

A Place at the Hearth:
Storytelling, Subversion
and the U.S. Culture Industry

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Abstract:

With few notable exceptions, the U.S. culture industry has failed to acknowledge the legitimacy of adult performance storytelling since the art form's resurgence in the 1970's. This has occurred in large part due to the popular identification of storytelling with children and the concomitant Disney-fication of folk narrative, the fact of being a non-technological mode of communication at a time when media are increasingly technologically sophisticated, and the tendency of storytellers to eschew mainstream consumer culture. This marginalization of storytelling works to the advantage of the cultural hegemony, because storytelling is, arguably, the most potentially subversive of art forms, due to its emphasis on innovation, co-creation between artist and audience, and the ascendancy of the underdog.

This paper (1) explores the evolution and marginalization of adult performance storytelling in the U.S., (2) describes and evaluates the role of low-cost, low-tech storytelling in an increasingly profit-driven technological culture industry, and (3) outlines an alternative course for the future of adult performance storytelling that embraces both tradition and innovation.

The metaphor of the hearth is often used to convey the communication community that storytelling creates and reflects. If we were instead to use *hearth* to connote the mainstream entertainment community from which adult performance storytelling is generally excluded, this is one hearth at which storytelling deserves a place.

Introduction: The Singular Case of Spalding Gray

A man takes the stage in a reputable performance hall in a major American city at 8 p.m. on a Saturday night. He is dressed in an ordinary plaid shirt and corduroy pants. He sits at a plain wooden table adorned only by a portable cassette player and a notebook. For the next 70 or 80 minutes, he tells a story about raising children in the suburbs. Occasionally he flicks on the cassette player, and tinny music emanates, presumably from the machine's small speakers. His audience laughs, sighs, sobs and, finally give him a standing ovation.

The above description of a show in the 1990s featuring the late Spalding Gray differs from those of most adult storytelling performances in America in at least four crucial respects: (1) the advertised name of the art form; (2) the venue; (3) the publicity campaign; and (4) subtleties in content and performance style. Yet Gray, whose work was captured in mainstream films such as *Swimming to Cambodia* and *Gray's Anatomy* and who regularly performed on mainstream stages, self-identified as a storyteller--in stark contrast to, for example, the public radio star Garrison Keillor, whom the storytelling community embraces, but who does not call himself a storyteller.

Interestingly, neither the national storytelling community (that is, the 2,500 members of the professional organization the National Storytelling Network) nor the general public appeared to agree with him. Gray's one-time performance at the National Storytelling Festival was roundly criticized (e.g., J. Sobol, personal communication, April 22, 2005), and his death was, to my knowledge, not noted in any national storytelling publication. (In contrast, within the same year the passings of two "superstar" storytellers whose names few outside the community would recognize--Ray Hicks and Jackie Torrence--were celebrated with broadcast e-mails, memorial programs at festivals and articles in storytelling publications.) What is more, few if any of the major press obituaries that appeared after Gray's death in March, 2004, referred to him as a storyteller, but rather as an "actor," "performance artist" and "monologist, although the BBC did note that he engaged in storytelling as a young performer.

I open this discussion of the marginalization of adult performance storytelling in the United States with a discussion of Spalding Gray because he was a rare exception to what appears to be a virtually unwavering rule: Performers who identify with the storytelling community are not generally accepted in mainstream adult performance venues.

The paper begins with a brief definition of storytelling and a description of the central problem facing the storytelling community: that artists with extraordinary skill are virtually invisible to the U.S. culture industry. I then identify a number of contributing factors to the problem. They are: (1) identification of storytelling a campaign of education for both the storytelling community and the

general public; and (3) a folk art; (2) the nature of storytelling as an act of co-creation; (3) ignorance of the art on the part of the theater-going public, critics and theater owners, based, in part, on that of storytellers; and (4) the association with children promoted by a variety of forces.

The problem is by no means insuperable, as long as the will exists within the storytelling community to accept the challenge. Possible solutions include: (1) a rethinking of what is meant by adult storytelling performance; (2) a repackaging of certain types of adult performance storytelling to fit current modes of mass cultural production, reminiscent of the paths taken by country music and poetry; and (3) an educational campaign for both the storytelling community and the general public.

Finally, I rely heavily on personal interviews for this work, due both to the extraordinary access I was able to attain to major players in the storytelling world, as well as the fact that few storytellers or cultural critics have tackled these questions in their written work. The topic is a critical one for the continued health of the storytelling community. Yet it is in some respects the proverbial elephant in the living room, which everyone notices but no one cares to acknowledge.

A brief introduction to storytelling

The word *storytelling* is commonly employed to describe a range of activities including film directing, novel writing, legal argumentation and flat-out lying. Perhaps the best definition with respect to Storytelling Studies is offered by

the editors of a new academic journal that is attempting to define and distinguish the emergent field.

We would assert, not as an *a priori* assumption, but as a postulate for exploration, dialogue, and research, that storytelling is *not*, in fact, a product that exists authentically within the bounds of any technological extension of the human body and senses—though any media product can employ images and genre markers that have their basis in storytelling. Storytelling *is* a medium in its own right, an artistic process that works with what we may call the technologies of the human mainframe—memory, imagination, emotion, intellect, language, gesture, movement, expression (of face and of body) and, most crucially, relationship in the living moment—person-to-person or person-to-group. It is a medium that has played a fundamental role in the evolution of these human body/mind-technologies; and it is a medium that continues to carry a fundamental charge for developing and for maintaining persons and cultures within their human element. (Sobol, Gentile, Sunwolf, 2004, p.)

In keeping with this description, storytelling author and coach Doug Lipman, a former member of the Board of Directors of the National Storytelling Network, identifies five primary characteristics of storytelling activities: words, imagination, non-verbal behavior, narrative and interaction (StoryDynamics, 2002).

