

The Storyteller Project: Introduction

Robin M. Boylorn

When Rachel Raimist and I conceived of the storyteller project it was an opportunity to connect the two things we were most interested in as feminists, colleagues, and friends: stories and women of color. As a writer and autoethnographer, my work has always centered and concentrated on the lived experiences of black women, particularly those in the south (Boylorn, 2017), and as a filmmaker and feminist scholar (turned TV director), Rachel's work, including her award-winning film *Nobody Knows My Name* (1999) has focused on uncovering and amplifying the lost or unheard stories of women, incarcerated men, and other marginalized voices.

We discussed the possibility of collaborating together for years, but the timing had never been right. First, tenure pursuits swallowed most of our free time, and Rachel was raising two children as a single mother. Then sabbaticals, semesters at sea, cross-country summers in LA, selling and buying a new home and other life recalibrations postponed our plans. In the spring of 2018, a casual conversation about goals for the next year, and a repeat email announcement about a college funding opportunity sparked an idea. I wanted to do a workshop for women of color to help them tell their stories. Rachel wanted to offer a primer in digital

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storytelling to teach women how to tell their stories using technology and digital media literacy. I was intimidated about collapsing a technological component to storytelling, but I was also intrigued. Rachel convinced me that bridging our ideas would yield a powerful project. We were qualified. She had successfully facilitated digital storytelling workshops before, and taught classes on it; I had written a book that was a compilation of black women's stories, and taught a class by the same name. Still I was unsure since I was a storyteller, but not a digital one.

We wrote a proposal, brainstormed names for the collaboration, and requested, then received college funding. Our next step was to create a logo and flyer to help us promote the workshop. We contracted Ashley Williams, a recent UA graduate and graphic designer, to do so. We began to promote "The Storyteller Project: Digital Storytelling for Women of Color" in the summer of 2018. Our goal was to hold the workshop the weekend before classes started, and before Alabama football kicked off. The workshop was originally scheduled for August 17-19.

**THE STORYTELLER PROJECT:
DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR
WOMEN OF COLOR**

**AUGUST 17-19, 2018
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, TUSCALOOSA**

WHAT THIS IS:
A three day intensive workshop on how to conjure stories within a frame of social justice. You will use materials prepared in advance, including photographs, letters, memories, etc. to write and digitize your story in a supportive, creative, and collaborative writing environment where tools of media technology will be made accessible through workshops, roundtables, and tutorials.

WHAT WE WILL DO:
Digital Storytelling: We will create short form stories that use writing, voice-over narration, images, artwork, and video edited into a five-minute story. Digital storytelling is a way for all people, regardless of technical skill or media literacy, to use digital media to amplify their voices, tell stories, and share them.

**WHO WE ARE:
AWARD-WINNING STORYTELLERS AND MEMBERS OF THE CRUNK FEMINIST COLLECTIVE**

DR. RACHEL RAIMIST
a filmmaker who believes in the power of a story to inspire, inform, impact and transform people, places and communities. Recently, she directed an episode of the award-winning OWN network series, *Queen Sugar*, which marked her directorial debut for television. She is an associate professor of media production in the Department of Journalism and Creative Media at the University of Alabama.

DR. ROBIN M. BOYLORN
an autoethnographer who writes about topics that are relevant and resonant to women of color. She has written about black womanhood for outlets including *Ebony*, *The Guardian*, *Salon*, and *State Magazine*. She is an associate professor of interpersonal and intercultural communication in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Alabama.

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APPLY:

When I told Veralyn Williams (a podcast producer and journalist based in New York with whom I had co-hosted a special series for the now defunct Represent podcast for *Slate*, and who had since become one of my closest sister-friends) about the project she was excited because she is also passionate about black women and storytelling. She offered, without me having to ask, to contribute to the workshop remotely, and I invited her to do a lunch and learn session on the second day to talk to the women about finding their voice.

Rachel and I were overwhelmed by the interest in the workshop, and received almost 50 applications from women of color all over the US and Canada. While we had originally planned to accommodate 10 women, we underestimated the number of applications we would receive, and how many compelling stories were waiting to be told. We sent out a few notifications, mostly to out of state participants to determine their interest and availability in participating given the cost, and began planning the logistics of the workshop.

Then, something amazing and unexpected happened for Rachel. She had recently directed an episode of *Queen Sugar* on the OWN television network, her television directorial debut, and it had opened the door for more opportunities for her to pursue her dream of directing on a larger scale. About a month before the workshop was scheduled, she informed me that she would not be able to attend on the advertised dates because of a work conflict that would have her out of town. She was also unable to commit to a future date because she had decided to relocate to Los Angeles.

