Humanness Across Racist Divides[1]

Timothy Stanley's 35 years of teaching antiracism have taught him that students' engagement with the "oral testimonies of residential school survivors have great transformative potential," as "these testimonies bring home the violence that racisms involve, while destabilizing much of what people think they know about their country."[2] While oral testimonies "directly challenge racisms," if they are to "achieve their transformative educational potential, teachers need to create conditions that enable all students to engage with their content and implications, without putting students from the excluded group at risk of further violence."[3] For those who are at risk, "the decision to tell of their experiences and under what circumstances rests on a calculus of risk that weighs the possibility of enhanced injury against the restorative power of truth-telling."[4] From those in "dominant position," this risk :can become "invisible," evident "in the ways in which white supremacist anti-Chinese discourse in Canada was completely self-referential to the imaginings of Anglo-Europeans."[5] Oral histories can help the self-enclosed to emerge from their racial hall of mirrors.[6]

Oral histories, however, may be skewed, Stanley cautions, as those who testify "tell different stories depending on whom they are talking to," suggesting that "sending a member of a dominant group to interview a member of an excluded group about their experience of exclusion is likely to produce an interview involving partial truths," as "any interview involves a complex calculation on the part of the interviewee weighing the potential for further racist violence against the potential for truth-telling," concluding: "It is often simply too dangerous for people to explain to their oppressors the effects of their oppression."[7] That would seem to place both in a double-bind, as without oral testimonies from victims racism might not be mitigated, but testifying places victims – and their descendants – at risk for further racism.

With that risk acknowledged, Stanley suggests that "on-going efforts are needed to witness [to] the consequences of exclusion and to heal its effects," as these "bring into circulation the experiences of those who have been excluded," and such knowledge "can become important vehicles for antiracism education, for impressing on all of us our shared humanness in the face of its denial."[8] No guarantees here, as Stanley reminds "that simply exposing students to the voices of people who have experienced exclusion is no guarantee that what they have to say will be engaged with," as "racisms don't suddenly end when a voice recorder is turned on or when someone listens to a recording."[9] He explains:

> To fully understand and engage the racisms at play, antiracism educators need
> to understand where the excluded account comes from, who produced it and
> why, and what contextual factors surround its production and its reading. In

effect this involves historicizing our texts and our teaching so as to break the cycles that reproduce racist exclusions.[10]

Clearly, "teachers have a key role to play," not only in "making the oral history accounts … accessible," but also in "explaining the circumstances that gave rise to the accounts," as this enables students "to engage respectfully with them."[11]

"Once this is taught," Stanley suggests, "the accounts themselves can transform students' understandings, as they are led to engage in shared humanness across racist divides."[12] Such anti-racism curriculum "begins the process of ending the exclusions that gave rise in the first place to the experiences being recounted."[13] Acknowledging the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Stanley urges his fellow educators "to get our students to engage with the Truth about racism and its effects, but the real struggle is the continuing one aimed at reconciliation."[14]

Kristian Stewart describes "how digital storytelling might be used for educating students in post-conflict zone spaces," suggesting that a "digital storytelling praxis prioritizes students' lived experiences by making their life stories an integral part of the curriculum."[15] Students are instructed to "actively listen and share stories," which "holds the potential to disrupt their preconceived notions of otherness, assist them in developing empathy, and help them to understand troubled knowledge."[16]

What is a digital story? Stewart defines it as a "twenty-first-century multimodal genre of writing," and it includes film, music, images and "participant voice in the form of a video montage."[17] Stewart asserts that it has been "an especially useful means to activate memory, encourage student engagement, and to communicate the cultural identities of a diverse student population.[18] As a "field of cultural practice," Stewart seems certain that digital storytelling enables students to "find power in ways of knowing outside of dominant discourses through composing multimodal texts."[19]

Stewart studied the "composing practices of digital storytellers in a South African teacher education classroom during the 2014 and 2015 academic years," research undertaken at a large university of technology in the Western Cape of South Africa, an institution that had been racially integrated in 2008.[20] Students (67 in total) who participated in this study were enrolled in their last education course before graduating with a Bachelor of Education degree; they represented recognized the South African racial categories of Black African, Coloured, White, and Asian.[21] On the first day of class, students reassembled into smaller groups - "story circles" - where they remained for the duration of the term.[22] Stewart studied a group of ten story circle participants who were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.[23] Students had formed groups separated by race, with Black African students in the back of the room, Coloured students in the middle, White students in front, closest to the instructor; they gasped when they were told they'd be reorganized "into randomly mixed groups [and] several students said 'no' loudly."[24] Placed they were, however, and in these "diverse story circles" they remained for the duration the term.[25] From this inauspicious start, Stewart reports that the "digital storytelling project not only became a platform for

students to redefine themselves, but also afforded students a chance to redress both their past and present histories by means of a story."[26]

