable to come to terms with the social and political power that has had such a devastating impact on our lives and those of the children we love. Without the power of storytelling, we remain separate from each other and from our selves, failing to find and take comfort in our common ground and connection. Without stories, we remain invisible and mute, destined to long endlessly for the missing story of ourselves, knowing that nothing less will suffice. Shannon Stanfield captures this potential for connection and Arendt's sense of the processes through which storytelling allows human beings to produce and reproduce themselves in the world through the interplay of lives and stories.

Shannon Stanfield

I did not—I could not—see her, but I have always sensed her presence. She was a companionless apparition—invisible to me—and evidently invisible to others. I sensed her, though, when I unshackled my imagination. I sensed her when I decorated cupcakes for my children's birthday parties and when I painted my children's bedrooms.

I sensed her when I made beautiful window treatments out of sheets, and decorative pillows out of small fragments of used fabric. I sensed her when I sat with my daughter and colored rainbows with crayons, and when my children and I sculpted clay characters. I sensed her when I planted my first flower garden and while gazing at a thousand stars in the early summer's night sky, trying to capture my connection to this universe. Sometimes she frightened me. I knew that if I acknowledged her, if I entertained her, my life would change. I was afraid of such a disruption. For many years I doubted her power, casting her aside; I almost left her for dead.

This woman, she would call to me. Sometimes she called to me just to remind me that she was still there. Other times she screamed, cried, and hollered for my attention. Even through I heard her, I still could not see her. When I scrubbed other people's bathrooms for money, she told me she felt wasted, and useless. When he hit me, she cried and told me she was suffocating. When I stayed with him, she whispered from the darkness that I was killing her.

During that time I could not acknowledge her; it was too painful. She went away for a long time. For six years she lay dormant. At times I wondered if she was even alive. I was alone when I sensed her again. I was painting a sign for

a local charity event—a fundraiser—when she returned. In her quiet trembling voice she asked me if I remembered her. With each stroke of my brush, her voice grew louder and clearer. I welcomed her. I missed her. She said she could help me. She said she could deliver me, and the children to a new life; a place where I could protect and provide for them. She said all I had to do was believe in her, and take the first step.

I took my children, and we climbed the stonewalls, built by hopelessness and helplessness. The woman kept her promise and with my return to college her identity and purpose in my life grew clearer and clearer. Not only did my belief in her deliver me and my children from static, uncertain, and violent future, but I now walk every day in a place where hope abounds and opportunities rain down on my face. With them I wash away the stains of my past, and the new sun casts brilliant light on my new path, and brings a rainbow of possibilities. On my path, and for the first time in my life, I cannot only sense and hear the woman; I can see her. I can reach her. This woman is the woman in me—she is my potential. Slowly we are emerging as one to reshape and stabilize my family's, and my own life through knowledge, self respect, and fulfillment (Stanfield, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Our goal then, initially, was simply to tell our own stories, to replace stories that hurt and marginalized us with more positive, complex, and "authentic" stories. Calling on the early feminist tradition of embracing and performing stories of personal experience that have been eclipsed in canonical productions of knowledge and power, we wanted to tell our stories that were simultaneously personal and political, as radical alternatives to master narratives and to claims of objectivity.

On the journey, we realized that telling our stories in higher education transforms our lives and those of our student collaborators in enabling us to "take us out of ourselves" (Arendt, 45). Storytelling with students whose experiences differ radically from our own allows us as a group to reshape personal experience into vivid and fungible collective forms of meaning and knowledge. Through our bodies and our words we are able to merge individual and general subjectivities fashioning what Jackson refers to as a "singular universal." It is in this intersubjective space that a shift moves us from personal story to shared history, and a political story begins to emerge that impacts each of our understandings of ourselves and our places in our shared world. In bridging the gap between private and public story we are able to participate in the construction of our own social meanings, identities and beliefs; without the hope of that power, we are reduced to debilitating anomie.

In employing a hermeneutics of "thinking from other's lives" along with our student audience, we begin to cultivate the kind of receptive and self-transforming

engagement that sophisticated critical and analytical thinking demands. When we engage—even briefly—with the lives, experiences, and identities of others who are different from us, our worldview opens up. In Kuhn's sense we experience a paradigm shift, engaging in "imaginative leaps, acts of re-description that frame the world in compelling new ways" (Felski, 227). We come to recognize that ours is only one of many possible interpretive frameworks while understanding the value of taking responsibility for the implication and accountability of our own storytelling in the world.

Finally, telling our own stories reminds us that we are connected and indebted to others who have also been silenced. We hope that by telling our stories in venues of power and authority we will expose this system of exclusion and call for an opening up of spaces where other marginalized women might articulate and theorize their own stories of identity and experience both in and out of academe. We are forever grateful for the opportunities we have been given, but remain frustrated that so many others—and certainly the one who is needy among us—are never allowed to even attempt to re-write their own stories through the pathway of higher education. We will continue to share our stories in educational settings as though our lives and the futures of our children depended upon it, and we are grateful to our allies and colleagues for supporting our efforts to speak and to begin to tell "the missing story of ourselves."

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NOTES

[1]We are grateful to Professor Priscilla Murolo, an extraordinary feminist historian and the Director of the Graduate Program in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College, who first invited us to share our stories at the 7th Annual Women's History Conference, entitled "Women's Stories, Women's Lives: Making Sense of Experience" (March 2005, on the Sarah Lawrence College campus).

[2]The ACCESS Project at Hamilton College is an educational, social service, and career program that assists profoundly low-income, single parents in central New York in their efforts to move from welfare and low-wage work to fulfilling and secure career employment through the pathway of higher education.

[3]*The Missing Story of Ourselves* exhibit and storytelling installation has been hosted by The University of Houston-DT, Herkimer County Community College, Lafayette College, Metropolitan College, St. Louis University, Williams College, North Seattle Community College, University of Washington-Seattle, The New York State Legislature, Meredith College, Georgetown University, Sarah Lawrence College, Hamilton College, The University of Puget Sound; Columbia University; Pacific Lutheran University; SUNY Stony Brook and the NWSA Conference, and is scheduled to visit Skidmore College, Rochester Institute of Technology, Colgate University, Lemoyne College, Syracuse University, SUNY-New Paltz, Smith College, University of Massachusetts-Boston, University of Washington-Tacoma, Utica College, Iowa State University, Swarthmore College, and SUNY-Alfred. For information please call us at 315-859-4292 or visit www.ACCESS Project/Hamilton College/edu

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