STORYTELLING: A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH

By

Lindsay M. Brown

B.A., University of Toronto, 1986
B.F.A., Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1989

**THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS**

**IN THE SCHOOL
OF
COMMUNICATION**

©Lindsay M. Brown
Simon Fraser University
June 1997

All rights reserved. This work may not be
reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without permission of the author.

APPROVAL

NAME: Lindsay Brown

DEGREE: MA

TITLE: Storytelling: A Cultural Studies Approach

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

CHAIR: Prof. William Richards

Prof. Gail Faurschou
Senior Supervisor
School of Communication, SFU

Prof. Pat Howard
Supervisor
School of Communication, SFU

Prof. Jerald Zaslove
Examiner
English and Institute for the Humanities, SFU

Date: 13 June 1997

PARTIAL COPYRIGHT LICENSE

I hereby grant to Simon Fraser University the right to lend my thesis, project or extended essay (the title of which is shown below) to users of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users. I further agree that permission for multiple copying of this work for scholarly purposes may be granted by me or the Dean of Graduate Studies. It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Title of Thesis/Project/Extended Essay

Storytelling: A Cultural Studies Approach

Author: _____
(Signature)

Lindsay Brown
(name)

June 13, 1997
(date)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a phenomenon in which a number of storytelling practices appear to be enjoying a "revival:" these practices include public storytelling performances, oral history projects, and a vast and growing popular literature which either incorporates or analyses "traditional" stories. At the same time, the thesis describes the current widespread appeal of the *idea* of storytelling and all it signifies. Its research question asks why storytelling is currently the object of so much interest and desire. Little academic work on these twin phenomena has thus far been undertaken. This thesis serves in part to provide a preliminary introduction to this popular but little studied area of interest.

The conceptual framework for this discussion is based on interpretations of the cultural and political character of narrative and speech as elaborated in recent traditions of communication, critical and literary theory. A close analysis of the concepts and categories by which westerners currently grasp the idea of storytelling is used as a case to examine these ideas.

Through this analysis I show that the modern relation to storytelling is in part a relation to the idea of *tradition*. Many Westerners now look to the modes of communication of "traditional" cultures and knowledge systems in order to construct meaning as well as social and collective relations in new ways. The paradoxes and tensions of this relationship are many. As the thesis shows, certain uses of storytelling participate in the reification, appropriation and commodification of the speech of past traditions as well as of contemporary 'marginal' cultures in what is a nostalgia industry, satisfying a contemporary longing for a simpler and a sanitized past. The thesis also describes other uses in which hearing and telling stories is a method of building historical consciousness in community

and of imagining an alternative position—the past, other cultures—from which to critique the social formations of the present. The attempt to revive storytelling can be seen as part of an ongoing struggle to find practical tools for living in an always changing contemporary context.

The thesis addresses the question of why practices of storytelling have regained popularity in the west over the past three decades. I draw on the work of Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, literary and critical theory to interpret the growing appeal of these narratives and to speculate on their cultural and social meanings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As with the old stories, this thesis is the product of more than one voice. Research for this thesis involved conversation with hundreds of people, only a fraction of whom I can mention here. To all those who have offered their thoughts and insights on the subject of storytelling, thank you.

Above all, I would like to thank Gail Faurschou, without whose very generous, painstaking help and friendly support this unwieldy project would not have been undertaken and this thesis would not have materialized. I am grateful for her friendship, her engaged and sustained interest in my work, and her unfailingly creative suggestions.

I would also especially like to thank everyone at the Vancouver Society of Storytelling, especially Helen O'Brian and Jill Baird, for generously sharing their knowledge, insight, support, and love of storytelling with me. Ginger Mullen, Teresa Vandertuin, Doug Waite, Kim Fedor, Mary Moltman, and Linda Lines have all been delightful and helpful friends over the two years in which I researched this thesis.

I am indebted to all those storytellers who inspired this project and who showed so much enthusiasm for it. I am particularly grateful to the wonderful storyteller Dan Yashinsky for his thoughtful correspondence, humour, friendship, and his provocative writings on the storytelling art. It was Dan who first introduced me to Hodja Nasrudin stories in Whitehorse during the 1995 Yukon International Storytelling Festival. I would like to extend a very special thank-you to Meryl Arbing and Lorne Brown, both of whom offered so many valuable thoughts and suggestions for this thesis and whose work on *Appleseed Quarterly* provided me with a wealth of material on storytelling. Joan Meade very kindly took me in during my research in Fredericton in 1995. I would like to thank Karyn Whitfield of The Storytellers School of Toronto for her encouragement and for first suggesting I talk to Dan Yashinsky about revival storytelling and its history in Canada. Jan Andrews in Ottawa, Melanie Ray in Vancouver and Kate Stevens in Victoria were all generous with their time and their encouragement and I am grateful to them all. I sadly regret that the First Nations storyteller Tom Heidelbaugh is no longer alive to share stories with children at risk from poverty and violence in Seattle and Tacoma, Washington. Conversations with Tom in 1995 first convinced me that storytelling was a valuable thing and worthy of more study than it has received. To these and all the other many storytellers who have spoken to me about stories and storytelling, thank you.

Special thanks goes to Diana Ambrozas, friend and one-person lending library, endless source of delightful and obscure novels, for our many conversations about narrative and cultural theory. Many of the ideas in this thesis were refined through conversations with Diana. I also owe Sourayan Mookerjea a big thank-you for his generosity with his extraordinarily wide-ranging knowledge of narrative, and for his

excellent cooking. Thanks also to all my other colleagues at Simon Fraser who offered encouragement for this project and whose thinking contributed to it in so many ways: Wreford Miller, Janisse Browning, Stuart Poyntz, Ron Vida, Silva Tenenbein, Bev Best, Dorothy Kidd, and William Santiago-Valles.

I would like to thank Pat Howard and Alison Beale for their support throughout my time at Simon Fraser and for their interest in this project. I am especially grateful to Tony Wilden for many years of friendship and challenging talks and for his faith that the strategic use of language can help us get somewhere in the struggle against myth.

Lucie Menkveld, administrative assistant, and Neena Shahani, grad secretary, have been extraordinarily helpful with employment and administrative support, and I appreciate their consistent good humour and patience.