I panicked because I didn't feel capable of moderating the workshop myself. While I am confident I can facilitate a storytelling workshop, the digital part had me stumped. I am, as Erykah Badu would say, "an analog girl in a digital world." I prefer face to face encounters over facetime, I handwrite things before I type them, and I keep a small spiral notebook and ink pen in my everyday bag so I can write down my ideas and take notes. While I had told and published dozens of stories, I had never even considered doing a digital story.

In addition to co-facilitating the workshop, I had been looking forward to "learning" how to translate my own stories digitally. I was interested in digital storytelling because it would not only preserve stories and give literal "voice" to them, but it would make them more accessible to a larger audience. I felt ill-equipped and fraudulent as someone who could singularly offer what we had promised. How could I deliver the workshop we promoted? Would it have to be canceled altogether? Would participants feel deceived if one of the facilitators was not present? I also worried that the participants signed up because of their interest in working with Rachel, a filmmaker and now television director, not me, an old school writer and storyteller. I was committed to moving forward with the workshop, but was clear I would not be able to do it alone.

In a tear-filled message to Veralyn, I shared my insecurities and fear of failure and disappointment in things not going as originally planned. Not only did I have

13 women who had paid a registration fee and made travel arrangements to attend a workshop on digital storytelling, but I had received funding for the project, and money had already been spent on graphic design, t-shirts, swag, and workshop materials. I reached out to Veralyn, half to cry, and half to ask if she knew someone in the region who would be available to help me. I told her I would petition for more funds to cover a modest honorarium. While I could have solicited the help of a colleague in my college, I felt it was important that the workshop be facilitated by women of color, and I knew Veralyn knew women of color doing similar work.

I never imagined or expected Veralyn would respond with an offer to come herself. She asked me to send the new dates, and said she would confirm her availability. Having recently started a new job, the generosity of her offer was not lost on me. I had rescheduled the workshop for October 5-7, which was the weekend before Indigenous Peoples' Day. Veralyn confirmed that she would have the Monday off to travel back home, but she would not be able to attend the first day of the workshop, which was on a Friday, because she could not miss work. I booked her flight, which would get to Birmingham at 10PM on Friday night, and we planned for her to facilitate day 2, which would be dedicated to recording and editing, and then she would be there on day 3 to help oversee the screening. All she asked in return was that I cover her flight and meals, and take her to Montgomery on Monday before her flight to visit the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace & Justice. Veralyn, who was already slated to do a session of the workshop, was my missing puzzle piece to make the collaboration work in Rachel's physical absence, and I could not think of anyone I would rather do it with. And while Rachel could not be at the workshop in person, she agreed to facilitate the lunch and learn session from Los Angeles that we had originally assigned to Veralyn.

In advance of the workshop, Rachel and I had anticipated the possibility of a research study stemming from our project, so I had submitted an IRB application to the university to get permission to conduct interviews, and requested a graduate student assistant for the fall semester who could help organize the data. When the workshop date changed, Oluwadamilola (Lola) Olabisi, my graduate assistant, became involved with the planning and logistics for the workshop, and would be present to assist with the day to day, and minute by minute agenda during the event (Lola's reflection on her experience with the workshop is included in this issue: "Digital Storytelling and Private Disclosure: From the Perspective of An Outsider Within").

I felt my role and responsibility on the first day was to get everyone acquainted and to create an atmosphere that would help the women think about the stories they wanted to tell, the stories they needed to tell, and the stories they felt ready to tell. Like a midwife, I intended to lovingly guide them through the uncertainty, pain, and discomfort of birthing their stories. We began by borrowing

from the voices of black women writers and storytellers we brought with us in the room. After initial introductions and explanations about what had brought us together, each woman shared storied excerpts I had asked them to bring with them written by a woman of color. Some women read passages from poems, novels, and self-help books, while others shared song lyrics, bible verses, and diary entries. I read the eulogy I had recently written for my grandmother's funeral.

Thirteen days before thirteen women would be arriving for the workshop, my grandmother died in North Carolina from complications related to diabetes. Her death was both expected and unanticipated. I received the phone call in the morning on Monday, September 24, and drove home overnight to help plan a funeral. I knew that my deep-seated grief had to be postponed, put off, so that I could do the work of preparation for both the funeral and the workshop. The following Monday I returned to Alabama with my mother, who I had asked to join me for a week-long visit. Four days later I cried out loud for the first time as I re-read the words I had spoken over my grandmother's casket.

As a moderator and facilitator for the workshop I had not planned to share an excerpt, because the time and space belonged to the participants, but I felt it was important that they understand the context of my presence. I wanted them to know that if I started crying over the weekend, it wasn't them, it was my recent loss. I also wanted them to know that I valued their time, commitment, and investment in telling their own stories, because it was one of the many ways I could show tribute to my grandmother's legacy.