Storytelling, therefore, is generally understood within the field to be a particular form of performance art that is distinct from others that may employ narrative, such as theater or dance, and a use of narrative that differs from filmmaking or fiction-writing. Despite these common characteristics of storytelling events, however, the field is anything but monolithic. As Sobol (1999, p. 2) notes, the practices of its purveyors "cover a wide range of performance conventions--from a variety of ethnic traditional storytelling styles, to stand-up comedy, to theatrical impersonation, to autobiographical performance art, to oral interpretation" Nevertheless, "these contemporary performers share in the

invocation of ancient traditions and roles as a common signifying framework"
(Ibid.)

These ancient traditions and roles date virtually to the dawn of humankind. The earliest storytellers were believed to be individuals describing their own activities, perhaps to the rhythm of their work, with a musical or other rhythmic accompaniment (Sawyer, 1942/1977). As the human brain and experience grew, people began to look around themselves for inspiration and narrated the activities of other humans, as well as animals and, eventually, the unseen spirit world.

Gradually, with the increasing complexity and specialization of human society, a professional storyteller, variously known by such terms as *griot* (West Africa) and *seanarchie* (Ireland), evolved as the keepers of the community's history, genealogy, traditions and, in these pre-literate cultures, as the repository of "the culture's accumulated knowledge, . . . specialists, technocrats of that culture . . . accorded all the prerogatives and respect of a sacred functionary" (Sobol, 1999, p. 2).

It is important also to note that the segmentation of culture into work and play, information and entertainment (a distinction that is once again blurring in our time), was as yet not as salient in these early societies. Thus the same storytelling material, indeed the same event, could be employed as entertainment, character education and history lesson. As we shall see, the similarities between the early uses of storytelling and those in our own time has had major ramifications for the art.

With the development of the printing press and the subsequent Enlightenment-based privileging of rationalism and empiricism, the oral tradition of which storytelling was a part declined. It was no longer necessary, nor practical, to rely upon the memory of a single individual or individuals for the collected wisdom of a community. By extending the capabilities of the human body, technology superseded the need for face-to-face communication of information and ideas, particularly among the educated elite. The oral tradition survived, but it was relegated to those who were not given the opportunity to benefit from the written word. That is, it was the purview of the uneducated masses--and children. As we shall see, the repercussions of this marginalization of oral narrative are still very much in effect.

Although British teacher Marie Shedlock laid the foundation for a storytelling revival in libraries and schools in her country and in the United States at the turn of the 20th century (e.g., Smith, 1988), the present revival of storytelling owes its beginnings to the folk art movement of the late 60s and early 70s, when folk dancing, music and other cultural artefacts enjoyed a resurgence as an antidote to the social and cultural upheaval of the previous decade.

Today, while performance storytelling is largely featured at rural festivals, the medium is also used to great effect by practitioners in non-entertainment venues. In the same way that storytelling played a part in the regeneration and maintenance of community in pre-literate societies, it is back at work as a mode of organizational and community development, healing and motivation. The

success of these applications of storytelling may be a factor in the art form's failure to achieve recognition as a popular adult art form.

The problem

Storytellers are not, by and large, starving artists. According to a recent National Storytelling Network survey, 24 percent of member/respondents expect to gross more than \$26,000 from storytelling in 2005 (National Storytelling Network, 2005a). What is more, many of those who are not retired also work full- or part-time in education, library science, medicine, business, bereavement, community development and other fields in which they can use their storytelling skills. In fact, it is possible that storytellers, given the growing recognition of the instrumental aspects of the art, have slightly better career prospects than other artists, the acceptance of therapies that employ dance or poetry notwithstanding.

Interestingly, storytelling in the widest sense of the term, as narrative art, is flourishing, as long as it is either a) created by multiple artists or b) called by a different name, such as rap (L. Niemi, personal communication, May 10, 2005). Yet those who are most deeply involved with the field readily acknowledge that all is not as it could be. In reference to the U.S. culture industry, many feel as if they are "outside a community knocking on the door and asking to come in" (G. Ducey, personal communication, April 28, 2005), or that, at best, storytelling has reached a plateau.

I have always suspected that . . . performance storytelling was at the very best stagnant, or maybe even decaying. I've been with it 30-some years, and the energy around performance is less than it was before. I think that the battle to win credibility hasn't been won;

the battle to win recognition and awareness hasn't been won. We're still fighting the perception after 32 years that it's a folk activity, a children's activity. We're still fighting those myths. And audience-building is still in many ways difficult. (J. N. Smith, personal communication, April 21, 2005)

There is also, Smith adds, an emotional issue for storytellers, the feeling that if they love and respect their art, why doesn't everybody else? Self-esteem is an issue as well, that is, the idea that "I'm doing something that's important; I want others to think it's important too, and they don't in many ways, and therefore I'm less than I want to be and my work is less than it can be."

These challenges make it more difficult not only for professionals to build satisfying careers, but also for the art form to grow and sustain itself.

The movement has passed its 30th year, at least according to the Jonesborough nativity calendar. Saturn has made a full transit in this corporate lifetime. In Erikson's human developmental model, the storytelling world in the United States is moving through young adulthood (with its defining conflict between intimacy and isolation), and starting its turn towards middle adulthood (and its defining conflict between generativity and stagnation). Storytellers and storytelling audiences are aging, too. We are beginning to think more urgently about legacies, about leaving structures in place that will continue the work in succeeding generations. (Sobol et al., 2004, p. 4).

Why is it that most American adults would not dream of attending a storytelling event unaccompanied by young children? Why is storytelling not a staple of night clubs, top-flight theaters, or the media? Why is there only one living American storyteller who comes close to household name status--Garrison Keillor--and he does not even market himself as a storyteller?

This paper seeks to identify some contributing factors to the marginalization of adult performance storytelling in the mainstream U.S. culture

industry. They are: (1) identification of storytelling as a folk art; (2) the nature of storytelling as an act of co-creation; (3) ignorance of the art on the part of the theater-going public, critics and theater owners, based, in part, on that of storytellers; and (4) the association with children promoted by a variety of forces.