Thank-you to everyone at the Banff Centre for the Arts and all the participants in the 1995 Artist's Residency "Telling Stories/Telling Tales," especially Donna Brunsdale, Su Ditta, Lisa Brenneis, and Rodrigue Jean, all of whom tell stories in their own sophisticated, experimental, and comedic ways. I am very grateful for their continuing friendship, encouragement, and conversation. I would also like to acknowledge the material support of the Banff Centre during a phase of the research for this thesis.

I owe a big thank you to all those old friends who have shared their stories and their reflections on stories with me over the years. I am particularly indebted to Lani Maestro and Stephen Horne, who have been so formative of my thinking and so kind in their encouragement. As my teachers at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and during our years of work together on *Harbour Magazine*, with all its stories, Stephen and Lani helped lay the seeds for this project. Dagmar Dahle, too has been a caring and supportive friend over many years.

I especially appreciate the support of my family during my research, particularly my parents, Alan and Alix Brown, and my sisters, Julie and Alison. My lifelong friend and favourite aunt Vicky Husband provided me with constant refuge in her house in the woods of Vancouver Island during the writing of this thesis, and Patrick Pothier, her partner in life, offered me his delightful company and stories of *his* storytelling uncle, Frankie Pothier, in pre- and post-war southern Nova Scotia. Last, but not least, I am affectionately grateful to my grandfather Harold Husband for his support, his extraordinary storytelling talent, and his observation that my generation's stories have no point and no ending.

Finally, I am very grateful to Andrew Carlisle for his constant support and encouragement, his always original and incisive comments on storytelling, the many hours he spent editing this work, and his ability not only to listen, but to hear.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval ii
Abstract iii
Acknowledgements v
Table of Contents vii

Introduction 1

1. Storytelling as a Contemporary Phenomenon 6

2. Storytelling: Current Categories of Storytelling 23
    - Is all narrative storytelling? 24
    - Traditional storytelling 28
    - Revivalist storytelling 38
    - Everyday storytelling 71

3. Theories of Narrative: A Review 82
    - Formalism, structuralism, narratology 87
    - Hermeneutics 96
    - Marxist literary analysis 100
    - Narrative and the philosophy of history 106

4. Long Ago and Far, Far Away: Nostalgia, Storytelling, the Past and the Cultural Other 119
    - A Cautionary Tale: The NSA 121
    - The heritage industry 125
    - Tourism and authenticity 138
    - Authenticity and nostalgia reconsidered ..... 145.
    - Commodification: the selling of the story 150
    - The Professionalization and Reification of Storytelling 157

5. Conclusion 165

Appendix A 185
Appendix B 192

Bibliography 196

Introduction

Once upon a time... it seemed telling a story, listening to a story, or knowing how to distinguish a story from other forms of prose or poetry, ritual or event was a relatively simple and unselfconscious matter. But as with any popular practice, the moment we begin to think about the significance of storytelling as a cultural and social form, the instant that we begin to raise questions about its definition, distinctiveness and conditions of possibility, all that was solid about the concept-object-event *storytelling* seems to melt into air.

The stationery of the storytelling organization for which I work bears the motto *The oldest profession is not what you think*. Indeed, storytelling evokes the idea of an age old tradition, and part of its current appeal is attributable to its status as an ancient art. However, at the same time it is clear that *storytelling* describes a collection of forms and practices that are radically heterogeneous. It is something for which the English language, unlike Gaelic, French or Italian, has only one common word. We use the word *storytelling* to signify what are, and were, vastly different practices and activities in a wide range of contexts. This is echoed in a report titled *Storytelling in Ireland: A Reawakening*:

> The word *storytelling* can mean many things. Each person holds a different idea of what it is. In order to make an adequate evaluation of the state of storytelling, one must establish a working definition for oral narrative. This must be sufficiently specific to provide a workable meaning but broad enough to encompass the wide range of activities individuals identify as storytelling.[1]

This thesis is an attempt to chart an emerging category called "storytelling," which includes a variety of ideas, activities, objects and events under its name. By historicizing the

[1] *Storytelling in Ireland: A Re-awakening*. Verbal Arts Centre, Londonderry, 1995, 1.3, p. 1-2

category of "storytelling," that is by showing what it means for us in our own time, we may begin to understand why storytelling—the image of storytelling as well as the actual activities to which it refers—has captured public attention. While much has been written in the field of cultural studies about 'the pleasures of the text,' almost nothing exists on the pleasures, effects or phenomena of contemporary oral storytelling or on the appeal of the image of the storyteller. Outside of a few notable essays, for example Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" and Trinh Minh-ha's "Grandma's Story," storytelling as a primary object of analysis appears to be absent from cultural studies. Perhaps the disciplines, being textual, prefer a textual (in the sense of written) object, and it is interesting to note that of all the storytelling activities in my list below, it is the printed incarnations of oral narrative which have received by far the most academic attention. While nowadays everything can be deemed a 'text,' in certain important ways my object of study is non-textual. In an apparent paradox, by writing this thesis I am committing to print an account of my own experiences of oral narrative, experiences that were sought in many instances as an alternative, among other things, to fixed forms of communication such as print or electronic media. In a further paradox, in writing this thesis I am not merely observing a new category called storytelling; I am also inevitably participating in the construction of that new category.

Storytelling Returns?

Some have claimed that the recent popularity of storytelling amounts to a "revival." But *popularity* and *revival* are not identical. The question raised here is whether storytelling is the revival of something that has been lost, or that has *almost* been lost, or whether it is the cloaking of something new in the costume of the old? What kind of relationship does contemporary storytelling have to its historical antecedents? Is this a revival of an 'art form' or of a common genre of communication? What does it mean to call a widespread expression of interest a *revival*, and if one can come up with a definition of revival, do recent attempts to resuscitate storytelling amount to one? To answer such questions it becomes important to attempt a

definition of storytelling, as well as a definition of narrative, since the two terms are increasingly conflated. These questions prove very difficult to answer. In the end it may be possible only to speculate on the reasons for storytelling's current popularity, a popularity that is itself puzzling. Moreover, while storytelling activities are objectively on the rise, we will see that it is the *idea* of the ancient art that is finding the most noticeable public favour.