The women embraced me and each other in a way I would not have expected from women who had only known each other for two hours, but our confessions, testimonies, and transparency transformed the space we were in into something special—something magical. The women shared sacred things they later confessed as secrets even people close to them did not know. Through that sharing there were confirmations, affirmations and me toos, knowing eyes, nodding heads, and held hands. It was a powerful co-created space we cultivated, perfect for storytelling.

After lunch and some thinking, bonding and writing activities the women were released for several hours to begin writing the stories instigated by our questions. When we returned to form a story circle before ending the first day some of the women confessed discomfort that I was asking them to write their own story, and not someone else's. However, despite their initial intention to tell someone else's story, they eased into their autobiographical narratives as we went around the room sharing the themes and thread-throughs of the stories they were writing. As I hoped, and suspected, each woman's story resonated, instigating and inspiring the next. Their homework was to use their shared writing prompts to finish a first draft, and to finish listening to Jill Chenault's story on a podcast Veralyn had produced for Panoply's Family Ghosts series called "Spirit

of Vengeance," which was an example of what a black woman telling her family story sounded like.

When I picked Veralyn up from the airport that night she asked how the first day went, and all I knew to say was, "It was really good." Already I felt myself healing.



On the second day of the workshop, most of the participants arrived to the venue before I did wearing shirts that read, "Cite Black Women" and "Black Girl Magic," inspired by the shirt I had worn on the first day that read, "This is What A Crunk Feminist Looks Like." We gathered around a continental breakfast like old friends, and the women greeted Veralyn with brief re-introductions. She smiled at the way they were already so familiar with each other, and immediately felt connected to them herself.

We assembled in a classroom where Veralyn led morning sessions on what counts as a digital story and finding their voice. Then Rachel gave a live lecture during the lunch hour called "Digital Power: Our Voices, Our Stories," where she talked about how to put stories together by figuring out what pieces are most important, and what parts can be left out. The digital stories the storyteller participants were completing would include both visual and/or oral stories.

The women had been invited to bring artifacts with them to the workshop, tangible things like photographs, newspaper clippings, and letters that would help them tell their story and decide which "type" of digital story felt most close to the story they were trying to tell. The artifacts offered context, but also helped them remember, pulling and piecing their stories together for an unfamiliar audience. After lunch the women returned to the computer room for a narration tutorial and the first of two editing sessions. Women scattered around the building, and outside to think through their stories and start recording their written text into phone or audio recorders. I unlocked locked classrooms so that women could find privacy and quiet to listen to their own stories in their own words for the first time. I worked one on one with them, listening as they either recited, read, or played what had already been recorded. I offered feedback and advice, and while Veralyn and Lola (assisted by Delilah, our tech genius storyteller-participant) tended to their technological needs (Delilah even helped the women create microphones out of paper cups to erase noise and feedback as they recorded), I went over scripts and helped edit them for clarity and length. I found myself anxious for the final screening, and with their permission, I invited my mother to attend on the last night.

¹ <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/panoply/family-ghosts/e/53874013>



On any Sunday morning in Reese Phifer Hall on the campus of the University of Alabama you can hear a pin drop, and the final day of our workshop was no different. The women spent most of our last day together wearing headphones and staring at computer screens as they completed the final touches on their personal stories. By then every woman had agreed, preliminarily, to be interviewed and have an edited (or unedited) version of their story included in this special issue of *Liminalities*. And by then they were within hours of consolidating their stories into five-minute vignettes. It was serious business, and as I surveyed the computer room hours before our scheduled screening the focused intent in their eyes, locked on the words and images that filled their screens, demonstrated their awareness that their stories mattered, and that their sisters' stories mattered too.

The digital stories they were creating didn't have to be perfect. We mainly wanted to demonstrate for them what they could do with their story and the basic technology they already had available to them. We had dinner together, reminisced on a weekend that felt like a lifetime, and celebrated the ways we made literal and emotional space for each other. There were tears, there was laughter, there was admiration, solemn silence, and solitude before, during, and after every story presentation.

The culmination of the workshop, and collection of these stories in this venue was, and is, a black woman offering, literal pieces and excerpts of life stories that are transformative, powerful and memorable. The stories, and the workshop, asked and answered the question: what happens when black women are empowered to center themselves and their stories? The stories told in this issue echo themes of resilience, survival, sacrifice, grief and loss, trauma, intimate partner violence, racism, misogyny, depression, imagination, embodiment, self-love, recovery and poetry. When black women are allowed to tell their truth without shame, embarrassment or judgment, when they are given the resources to reflexively and retroactively make sense of their lived experience, when they are allowed to consider their circumstances within the context of racialized and sexist oppression, when they are supported and affirmed in the process and encouraged to bring their whole selves in the room, *in the story*, black women "get free" (see Veralyn Williams' article, "When Free Black Women Grab the Mic," in this issue).

