

### **The magic space.**

## **Once upon a time Intergenerational Storytelling and Mr. Neoliberalism**

Esther Uria-Iriarte<sup>a</sup> & Emilio Méndez-Martínez<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Educational Sciences, University of the Basque Country, Spain;

<sup>b</sup>Principality of Asturias Department of Education, Spain

### **Abstract**

This article is a story told to a young boy by his grandmother. Once upon a time, there existed a place where listening to stories was a way of life. This happened in all places around the world: Lakota and Navajo tribes of North America; Yoruba and Guji-Oromo in Africa; Estonian or Basque Country in Europe... But suddenly, the titan Mr. Neoliberalism displaced the elders: casting its shadow and silencing places. Economic production became all-consuming and human beings used almost all their energies pursuing it. And then, hope emerged as intergenerational performance. Some communities participating in this type of performance—Reminiscence Theatre and Verbatim Theatre, for example—recovered the collective power of storytelling to educate both the young and old about values, culture, identities and history ... Storytelling invites ways to know who we are, where we come from, and where we belong: storytelling as hope, storytelling as a dream, storytelling as a magic space where imagining other realities is possible.

**Key words:** storytelling, intergenerational performance, theatre, drama.

Grandmother. – Do you want me to tell you a story before going to sleep?

Grandson. – Will it scare me?

Grandmother. – No, of course not, sweetheart. It is just a story.

Grandson. – Well then, okay.

Grandmother. – Now, close your eyes. The story goes like this ...

### **... Once upon a time ...**

... human beings felt the need to understand their reality. To achieve this, they created paintings, songs, dances, rituals ... Once they discovered the spoken word, then stories emerged. Storytelling was born as a powerful means of communication. Human beings realized the power of their stories when they witnessed words being brought to the present, moments previously located in another time and place (Yılmaz and Cığerci, 2019). It was like performing magic! Stories held the accumulated experience of societies and passed on wisdom to future generations (Bettelheim, 2008).

It is impossible to know who was the first person to tell a story (Hutton et al., 2008). Possibly this person was a hunter, maybe a mother, perhaps a shaman. Pharaoh Khufu's children entertained him with stories, according to archaeological evidence (Hutton et al., 2008). This discovery establishes a storytelling tradition existing in Egypt, in 2560 B.C.E. These thousands of years since, storytelling between generations, grandparent to child, has been part of the daily life of us all. Mothers, fathers, and grandparents have continued to share stories with their families. Thus, storytelling has spread among traditions and communities, worldwide. Let's visit some of them, shall we?

In Judaism, storytelling has been historically present in all aspects of cultural life, from the rabbi's sermon to stories told in family environments (Gratch, 2018). In Arab culture it has been a millenary practice, centered on family. Stories have been traditionally passed down from grandfather to grandson, from uncle to nephew, and from mother to son (Sharpe, 2008). On the American continent, the Lakota people's stories forge paths towards peace and reconciliation, and strengthen the connection of the community with the land (Cornier, 2018). The Navajos, also, have told their experiences through storytelling and song. Like in most American first nations, their stories, spoke of the world's creation and instilled a strong spiritual connection between community and nature (Maryboy and Begay, 2000). In Africa continent, one of the Yorubas' principal activity has also been storytelling, which is usually shared after communal meals (Sharpe, 2008). The Guji-Oromo people of eastern Africa, have integrated "Duriduri" as storytelling that communicates skills, norms, and values held by their communities (Jirata, 2014). There, a child asks his grandmother, "Akko [Grandma], tell us a story" (167) and adults perform as storytellers, artists, performers, and educators.

On the European continent, storytelling has also occupied an important place. In Estonian villages, for example, storytellers were an elite group who shared stories and songs with fellow villagers, passing them down from generation to generation. In small Irish and Scottish communities, stories were always told in the evening, after daily work. There, townspeople congregated in the Seanachai's (storyteller) home to hear mythological stories or the goings on of neighboring towns (Sharpe, 2008). In the Basque Country (Spain), myths and legends have long been told featuring fascinating beings such as Mari (Mother Goddess) or Basajaun (Old Man and Lord of the Woods) (Ortiz-Oses, 2007).