Revival or not, there can be no question that storytelling is popular and becoming more so. As I will discuss below, one finds frequent reference to storytelling in newspapers, magazines, the electronic media, arts council and social planning reports, cultural theory, night course catalogues, popular magazines, university calendars, advertising, on the dust jackets of novels and in countless other places. It is as if storytelling has just been discovered. One can also find ample evidence of the idea of storytelling's revival, renaissance, reawakening, rebirth or return. In June of 1996 *The New Yorker Magazine* ran an article entitled "The Seductions of Storytelling: Why is narrative suddenly so popular?" which referred repeatedly to the "*extraordinary revival of storytelling*" and claimed that the ancient form was reappearing in unlikely places.[2] Internet searches under the heading "storytelling" bring up hundreds of citations, such as a fairly typical web page titled "What's the buzz about storytelling?" that begins "The story once again is in fashion... ." In 1990, *American Demographics* magazine, a bible of marketers and advertisers, published an article titled "The folktale market" alerting business readers that storytelling had broken out of the education market and had begun to appeal to age, class and social groups it had not previously attracted.[3]

Another sign of storytelling's popularity is an increase in activities that fall under the general category of storytelling: formal storytelling performances, new applications of storytelling in diverse fields, and a noticeable upsurge in oral history projects. These activities

---

[2] Bill Buford "The Seductions of Storytelling: Why is narrative suddenly so popular?" *The New Yorker Magazine* June 24 - July 1, 1996, Special Narrative Issue, p. 11-12

[3] Blayne Cutler, "The folk tale market" *American Demographics*, 12, October 1990, pp. 47-9.

have been on the rise for over two decades, but there has been a striking increase in North America since about 1989. The phenomenon appears to be exactly paralleled in Western Europe. A 1995 report of the Irish Verbal Arts Centre found that "[t]here has been a marked increase in storytelling and general activities related to oral narrative over the past ten years, and a notable increase of activity over the past five years."[4]The above-mentioned *New Yorker* magazine article agrees that it all happened about five years ago, glibly remarking that the modernist anti-narrative attitude collapsed around 1989, along with all sorts of other things, notably the Iron Curtain.[5] The recent increase in activity has produced new forms and contexts for storytelling. New forms and contexts in turn necessitate new terminology. For example, in terms of storytelling performances a distinction between *traditional* and *revival* (or "*revivalist*") *storytelling* is becoming common. The latter refers to storytelling that is learned outside a continuous oral tradition and is performed in new contexts.

In the chapter that follows I will describe in more detail examples of storytelling as an increasingly popular phenomenon. First, however, it should be made clear that storytelling is more and more often targeted toward adults. For some time—approximately two centuries—storytelling has in the West been associated almost exclusively with children. During most of the twentieth century, storytelling as an art was maintained in the industrialized nations only by schools and children's library programmes, "where the flame was kept alive for all those years," as professional storytellers often say. However, it is as an adult form that storytelling is gaining a new visibility.

In the second chapter I make an extended attempt to reveal the many meanings of the term storytelling in the present context. The category *storytelling* is broken down into subcategories, and is also contrasted briefly with the term *narrative*. The third chapter provides

---

[4] p. viii *Storytelling in Ireland: A Re-awakening*. Londonderry: The Verbal Arts Centre, 1995.
[5] Bill Buford, "The Seductions of Storytelling: Why is narrative suddenly so popular?" *The New Yorker Magazine* June 24 - July 1, 1996, Special Narrative issue, p. 11

a brief review of the major strands of theories of narrative in an attempt to determine whether they yield the means to define storytelling or to understand its current popularity. Chapter Four undertakes an analysis of storytelling practices in terms of critiques of heritage, museums and tourism and of the problems of nostalgia, the search for authenticity, and consumption.

Chapter One

Storytelling as a Contemporary Phenomenon

Current interest in storytelling is manifested in numerous phenomena from festivals to fiction, from oral history projects to images of the storyteller in television advertising. The scope of these practices is so wide that some might argue to relate them to each other is to patch together a homogenous whole from a vast heterogeneous collection. The case could be made that these phenomena do not cohere under the category "storytelling," or if they do, that the category is too large to be meaningful. It is true that the category is large and its manifestations diverse. But the phenomena are, however inaccurately, regularly called "storytelling" by people engaged with them. For the purposes of this introduction, these activities will all be seen as part of a single, broad situation. Internal differences and contradictions will reappear later as instances of storytelling are examined in more detail, and we will at that time decide whether "storytelling" is a coherent category of activities or merely a floating signifier. Chapter One will attempt to give a working definition of the term storytelling so that differences among activities can be seen more clearly.

The Storytelling Revival

One of the most remarkable phenomena of the current interest in storytelling is the effort to preserve or revive the "art" or "oral tradition" of storytelling. Over the past few decades thousands of organizations have been formed with the mandate of bringing oral narrative to the public. I briefly describe a small number of these below.

Of the storytelling organizations formed to preserve and promote storytelling, the longest established and most active organizations are the National Storytelling Association (NSA) in the United States; Centre pour la Literature Oracle (Clio) and the French Storytellers Association in France; the recently formed Society for Storytelling in England; and the Scottish Storytelling Forum in Scotland.[6] The strongest "revivals" and the most structured movements are in the United States, France, Britain and, increasingly, Australia. Each of these countries has a history of storytelling activities going back nearly twenty years. In the U.S. the NSA marked its twentieth birthday in 1995. One or two rare organizations are substantially older, such as the National Story League in the U.S., which has operated continuously since 1903. In Canada, the eighteen-year-old Storytellers School of Toronto is one of the oldest of the Canadian storytelling organizations. Canada's first national association of storytellers, the Storytellers of Canada/Raconteurs du Canada (SC/RC), was formed in 1993 to link tellers and to speak for the storytelling art at the national level. Most of the organizations mentioned above hold annual conferences to bring storytellers, professional and amateur, together. Conferences tend to address such issues as funding, professionalization, audience development, ethics, copyright, cultural appropriation, and fees, and they usually offer workshops in the craft of telling as well. Several of the above organizations also produce their own storytelling festivals.

