

**Unexpected self-expression and the limits of narrative:  
Exploring the implications of unconscious dynamics for narrative inquiry in the  
digital storytelling of immigrant women**

Chloë Brushwood Rose and Colette A. Granger

*Faculty of Education, York University*

## *Abstract*

This study of the oral narratives and digital stories of immigrant women living in Toronto explores the tension between self-knowledge and self-expression, and how it manifests in the processes of storytelling that unfold in digital storytelling workshops. Both in their multimodal complexity and in the significant shifts from their original telling, the digital stories seem to offer something in excess of the storyteller's conscious intention. Here we consider what these unexpected self-expressions might mean for theories of narrative and practices of narrative inquiry: How do the unconscious dynamics of storytelling complicate our notions of narrative? How can narrative inquiry account for the unconscious? To explore these questions, we begin with a conceptual exploration of narrative and its limits and possibilities, followed by a discussion of two case studies that illustrate a range of dynamics – telling several different stories, telling a contradictory story, and repeating the same story over and over.

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#### ***Introduction***

From an early age, we are instructed in the art of telling tidy and coherent narratives. As children, admonished to “get our stories straight,” we learn early on that changing a story is the sure sign of a lie, an untrue story, a false self. In schools, Language Arts curricula teach us to identify the central argument of a text and all its supporting points. Yet, as subjects and researchers with many stories to tell, we know that a central dilemma of any narrative inquiry is that “our voice is always contingent upon shifting relations among the words we speak, the practices we construct, and the community within which we interact” (Britzman 2003, 34) – what Bakhtin (1981) calls “heteroglossia.”

In addition to the contradictions within a story that reveal its complexity and (perhaps unconscious) ambivalence, we have observed in others and in ourselves the tendency to tell many different stories, to change our stories again and again, to repeat the same story as if its first telling has been forgotten, and to tell strange stories from which even the teller seems distanced. In our own experience as narrative inquirers, we are curious about how these storytelling dynamics may paradoxically let us tell both more and less about the self, or even avoid telling that self’s story altogether. The ambivalences of the contradictory story, the shifting story and the strange story undermine the belief in a coherent autobiographical narrative and suggest an important tension, at the heart of all

narration, between self-expression and self-knowledge. Is it possible to tell a story we don't already know? What are the limits of self-narration?

In our study of the oral narratives and digital stories of immigrant women living in Toronto<sup>i</sup>, we have become interested in how this tension between what we know of the self and what we can tell manifests itself in the kinds of story, and the processes of telling, that unfold in digital storytelling workshops. Workshop participants create complex and aesthetically rich narratives in which the coherence of the spoken autobiographical narrative is both enhanced and undermined by the various ruptures, contradictions, and gaps that emerge through the juxtaposition of sound and image. Both in the stories' multimodal complexity and in the ways they reflect significant shifts from their original telling, the digital stories seem to offer something in excess of the original scripts they are based on, and even in excess of the storyteller's conscious intention.

This paper offers an exploration of what these unexpected self-expressions might mean for understandings of narrative and practices of narrative inquiry: How do the unconscious dynamics of storytelling complicate our notions of narrative and autobiography, and our expressions of self? How do stories reveal the possibilities and impossibilities of self-representation? How can narrative inquiry account for the unconscious? How might a discussion of storytelling's unconscious dynamics change how we think about narrative inquiry and the function of the story in research? What do we use a story to do? And how might the processes of telling, representing, and interpreting be more significant than the nature of the story that gets told? In order to consider these questions, we begin with a conceptual exploration of narrative and its limits and possibilities. This is followed by a discussion of two case studies from our

project that illustrate the tension between self-expression and self-knowledge, and the way it manifests itself in a range of dynamics – refusing to tell a story, telling several different stories, telling a strange or contradictory story, and repeating the same story over and over.

As researchers who use stories as both a source of data and an interpretive method, we have become interested in the limits of the narrative that is understood as self-evident and coherent. Indeed, we argue here that in some way every story is contradictory, partial, untold, and that these contradictions, refusals, and silences are central to understanding how we negotiate our relations with others and the world. The dynamics of storytelling documented in our study reveal some of the ways in which telling a story may simultaneously function as a means to know ourselves and a resistance to self-knowledge. Just as our narratives of educational experience are characterized by the space and movement between learning and not learning (Britzman 2006), the digital stories we discuss here offer complex insights into the experience of migrating and not migrating, growing up and not growing up, leaving home and not leaving home, being a daughter and not being a daughter, and so on. Similarly, both the stories themselves and the narratives of their telling help us understand the vicissitudes of knowing and not knowing, telling and not telling.

### ***Some thoughts on narrative and its limits***

Evolving at least in part as a response to worries that quantitative research subsumes the active agency of individuals into the conceptualization of identity as static and structurally predetermined (Elliot 2005), narrative inquiry, and by implication narratives

or stories as such, have for many decades been used across academic disciplines to study experiences of and in the world: recent work locates itself in social sciences generally (Bruner 2002); medicine (Charon 2005, Randall 2007), psychology and psychiatry (Coles 1989, Schafer 1992, Church 1995); anthropology and higher education studies (Behar 1996, Rodman 2007); and migration and feminist studies (Kadar 1992, Riessman 1993, Brinker-Gabler & Smith 1997, Bloom 1998), among many others.