Grandson. – Grandma, but why did people tell stories?

Grandmother. – "The real question may be how can one *not* tell stories?" (Hutton et al., 2008, xviii). I'm going to tell you a secret, darling ... A story leads one into a different state of awareness (Sturm, 2015), one enters a kind of trance by engaging the "as if" ... It is like entering a *magic space* between reality and fiction. This is what Turner (2017) called "liminal space", where you can play on the margins of what is structured and, there, imagine possible worlds. Do you realize that storytelling can make social transformation possible, through processes of empowerment and construction of personal and community identity? (Garlough, 2013). If you think about it, storytelling encourages family members to interconnect and, then, pass down these knowledge and values (Hutton et al., 2008; Jirata, 2014; Nava, 2017). "In Africa, when an old man dies, a library burns," said Amadou Ampaté Bâ, when UNESCO declared the African Oral Tradition to be an Intangible Heritage of Humanity (Castellano, 2019). In the many villages, you and I have been traveling through together this evening, the elders have long continued to be an authoritative people with valuable perspectives for solving community problems: elders of the Native American tribes, shamans of South America and regions of Russia, family patriarchs and matriarchs in Asia and Europe, mothers and grandmothers of the Jewish culture ... (Sharpe, 2008). In this space of intergenerational communication, new meanings were being built together that allowed for open processes of critical self-reflection and opened the imagination to consider other possible realities (Nava, 2017). As a consequence of these interactions, we build the *intergenerational self* (Fivush, Bohanek, and Duke, 2008). Darling, do you realize? When we tell of experiences, we build a nuanced perspective of our own past. When we listen to the experiences of others, we intermingle our own points of view, as a way to understand our own experiences (Fivush, Bohanek, and Duke, 2008).

Grandson. – I see! “We are who we are because of what we have experienced and what we have been told” (Fivush, Bohanek, and Duke, 2008, 131).

Grandmother. – Exactly! ... Everything has seemed to follow the logic of the stars ... the wind that crosses the forest, the incessant path of the river towards the sea ...

... **But suddenly ...**

... Western countries were being conquered, inch by inch, by the titan Mr. Neoliberalism coming to reign in most of them (Peters and Olsen, 2011). His empire sought to achieve *Homo economicus* (Foucault, 2004), based on belief in individualism, competitiveness, productivity, privatization, and entrepreneurship, all erected on the idea of a welfare society that was based on an alienating balance between the values of effort and leisure ... And finally, control (Foucault, 2004; Doherty, 2007). The obsession of Mr. Neoliberalism, enemy of Democracy (Pais and Costa, 2017), was determining “the way in which the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed” (Foucault, 1977, 341) to produce fast-working workers. Accordingly, Mr. Neoliberalism sought to strengthen individual identity—“being oneself”—and to favor *hyperconsumption* (Lipovetsky, 2007). This idea of individualism preferred that people personally consumed all they wanted, no longer living collectively. Consequently, the attractiveness of one’s individual identity, oriented to market thinking, was imposed on the collective imagination (Doherty, 2007), to the detriment of the collective. A strong wind brought a shadow and silence that slowly covered everything, year by year, almost without anyone noticing: as can only happen in stories. Everything which did not produce benefits was increasingly isolated, until it eventually disappeared. People stopped meeting together to tell stories and community elders became isolated, having been rendered useless within a system that weakened the intergenerational relations. Everyone was in a hurry without knowing why and, yet, nobody believed that they did anything without a reason behind it (Lambert, Wright, Currie, and Pascoe, 2016).