Since about 1975, storytelling festivals have proliferated across North America. The National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee and the Toronto Storytelling Festival were two of the earliest festivals to be founded on this continent, in 1973 and 1979 respectively. Festivals also began to appear simultaneously in Britain and Western Europe as well as in other parts of the world including Eastern Europe, Turkey, Japan, Australia and South America. "A quiet revival in storytelling has been going on... for at least half a century, but during the 1980's the revival produced an explosion of professional storytellers and storytelling festivals."[7] In

---

[6] *Storytelling in Ireland: A Re-awakening*. Londonderry: The Verbal Arts Centre, 1995. p. 9.
[7] Ruth Stotter, *About Story*, Oakland: Stotter Press, 1994, p.103

1989 there were 114 large festivals exclusively dedicated to storytelling in the United States,[8] and I estimate that the number has at least doubled since then. Storytelling festivals are increasingly well-funded by both government and private corporations. The best-funded event in Canada is the ten-year old Yukon International Storytelling Festival, with an annual budget of approximately two hundred thousand dollars obtained from the Yukon and federal governments, DuMaurier Tobacco and other funders.

Over the past decade, storyelling has slowly begun to win recognition from arts and community funding bodies. In early 1996, after four years of lobbying by the Storytellers of Canada/Raconteurs du Canada, the Canada Council finally agreed to award travel grants to storytellers. These are much like grants available to artists in other media. The new funding came a year after the creation of a unique arts category of "oral performance," a category primarily intended to support First Nations oral traditions. Non-native storytellers across the country successfully argued that the oral performance is not unique to First Nations and that other traditions of oral narrative should also be supported. The documented popularity of storytelling festivals was instrumental in winning this funding. Provincial and municipal bodies in Ontario, the Maritimes, British Columbia and Alberta have readily funded storytelling festivals. In the United States, the National Endowment for the Arts offers funding for storytellers under the general category of performing arts, and professional storytelling associations have been lobbying for a specific category for oral narrative performance. Storytellers are sometimes known as "traditional artists"—the NEA gives $10,000 fellowships to "master traditional artists." Periodically these go to storyteller musicians; on two occasions, in 1983 and 1994, they were awarded to storytellers .[9]

---

[8] Blayne Cutler, "The Folk Tale Market," *American Demographics* 12, October '90, p. 47.
[9] "Stories: a western storytelling newsletter", Vol. 8 No 2, Winter 1995

In addition to festivals, it is estimated that there are thousands of storytelling "circles," "swaps," or "guilds" in towns and cities across North America. These groups are often behind the founding of local festivals. Circles, clubs, swaps and guilds (the terms are usually interchangeable) are made up of listeners and amateur and professional storytellers who meet regularly to exchange stories and provide each other with support and criticism. Gatherings range in size from five to over fifty people and vary widely in their degree of formality. The Vancouver Storytelling Circle was founded in 1982 by Bill Richardson, now a well-known local writer and CBC radio broadcaster. In its early years, the group consisted of a small group of librarians, storytellers, actors and writers who had previously been working mostly in isolation and who wanted to practice their art in the company of others. The Circle now has a membership of about 140 people, though usually an average of thirty-five or forty people show up at the monthly Sunday night gatherings. A smaller group calling itself "Talespinners" also meets regularly in Vancouver, and a "multicultural storytelling" group also holds regular meetings to tell stories of immigration. New storytelling circles are being formed everywhere, even more quickly than new festivals appear.

The past fifteen years have seen a proliferation of storytelling schools, courses and workshops. In Canada, The Storytellers School of Toronto (TSST) has run courses in the art and technique of storytelling for more than fifteen years. The Vancouver Storytelling Circle has sponsored workshops for its members since the early eighties, and for many years two of its members have also taught storytelling courses as part of the University of British Columbia's Continuing Education program. But storytelling apprenticeship has not been limited to unaccredited storytelling schools, informal arrangements, weekend workshops taught by "professional storytellers," and community night classes. The early 1990's marked the institution of degrees in storytelling at major U.S. universities including Columbia University in New York. It should be noted that the art of storytelling has long been a part of the university curriculum in such departments as childhood education, library studies, theatre, and folklore. However, it is

now possible to "major" in storytelling at a growing number of schools, often on an interdisciplinary basis. Outside San Francisco, Dominican College's Certificate-in-Storytelling Programme offers an interdisciplinary storytelling bachelor's degree, incorporating courses in psychology, anthropology, folklore, literature and the performing arts, as well as specific for-credit storytelling courses such as "Advanced Storytelling", "The Arabian Nights," Fairytale - Symbols and Meaning in Our Lives," "Illuminating History through Storytelling," and "Telling Jewish Stories." The very first Master's degree specifically in storytelling—an "MA (Storytelling)"—was launched in 1995 by East Texas State University's graduate storytelling program, and in September of 1996 the University of Connecticut became the most recent North American storytelling programme to offer a new storytelling master's degree. Canadian courses in storytelling are offered at Trent University with Sean Kane, nephew of one of Canada's most well-know storytelling elders, Irish-born Alice Kane; Gail de Vos teaches storytelling at the University of Alberta; and Kay Stone runs a storytelling programme at University of Winnipeg. Full-credit storytelling courses are also offered by Ottawa and several other universities.

Storytelling can be heard and practiced regularly in cafés and restaurants in London, New York, Dublin, Glasgow, Toronto, Ottawa and numerous other cities. The active Toronto storytelling scene was born in the late 70's when storytellers, who had previously worked only in isolation, met to tell stories every Friday night in a café in what came to be known as the "1,001 Friday Nights," a tradition which has continued uninterrupted ever since. London's Crick Crack Club is a twenty-year old venue primarily dedicated to storytelling. In Vancouver in the fall of 1996 I attended an event at a Granville street café featuring well-known local storyteller Nan Gregory. After a performance by a "spoken word" poet and a reading by a short story writer, Nan told two traditional stories, a "jack" tale from the American South and a Russian Baba Yaga story. Storytelling and "spoken word" poetry have an unusual relationship, with different histories and aesthetics, but they are increasingly sharing time at public events. The popularity of "spoken word" and other oral performances is growing in urban centres and may not be

unrelated to the rise of storytelling, since both share a focus on the oral, immediate, face-to-face contact of audience and artists.[10]