(1) Identification of storytelling as a folk art

Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people; it includes both the form and content of these traditions and their style or technique of communication from person to person. Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples. (Brunvand, 1978, p.).

As stated above, the current U.S. revival of storytelling was part of the larger canvas of the folk arts revival in the early 1970s. Thus the primary venue for performance storytelling is the outdoor folk festival, dozens of which take place throughout the country every year. These festivals may highlight storytelling (e.g. the Illinois Storytelling Festival) or showcase it among other folk arts (e.g. the Florida Folk Festival).

The National Storytelling Festival, founded in 1973 in Jonesborough, Tennessee, is the largest and longest-running event of its kind, drawing more than 10,000 people to the tiny pre-Revolutionary War town the first weekend of October. The festival is owned by the International Storytelling Center, a not-for-profit advocacy and educational organization (ISC), with a portion of its proceeds going to its sister organization, the National Storytelling Network, a professional organization (NSN). A spot as a mainstage performer is by far the most prestigious and highly sought-after gig among members of NSN.

By most accounts, it was the National Storytelling Festival that jump-started the storytelling revival (e.g. Smith, 1988; Sobol, 1999). Yet, Smith says, the festival was never intended to be the model for performance storytelling. The Southern Baptist tent-revival environment simply suited the tastes and pocketbooks of the rural East Tennessee population. So, apparently, did the downhome style of telling, the suspender-and-bowtie personas of the most popular tellers, and the G-rated content of the stories, all of which contributed to a homespun, and to some tastes saccharine, atmosphere reminiscent of an idealized, pre-industrial America. In fact, *Homespun* was the title of the 1988 storytelling anthology edited by Smith. In addition, festivals take place during the daytime hours as well as the evenings, making them generally family fare.

Thus, one of the most significant aspects of the identification of storytelling as a folk art is that it is understood by the general public--as well as by many storytellers--as morally uplifting and, in some respects, sacred.

All along the way there has been a tender protectiveness in the community towards the sacred quality of innocence, so evident in the quasi-religious rhetoric and atmosphere of storytelling events—yet a corresponding and contradictory quality of missionary zeal, of proselytizing fervor. How to spread the Gospel of Storytelling without corruption...? (Sobol et al., 2004, p. 4)

In fact, "sacred storytelling" is a time-honored Sunday morning tradition at the national festival.

This salutary quality of storytelling is in evidence not only in performances and in community applications of storytelling, but also in the growing body of literature in the field, with titles such as *Peace Tales*; *Spinning Tales*, *Weaving Hope*; *The Healing Heart for Families: Storytelling to Encourage Caring and*

Healthy Families; and *Story Medicine*. This is not a new phenomenon in publishing, however. As early as 1936, Benjamin (1968) famously reported that the storyteller is "the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself," and that storytelling is on the decline "because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (87).

Storytellers ignore this moral imperative at their peril. When a promising young storyteller recently used a four-letter word in a performance at the Southern Order of Storytellers Festival in Atlanta, the hosts of the festival received an inordinate amount of complaints of "crudeness" from storytellers and audience members alike (J. Gentile, April 19, 2005; T. Miller, April 25, 2005). Twenty years earlier, Spalding Gray received the same reception for saying the same word at the National Storytelling Festival.

It is worth exploring the fact that much of the emphasis on didactic, life-affirming and culturally restorative (as opposed to edgy, meta-cultural, self-reflexive, ironic) storytelling lies with the tellers themselves. Roslyn Bresnick-Perry (personal communication, March 10, 2005), for example, who has been honored for her work by the Library of Congress, among others, bemoans the irrelevance of much performance storytelling, seeking, instead, "meaning in stories, not just entertainment." Similarly in her "Storyteller's Prayer" (1987, xxxv), Peninnah Schram, who has been awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Storytelling Network, emphasizes the sacred communal role of the Jewish storyteller:

... God of the Universe, listen to my heart
and my voice as I stand before You, wanting to tell *our story*.

[italics mine]
Make my voice expressive and clear so that the *collective wisdom of our people can reach the hearts of those who listen*. [italics mine] . . .
Allow me to *assume this responsibility as my forebears did before me--to continue to retell our stories* [italics mine]. ...
Make me worthy to be a storyteller of our Jewish people.

Unlike the artist who believes that she is making a personal statement—or simply doing a job—Schram recognizes that as a Jewish storyteller, she is not merely telling her own story, but rather "our" story. Storytelling, that is to say, is serious business.

Storytelling is messianic, a heady feeling (G. Ducey, personal communication, April 28, 2005), and it is little wonder that many storytellers take upon themselves a mandate to speak for and inspire humanity rather than merely to entertain. Yet this is a tall order for popular artists and makes it difficult for them to sell their services in a culture industry that tends to promote sex, violence, sex, profane language, and sex.

Another aspect of the identification of storytelling with the folk art movement is its independence from technology. Despite the prominent display of digital storytelling at the 2005 Media in Transition 4 conference, for many in the professional storytelling community, digital storytelling, which is designed to be enjoyed in isolation, constitutes a virtual contradiction in terms.) Benjamin (1968) understood the reliance on technology as a sea change in the evolution of art. A non-technological, or in the case of storytelling almost seemingly *anti-*technological stance is contrary to the direction in which the arts, indeed, the entire society, is moving. Sobol (1999) notes:

With [the] ever-increasing technological extension and corresponding cultural fragmentation, storytelling has come to appear childish to many. The technology it embodies is primitive. It is apparently irrelevant to a hypervisualized electronic environment and might therefore be expected to be devoid of cultural magnetism (p. 2).

While Sobol goes on to state that in fact, storytelling took root in this environment, the explanation also serves to explain why it has not flourished in a larger range of venues and to more sophisticated theater-going audiences.