Years passed, and from his mountain, Mr. Neoliberalism realized the importance of storytelling in consolidating his empire. Could stories serve to stimulate the economy and spur any sale? Here, the titan had the help of the intelligent Madame Advertising, she became his right hand, providing her support to the established order. By the beginning of the 21st century, Madame Advertising was proving storytelling’s enormous importance in shaping people’s opinions. Storytelling generated magical realities, tapping the deepest desires of Madame Advertising’s vassals, in order to push them to identify with role models and accept her own protocols (Salmon, 2008). Madame Advertising immediately decided to recover the traditions of storytelling, which had been formerly bearing collective identities, but were now in favor of strengthening individual identities and, ultimately, were in the service of sales. Interest groups, close to Mr. Neoliberalism, also echoed the discoveries of Madame Advertising and appropriated storytelling. As Lori L. Silverman (a North American management consultant) stated in 2006, “NASA, Verizon, Nike and Lands End consider storytelling the most effective approach to business today” (Salmon, 2008, 34). Marketing expert Ashraf Ramzy declared that people do not buy products, but the stories behind those products. They don’t buy brands either, but the myths and archetypes that those brands symbolize (In Salmon, 2008).

Those times were dark for communities. Countries lost their way and, as a result, were being slowed to an unconscious inertia. People lived to produce things that strengthened a system that only served to produce more things (Lipovetsky, 2007). They did not have time to meet and tell stories, they became increasingly strangers to one another. The innate need to communicate emotionally was running the risk of being forgotten (Lambert et al., 2016).

Grandson. – But, Grandma, you said you would not be telling a scary story.

Grandmother. – It's only a story. Please don't worry.

Grandson. – Okay ... but does it all end well?

Grandmother. – Patience ... Now, where was I going ... Just when there seemed to be no hope...

### ... Then ...

... Like a flower pushing its way through concrete, the voices of our ancestors, silenced for so many centuries, began to re-emerge in people's minds. What new spaces could permit the young and the elders to meet (Gürgens, 2013)? Theatre was appreciated as being innate to storytelling and dramatic practice was known to be based on memory (Nicholson, 2012). Here was the possible solution! Theatre held potential for becoming a means to reacquainting community members with that weakened intergenerational self.

Different types of theatre were recovered: one of them was *Verbatim Theatre*, heir to the so-called documentary theatre. *Verbatim* based its technique on the power of the word: listening to stories, recording them, and selecting meaningful audio clips. Then, these audios were distributed among members of a theatrical cast who transferred the stories to the stage in the most literal way possible (Salvatore, 2018). Inspired by wise people like Brecht or Boal, Verbatim Theatre gave voice to groups normally socially silenced (Anderson, 2007). Its staging sought to make known each story, while safeguarding the identity of the storytellers. This allowed for completely free expression and offered prominence to the stories. Using this technique, several intergenerational performances resulted. *The Bridge*, performed between 1990 and 2018 (Goldstein, 2019), was a drama project that showed younger generations the history of the Australian working class, and analyzed past policies, while searching for new ones. Another experience was *Fiesta, Fiesta, Fiesta* (Villena, 2020), a Spanish play that analyzed the intergenerational problems posed by the educational system. All these pieces strengthened the intergenerational self as they restore the power of stories to create community.

Other spaces of remembrance continued to reemerge, including the Reminiscence Theatre (Pauluth-Penner, 2018; Prendergast and Saxton, 2016), where plays were developed from narrated and recorded memories of elder people. This type of theatre reformulated the stories of the elderly in a dramatized way, giving them greater meaning and recognition (Prendergast and Saxton, 2016). Appeared

Numerous Reminiscence Theatre companies were created: *Elders Share the Arts* (Binder, Chipking, Fogelman, Goldstein, and Lippel, 2013), *Stagebridge*, *Grandparents Living Theater*, *Footsteps of Elders*, *Extended Run Players*, *Encore Theater* (Davis, 2001), *Taiwanese Uhan Shii Theater Group* (Wang, 2006), and Silver Kite's Intergenerational Theater Company (2020). For instance, The London Bubble Theater generated intergenerational performance projects based on storytelling (Petherbridge and Kendall, 2012; Prendergast and Saxton, 2016). The first phase of one of its projects, *Grandchildren of the Blitz*, was to pair together young and elderly people and record these encounters. The children used tape recorders to collect the testimonies of the elder participants, which would later be dramatized. The gathered stories were personal testimonies collected on a website as a repository of elders' voices recollecting their wartime experiences.