Oral History

The practice of the storytelling art and an interest in oral histories appears to be related. The 1990's has seen a rapid growth in oral history projects. Alan Specht, archivist at the B.C. Archives & Records Service, and President of the Canadian Oral History Association, provided a short history of oral history projects to an oral history conference in Vancouver in 1996. Specht described an upsurge of interest in the 1960's and early 1970's, followed by a lull ending only in the early 1990's. He suggested that nearly as many projects have been undertaken in the past five years as in the twenty years previous.[11] Serious problems of storing, transcribing and archiving material have arisen as a result of this activity, and issues of copyright, permission, ethics and community control of stories have been raised anew. Some of the impetus for the recent projects has come from the museums. Museum studies and the new anthropology with its critique of the colonial or master narrator have begun to emphasize unofficial accounts of history and a diversity of voices in the telling of it. As a result, museums have increasingly built exhibits around oral histories. Popular oral histories in book form have also been part of the growing interest. Studs Terkel is one such popular oral historian in the United States.[12] Family stories and histories also fall under this category, and a publishing micro-industry in how-to books, tapes and videos has been launched as families scramble to record the stories told by grandparents and other elders "before they disappear." Robin Moore's prize-winning *Awakening the Hidden Storyteller: How to Build a Storytelling Tradition in Your Family* is one of the

---

[10] Spoken word is a practice of either informal "open mikes" or more formal, scheduled poetry and fiction readings and verbal performance art, most often in cafe or bar venues.

[11] VOICES: An Oral History Workshop, a 3-day meeting co-sponsored by the Vancouver Society of Storytelling and the UBC Museum of Anthropology in conjunction with the Japanese Canadian National Museum and Archives, Feb. 9-11, 1996.

[12] Marie Hofer, "Studs Terkel: Hungry for Stories." *Storytelling Magazine*, Summer 1991, Vol. 3 No.3 p. 12-15.

better-known of these manuals.[13] "Community stories" are collections of oral narrations which are made with the express purpose of defining or building new communities, with local stories being published or taped primarily for the use of the community itself. Oral historians, videographers and filmmakers are increasingly employed to record and compile oral histories, family histories and community stories. One such company in Vancouver is Word of Mouth Research.[14] In the U.S., a team of documentary filmmakers calling themselves "Visual Stories" received an Emmy nomination in 1989 for their film "The Spirit of St. Elmo Village," in which residents of a Los Angeles community narrate the story of their neighbourhood's renewal.[15]

Stories in other media

Storytelling has made a noticeable reappearance in the electronic media since the mid-1980's, especially on public radio. Garrison Keillor is perhaps the most obvious example, but lesser-known storytellers appear on radio regularly. The Vancouver Society of Storytelling, despite the fact that it is not an agent or clearinghouse for storytellers, receives regular calls from the CBC and other media outlets requesting storytellers for radio shows.

1997 has seen the arrival of a new form of entertainment: rock star as storyteller. Ray Davies, lead singer of the 60's British pop band The Kinks, is currently touring a one-man, rock concert/book promotion show titled *The Storyteller*. The show combines live acoustic performance of Kinks songs, many of which are narrative in form, with Davies' personal anecdotes and reminiscences of the band, the music scene and the 60's. While the term *storyteller* may now be attached to anything and everything, Davies is specifically interested in the telling of stories. The show is unrehearsed and informal, evolving from concert to concert in

---

[13] Robin Moore, *Awakening the Hidden Storyteller: How to Build a Storytelling Tradition in Your Family*. Boston: Shambhala, 1991.
[14] Word of Mouth Research is Wreford Miller and Janisse Browning, previously of the School of Communication graduate program, Simon Fraser University.
[15] David Rhoden, "Saving Lives on Tape," *Storytelling Magazine*, Summer 1991, Vol. 3 No.3, p. 7.

response to the demands and interests of audiences. A reviewer commented that "the show's very entertaining and intimate that way, not like a standard concert in which the audience is herded like sheep and the set list is as strict and preplanned as a script. Davies explained:

> It's like people coming to see me in my house, that's what the feeling's like. And if I get a sense from the audience that they don't know who the Kinks were, it becomes a story about any four guys getting together and forming a band. The Kinks are incidental, really... Sometimes I think it's someone else I'm talking about.[16]

The reviewer also remarked that the show's charm lies in its subversion of the accepted form of the rock concert, "a knowing, joking acknowledgment between star and audience that we're participating in something a little more privileged than the usual concert event." Subtitled *Twentieth Century Man*, the show promises to both demystify celebrity and also to allow audiences a personal sense of the extraordinary experience of fame, which somehow sums up the century.

Robert Bly and Clarissa Pinkola Estes' recent best-selling books *Iron John* and *Women Who Run With The Wolves* are meditations on the relevance of folk and fairy tale to everyday life. While they have received criticism from many quarters for their New Age or "pop psychology" perspective, there is no question that Jungian analyses of the folktale such as those by Bly and Estes have been influential in putting traditional stories at the front of awareness. Jean Shinoda Bolen's popular 1992 book *Ring of Power: A Jungian Understanding of Wagner's Ring Cycle* is in the same vein, though it takes myth and folktale as cautionary tales rather than as models for action. Marina Warner's best-selling 1995 analysis of the fairy tale, *From the Beast to the Blonde: Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* takes a sociohistorical approach to the fairy tale form, critiquing the Jungian approach, which interprets the traditional story as an allegory of the family drama to the exclusion of other interpretive possibilities, but at the same time

---

[16] Watson, Dave. "*Storyteller* Delivers Kinky Tales." *The Georgia Straight*, April 3-10, 1997. p. 55. See also Appendix A.

foregrounding it as the dominant interpretive model. While there has been interest in older narrative forms such as myth, folk tale and fairytale, parable and Zen tales since the 1960's—and Joseph Campbell is the central figure here, with such works as *Myths to Live By* and *Hero of A Thousand Faces*—the 1990's has seen a remarkable attraction to ancient stories of all genres. It is interesting that Campbell's work only made a return to public attention in 1991, with the broadcast of Bill Moyers' popular PBS interviews with the elderly writer. The psychological or Jungian approach to the traditional story has played a central role in what can now be considered a growing industry in publishing and New Age products.