In the field of education, Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 2000) view the storying and restorying of our lives as a basic human experience and a “fundamental method of personal (and social) growth” (1991, 259), and – following Mitchell (1981) and Polkinghorne (1988) – give the name *narrative* to the “structured quality of experience to be studied” (Connelly & Clandinin 1990, 2). Within the overarching field of education research there has been a good deal of meta-level research on narrative as methodology (Richardson 1999, 2001; Ellis & Bochner 2000; Ellis 2004; Granger 2007) and counter-hegemonic strategy (Grumet 1990, Lather 1991, Fowler 2006). Alongside this work are narrative inquiries in the areas of teacher education and development (Britzman 2003, Goodson 1992, Wilson 2002, Pitt 2003, Luce-Kappler 2004), adult education (Rossiter 1999, Alfred 2003), second-language learning (Peirce 1994, Granger 2004, Rhee 2006), English education (Ashton-Warner 1986, Schaafsma *et al* 2007), adolescent and literacy studies (Majors 1998), arts-based research (Singer 1996, De Freitas 2007), and work on difficult knowledge in teaching and learning (Pitt & Britzman 2003).

Notwithstanding occasional critique of narrative inquiry as privileging the individual by ignoring the social (see Connelly & Clandinin 1990, 2), we concur with the view, by now fairly consensual (Grumet 1990, Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992, Richardson

2001, Elliott 2005), that narratives both allow and articulate places and moments in which the individual and the social meet and interact, where the stories we tell about ourselves and our lives not only reflect our realities but construct them as coherent and meaningful. That is, narrative works, and is worked, in multiple directions shaped both “by the social world... and... through the cultural repertoire of stories to which each individual has access” (Elliott 2005, 126-127). Bound by contexts social, cultural, historical, yet simultaneously idiosyncratic (Neumann 1998, Rosen 1998, Richardson 2001, Elliot 2005), narrative’s instantiation as written memoir is described by Grumet (1990, 322) as simultaneously inner and outer, personal and public. Her later (1992) discussion of “inner temporality” further elucidates this surprising and complexifying phenomenon, wherein remembering events and narrating those memories involves a “double awareness of encounters in the world and of experience of those encounters extended through...inner time” (1992, 35).

### *Making meaning, and beyond*

Narrative is complex; it can do a lot. In turn, we ask a lot of it. Richardson (1990, 10) contends that narratives of experience do not “simply chronicle what happened next, but place the next in meaningful context,” while Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 11) argue that stories allow us to “broaden” (generalize) and “burrow” (deepen) understandings of their tellers. Rossiter (1999, 59) argues that approaching questions of development from the perspective of “story as a metaphor for human life” helps us think more deeply about “narrative knowing” as constructed, interpretive, and, with its historical and temporal aspects, central to retrospective identity formation and meaning-making. More

particularly, in discussing the role of illness narratives in patients' search for authenticity, Bochner (2001, 147) posits that such stories teach us "about the struggle between personal and cultural meanings." Pagnucci insists that in "showing us things we never knew" stories can be "both powerful and frightening" (in Schaafsma *et al* 2007, 298).

But the more we ask a method or a discourse or a genre to do, the more questions we open up. How do we decide what matters most, or least, about a story? What else might matter, apart from the story as such? And as Riessman asks in her exploration of narrative analysis as a research genre, "How are we to evaluate a narrative analysis? Can one tell a better one from a worse one?" (1993, 64-65) To these questions Riessman responds that what can be said about narrative analyses can equally be said about narratives themselves; they are interpretive events, situated within social and political discourses, which change from one individual to the next and from moment to moment. Nevertheless, they can be evaluated in terms of qualities of "trustworthiness" – including persuasiveness, correspondence, coherence and pragmatic use: "the extent to which a particular study becomes the basis for others' work" (1993, 68).

Meaning-making seems to weave thematically through these ideas about narrative's value and about how to determine that value. This is not surprising; stories can help us understand our own and others' lives. But no narrative holds, or even invites, a singular interpretation. In this view we are, with Pitt (2003, 5), "suspicious" of unproblematized personal narratives offered as "an explanatory device for understanding experience." And given this suspicion about the transparency or "meaningfulness" of narratives, what else, we ask, do narratives do beyond making meaning? What are the limits of what they can do? Crucially, *what do we use them to do – or not to do?* Our focus in this project, and in



this paper, is less on the specific meanings of the stories we tell than on the importance of the processes of telling, listening, and interpreting those stories.

### *Story as partial*

Pitt is not alone in taking the view that narratives are always partial, and that reading them is likewise selective. In contesting the traditional social-scientific views of personal narrative as “useful only when it is subjected to some form of cultural criticism or when it is theorized, categorized, and analyzed,” Bochner (2001, 133) is asserting that stories offer possibilities for representational pluralism in research – for moves “away from facts and toward meanings” (134). Goodson’s (2006) analysis of distinctions between “grand narratives” and “life narratives” insists that opportunities for understanding how subjectivities are socially constructed are lost if narrative remains “at the level of the personal and practical.” Elliott too (2005, 127), in viewing “narrative identities” as constructed in interactions between “... cultural discourses ...and the material circumstances and experiences of each individual,” acknowledges and values multiplicity. And in her work on narrative and memory, Chambers (1998, 14) asserts that stories of earlier life hold potential for “revising and reinterpreting not only the stories themselves but the lives to which they are connected.”