These voice repositories are considered to be authentic memory museums, such as the one in Asturias (Spain), where stories, legends, romances, and stories of our own elders are collected (Museos Gijón, 2020). In the Basque Country (Spain) there is also a

voices museum that safeguards the heritage of Basque cultural memory. These voices, previously heard around a fire, are beginning to be carried in classrooms (Ahotsak, 2020). Yes! The intergenerational performance based on storytelling has a positive impact for the participating elderly, children, and adults (Petherbridge and Kendall, 2012). By representing the stories of their elders, young people gain a greater understanding of their past; and by being able to tell their stories, older people gain greater visibility within their community (Nicholson, 2012). In short, storytelling helps to strengthen the concept of community that is inherent to human beings, which consequently weakens individualism, a pillar of Mr. Neoliberalism's empire.

Do you realize, my darling, that today, in April 2020 and in the midst of the global crisis of COVID-19, these words: “when an old man dies, a library burns”, make more sense than ever? And don't forget the most important thing: one day you will be the old man who will tell this story.

Grandson. - But, grandma ... how does this story end?

Grandmother. - ... Ah, but now it is too late. Tomorrow, we will continue. Good night, darling...

*The boy closed his eyes, immediately fell asleep and began to dream. In one dream, he was in a voice museum, like his grandmother had described, on a school excursion. All his classmates listened to the voices of their ancestors and imagined, in great detail, each story behind each voice. Just before dawn, the boy dreamed that he was already in his school and all the students played together, acting out the stories they had heard.*