"Master storytellers"

In the past year alone newspaper book reviews and dust jacket promotional blurbs have reported that Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, and Margaret Atwood are "master storytellers," which seems to signal an easing of the modernist distrust of traditional narrative still prevalent in the 1960's and 70's. While it seems any novelist may now be called a storyteller, despite the novel's many differences from traditional or even contemporary oral storytelling, the novel has in fact recently concerned itself more directly with oral narrative structures. Distinctly oral forms of narrative have been steadily making their way into fiction. Traditional oral stories lose their extralinguistic features and their special intangible oral character when they are written down, of course, but many of their devices, conventions and styles may be retained so that within a text oral narratives are usually recognizable. Italo Calvino, Salman Rushdie, Louis de Bernières and A.S. Byatt have made extensive use of these forms. Writers from marginalized cultural backgrounds have made special use of these as well; Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko are perhaps the best-known of the many writers who have reworked and retold traditional narratives. While the practice of rediscovering and incorporating old tales reaches back before Zora Neale Hurston collected stories in the Georgia Sea Islands, its growth has become noticeable in recent years as writers, particularly those of colour, turn to marginalized and suppressed oral traditions

in a search for history and identity. Other categories of the novel form have become equally preoccupied with storytelling. Writers of science fiction, particularly women writers of utopian science fantasy, have for some time been reworking or inventing oral narratives -- imagining new oral traditions and reflecting on storytelling itself. Ursula LeGuin's work is the most striking example of this sub-genre.

Storytelling has been showing up in even stranger places. In a new development known as narrative law, lawyers have begun experimenting with parables in the courtroom. "*Law's Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*," a collection of essays on the new practice of telling stories to argue cases rather than using traditional rational methods of argumentation and reference to precedent, was published in 1996. While this trend is considered by some critics to be inadequately serious for the law, its use in the United States is growing. Lawyers and legal philosophers who oppose the practice of storytelling in court have been forced to make recourse to literary and narrative theory to argue their positions. In his contribution to the book, lawyer Alan Dershowitz paraphrases narrative theorist Hayden White and declares that "[h]uman experience cannot be cabined into the structure of narrative." One of the book's editors cautiously remarks that narrative law might be "more appropriate for racial and religious minorities, and for women."[17] While clearly the legal edifice still considers storytelling something for real and figurative children, the fortunes of "narrative law" still appear to be on the rise.

The telling of tales is more firmly established in the field of mediation and dispute resolution. This field encompasses labour arbitration, family or community dispute resolution, the resolution of internal or inter-institutional or corporate conflict, and, increasingly, mediation of legal disputes as an alternative to the courts. The telling of folktales in mediation, particularly those from the Jewish, Sufi and Zen traditions, stems from recognition of their ability to provide

---

[17] Wilson, J. and E. Barnes, eds. *Law's Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law*. New York: Routledge, 1994. pp. 3, 54.

distance from conflict, promote lateral thinking and spark creative solutions. Locally, storytellers have been hired to teach mediators at the Justice Institute of British Columbia methods of choosing and telling appropriate tales, and on occasion storytellers are also hired to join mediators in the mediation room.

In the company of storytellers

In businesses and other organizations, managers are consciously adopting storytelling as a management tool. Stories help to bring managers and employees closer together, communicate company policy, and allow managers to monitor the organization's daily workings. This is part of a new area of research known as "organizational storytelling," a topic on which business and management schools have produced an extensive body of research over the past five years (see bibliography). Alan Whitkins, the Wheatley Professor for Integrity in Free Enterprise at Brigham Young University, claims that "storytelling is a key feature of organizational life." He claims that a company's stories sum up its core values and that these organizational stories "help workers navigate the corporate world's often confusing terrain." David Boje, a professor of management and editor of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, says "[p]eople don't remember a company's policy statements. But people do retain and act on stories about company life because such stories connect on a personal level." Boje suggests that managers think of an organization as "an ongoing storytelling event." David Armstrong, a U. S. corporation vice-president who spends much of his day "storying around," says that he only averages about one formal meeting a week. "Ninety per cent of the time I'm walking around, talking to people. Storying around helps me learn so much about the company, it's the most productive thing I do."[18] It is possible that managers have always kept their ears to the ground; the difference is that they now call it storytelling.

---

[18] Larry Pike, "When Stories Mean Business", *Storytelling Magazine*, Summer 1992, Vol 4 No 2, p. 10 - 13.

Selling Storytelling / Selling with Storytelling

As with many creative practices gaining popularity, storytelling's power has not escaped the attention of advertisers. Not only are advertisements increasingly narrative in form, but many of them actually refer to storytelling itself. A Vancouver multimedia advertising and promotions company named **e & s Inc.** —"Envisioning & Storytelling Inc." (previously known as "As Nature Sings")—"is only one of many companies showing corporations and other clients how to present their ideas in narrative form, whether in boardrooms or in print and electronic advertisements. According to an **e & s** executive, storytelling is the current advertising keyword. "Without storytelling, you can't sell anything," he says. A recent national television ad campaign for the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce features a number of bank clients, each telling his or her story about the bank in a warm and personal fashion. Next to each person's face is placed the text line *Storyteller*. And in a surprising move, early in February of 1997 the world's most well-known international retail chain of so-called "green and ethical" cosmetic products will be featuring storytellers in its boutiques. The Body Shop has approached storytelling schools in Britain with the idea of teaching storytelling techniques to its management and sales teams. The aim is to improve interaction with the public and to "bring out" the meaning of each product. Not only has the PR industry discovered the plain persuasiveness of oral narrative as a tool of communication, but it has also discovered that storytelling is an effective way to attach a specifically "human face," or the sound of old-fashioned wisdom, to commercial and corporate enterprise.

The study of oral narrative has even made a surprising detour through the field of health and medicine. Health practitioners, including doctors, have begun to study narrative theory in order to better hear and interpret their patients' personal and disease narratives. This move has produced conference workshops, academic research, and articles in accessible professional literature such as medical magazines. Sensitivity to stories is said to help health professionals make quicker and more accurate diagnoses, understand the course of disease against the

background of patients' lives, develop closer relationships with patients, and decrease patient anxiety and recovery time. Oliver Sack's narratives of medical cases, such as his best-selling *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat,* are evidence of this interest in the everyday human experience of illness. While Sacks' work could be seen as a reworking of the classic genre of science writing known as the case history, its preoccupation with the anecdote and the person mirrors the holistic approach health care workers aim to adopt through the use of storytelling techniques.