Stewart corroborates this claim by referencing students' testimonies, registered in "interviews and reflective essays [explaining] how participating in the digital storytelling process altered the way they viewed their peers," how the "entire project was an emotionally driven and bonding experience," something Stewart saw for herself: "students hugging, holding hands, or just sitting together in support of one another after the stories were shared."[27]

In digital storytelling, Stewart explains, the "curriculum and the students' personal experiences merged," evident when the students, "conscious of the borders they had placed between themselves at the onset of the class, as they reconsidered longstanding beliefs regarding how they viewed their peers."[28] Digital storytelling "put a face on personal experience and humanized the people behind social and political issues that may have seemed abstract to many," accounts of "everyday" life that provided "insider and intimate knowledge of each other."[29]

"Digital storytelling," Stewart summarizes, "provided these students a way of knowing not found in textbooks, and it was an effective tool for examining a historical account from multiple viewpoints."[30] She asks: "Without a curriculum that accepts personal testimony in classrooms, and especially those that train teachers, how else might narratives of place and pain be altered?"[31] She answers: "Digital storytelling allows student-driven content to become the curriculum, effectively making everyone's history count."[32] In South Africa, she continues, "where trauma is both embodied and historically inscribed, pedagogy that attends to self and social transformation has merit," as it recasts "vulnerability as an intellectual enterprise, a salient curriculum marker when navigating students across lines of difference and fundamental for producing critically conscious student populations."[33]

COMMENTARY

Stanley testifies to the educative potential of truth-telling in anti-racist and redress curriculum, accenting the significance of context, crucial if those who listen – those who bear witness - are to understand the racisms and exclusions others have suffered and suffer still. Despite educators' ethical resolve, oral histories in and of themselves do not end racism. They can play a powerful role, however, in knowledge, awareness, and potentially in "reconciliation," but they must be understood in context and communicated across "racist divides" if they are to enjoy any chance of being accepted. In recounting a course focused om digital storytelling with racially diverse" teacher candidates, Stewart reports that digital storytelling enabled students to not only share their stories but also attend to their peers' stories, putting a personal "face" on

History, "producing critically conscious student populations." Simultaneously sobering and encouraging, these studies strengthen educators' resolve to participate in processes of truth and reconciliation.

REFERENCES

Stanley, Timothy J. 2020. Witnessing Exclusion: Oral histories, Historical Provenance and Antiracism Education. In *Oral history, Education and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation*, edited by K. R. Llewellyn and N. Ng-A-Fook (32-49). New York: Routledge.

Stewart, Kristian D. 2020. Re-*Story*ing South Africa: A Digital Storytelling Praxis for Developing Historically Conscious Teachers. In *Oral History, Education and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation*, edited by Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook (168-182). New York: Routledge.

ENDNOTES

[1] I take the title from Stanley (2020, 46).

[2] Stanley 2020, 32.

[3] Stanley 2020, 32.

[4] Stanley 2020, 32-33.

[5] Stanley 2020, 36.

[6] Stanley 2020, 36.

[7] Stanley 2020, 40-41.

[8] Stanley 2020, 45.

[9] Stanley 2020, 45.

[10] Stanley 2020, 45.

[11] Stanley 2020, 46.

[12] Stanley 2020, 46.

[13] Stanley 2020, 46.

[14] Stanley 2020, 46.

[15] Stewart 2020, 171.

[16] Stewart 2020, 171.

[17] Stewart 2020, 171.

[18] Stewart 2020, 171.

[19] Stewart 2020, 171. I should have thought digitality *was* the dominant discourse.

[20] Stewart 2020, 172.

[21] Stewart 2020, 172.

[22] Stewart 2020, 172.
[23] Stewart 2020, 172.
[24] Stewart 2020, 174.
[25] Stewart 2020, 174.
[26] Stewart 2020, 174.
[27] Stewart 2020, 175.
[28] Stewart 2020, 177.
[29] Stewart 2020, 177.
[30] Stewart 2020, 177.
[31] Stewart 2020, 179.
[32] Stewart 2020, 179.
[33] Stewart 2020, 179.