Thus is narrative a helpful “thing to think with” (Turkle 1985, 22). In educational research in particular, approaches to narrative that incorporate, as Miller recommends, “situated analyses of specific contexts that influence the constructions and representations of self and other” (Miller 1992, 508) may usefully challenge positivist educational

discourses, provided we recognize that no story holds a unitary meaning (or represents a unitary subject *of* meaning).

Further, it is not just the story as told that cannot be easily and immediately interpreted or known. This is particularly relevant in the context of digital stories, which add visual and often musical dimensions to the verbal one. To wit, in response to Adrienne Rich's contention (1996, 32) that "relationships of race and power exist in [white poets' writing] most often as silence or muffled subtext," Mazzei (2003, 355-356) asks whether these relationships might also exist in the "unspoken, the inaudible, the ignored" aspects of stories – in their silences. This is, arguably, more emphatically observable in narratives of women who might perceive a need to conform to traditional discourses or "audience" expectations: "For women, the ability to value their own thought and experience is hindered by self-doubt and hesitation when private experience seems at odds with cultural myths and values concerning how a woman is 'supposed' to think and feel" (Anderson et al 1991, 232). Of course, the cultural myths and values that shape a narrative also shape its interpretation, determining which parts of a story – whether spoken or not – are attended to and which are ignored. Relatedly, in her work on feminist research methods Bloom (1998) compares the initial telling of a respondent's story, in which she positions herself as a "feminist icon" (72) with a second, more complete version that includes some complexly nuanced affective elements. Bloom demonstrates how the first telling conforms to a narrative "master script" that is ultimately unsatisfying and incomplete: hence the retelling.

Bloom's notion of a second telling does not map isomorphically onto the addition of visual and audio layers to the initial spoken narratives that become our project's digital

stories. There are, however, Put another way, we might understand the story as a space in which the storyteller risks her or his connection to the world by both finding and creating useful objects: perhaps, as Hull and Nelson (2005, 252) suggest, “the power of digital stories ... has to do with a happy melding of old and new genres and media” which in the case of the digital storytelling project allows for a more multilayered and nuanced story than one genre on its own could convey. Indeed, many theorists have argued that multimedia or multimodal composition creates new meaning forms, qualitatively different from the sum of their parts, which transcend the simple addition of what is possible in each medium alone (Lemke 1998, Packer & Jordan 2001, Hull & Nelson 2005).

However, what is often missing in these discussions, which ultimately seek to totalize the meaning of a multimedia text, is a consideration of an aesthetic quality central to multimedia’s productivity – that is, the spaces and gaps between media, which hold the productivity of juxtaposition (Landow 2000). Paradoxically, multimedia collage not only produces a multiplication of meaning, but also points to the limits of meaning-making and illustrates the insistence and significance of what cannot be known. Understanding multimedia text as straightforwardly “multiplying meaning” (Lemke 1998) leaves little room for representations or narrations that fall outside of or exceed traditional boundaries of meaning-making: silences, contradictions, ambivalence, nonsense. Art historian Elkins (1999) and others, including Barthes (1981) and Greene (1995), have discussed the limits of meaning-making in their theories of the image or visual medium as narrator. For Elkins (1999, 81), “pictures are those images taken to be constituted by the in-built vacillation, contradiction, paradox, or uncertainty of ‘saying’ and ‘showing.’ Something

in them is linguistic, prepositional, systematic, or otherwise semiotic. The rest, as Wittgenstein famously said, is ‘silence’.”

In his work on memory and autobiography Kermode (1995, 37) argues that “honest truth” is never fully accessible. Perhaps not. Perhaps, like any narrative, the digital narrative tells a story, or rather a version of a story, “that is possible, not one that is necessary” (Ellis 1993, 725). But adding layers to our stories and retelling them in different ways allows us to get at a less partial story, if not an altogether full one, so that a digital story arguably becomes something more than its text-only counterpart by adding to what Bloom (1998, 65) suggests is the potential of a back-and-forth re-editioning of an individual’s experiences, and understandings of those experiences, and by shining a light on the ongoing process of making and remaking identity: our perpetual “becoming”.

### *Story as unconscious*

How should we think, then, about the empty or silent spaces that make a story partial, about the ways digital stories may fill in some gaps but leave others open? What creates the gaps in the first (and second) place? Keeping in mind that the structure of the analytic encounter within “talk therapy” embodies multiple narrative qualities, it is instructive to look to psychoanalytic theory for ways to consider these kinds of questions. In our case-study discussion below we raise the psychodynamic concepts of free association (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973) and transitional objects and spaces (Winnicott 1971); the foundational concept of the unconscious is worth summarizing at the outset.

A teller of stories – or narrating self – can be conceived psychoanalytically as a manifestation of a psychosocial whole that embodies both conscious and unconscious

elements. But in the normal course the conscious individual has no access to the unconscious except through its “effects” (Benjamin 1992, 137): forgetting, jokes, and inadvertent “slips.” To translate this partialness to a context of narrative, although we may imagine we are telling the whole story, we are telling only part of it. Even a retelling that fills in some spaces in the original never quite arrives at the whole story: we may believe, with Harper (1997, 156), that storytelling – written, verbal or otherwise – “demands self-consciousness,” but in psychoanalytic thinking, full self-consciousness is simply not possible. Perhaps that is part of what makes narration difficult: the unconscious cannot be put into words, thus a story is limited to an encounter between the narrating subject and the “otherness of her own unconscious knowledge” (Pitt 2003, 54).