Telling and selling the news story

A field that has traditionally sought "the story" yet claimed that its work is anything but "storytelling," journalism too has jumped on the storytelling bandwagon. Newspaper chains have hired writers and storytellers to teach journalists the art of the well-told tale as part of an unapologetic move away from analysis and toward news stories with greater audience appeal. As in the fields of narrative law, business and medicine, the news media has been producing research into narrative as well as numerous articles exhorting news writers to become "storytellers." A library journal search on the general topic of storytelling now brings up nearly as many references to these unlikely fields—law and mediation, business, advertising and health—as to fields in which storytelling would naturally seem to belong, such as childhood education and folklore.

Studying storytelling

Professions that have traditionally relied on personal and cultural narratives, such as psychotherapy, family counseling, social work, and education, have become increasingly aware of the role and uses of oral narratives. Their interest in stories has grown steadily since mid-century, deriving in large part from psychoanalytic approval of fairy tales as highly educational and therapeutic, a view crystallized by Bruno Bettelheim's famous studies of the fairy tale

form.[19] After many decades, academic research on narrative and storytelling shows no sign of losing impetus, but rather is expanding, particularly in the fields of education and psychology. Educational research tends to focus on the effects of narrative on children and usually demonstrates that narrative and storytelling have unique and potent effects on development. Qualitative and quantitative evidence overwhelmingly suggests that narrative—reading, but also and especially oral storytelling—increases IQ, creativity, memory, and concentration. Neurological research appears to show that reading or listening to narrative produces intense frontal lobe activity in the form of mental visualization, which in turn enhances the development of neural dendrites, particularly in children. This research has contributed to a revolution in classroom techniques.[20] The concerted effort to de-emphasize storytelling in education in favor of a more fact oriented curriculum, especially as students get older, has been challenged by two recent bodies of research, one which discusses how narrative undergirds many complex thinking tasks, and the other which stresses learning as a social process.

Psychology too has increasingly focused on positive effects of narrative and storytelling. A new web page entitled "Clinical Psychology and Narrative" provides the following introduction: "The discipline of clinical psychology has been increasingly concerned with issues of narrative not only in regard to data gathering procedures but especially in the processes of therapy and counseling which are founded upon the stories of patients." Its annotated bibliography includes dozens of recent references to storytelling, including *Story re-visions: Narrative Therapy in the Postmodern World,*[21] which explores "storytelling and its therapeutic use, as well as psychological aspects of postmodernism." Research also suggests that the

---

[19] For a discussion of Bettelheim see Warner (1995) 413; also Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

[20] For example see "Effects of oral vs. read stories on children's creativity and sense of story structure (oral stories, storytelling)" by Pratibha Khare, University of Alabama, 1992 Birmingham, University of Alabama UP. See also Carolyn Ann Newman, "Kindergartners' Literacy and Storytelling." University of Texas at Austin, 1993 p. 222. Research has suggested that there are connections between drawing, writing, and storytelling and children's literacy acquisition.

[21] Parry, A., and R.E. Doan, *Story re-visions: Narrative Therapy in the Postmodern World*. New York: Guilford Press, 1994.

practice of writing or telling stories, autobiographical or otherwise, inhibits depression. A new interdisciplinary body of research bridges education, developmental psychology and counseling psychology in a study of the effects of narrative and storytelling on brain function and on mood in all groups and ages.

Brain research is increasingly cited by theorists of literature and narrative. A recent popular example is Mark Turner's 1997 book *The Literary Mind*, which speaks of the "literary mind" not as a rarefied type or application of mind, but as the quintessential human mind for which stories function as the essential, fundamental building blocks of thought. Turner is a professor of English at the University of Maryland and works closely with the university's neuroscience and cognitive science program. In contrast to Chomsky's theory of generative grammar, Turner argues that brain activity is more fluid and less stable than has previously been thought, with information stored throughout the brain in an ad hoc manner. Meaning resides not in any one site but as a dynamic and variable pattern of connection over many elements. It is stories, according to Turner's controversial contention, which necessitate grammar, rather than the other way around.[22]

Storytelling in the academy

Storytelling has come to the foreground in other academic fields as well, as recent academic conference titles and articles can attest. Many of the conferences organized around the topic of storytelling are interdisciplinary, though others come from traditional disciplines such as English. The following is a small selection of such meetings held over the past two years.The Midwestern Modern Language Association organized a panel on the topic of "Storytelling in Contemporary American Women's Narratives" for its 1996 convention. The call for papers read as follows:

---

[22] Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

> Storytelling has had a long presence within American literature. This panel will focus attention on the role and practice of storytelling in American women's narratives. Possible topics include the role of storytelling in connection to family and cultural history, the relationship between storytelling and individual, ethnic or gender identity, breaking silences by telling stories, the significance of storytelling in mother-daughter relationships, storytelling as instruction, autobiography and storytelling, multiple voices and stories within narratives, narrative structure and storytelling.

In 1996 the University of Hawaii held a major interdisciplinary arts conference entitled "Storytelling for the Millennium," and the University of Toronto hosted an international meeting called "Twice-Told Tales: Recycling Narratives in America, 1607 to the Present." In 1995 the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta dedicated its annual visual arts thematic residency to the theme of "Telling Stories/Telling Tales" in response to what it termed "the revival of narrative." The residency included a public academic conference on storytelling and narrative in the arts which was designed to "showcase discussions on some of the issues that emerge around narrative: its history as an artistic strategy, the effects of new technologies, media theory and identity politics, and storytelling traditions from oral cultures."

A quick survey of academic dissertation topics on the "Dissertation Abstracts International Database" reveals a striking recent increase in the number of abstracts using the term "storytelling." In the database 1993 to the present there were four times the number of doctoral dissertation abstracts mentioning the concept "storytelling" than referred to it in the period 1988 - 1993, even after factoring in the difference in the total number of abstracts in each database. Dissertations referring to storytelling most often came from English, comparative literature, and education, but significant numbers also came from philosophy, history, computer science, medicine, journalism and business.

Storytelling, broadly defined as narrative structure in oral or even at times written communication, is a pervasive element in much of human activity. From this point of view

storytelling is simply the collection of all activities deemed to be storytelling. Should it then be surprising that storytelling is showing up everywhere? Claude Lévi-Strauss was not the first to remark that narrative and storytelling are primary functions of the human mind—that we are *homo narrans.* What remains to be asked, however, is why, in most of the fields mentioned above, storytelling is being *consciously* applied, deliberately studied and examined, and persistently defined and redefined. What has produced this preoccupation, renewed pleasure, or longing? Why has storytelling come to seem such a useful tool for so many diverse purposes at this point in history? It is impossible to understand storytelling's popularity without further analysis of the cultural category "storytelling."