## References

- Ahotsak. 2020. Archivo oral vasco. Accessed April 1, 2020. <https://ahotsak.eus/spanish/>
- Anderson, M. 2007. Making theatre from data: Lessons for performance ethnography from Verbatim Theatre. *NJ*, 31(1): 79-91. doi:10.1080/14452294.2007.11649511.
- Bettelheim, B. 2008. *Psicoanálisis de los cuentos de hadas*. Barcelona: Crítica.
- Binder, R. O., I. Chipking, V. Fogelman, B. Goldstein, and A. Lippel. 2013. Learning by hearth: Intergenerational theater arts. *Harvard Educational Review*, 83 (1): 150–152. doi:10.17763/haer.83.1.r16186gr82t78471.
- Castellano, A. 2019. La voz de la memoria. *Aeda: Personas mayores y narración oral, un camino de ida y vuelta*, 77. Accessed March 27. <https://cutt.ly/RtHXMGo>
- Cornier, P. N. 2018. Storytelling and peace research. Storytelling and peace researching indigenous contexts learning the... *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 14 (2): 161–184. doi:10.13110/storselvesoci.14.2.0161.
- Davis, A. 2001. The time of our lives: International festival of reminiscence theatre. *Theatre Journal*, 53 (1): 155. doi:10.1353/tj.2001.0004
- Doherty, R. 2007. Education, neoliberalism and the consumer citizen: After the golden age of egalitarian reform. *Critical Studies in Education*, 48 (2): 269–288. doi:10.1080/17508480701494275.
- Fivush, R., J. Bohanek, and M. Duke. 2008. The Intergenerational Self: Subjective Perspective and Family History. In *Self continuity: Individual and collective perspectives*, ed. F. Sani, 131–43. Washington: Psychology Press.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. London: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. 2004. *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the college de France*.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Garlough, C. 2013. Savitri's stories and girl power: Rhetorical approaches to feminism(s) in Indian American... *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 9 (2): 143–68.
- Goldstein, T. 2020. The Bridge: The political possibilities of intergenerational Verbatim Theater. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26 (7), 833-839.
- Gratch, A. 2018. On legends of the Jews and Jewish stories of love and marriage. *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 14 (2): 280–286. doi:[10.13110/storselfsoci.14.2.0280](https://doi.org/10.13110/storselfsoci.14.2.0280).
- Gürgens, R. 2013. Art, age & health: A research journey about developing reminiscence theatre in... *Nordic Journal of Art and Research*, 2 (2): 244–266.
- Hutton, I., F. Joy, M. R. MacDonald, J. Sherman, S. Smith, and G. de Vos. 2008. Introducción. In *Storytelling: An encyclopedia of mythology and folklore*, ed. J. Sharpe, xvi–xxv. New York: Sharpe Reference.
- Jirata, T. J. 2014. An ethnographic study of storytelling for socialization of children in Ethiopia. *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 10 (2), 156–176.
- Lambert, K., P. Wright, J. Currie, and R. Pascoe. 2016. Embodiment and becoming in secondary drama classrooms: the effects of neoliberal education... *Critical Studies in Education*. doi: [10.1080/17508487.2016.1238402](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1238402).
- Lipovetsky, G. 2007. *La felicidad paradójica. Ensayo sobre la sociedad de hiperconsumo*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Maryboy, N. C., and D. Begay. 2000. The Navajos of Utah. In *History of Utah's American Indians*, ed. F. S. Cuch, 264–313. Utah: University Press of Colorado.
- Museos Gijón. 2020. Archivo de la Tradición Oral. Accessed April 1, 2020. <https://cutt.ly/xtHCLdS>
- Nava, P. E. 2017. Abuelita storytelling from pain to possibility and implications for higher education. *Storytelling, Self, Society*, 13 (2): 151–169. doi:[10.13110/storselfsoci.13.2.0151](https://doi.org/10.13110/storselfsoci.13.2.0151).
- Nicholson, H. 2012. The Performance of memory: Drama, reminiscence and autobiography. *NJ*, 36 (1): 62-74. doi:[10.1080/14452294.2012.11649555](https://doi.org/10.1080/14452294.2012.11649555)
- Ortiz-Osés, A. 2007. *Los mitos vascos. Aproximación hermenéutica*. Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto.
- Pais, A., and C. Costa. 2017. An ideology critique of global citizenship education. *Critical Studies in Education*. doi: [10.1080/17508487.2017.1318772](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2017.1318772).
- Pauluth-Penner, T. 2018. Moving forwards backwards: Exploring the impact of active engagement in reminiscence theatre. PhD diss., University of Victoria.
- Peters, M., and M. Olssen. 2011. Neoliberalism, higher education and knowledge capitalism. In *Neoliberalism and after? Education, social policy and the crisis of western capitalism*, ed. M. Peters, 41–74. New York: Peter Lang.
- Petherbridge, J., and D. Kendall. 2012. The process and impact of intergenerational theatre making. *Quality in ageing and older adults*, 13 (4): 301–06. doi:[10.1108/14717791211287002](https://doi.org/10.1108/14717791211287002).
- Prendergast, M., and J. Saxton. 2016. *Applied Theatre: International case studies and challenges for practice*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Salmon, C. 2008. *Storytelling. La máquina de fabricar historias y formatear las mentes*.

Barcelona: Península.

- Salvatore, J. 2018. Ethnodrama and Ethno-theatre. In *Handbook of arts-based research*, ed. P. Leavy, 267–287. London: The Guildford Press.
- Sharpe. 2008. *Storytelling: An encyclopedia of mythology and folklore*, xvi-xxv. Armonk: Sharpe Reference.
- Silverkite. 2020. Intergenerational Theatre company. Accessed April 12, 2020. <https://cutt.ly/yHC7aK>.
- Sturm, B. W. 2015. The "storylistening" trance experience. *Journal of American Folklore*, 13 (449): 287–304.
- Turner, V. 2017. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-Structure*. New York: Routledge.
- Villena, M. 2020. Realidad adolescente sobre un escenario. *El país*, January 18. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://cutt.ly/QtHVsmP>
- Wang, W. J. 2006. The subversive practices of reminiscence theatre in Taiwan. *Research in Drama Education*, 11 (1): 77–87.
- Yılmaz, R., and F. M. Cığerci. 2019. A brief history of storytelling: From primitive dance to digital narration. In *Handbook of research on transmedia storytelling and narrative strategies*, ed. R. Yılmaz, M. Erdem, and F. Resuloğlu, 1–14. Hershey PA, USA: IGI Global.