Furthermore, in a psychoanalytic framing, not only is our unconscious knowledge rarely accessible to us, and partial at best, but we always come to it belatedly. For Benjamin (1992, 155), “the word [we might extrapolate, the *story*] as well as the presencing of the unconscious ... are to be understood as articulating and thereby being articulated [with] ... *Nachträglichkeit*...” This is psychoanalytic theory’s “deferred (re)vision” or “afterwards-ness” (see Laplanche & Pontalis 1973, 111), which King (2000, 22) relates with personal story in her contention that “[a]utobiographical narratives reconstruct the events of a life in the light of ‘what wasn’t known then’.” A story can be “a narrative reconstruction of [a] split ... between the ‘child who knew’ and the conscious self who [at the time of the event] had no knowledge...” (65). While remembering, and narrating what we remember, can identify gaps in memory and even help begin to fill them, rendering narrative at times both “necessary and therapeutic” (King 2000, 24), the “afterward” location of memory means that any narrator, “in the present moment of the

narration, possesses ... knowledge that she did not have 'then', in the moment of the experience" (2). Thus, while memory is what makes narration possible, narration also constructs what is remembered. And yet we forget this: we imagine narrated memory "as if the narrating 'I' and the subject of the narration were identical" (King, 2000, 3). This flawed imagining further complicates the work, and the implications, of telling one's story.

### ***The study***

The implications and complications that emerge for narrative inquiry from psychoanalysis and its understanding of the story or narrative as unconscious, belated, and incomplete similarly emerge for us in relation to our study of the oral narratives and digital stories of two groups of women who are recent immigrants to Canada. Over a twelve-month period, in collaboration with two community-based social service agencies, we co-facilitated two digital storytelling workshops (Lambert 2006) for newcomer and low-income women in downtown Toronto. Participants in these settings work in a close-knit learning community, producing short (2-3 minute) digital videos that reflect multiple approaches to personal narrative and storytelling, from confessional to more experimental or poetic. The workshops represent a semi-formal, community- and arts-based adult learning experience through which participants explore issues of social identity and difference, and improve oral, written and computer literacy skills (Beeson & Miskelly 2005, Freidus & Hlubinka 2005, Burgess 2006), while creating content meaningful to themselves and their communities.

The digital storytelling process comprises several stages: sharing personal narratives in an oral story circle; creating storyboards; writing stories or “scripts” and recording them as voiceovers; collecting visual artefacts and footage; and combining and editing all these elements in a non-linear digital environment to create digital videos. Participants become familiar with computer-based applications, including programs for word-processing and sound-, photo- and video-editing (in this case, Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Premiere). In our project they also worked closely with facilitators to develop their spoken and written literacy. Throughout these production stages, the women “tell their stories” numerous times, in different ways: through short writing exercises and discussions meant to elucidate the elements of storytelling, in the story circle where everyone has time to share the story they are working on by telling it to the group, in the writing of a final story script, and then in the editing process as they combine their audio-recorded narratives with moving and still images, cinematic effects, and music and other audio.

Documentation by the Center for Digital Storytelling (Lambert 2006) and in a few other settings indicates that this educational model has been effective in a wide range of contexts, including projects geared toward community development and mobilization (Beeson & Miskelly 2005, Freidus & Hlubinka 2005), art education (Chung 2007), and media access and literacy (Meadows 2003). Additionally, researchers are beginning to theorize the richness and complexity of expression afforded by a multimedia or multimodal narrative structure (Hull & Nelson 2005, Brushwood Rose forthcoming) and its potential as a site of identity construction and representation (Burgess 2006, Hull & Katz 2006, Vasudevan 2006). Nevertheless, the use of digital narrative as a research

method, while fairly common in community-based contexts, is largely undocumented in the educational research literature.

Our first digital storytelling workshop was offered over 16 weeks for two hours weekly, to accommodate participants who are primary caregivers to their children. This workshop was attended voluntarily by eight women who spoke five different first languages – Tamil, Bengali, Mandarin, Somali, and English – and who had signed up to participate after seeing advertisements in local community-based agencies. The second workshop was offered one full day a week for nine weeks: six women participated as part of a year-long training program called the Immigrant Women’s Integration Program (IWIP), and two others attended as part of their training for other community-based organizations. The women enrolled in IWIP had come to Canada from China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Egypt.

Both workshops, in which participants developed digital stories about significant and often transformative events in their lives, were co-facilitated by a team including two researchers, a staff member from one of the collaborating agencies, and three “peer leaders” – women who had participated in earlier iterations of IWIP and previous digital storytelling workshops. The workshops functioned as both research context and data collection method. Following the workshops we conducted in-depth interviews with willing participants; these narratives offer a further site of storytelling, adding to the rich and complex body of data provided by the stories told and made in the workshops. In addition to referring to the digital stories and the interview transcripts, our case study analysis relies on our own observation of and participation in the story circles, in which participants speak aloud the narratives they intend to use in their digital stories.



Interview data confirms that the story circle is a “moment” that serves as both locus for community-building and motivator for engagement in the workshop’s collaborative structure. Liu<sup>ii</sup> refers to the story circle experience as “precious” — a way of “sharing, so we can understand each other better, and ... enhancing our friendship.” Liliana, who describes the story circle as “intense” but “very touching, because a lot of us talked about abuse, and losses,” also calls it “beautiful”, a “way of nurturing ourselves and each other.” For Chandra, it provides a space for honouring stories that busy daily life lacks; a kind of “freedom” or “power” to “take something ... that is hiding inside” and “put it outside.” Several credit the story circle with inspiring the disclosure of previously “secret” feelings; Ming says that by “talking about the moment in their lives, their personal things, the [others] encouraged [her] to tell [her] story,” while Nalini refers to telling her “untold story” as a moment of self-revelation: “In front of people [there are things] I hide, but in my story I don’t hide anything.”