The irony or, depending on one's point of view, tragedy, in the homespun, folk art approach to storytelling is that most folklorists agree that we are all, Northerner, Southerner, educated, illiterate, techophobe and techie alike, "the folk" (e.g., K. Dietz, personal communication, June 15, 2005). That is to say, the urban legends that flourish on the Internet, rap music, and a friend's recipe for hash brownies are all examples of folklore. A direct link to the mores and fashions of small-town America is not a necessary qualification.

Equally important is the argument that folklore reflects both communal tradition and individual innovation. Folk narratives have survived over the centuries and across the planet because they have incorporated contemporary elements while at the same time maintaining the basic theme of the tale. It is this ability to assimilate aspects of dominant culture that have enabled the folk narrative to serve as an effective instrument of change (e.g. Korman, 1984).

Along these lines, Riesman et al. (1961) observed that the storyteller is traditionally an innovator or rebel, a marginal individual of the type drawn into roles such as that of shaman or sorcerer. Reflecting this association, there is a dual nature to stories, which are just as likely to promote rebellion as

socialization. This balance of tradition and innovation is evident even within the stories themselves, which tell listeners: You must be like so-and-so if you are to be admired and to live up to the noble traditions of the group. At the same time, however, they are also told that there have been people like so-and-so who broke the rules and not only survived, but are still talked about today. By highlighting such examples and images and implanting them directly in the minds of listeners, storytelling is potentially the most subversive of art forms.

These subversive aspects of folklore are mostly overlooked in today's storytelling climate, which favors instead a high "nice quotient" (G. Ducey, personal communication, April 25, 2005) both in terms of content and general behavior, as opposed, for example, to stand-up comedy.

It's always been my view that the difference between stand-up and storytelling in the broadest outline is that good stand-up requires an adversarial relationship with the audience. That's the core and center of the dangerous play. In the best cases, it is filled with dangerous delight. Storytelling, at least as I see it in a contemporary sense, is a more comfortable setting, a festival, let's say, where the audience is self-selected, knows what it's getting, or thinks it does. Storytelling is anything but adversarial. It comes close to reinforcing a sense of comfort and an assumption about the world as we see it in the U.S. that things are okay, and they're going to work out just fine.

If I were to say one issue [within storytelling] that troubles me more than any other, that's the one. A clown for children is someone who's pure, with the pure goal of entertaining and making little and bigish ones laugh, and perhaps encouraging them to do their own kind of laughter and play. The jester, however, in the court, certainly was good at doing that, but the jester's real job was to tell the truth to the king, but to tell it to him in a manner that would be sufficiently veiled and symbolic, so that the king was never personally embarrassed. That's a dangerous game and a good game for adults.

Folklore includes "dangerous" elements, of course, but they have been largely eliminated in favor of niceness.

Thus the problem that the folklore label poses for storytelling, Dietz (personal communication, June 15, 2005) argues, is that the storytelling community has allowed the homespun, 19-century image of folklore to define it, "so that it shapes our thinking about how we relate to storytelling, how we present it at festivals, and what we think about the audience that attends. In short, it narrows the field."

Subversion is also indirectly related to the concept of co-creation, discussed below.

(2) The nature of storytelling as an act of co-creation

Perhaps the most singular feature of storytelling as an art, or at least that which most significantly distinguishes it from its descendant classical drama, is *co-creation*, sometimes discussed in terms of the elimination of the fourth wall, that is, the imaginary separation between audience and action that makes the audience members passive, invisible observers to the activity onstage, thereby discouraging intimacy (Harley, 1996, p. 130). A storyteller does not memorize her performance. Instead, she must be attuned to the audience's needs and responses in order to shape the performance accordingly. For this reason, most tellers prefer to work with the house lights up, in order to attempt to gauge the audience's response.

Co-creation has obvious benefits for a performance. Because it varies from night to night much more significantly than theater, a show is truly made to order for each audience and thus, at least in theory, has a greater chance of success. Co-creation also keeps the material fresh, again, in theory, for the teller. With co-creation, a reciprocity exists that feeds the work of the storyteller at the same time that it entertains and enlightens the listener (Martin, 1996).

Freshness and malleability may also work as detriments, however. First, as noted, a storytelling audience does not sit in darkness, as it would for a play or stand-up comedy act. Thus an audience member who listens to "adult" material might feel uncomfortably exposed, or even implicated. Whereas books, movies and the Internet are private spaces in which to explore our "shadow," by its nature, storytelling is a decidedly public venue. (J. Sobol, personal communication, April 22, 2005). This is one reason that storytelling festivals have become largely "laughoramas" comprised of crowd-pleasing tellers (G. Ducey, personal communication, April 28, 2005) rather presenting difficult issues with depth and insight.

In addition, the intimacy that the storyteller creates may have the "familiarity breeds contempt" effect, that is, if you're just like me, why should I pay \$50 and hire a sitter to see you? Thau (personal conversation, May 10, 2005) notes that audience members in her Moth storytelling series routinely go out for a drink or dinner with the tellers following performances.

Finally, as noted above, storytelling is among the most potentially subversive of art forms, due to the implicitly or explicitly radical messages of

most stories. Of course, the arts in general have long been held to be vehicles of opposition. Art, by its nature, is anti-bourgeois and subversive (e.g., Marcuse, 1978). The challenge to the hegemonic structure is not based on the content of the work, but rather, as Marcuse noted, its "aesthetic dimension," which is constituted by the aesthetic form. He writes:

In a narrow sense, art may be revolutionary if it represents a radical change in style and technique. . . . Beyond this, a work of art can be called revolutionary if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and the rebelling forces, thus breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality, and opening the horizon of change (liberation).

In this sense, every authentic work of art can [conceivably] be called revolutionary, i.e., subversive of perception and understanding, an indictment of the established reality, the appearance of the image of liberation (xi-xii).

Marcuse goes on to say that the more obviously political the work, the less, in fact, its potential for real political praxis.

