SPREADING THE WORD:
TRACING THE AFFECTIVE ECOLOGY OF DIGITAL ORAL STORIES

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This project explores the potential of creating, sharing and listening to oral stories online to open affectively charged spaces for listening across difference. While scholars have explored the potential of more visual forms of new media, podcasts and other oral storytelling forms have been largely under theorized (Edmond, 2015). With its wide influence and popularity across several platforms (radio, podcasts, apps), the storytelling project StoryCorps provides a useful case study to analyze various modes of producing and circulating personal narratives and to examine how these narratives operate within larger discursive structures surrounding difference. Whereas difference is often deemed a challenge to be overcome or a static component of identity to be acknowledged on a superficial level, drawing from Joseph (2017) this project uses difference as an oppositional term. Listening across difference means moving beyond including more voices to expose the power differentials between them and to demand equity. This project is significant because it highlights the boundaries and possibilities of storytelling as a way to connect with others. The boundaries remind us of the persistence of structures of marginality that limit the seemingly democratic practices of storytelling in a digital age; the possibilities gesture to the power of minoritized voices to disrupt entrenched narratives.

Drawing together recent work on affect from rhetorical studies, cultural studies and new media studies, this project uses textual analysis to trace the affective resonance of StoryCorps conversations shared online. Affect is a useful tool when analyzing the movement and potential of personal narratives across platforms because it provides a means of conceptualizing the non-causal dispersal of emotioned energy that is both virtual and material, that flows between individual and collective identities. Affective responses are not yet tied to larger ideological narratives. When listening to a stirring piece of music, for example, tears may begin to well in our eyes without us being able to

pinpoint a logical connection between the sound and the response it elicits. While reading online responses to StoryCorps pieces and talking to listeners, people repeatedly allude to that heightened affective resonance, that welling of the eyes, when they hear the crack in the storyteller's voice or the hushed intensity marking a shift in the narrative. I am interested in how this affective attunement morphs as these stories circulate online.

The forty-minute conversations may, but do not necessarily, generate a networked reaction where a moment of affective resonance in the story is distilled down and propelled through the various StoryCorps channels, through radio, podcast, and apps, creating emotioned patterns of response from users. In her discussion of the formation of digital affective publics, Papacharissi (2014) argues that affective processes online "mix fact with opinion, and with emotion, in a manner that simulates the way that we politically react in our everyday lives" (p. 27). Online storytelling, she notes, involves the mixing and convergence of disparate content through links and shares and likes "to affectively represent subjectivities" (p. 27). In a world in which we are increasingly able to tailor the technologies that surround us to echo back our own voices and worldviews, we seem less willing to slow down and listen deeply to the voices of those whose presence risk placing our tidy worlds into turmoil. The echo chambers that trap us often lead to myopic understandings of our past and present that mute competing voices. In this project, I look at StoryCorps initiatives featuring the voices of marginalized communities and how the materiality of the various platforms invites different forms of affective interactivity that either opens or closes possibilities for listening across difference.

Structure

This project uses textual analysis to map three intersecting StoryCorps platforms. I compare the types of narratives that appear on these platforms, the audiences that have access to them, and the reception to stories across platforms by analyzing online user comments and other digital means of response such as sharing, liking, and tweeting. In order to limit the scope of this project, I analyze stories from the following StoryCorps initiatives: Griot (archive of African American voices), Historias (archive of Latinx voices) and StoryCorps OutLoud (archive of LGBTQ voices). Analysis of each platform acts as a separate chapter:

1) *StoryCorps stories edited and broadcast through a partnership with National Public Radio's Morning Edition*. These short, professionally edited StoryCorps pieces often succeed in eliciting a strong affective response from listeners. My analysis of user responses online, however, suggests that listeners are more likely to assimilate the affective resonance of these stories into a preconfigured ideological landscape rather than create a rupture that opens space for questioning and change. The short highly edited clips crafted for mass broadcast largely focus on a harmonious and sentimental narrative closure that does not seem to provide enough context to alter beliefs and behaviors.

2) *The StoryCorps podcast*. The StoryCorps podcast spends more time providing context, follow-up interviews with participants, and highlighting some points of

unresolved tension. The podcast often ties clips from StoryCorps conversations to larger structural themes, drawing connections between various participant experiences and helping the listener see, or rather hear, patterns of systemic oppression. The medium of podcasting differs from both radio and visual forms of digital storytelling to engender unique types of embodiment. The portability of podcasts and apps enables an embodied experience of moving through the world enmeshed with the stories being told. The podcast, however, has a smaller listenership than the stories broadcast on NPR's Morning Edition, and because of its length is less likely to be shared and circulated online, limiting its potential reach.

3) *The StoryCorps Me app.* This app gives storytellers the greatest control over the narratives being recorded and published online. These amateur recordings often include awkward pauses and an aura of uncertainty. In contrast to the affective hit of the professionally edited StoryCorps segments featured on both NPR and the podcast, recordings from the app often generate discomfort as the difficult process of working through difference is made palpable. I am often the first or second person to hit listen to the uploaded recording, and thus the ability of these voices to spur deep listening among wider publics is highly unlikely. Still, I contend that the existence of the app, a technology that encourages the act of sitting together with a friend or family member to engage in these difficult conversations, facilitates a space of deep listening, even if that space only extends to the individuals who take part in the activity.

Through tracing the movement of personal narratives across various platforms, this study analyzes the relationality of listening, how we listen, and how this listening structures affective relations across difference. I analyze the significance of how the various StoryCorps affective ecologies operate to either open spaces for listening and dialogue around thorny issues of power and difference or displace such dialogue by foregrounding universality and harmony in a way that elides difference.

References

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