The dynamics of how stories come to be told in the story circle are marked by a reluctance that, curiously, is ameliorated by other, similarly reluctant participants. This is key to understanding the story circle as motivator. Sati recalls how in her own first digital storytelling workshop the facilitator said, “Okay, tell something about your life story, and everybody said ... *we* don’t have any stories.” Yet they do. Some participants have stories they have long waited to tell; others’ stories are reawakened by those of fellow group members.

And there are surprises. Some women note that hearing someone else’s personal story changed their minds about which of their own stories to tell. Others are reminded of a particularly important or difficult experience, which they share in the story circle, later

choosing another story to produce digitally. In some cases, hearing others' narratives reminds participants of forgotten events, or gives them courage to speak what they have previously kept silent. A case in point: Christine was initially quite reticent in the story circle, waiting until the very end of the meeting to tell her difficult story, about a death that had occurred while she was in Bangladesh. She later confided that this was not the story she originally had in mind; she had decided to tell it when those of several other participants, equally poignant, reminded her of both the death and her trip to Asia.

Thus can telling one story make it possible to tell others. Partly this happens because another's story reminds us of our own similar one. But the circle additionally issues an invitation – a validation of personal narrative that hearing others' stories offers – which opens up a space to tell stories that might otherwise have remained untold.<sup>iii</sup> And in this way, as Chambers (1998, 14) notes, the work of remembering the narratives of earlier life hold potential for changing “not only the stories themselves but the lives to which they are connected,” including the lives of those who hear them. While the act of telling the story expands, enriches and complicates the answer to the question “Who am I?”, the telling and listening that occur in the story circle connect the selves and stories of the women with the shared culture they create together.

Not all stories are told. In our first workshop, some participants, originally keen to be involved in digital storytelling, stopped attending once they realized they would be asked to tell their story to others and receive constructive feedback on it. Yet these silences also attest to the story circle's import, for if there is power in having what Lambert (2006, 93) calls a safe place to be heard, it may be that not everyone feels equally safe or is equally able to engage that space by breaking a silence. After all, the

stories that *are* told are often difficult, even horrific: stories of harsh economic, political or religious struggles; of terrible personal loss; of violence or abuse. What is clear, albeit ironic, is that the story circle can be a significant experience whether or not one undergoes it.

Throughout this study, and through the processes of each story circle and the production of each digital story, we have grown particularly interested in both surprises and silences. In the following case studies we return to the questions we posed at the beginning of the paper, about the significance of unexpected and perhaps unintended expressions and resistances that characterize the experience of storytelling, or narrating one's life: What do these unexpected self-expressions reveal about the unconscious dynamics of storytelling? What do those dynamics suggest about the function of storytelling in our lives? And what are their implications for our conceptualizations of narrative inquiry?

***Shifting stories: Neema's "Love with the enemy"***

Often, the stories spoken in the story circle remain there, while other stories are told in the more "public" venue of the digital story itself. Yet we are reluctant to reduce the cause of these shifting stories to the public or private nature of the varied contexts of telling. What other dynamics of self-representation are at work here? What does it mean to change one's story many times, to tell one or more stories in the story circle and then tell another in the digital story? Our first case study explores the experience of the shifting story, manifested in the contrast among

Neema's multiple stories: two she told in the story circle, and a third that became her eventual digital story.

Despite usually being quite a vocal participant, Neema waited until the very end of the story circle to take her turn. She began by saying that she had three stories in mind but could not decide which to tell. The others in the circle encouraged her to tell all three, suggesting that they could help her think about which to use as her digital story. In the end she told two: the first summarized a news story she had heard about a young female activist killed while acting as a human shield against the bulldozing of houses in the Gaza Strip; the second, described as the story of “how I met my husband,” turned out to be primarily about her experience as a graduate student in Egypt and her rejection of the idea of marriage in favour of her education, until she met the man she eventually married. Curiously, her digital story was ultimately neither of these, nor was it the third story she had originally intended to tell. Rather it was a narrative about her intense personal struggle learning to use the computer to communicate with her husband, who worked abroad while she remained in Egypt.

While they are clearly different, there are interesting parallels among these stories. In Neema’s two “told” stories, there is a resonance between her description of her younger self, steadfastly resisting the expectation of marriage, and the young woman standing up to the bulldozer. Indeed, the way she described her marriage to her husband and the experience of becoming a wife and mother as terminating the progress of her graduate degree might be interpreted as the death of another version of herself – a younger self, resistant and independent. This death is paralleled in the death of the young activist and then again, metaphorically, in her digital story through the demise of her

computer, which in her words “broke down, completely dead. My attempts to revive him failed.”