Added to this potential for revolution on the part of art is the concept in linguistics of the performative speech act, as described by Austin and, later, Searle (Petrey, 1990). Speech act theory, put simply, discerns the varying effects on reality of different modes of speech. Austin distinguished speech acts into the *constative* and the *performative*, the former being a description, such as, "They are man and wife." Conversely, a well-known Western example of a performative speech act is, "Let there be light," an utterance that decidedly effects change. Similarly in philosophy, Peirce's () theory of abductive reasoning, with its emphasis on the possible, opens avenues for change.

This display of individual power, both on the part of the teller, who captivates her listeners by creating an entire world in their heads, and the hero of the story itself, may be as unsettling as it is stimulating.

Storytelling has got to be dangerous. It questions, and it's living on the edge. It opens up the possibility of seeing things in more than one way. And like Pandora's box, once the mind is open to new possibilities, it's very hard to close it again.

Storytelling can upset the status quo, because here you thought the world was in such and such a way, whatever it might be. Or that this is right and that is wrong, that things are either black or white. But what happens in the story is that there are not only shades of gray, but blue and green and pink. You just turned everything topsy turvy. You just turned my whole vision of this world upside down (C. Ayvar, personal communication, June 15, 2005).

The revolutionary potential of storytelling is even more salient when taking into account the makeup of the National Storytelling Network. Sixty-five percent of respondents to the NSN membership survey were white women aged 46 and above (National Storytelling Network, 2005a). Whether or not white middle-aged women are more apt to respond to surveys in general, the feminization and Anglocization of storytelling are factors not wholly tangential to this research, particularly when the word *power* is frequently used in reference to storytelling by storytellers with little or no power of their own (G. Ducey, April 28, 2005).

(3) ignorance of the art on the part of the theater-going public, critics and theater owners, based, in part, on that of storytellers

What is a successful storytelling performance? How do we evaluate it? Another contributing factor to the marginalization of adult performance storytelling is the lack of critical standards, the fact that no established canon

exists for the study of storytelling, either as an art form or a profession, that there is no means of articulating a coherent critical perspective. Despite more than 200 storytelling classes and programs in higher education loosely assembled into the emergent academic discipline of Storytelling Studies (situated in departments including Communication, Education, Library Science and Theater), and despite the best efforts of the National Storytelling Network and its members, the process for learning about storytelling and becoming a storyteller is decidedly vague.

I think one of the problems we may be facing is that you wouldn't think about going into law without understanding some of the Hebrew or Roman or Greek law. You would never think about hanging out a shingle and saying I'm a lawyer without this rich array of learning. Spalding Gray studied for years before he had any success in New York theater. Musicians go to Berkeley, or Juilliard. But we have no process of learning and refinement and study. So everybody in the storytelling community, or most everybody, in the absence of this infrastructure, are teachers. Some move to storytelling out of theater, some from library work. And they hang up their shingle.

I wonder if we've tried to build this art form on castles in the air. There isn't any infrastructure; there isn't a taproot that goes deep. Is it possible that the absence of this platform, this taproot, this foundation, also gives us reason to think that you can't build something majestic without a good solid foundation? (J. N. Smith, April 21, 2005).

Smith attributes this dearth of standards to the membership organization around which the storytelling movement has evolved, which, having emerged from the cultural revolution of the 1960s, favors a decidedly egalitarian approach. By embracing a wide breadth of talent, he contends, the storytelling community confers credibility and credence to performers who do not necessarily deserve them. The result: When unschooled audience members hear a less talented

teller, they perceive that maybe all storytelling is like this, that, in fact, they dislike not this particular storyteller, but storytelling in general.

"How do you not say one is better than another?" Dietz asks.

Because we work in a democracy, we do not have a guide, we do not have a map of the field so that people can understand performance storytelling and applied storytelling. We have no way to guide people, except through our folklore, which is to say, you have to be in the in-group to take advantage of the cultural knowledge transmission (personal communication, June 15, 2005).

The lack of objective performance standards in storytelling speaks to the very nature of the medium. Scholars have long spoken of the human being as *homo narrans*, the storytelling animal. That is to say, the narrative impulse is perceived as nothing less than one of the primary characteristics that distinguishes human from non-human. Applications of storytelling in healthcare, business, community-building and other fields, which the National Storytelling Network strongly support, are predicated on the notion that "everyone is a storyteller." The logical extensions of this premise are, first, that no one needs to be trained as a storyteller, and, secondly, that if everyone is a storyteller, how can anyone's storytelling be criticized?

Unfortunately, this lack of measurable standards within the storytelling community is reflected in the reactions of audience members and critics. Michael Hall, artistic director of the acclaimed Caldwell Theater in Boca Raton, Florida, is no stranger to storytelling. While Hall is open to the idea of bringing in storytelling to his theater, he worries about ticket sales.

People don't understand storytelling or know what it is. When I brought Regina [Ress] here five or six years ago, I was very excited about the possibilities. And I was met with blank stares. People just

simply didn't know what that meant. They think of people sitting around a campfire, that it couldn't be a very important art form. What I did was I brought a group of people together from various organizations, thinking they might be able to book Regina and her program and they were somewhat responsive, and I did book a group for one of her Holocaust-themed stories. But there just was sort of a blank stare as to why this would be meaningful. (Personal communication, April 18, 2005)

This limited understanding, Hall explains, greatly restricts the number of reviews written about a performance, which in turns greatly restricts publicity. On the other hand, he notes, an intergenerational workshop that Ress facilitated was extremely successful. Community applications of storytelling generally fare much better than do performances in terms of bookings and audiences, due to the aforementioned instrumental benefits of the field.

Contributing to the confusion surrounding standards of storytelling, storytellers say, is the name of the art form.

When I think of a one-woman play or spoken-word art, I have different mental pictures than when I think of storytelling. I also think that storytelling is most often associated with a festival environment rather than legitimate theater.