When I asked the women to share their stories in this special issue, they were all interested but not all of them had the time or opportunity to do the revisions they felt would be necessary for inclusion. Some of the stories are exactly what we saw and experienced on that first night, others have been revised, edited and/or re-imagined with the help of Veralyn and Rachel, and still others are not included here, but have been personally shared with their partners, families or

communities. Fourteen women were invited to participate in The Storyteller Project. Out of that fourteen, thirteen women attended. Out of that thirteen, eleven stories are included here.



Story Abstracts

Tracy Dorsey, *The Woman Who Raised Me*. The old saying goes, "Like mother, like daughter." This simple explanation does very little to explain the complexities of the relationship that exists—or doesn't exist—between a mother and her daughter. *The Woman Who Raised Me* is a story of one such relationship. A woman looks back and gives a glimpse into her life as a little girl. A little girl who was given birth to by one woman but given life to by another. Sarah, her mother, pours all of the love she has into the baby she chose to raise. When the little girl is nine years old, her world is turned on its axis when Sarah unexpectedly dies; leaving behind unanswered questions, behavior regret, and a heart void of lifelong proportions.

Allison Upshaw, *Mama and Me Chronicles, Part I*. This story introduces Dr. Allison Upshaw and her mother, Alice Upshaw. In it she braids a critical performance of Black womanhood through the strands of being an autoethnographer of her history, daughter to her aging mother, and caretaker of the family's land. Their storied lives reflect only one of the 21st century conflicts for African American families.

Lakeesha Harris, *A Little Black Girl's Magic*. How often do we ask, as a society, what freedom looks like to our youth? Young people are often silenced and rendered invisible, their oppression untold. Octavia E. Butler once wrote, "Freedom is dangerous, but it's precious, too. You can't just throw it away or let it slip away. You can't sell it for bread and pottage." *A Little Black Girl's Magic* is an exploration into what liberation looks like for a young Black girl caught between worlds of poverty, domestic violence, and male dominance. A vibrant, imaginative, and headstrong child, the main character reimagines her world, is punished for doing so, and wishes her way to the other side, to freedom. What we learn is that true liberation is a process of imagining what another world looks like and working our magic to make it happen.

Delilah Gilliam, *Untruthing*. This story offers insight into Gilliam's journey of discovering self: exploring the complex identities of a weird black girl coming to terms with a lifetime of exposure to toxic white culture. Through critique and

reflection, she disproves the societal truths she was conditioned to believe—ultimately, allowing her to reclaim her authentic identity.

Jameka Hartley, *Lost and Found*. This story is an exploration of the grief process. The grief process has been broken down into various stages ranging from five to seven to ten steps. It is the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) that are most embedded in our societal imagination. Yet, grief and healing are not as nice and neat as those stages would suggest. This story is a first-person account of the author's grieving after her mother's death in July 2017. It also includes a poem written roughly 15 months after her passing. This story is a tapestry of voice and the visual.

Salaam Green, *Grieve Girl*. Green uses poetic voice and spirited images to explain the relentless resilience of an African-American Girl faced with her mother's abuse by the hands of her father and the emotional struggle of a middle-class family. *Grieve Girl* gives insight of how pain can be transformed into beauty in the mind of a young girl in light of her relationship with her mother in the rural south. *Grieve Girl* acknowledges the journey of healing and uses the healing power of words to unlock generational silence.

Andrea Dobyne, *_enABLED*. This story explores the life of a legally blind, African-American woman and her journey with adaptability, access, and acceptance.

Kristina Hamlett, *A Walking Color*. This audiovisual story is comprised of two parts. The first part examines a racist trauma experienced by an 8-year old girl while in the care of a teacher in a classroom. The second is a recitation of a poetic piece entitled "I am not a walking color" which serves a dual purpose: to reclaim Kristina's voice, and to give an empowered voice to the pain and frustration of navigating everyday life as a Black woman in this country.

Bernadette Merikle, *Perspectives on Fidelity*. What is it to be born a lie, the product of secrets? What is it to live a concept before its due time? What would our stories be—of fidelity and honor and promises and half truths—if we got to go back and fix the fictions we cling to? What would happen if we got to go back and curiously inquire from a different perspective, from our own reasoned realities informed by the cycles we cannot break?

Jilisa Milton, *Screaming*. This story challenges the listener to consider the myriad ways people of color are subjected to surveillance, mis-identification and the threat of death while going about their everyday lives. What makes you want to scream? What keeps you from screaming?

Cassandra Dione Jones, *Deliberate Speed*. Cassandra interviews her mother about her experience of school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. She uses her mother's experience and historical context to explain the importance of education advocacy, the generational resilience of black women, and how race and racism has always influenced educational possibilities and outcomes.

References

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