In each of her stories, Neema referred to herself as very smart and very good at school. Yet when speaking of becoming a wife and mother, she described herself as being at a loss, not knowing what to do. In her digital story, she says, “I was not stupid, I always got the highest marks in my education,” and then wonders, “What has happened to me after getting married and having children? Is my mind frozen? Are the gears of my brain rusted?” The parallel between the image of Neema as a rusted machine whose gears are frozen and the image of the computer that won’t work and eventually breaks down is striking. While Neema positions herself in opposition to the computer, which she refers to as “the enemy,” her simultaneous identification with it, which comes through in metaphors and images, offers her a way to express something about herself she may not yet know: through her multiple and shifting stories, Neema tells a story she may not yet realize she has to tell.

One of the dynamics characterizing this tension between self-expression and self-knowledge, and arguably lying at the heart of self-representation, is ambivalence. For Neema, this ambivalence is evidenced both in her difficulty deciding which story to tell or which self to express, and also in the shifting of her story, which is somehow both resisted and discovered in the process. This ambivalence is also at work in the details of the stories themselves, and in the contradictory title Neema gives her digital story – “Love with the enemy.” Who is the enemy here? The computer about which she says, “from the first sight, I hated it”? The marriage that signals the death of her graduate education? Perhaps. Yet she has chosen both her marriage and the computer. And at the

end of her story she says, “My enemy has become my dearest friend. I cannot imagine my life without this friend. My computer is a window that I open to see the whole world.” But ambivalence emerges yet again in her interview where she recognizes the implications of this new “friendship” (and its professional commitments) for her roles as wife and mother: “Some weekends I wasn’t able to go out, I had to stick in front of my computer at home doing a lot of homework, so sometimes I feel I shouldn’t [participate in educational programs], ... because my main responsibility is to be a mother.”

Neema’s telling of these three stories reveals much about the complexities of lived experience and identity as well as the ambivalence of storytelling itself and, at times, the impossibility of telling the story at all. In her digital story, her difficulty mastering computer technology seems to stand in for the twin difficulties of knowing, and representing, the self. After all, Neema’s story about the computer functions to estrange her from other stories of herself, which do not get told, while it is also a hidden story about herself and her estrangement from her former self. Perhaps not coincidentally, at one point in her interview Neema insists, “Everyone’s a stranger here.”

Neema’s digital story, in which she reveals little about any other person, but instead describes her relations to a machine, also reminds us of the importance of the social in producing the unconscious dynamics that shape a story. It is a public document in a way that her oral narratives were not. Her story about the computer may be another way of expressing her necessary estrangement from others, insofar as the full details of her personal life are present only in symbolic terms in the digital story viewed by a “strange” public.

### ***Strange Stories: Faribah's "My life mystery"***

The theme of estrangement appears in many of the digital stories, often quite overtly. Some women talk about being separated from their families and their homes, others about being alienated in a new city. One feels estranged from her own emotions: even when her deportation order was rescinded, she tells us, "I had no feelings. I did not even hear the part of being approved [until] the immigration officer said, you should be happy." But accompanying this estrangement motif is also the notion of *strangeness*. Like Neema's reckoning with the strange technology of the computer and the strange shifts in her self-concept, other digital stories, as well as many of the interviews, refer to the difficulties of making new lives in Canada, where the women "didn't know the culture," "had no one to talk to," and where "everything – the weather, the city, education [for themselves and their children] – was unknown." Some stories take strangeness itself onto unfamiliar ground, as the women puzzle through events or moments that took them by surprise. One story that embodies not only elements of estrangement from parts of the teller's own life, but also a sense of puzzlement, even bewilderment, at the strangeness of the story she is telling, is Faribah's.

Like Neema, Faribah initially described her story as being about meeting her husband. But her digital creation reveals a complicated tale of transitions and losses; where Neema's ambivalence is demonstrated in her multiple, shifting narratives, Faribah's is carried by her digital story's structure, with voiceover, image and sound colliding to offer contradictory meanings. Additionally, Faribah seems, paradoxically, to be unable to find a clear beginning or a definite ending to her story, yet at the same time

to be positioned close to the edge of an awareness of its contradictions, its shifts, and perhaps even its secrets.

For a “main” character, Faribah’s husband is a visually ambiguous “absent presence” throughout the video. For the entire first half, he is represented only briefly, and by a clip-art silhouette at that. Faribah’s stated reason for this was that since she didn’t know what he looked like at this point in the story, neither should the viewer. But his near-invisibility persists. He is shown for less than 20 seconds of the three-minute video, and not once does Faribah zoom in to a close-up of his image, as she does with photographs of herself and her own family. The voiceover treats him similarly; until the halfway point he is referred to only as *he*, *him*, or “the man from Canada.”

These aesthetic choices extend to her husband’s positioning within the story’s narrative arc. The opening and closing images are of Faribah, her mother and sisters; her husband is there at the story’s temporal midpoint, but surrounded on all sides by her family – including their children, whom she refers to as “hers.” The story she intended to tell about “the man who changed her life” is bracketed by the more central one of Faribah and her family (especially the women), her children, her experiences. Indeed, in the video’s final moments her words – “I am struggling to find a good job [in order to bring] the rest of my family here and we can live together” – are accompanied by an image that underscores what seems clearly to be the main relationship in the story: that of her and her mother. Her spouse is ostensibly positioned at the middle of her story, but we are not convinced that he is its centre; as the video ends, he is quite literally “out of the picture” altogether.