I was recently in San Francisco and saw Brian Dennehey in a show called *Trumbo*. It was essentially Brian telling the story of the man, Dalton Trumbo, who was a screenwriter blacklisted in the late 1940's. Why was that not Brian Dennehey's storytelling, but rather a one-man theater program? Is it all in how we name things? (N. Kavanaugh, personal communication, April 23, 2005)

The question of naming comes up with some regularity in storytelling circles. The argument goes: If storytelling is perceived as an occupation for children, if it confuses potential audiences, and if it serves as a detriment to the growing legitimacy of the study of storytelling in the academy, why use it? We call our art

storytelling, others say, because that it is what we do. It is the tradition out of which we work.

This is a critical issue for the field. As Sobol et al. state: "Naming is a key to identity. The *logos*, or language core, of an organization, a movement, a discipline, or a publication, is also an essential constituent of its *mythos*" (2004, p. 2). The authors refer here to the distinction in academia between *storytelling* and *narrative*, but the same point can be made in regard to *performance art*, a term that appears more palatable for contemporary audiences than does *storytelling*.

Gentile notes that the work of "performance artist" Tim Miller appeals to a young, hip, urban crowd, hence the use of the identifying term.

He speaks about very contemporary issues: gay marriage, highly politicized work. He uses [theatrical techniques such as] nudity, but his work is predominantly narrative. My take on him is that he uses the term because it is less restrictive than saying *storytelling*. That denotes a certain limitation of style of presentation. Theater people assume it means drama. Performance, or performance art, gives him more freedom (personal communication, April 19, 2005).

In contrast, it is safe to say that most artists are proud to self-identify with their art form. For a field as tradition-conscious, if not -bound, as *storytelling*, this problem of the ascriptive characteristics of identity is no small crisis.

(4) *the association with children promoted by a variety of forces*

According to the National Storytelling Network, 35 and 12 percent of storytellers, respectively, count among their major sources of income the professions of education or library science. (Note: Questions allowed for multiple

answers.) Of those who primarily work with children when they are engaged in storytelling, 74 percent noted that their audiences were elementary school students; 42 percent said preschool.

It was only in the last two centuries that folk and fairy tales were considered to be the exclusive purview of children (e.g., Tatar, 2002). Until the early 19th-century publication of the Grimms' *Household and Nursery Tales*, for example, many of these stories were the soap operas and cautionary tales of their day. In the interests of German nationalism and the concomitant rise of the bourgeoisie, the Grimm brothers sculpted the stories they collected to reflect the values they wished to inculcate in the new order, including hard work and the triumph of good over evil, while deleting sexual references. (Interestingly, the the violence remained.)

When Walt Disney began to work with the Grimms' stories in this century, he further bowdlerized and infantilized them, with saccharine animation and music and, most importantly, watered-down content (Ibid.) . This is the legacy that Americans are left with today.

Now, although most professional storytellers refer to more authorized sources for their stories, the effect is largely the same. Both storytellers and storytelling audiences alike hold certain expectations for the genre that are difficult to overcome when attempting to reach out to an adult audience.

Some areas for exploration

My research has identified three main arenas in which the storytelling community can begin to address the difficulties that confront adult performance storytelling: (1) a rethinking of what is meant by adult storytelling performance; (2) a repackaging of certain types of adult performance storytelling to fit current modes of mass cultural production, and (3) an educational campaign for both the storytelling community and the general public.

(1) a rethinking of what is meant by adult storytelling performance

The definition of adult storytelling performance varies greatly, depending on whom you ask. As discussed, veteran storytellers Peninnah Schram and Roslyn Bresnick-Perry see a kind of mission in their storytelling; although their styles and material are quite different, they perform as representatives of the Jewish people. Linda Spitzer, born and raised in Orlando, Florida, considers classic folktales, told in a direct manner with little or no "edge" or "attitude," to be perfectly acceptable entertainment for most adult audiences (personal communication, June 10, 2005).

Sobol, however, takes a different tack. In order to be a functioning adult in society, he says, Americans are conditioned by the media to establish a distance,

a certain kind of ironic attachment from one another, from community, from the whole notion of community, from place. And those kinds of attitudes--they are more than attitudes; they're basic conditioning to the way our identity is expressed--those are really oppositional to the kinds of attitudes, the kinds of conscious orientations that storytelling demands and asks of us as audience members (Sobol, 2005).

As stated previously, Sobol also acknowledges "a kind of circumspection or shame about the really gritty processes of being an adult in our culture" that can flourish in isolation, but not in a well-lit hall or folk festival.

To its credit, can encompass all of these views (K. Dietz, personal conversation, June 15, 2005). It can be both sacred and profane, clean-cut and dangerous, just as can theater or stand-up comedy. The challenge for storytelling is to embrace all the archetypes that comprise it, that is to say, not only that of the hero, but also the shadow. Tellers who use adult language and subject matter are cautioned, as are all performers, to know their audiences. But storytelling must be marketed and promoted both to community centers and houses of worship, and also to nightclubs and other venues that confront the shadow, following the examples of theater, country music, and stand-up comedy. The question is how.

(2) a repackaging of certain types of adult performance storytelling to fit current modes of mass cultural production

As previously mentioned, storytelling is generally considered to be folksy, uplifting family fare, , which works well for some adult audiences. At the same time, in the eyes of the culture industry, anything perceived as "good for you" must necessarily taste bad. Presumably, one way to appeal to a larger adult audience is to repackage the storytelling event, introducing edgier environments and "shadow" content typically associated with other forms of contemporary popular entertainment. Several examples of this repackaging exist, including fringe festivals, performance art, and the Moth, an "urban storytelling" project.

Fringe festivals, which are less popular in the U.S. than in Canada, generally take place in metropolitan areas such as San Francisco, Philadelphia and Minneapolis. These venues offer storytelling as just one among a range of art forms, including dance and music. Some of the same tellers who perform at more traditional festivals also do the fringe circuit. Storyteller Antonio Sacre, a favorite at the National Storytelling Festival, dramatically alters his program for fringe festivals to appeal to younger, more culturally sophisticated adults (L. Niemi, personal communication, May 10, 2005).