The ambiguous, even contradictory, positioning of her husband both at and outside of the centre of her story, and the individualist language she uses to talk of both past and future – “*I and my family were living in Pakistan. ... I have a new family now ... I’m ... bringing my family here...*” – position Faribah in ways that challenge dominant notions of the passive, obedient, Middle Eastern wife. In her story, as in Neema’s, a resistant thread moves through Western views of non-Western women. Sadness and loss are evident in Faribah’s story, but alongside these are strength, resourcefulness and optimism; with her articulated refusal to continue letting “destiny” keep her apart from her family she subverts both the notion of a unitary self, and the stereotype of a passive wife, and articulates the position of strength from which she will try to mitigate the losses so evident in her narrative.

Is this what Faribah herself is using her story to do? Her title, “My life mystery,” offers an important clue. While at first we assume that this mystery is the unknown “man from Canada” who suddenly entered her life, the multiple and complex dynamics of images, voiceover, and narrative structure invite a more open reading, through which we perceive Faribah as puzzling over her own story, over the mystery that is not quite named but that seems to constitute not a *stranger* but a *strangeness*: How, she seems to be asking, did all this happen? Or even, how could I have let all this happen? But Faribah does not ask these questions out loud, and perhaps they cannot be asked, not directly, or not yet.

Does expressing something that is not yet known help us come to know it? Can a question help us get to a story? Conversely, can telling a story be a point of entry to a transitional space where we might begin to imagine asking our question? Might it be that

the very act of *telling* our stories – even though there is always something we do not tell – can move us forward in how we *read* the stories, and think the questions, of our own and others’ lives? So it may be with Faribah. The fact that in her story the images of her and her family do not follow a strict chronology, along with the video’s layered narrative structure and its ultimate return to its starting point, gestures toward a kind of uncertainty around when and where, and how, the larger story – of which the video is one part – begins and ends. Perhaps telling her story is a way for Faribah to begin a beginning, if not to get to an ending: a way, that is, if not quite to answer those questions, at least to recognize them *as* questions.

### ***Some thoughts on narrative inquiry and its limits***

As our two case studies illustrate, and as our earlier observations suggest, what remains untold or silent in a story can both constitute and undermine a telling. Instructive here is the psychoanalytic notion of the “screen memory” – a dynamic in which the collision between the urge to remember something significant and the unconscious resistance to that remembering results in the collapse of the memory into a symbol or image (the “screen”), which allows its retention yet inhibits the conscious attention that might cause the painful reliving of a trauma (Freud 1899, 307). The story that is remembered or told via this dynamic is necessarily incomplete, marked by unconscious resistances, refusals, and concealments. And yet the possibility of ever getting to the whole story, or even to a more complete version of the story, rests on the possibility of that first partial telling. We must tell one story to tell the next.

The tension between self-expression and self-knowledge at the core of all narration, which we have explored in the case studies offered above, suggests an understanding of the self and of narrative that is implicated in Freud's notion of "free association" (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973), described by Britzman (2006, 22) as "an occurrence where the drive plays with and may destroy the representations it seeks." While free association is most importantly a technique of therapy, Britzman suggests that it might also describe "any form of practice, including our own pedagogical ones, that requires a faith in narrative, the faith that words create forms of life" (27). At the same time, "free association reveals the trouble with language" and indeed all attempts to represent or narrate experience. The technique of free association can offer us insight into the work of narrating experience as, significantly, something both more and other than meaning-making. Indeed, for psychoanalysis, it is precisely the conflict at the heart of narrative, as a way of making meaning and a resistance to it, which makes free association useful as a therapeutic technique. Britzman writes (2006, 39):

[W]e are closest to the difference that is the unconscious when we notice its displacement, when we are not listening, when we say the opposite of what we mean, when we turn language inside out, when our grammar collapses under the weight of our desire, and when we have no regard for staying on the topic. We are closest to our unconscious when it can be witnessed by another, when the Other puts us on notice, gives us back our conclusions so that we can redo them again.

Reading and interpreting an Other's story is arguably a way to "give back" the teller's conclusions. In thinking about the digital storytelling, and "reading" the digital stories, of the women we have worked with, we want to suggest that these modes of self-

expression and processes of storytelling might similarly offer a space for representing to the Other, and to the self, the ambivalence and contradiction that can characterize the interminable process of relating our inner reality and the external world (Winnicott 1971). Neema's shifting narratives, and Faribah's surprising and even contradictory combination of images and voiceover, each complicate notions both of the unitary subject who can tell a coherent life story, and of the transparency of that story for the reader or viewer. And yet, as in free association, which requires faith in language but also demands that we notice its limitations, it is precisely the undermining of narrative coherence, both intentional and accidental, that offers these and other participants the possibility of self-expression as a method for working through complex experiences of ambivalence, power, and loss.

Put differently, alongside the complex meanings made and resisted in these particular digital stories, and personal narratives in general, there is the important question of what we use story to do. Pitt suggests that we consider curricular experiences and objects, not primarily in terms of their content, "but rather as a method for observing how we experience ourselves in the world" (Pitt 2003, 89). Following Pitt's lead, we might ask: What is the use of the story? How do the dynamics at stake in narrating the self allow us to observe our experience in the world? As researchers engaging in narrative inquiry, it may be that we need to follow the story, not as a vessel of meaning, but as a practice that illuminates the complexities of the storytelling subject and her relation to her own experience.