As a reflection of the growing popularity of fringe storytelling, the National Storytelling Network has scheduled the Lyceum, a fringe experience for its 2005 annual conference that advertises:

Twelve storytellers--from well-known to emerging--randomly chosen from an open application process, each has 55 minutes to perform whatever they wish: new, old, untried, true, traditional stories or giddy explorations of form and content. Think of it as an experiment on the fringes or a chance to discover the "next big thing!!" (National Storytelling Network, 2005b)

Not only do fringe tellers use different material, but they also often change the name of their art from *storytelling* to *performance art*, which affords them access to adult venues, along with the ensuing perquisites. We have seen above some of the ramifications of the term *storytelling*. Changing one's name, whether in the arts (e.g., Brooklyn-born Allen Konigsberg to Manhattanite filmmaker Woody Allen; Bronx-born Bernard Schwartz to Hollywood star Tony Curtis) or not, is a well-known technique for Americans who wish to rise in class and to escape a somehow shameful identity. Just as taking on a Gentile moniker

opened professional and social doors for Jews in the 1950s, so does using a name other than *storytelling* open doors to urban venues for storytellers today.

Case in point: Tim Miller, who markets himself primarily as a performance artist, was recently nominated for a Drama Desk Award for Best Solo Performance (alongside Billy Crystal, Jackie Mason and others) for his show *US*, in which he employs costume--and, significantly, the lack thereof--show music, and other theater conventions to tell the story of problems he and his gay lover are facing due to their inability to marry. Miller uses the term *performance art* to describe his highly politicized work.

By terming his work performance art, Miller ensures that it will be received by venues that fall within the radar of reviewers, which, as we have seen, is imperative for building audience. Miller's touring schedule includes, in addition to college campuses where self-identifying storytellers also perform, performing arts centers, theaters and art museums.

Urban storytelling, as created and exemplified by the wildly popular Moth in New York City, is a different kind of event that is nonetheless highly relevant to the present discussion. The Moth's storytelling slams and "mainstage events" feature unknown or relatively unknown, performers, along with a celebrity guest not necessarily known for live performance, such as musician Joe Jackson, director Doug Liman, screen actor Teri Garr and athlete/author Jim Bouton. Professional storytellers are not discouraged, but none, to my knowledge, has performed at one of the nightclubs or other venues in which Moth shows are mounted. The emphasis is on articulate, people who have something to say on a particular theme that is chosen either by the producers themselves or by a guest "curator" (L. Thau, personal communication, April 23, 2005).

A recent Tuesday night show at a Moth production held at Crash Mansion, an invitingly louche nightclub in Lower Manhattan, drew in 300 fashionable and fashionably un-fashionable professionals, who sat in the dimly lit room smoking, drinking, eating, and volubly emoting. Started seven years ago in its founder's living room, the Moth's 2004 operating budget was \$395,000, nearly half of which came from its annual benefit, while the rest was grants, box office, individual contributions/memberships; "and other corporate sponsorship/support/ training work." (Ibid.) The Moth is currently considering a national tour in 2006-07 and has received offers for a book and television show.

Despite the fact that the content of the show I attended was sometimes decidedly vulgar, the audience loved it, and the electricity surrounding the Moth is contagious. It is a viscerally different event than a family storytelling festival.

The Moth model appears to contradict the earlier statement that perhaps the familiarity of storytellers breeds contempt. Audience members deeply appreciate the sense of community that has grown around the shows due to the opportunity to socialize with the performers after the shows (Ibid.). However, while the model is an important one for the storytelling community to study, its "reality show" environment distinguishes it significantly from events that feature professional tellers.

The non-traditional presentations of storytelling discussed here--fringe festivals, performance art, and the Moth--share one important characteristic: They appeal to urban professionals aged 25 to 44, a cohort that wields vast influence over the entertainment industry. (Interestingly, although just 10 percent

of the U.S. population falls into the 18-to-24-year age range (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005), most of popular culture is directed to this group. In contrast, as we have seen, nearly two-thirds of storytellers responding to the National Storytelling Network survey are white, female, and age 46 or older. The average age for festival attendees, although not systematically surveyed, appears to be within that range.

A brief discussion of country music will prove instructive here. Similar to the audiences for non-traditional storytelling, the primary market for country music is comprised of people in their mid-20s to late 40s (Shusterman, 2000), and that market is significant. In 2000, the country music industry had 10.7 percent of the U.S. music market share, with revenues more than doubling since 1990 (Country Music Association, 2001). More radio stations offered country music than any other format, and 22 of those rated #1 in the top 100 markets were country stations. Moreover country stars also had lucrative corporate endorsement deals, such as Tracy Byrd (Wrangler, Justin Boots), Sammy Kershaw (Ford trucks), Lyle Lovett (Texas Tourism) and LeeAnn Rimes (Red Lobster, Samsung).

The increasing popularity of country music is based on several factors that resonate for storytellers. First, there is the overall aging of America, which turned country "from an eccentric, minor musical genre into a mainstream popular force," (Shusterman, 2005, p. 77) while rock and rap music typically appeal to younger audiences. Second, there is Americans' growing interest in ethnic identity and multiculturalism, which conversely, strengthens white pride.

Where ... can one find a specifically white American ethnicity expressed in a distinctive, ethnic popular music? Country music is the obvious answer. Like rap and reggae, it provides a complete cultural style replete with distinctive dance, fashion, food, and behavioral conformity that highlights nonwhite ethnicity (p. 78).

Shusterman goes on to explain that country style not only excludes non-white minority interests, but also those of bland, white-collar corporate America.

The third causal factor Shusterman cites for the ascendancy of country music is the dearth of musical alternatives in the music of the 1990s. The creativity of rock music, he suggests, was on the wane, while rap, techno and heavy metal were "very unappealing" to most Americans (p. 79). Equally significant is the industry's willingness to embrace new trends, such as music videos and crossover artists.