In his provocative descriptions of the infant's early researches into and negotiations with the external world, Winnicott (1971) suggests that rather than encountering the truth

about the world, a task which is interminable and never complete, the best we may do, to begin with, is find and create useful objects. Winnicott writes about the transitional object, often in the guise of a well-loved teddy bear or blanket, as what we see of “the infant’s journey from the purely subjective to objectivity...of this journey of progress toward experiencing” (1971, 6). The parent makes an agreement with the baby, Winnicott says, not to force differentiation between primary creativity and objective perception of the transitional object by asking, “Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?” (12). This allows for a neutral area of experience in which the child gets to have the illusion that external reality corresponds to her own capacity to create. This “transitional space” (64), in which transitional objects do their work, lies “between the inner reality of an individual and the shared reality of the world.”

In the same way, we might understand the story or narrative not primarily in terms of its accuracy or authenticity in representing experience, but as an intermediate area of experience in which the story we tell can contain both what we know and what we imagine or do not yet know. Put another way, we might understand the story as a space in which the storyteller risks her or his connection to the world by both finding and creating useful objects – in this sense, it is up to the researcher never to ask “is this the truth, or did you make it up?”

Two questions we asked our participants to think about in the story circle and in the scripting process for their videos were, “Why tell *this* story?” and “Why now?” Sometimes we don’t know the answer to such a question; sometimes the answer, whether explicitly articulated or not, is that we do not choose which story to tell so much as the story chooses us. Sometimes the story we end up telling is not the one we began with.

And sometimes we just don't know where to begin. No story tells everything. But some stories cannot be told at all, because we do not (yet) know them. Perhaps the ambivalences, contradictions, concealments and tentative beginnings we read in, or into, Neema's shifting narratives and Faribah's contradictory digital story are born of an unconscious, paradoxically *unprepared preparedness* to tell – without telling all – that Winnicott names the “secret self,” for whom it is “*joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found*” (1963, 186; original italics), and which Pitt (2003, 83) summarizes as the “need to communicate ... countered by the equally pressing need to defend against communication.” Winnicott might say that as storytellers, both Faribah and Neema are finding ways to make their not-quite-asked questions, and the selves that are not-quite-asking them, a little bit accessible, not for the researchers, and not for the audience, but for themselves.

### ***Conclusion***

In her work on “a narrative approach to development,” Rossiter (1999, 69) opines that development is better understood inductively *from* stories rather than by applying theories *to* what we observe. This may be so, but in a sense even an inductive understanding is grounded in one or another “theory” or principle or way-of-reading, however multiply informed that theory may be and whether or not we are even aware of it. Nevertheless, Rossiter's idea seems to resonate somewhat with Hunsberger (1992, 85), who understands the work of engaging with others' narratives as feeding “a continual impulse toward making sense, unity, and ... integrity in our lives” both during the act of reading itself and in the belated, *nachträglich* understanding that follows.

As transitional space, the digital story may allow us the experiences of beginning to find and create objects without the demand to distinguish between them. More importantly, as researchers, in our engagement with and interpretation of these digital stories, we can resist seeing them simply as transparent representations of a subject's experience or life and instead try to bear witness to the ways in which they are also testaments to the unknowability of the self and the (im)possibilities of self-representation.

Alongside the tensions between what we express and what we know, and between what we know but cannot express, and between what we express without knowing we are expressing it, there is another tension between the necessity, indeed the compulsion, to tell stories and the insufficiency of the story itself – the impossibility of ever telling the whole story. The unconscious dynamics at stake in storytelling remind us that the narrative itself is both a path toward knowledge and a resistance to it. This conception of narrative, as not only incomplete and partial but powerfully resistant to the demand to fully know (or transparently represent) the self, has implications for both our thinking about the work of narrative inquiry and our conceptualization of the function of story for both teller and listener.

Indeed, these impossibilities similarly apply to the research story we tell here. For even as the complexities of the stories we discuss in this paper might open up the possibility for their narrators of representing the not quite fully representable complexities of the self to the Other, as that Other – the researcher – we each must acknowledge that our own investments and resistances are inevitably also (re)presented in our own always-incomplete readings of the stories.

While the storyteller can never tell the whole story or perhaps even the true story of herself, we are convinced that the act of telling *one* story remains powerful, often transformative, and fundamentally helpful. Indeed, it is only in telling one story that we can go on to tell another, and another, and another, and in the telling work through the complexities of being our selves in a world that is not us. As in free association, wherein "words fail in so many ways, even as they may urge us along to notice just that" (Britzman 2006, 27), it is precisely the impossibility of storytelling – the incoherencies and ambivalences – that offers us the possibility of a space where we can work through complex experiences, both found and created.

### *Notes*

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- i This study was generously funded by the Canadian Council on Learning.
  - ii The names of all participants in this study have been changed to protect their identities.
  - iii However ubiquitous the idea of “the personal” may have become of late in academic work (Kadar, 1992), to a degree it still resides in the hinterland of research, its inclusion requiring justification, and the care not to let sentiment overtake trustworthiness (Spigelman, 2001, 63). In a sense this is because the personal is still often understood as diametrically opposed to the professional, the public, the academic; it is in the domain marked as feminine and as such a counterpoint to the masculine (or masculinist) framing of intellect, judgment, research, etc. So it is perhaps a little curious that the women in the digital storytelling workshops, who are predominantly from cultures in which traditional understandings of femininity (are



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seen to) prevail are also, frequently, reluctant to speak aloud of their personal lives, memories, difficulties and so on. It seems to have something to do with the perception that *as* women the kinds of stories they tell are, de facto, unlikely to be valued. Many of them say that they haven't told these stories in private either.

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