There is, however, another contributing factor to the success of country music that speaks directly to the heart of the storytelling community: expressiveness. Shusterman argues that although intellectuals dismiss country music as "vulgar kitsch" (p. 85), its scholars and singers believe that its famous, or infamous, displays of emotion secure its authenticity, and thus its success.

For most Americans, not only are country music's words easy to understand, but its truths are easy to believe, and its feelings easy to share and accept as real. More philosophically interesting, however, is that it is easy to accept the truths and share the feelings because one gets the words, while one believes the words because one gets the feelings (pp. 79-80).

...In short, while country's purest music and authentic love confessions still involve artificial light, smoke-polluted air, and a commercial audience, they convince by their contrast to worse impurities and by their emotional appeal to our need to believe, an unavoidable need that pragmatism recognizes when it defines belief as an essential (though not necessarily explicit) guide for action (p. 92).

In another echo of storytelling, Shusterman notes that part of the appeal of country music is the blurring of art and life, as when George Jones sings about his well-publicized bouts of drinking or Garth Brooks about his marital infidelity and reconciliation. Interestingly, the ratio of personal and family memorate performance to that of folktales is growing, for example, at the National Storytelling Festival, while personal memorate is the only genre employed by Moth tellers and the more popular form at fringe festivals.

As with country music, ethos and pathos are both deep, rich currents within the rhetoric of storytelling. The field must never lose its appeals either to a higher purpose or to emotion. Nevertheless, it can incorporate the techniques of the U.S. cultural industry that can promote and strengthen it.

The term *culture industry* was coined by Frankfurt School theorists Adorno and Horkheimer to underscore the highly instrumental commercialism of mass culture under late capitalism (Edgar & Sedgwick, 2002). There are storytellers who eschew this commercialism and will continue to do so. I argue, however, that in order to achieve national prominence and recognition, storytelling cannot remain largely a not-for-profit field. As Dietz pointed out with reference to content, the storytelling community has no reason to be monolithic.

Fortunately, the tectonic plates of the storytelling world are already shifting. As noted above, the National Storytelling Network has included fringe telling to in its 2005 conference. It has also invited a gifted young storyteller in her early twenties onto the Board of Directors. Two years earlier, the International Storytelling Center received \$1 million from the Krispy Kreme

Doughnuts foundation for operational expenses, a new theater, and funds to encourage storytelling in education. Soon a small Krispy Kreme store sprang up just off Main Street in Jonesborough, Tennessee, a block away from the Center, the National Storytelling Network, and their Festival grounds. While many in the old guard sniffed in disdain, those festival goers with no such feelings about the purity of storytelling flocked toward the inviting scent, a mixture of doughnuts, perhaps, and money.

The change in focus is perceived as a "devil's bargain," however it is achieved.

We know that there are a couple of ways to purvey one's wares as performers for adults and artists. One is to present something which is unusual, and ask for a stage or a forum in which to show this unusual thing. The other is to cleave to existing models and to say, "we're really like that, actually; there's not so much difference between us." Both of those present the devil's bargain. The first presents the devil's bargain because those that might hire storytelling artists for adults are less likely to hire them if it represents such a departure and audiences wouldn't be interested. The second is that in crafting a show for an existing audience, one automatically crafts it as artistically palatable or at least artistically familiar (G. Ducey, personal communication, April 28, 2005).

At one time or another, most successful artists have had to wrestle the Devil of commerce in plying their trade. Yet despite the sacrifices, extraordinary art is produced.

(3) a concerted campaign of education both for the storytelling community and the general public.

How does an artistic community educate itself and others about its art?

The national storytelling community has done a poor job of articulating the difference between storytelling as it is generally perceived and storytelling as it is practiced both inside and outside the community (G. Ducey, personal communication, April 28, 2005). One way to remedy the situation is by exposing storytellers and non-storytellers alike to basic principles of narrative, folklore, performance and storytelling, as well as to more challenging forms of the art, notwithstanding the fact that, as has been demonstrated, the effort may receive a cool reception.

At present, the National Storytelling Network are doing a remarkable job of peer education, with its *Storytelling* magazine, mailed free to all of its members, as well as its annual educational conference. Regional organizations such as the Florida Storytelling Association also hold conferences, while individual tellers such as Doug Lipman and Susan Kaplan crisscross the country for small-group workshops and produce informational books, e-mailings and other products. Meanwhile, the International Storytelling Center is doing public advocacy on behalf of the field. Much of this work is of the highest quality.

Serious artistic training, however, does not take place in annual conferences or out of books. It requires time, patience, and, if not a formalized education, then an apprenticeship with more advanced practitioners. At present, East Tennessee State University, which is closely associated with the National Storytelling Network, is one of less than a handful of programs that offers a graduate degree in the field.

I recommend a mentoring program through which experienced tellers can be paired with promising colleagues in exchange for NSN benefits, such as free membership and conference fees, and a small grant from the organization. As an adjunct to this valuable work, a concerted e-mail and media campaign is needed, designed to address the above-mentioned issues, while, to a lesser extent, scholarly publications such as the *Storytelling, Self, Society: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Storytelling Studies*, which is sponsored in part by the organization, can solicit relevant articles. NSN and ISC can also host a series of discussions, in person and on the Internet, with the purpose not only of initiating professional standards and a healthy respect for innovation, but also of addressing why these are vital to the field. In addition, the growing number of storytelling classes and programs in higher education are equipped to play the same role, as can a concerted public relations campaign that highlights a broad range of storytelling styles.

In his discussion of Benjamin's famous essay "The Storyteller," Shusterman notes, "what ultimately generates the story's conviction is its capturing the listener's interest" (Shusterman, 87). To complete the classic communication triangle, storytellers require story listeners. This essay has sought to determine some causes for the stagnancy of adult performance storytelling, and well as to offer some possible directions for the future of the art. Storytelling is, at its core, about transformation, the subversion of the status quo.

When the storytelling community can transform itself to meet the needs of

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twenty-first century audiences, it will live up to its age-old legacy, if not happily ever after, then at least on a more satisfying and fruitful path.

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Biography

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