Chapter Two

Current categories of storytelling

As was explained in Chapter One, the term *storytelling* now refers to a number of popular *ideas and images* as well as a collection of *activities*. The topics and categories outlined in this chapter will encompass both representations and activities. Ideas and practices of storytelling bear a close relationship to each other. The *idea* or *image* of storytelling—and the storyteller—currently have a strong appeal as is demonstrated by the frequency of the word's appearance in advertising and in popular parlance, a phenomenon that will be discussed in later chapters. The attraction of the idea of storytelling relates to storytelling activities in two ways. First, already existing objects and activities are being recast as storytelling. *Storytelling* is an evocative name that is now affixed to anything and everything; things seem to become more meaningful and attractive when they are named storytelling. Second, the desire for storytelling gives rise to a whole *new* range of storytelling practices and activities that did not exist before. These new activities in turn give rise to new perceptions of storytelling.

I will first describe the phenomenon by which all forms of narrative and even of communication are now reconceptualized in storytelling's terms—narrative conceived as storytelling. Works of fiction have long been called storytelling, but increasingly theory, historiography, the social and even the hard sciences are named storytelling as well. This conflation of narrative, communication, and possibly language itself with storytelling will be discussed. Secondly, I will examine the category of ***traditional storytelling***, a common concept whose many implicit preconceptions I will try to draw out. The idea of traditional storytelling turns out to be a foundational one that conditions our understanding of the term storytelling itself, with all its connotations of ancient forms and the past. Thirdly, I will look at the phenomenon of ***revival or "revivalist" storytelling***. This is a new set of practices and discourses

by which individuals and groups deliberately attempt to revive, promote, preserve and understand storytelling and oral traditions. Its ideas and practices are often determined by perceptions of traditional storytelling; it is either traditional stories, or traditional storytelling practices, or both, that "revival" storytelling aims to resuscitate. While "revival storytelling" is not a well-known term, it refers to a set of practices and ideas that are quickly becoming more visible in western countries in the form of public storytelling performances and events. Revival storytelling is an interesting object of study because it is there that current conceptions of storytelling are crystallized and articulated most clearly. Finally, I will briefly identify a category named ***everyday storytelling***, a term that is in increasingly common usage. Just as all narrative comes to be understood in terms of storytelling, so too is all our daily talk and conversation coming to be conceived as storytelling. As we are made more aware of the storytelling that takes place within our families and within our other relationships both public and private, we increasingly conceive ourselves as storytellers. Taken together, these four broad conceptions of storytelling will begin to provide us with a sense of what the signifier *storytelling* has come to mean.

This study, then, is an attempt to historicize current categories of storytelling. That is, it is an attempt to study an object—storytelling—at the same time as studying the concepts and categories (themselves historical) that we necessarily bring to the object. (Jameson, 1981, p. 109) This chapter, then, will not attempt to define some transhistorical object called storytelling. Instead, it shows that individuals in the West are bringing to the idea of storytelling a number of concerns, preoccupations and blindspots which are particular to their own place and time.

Is all narrative storytelling?

One way to picture the relationship between storytelling and narrative is to view storytelling as a set of particular *uses* of narrative form (uses which are, incidentally, so

heterogeneous that they are nearly impossible to pin down). However, this traditional way of perceiving storytelling has been turned on its head; instead of categorizing storytelling under narrative, all types of narrative are now subsumed under the category storytelling. And sometimes the two terms are simply substituted for each other.

Narrative, though arguably a less evocative term than storytelling, is itself notoriously difficult to define. There is no consensus on its definition either in literary theory or in popular usage. A source of confusion is the uncertain distinction between *narrative* and *story. The Oxford English Dictionary* defines *narrative* as "a spoken or written account of connected events in order of happening; the practice or art of narration." *Story* is defined more broadly as "an account of imaginary or past events; a narrative, tale or anecdote; the past course of the life of a person or institution etc.; the narrative or plot of a novel or play etc. (story-line); fib or lie (colloq.); a narrative or descriptive item of news."[1] In common usage the term "narrative" usually simply means "something that tells a story," though occasionally it also seems to signify that the story is fictional. "Story" usually refers to a form that includes characters, human or otherwise; a narrator of some kind (the speaker or author; possibly also an internal narrator; and narrations by different characters: in short, at least one but sometimes more than one discernible point of view); events occurring in time; and sometimes, but not always, a developed plot.[2] *Plot* usually implies some level of artistic intervention or other advanced structuring, and it distinguishes "art" or literary narratives from the supposedly unstructured, plotless sequences of

---

[1] *Concise Oxford Dictionary,* 1990 Edn. The Oxford is the only dictionary consulted which strongly emphasizes that narrative recounts events "in order of happening." Other dictionaries demonstrate the fact that *narrative* and *story* rely on each other for definition. *The Penguin Canadian Dictionary* (1990) defines narrative simply as "*n. & a.* a story or tale that recounts events" while story is "an account or narrative; a newspaper report; a made-up account; a written story, esp. one with literary qualities; a story as reflecting truth or falsehood; the plot of a novel or play." *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* roughly approximates the Penguin: "something that is narrated (as the account of a *series* of events)... adj. having the form of a story." It is curious that dictionary definitions invert a distinction sometimes made in literary theory by which plot defines the narrative while stories may be less structured or may simply tell events in order of occurrence (though "story-line" generally signifies plot).

[2] See Terry Eagleton, 1983, p. 105 on Genette.

everyday stories or narrations. Some theorists make the distinction that to be deemed a *narrative* a story must exhibit at least a rudimentary plot and a sense of beginning, middle and end; without a plot it may only be considered a 'proto-narrative.' Loosely defined, *narrative* and *story* are often extended to include a large variety of written or oral verbal forms of communication as well as many non-verbal forms, for example, dance, pictorial representations, or the picture track of films. Academics and theorists, even those whose works rely on a theory of narrative, occasionally use the term in inexact or eccentric ways. For example, Walter Ong's idiosyncratic definition classes narrative as a single 'genre' that excludes drama, historiography, biography and autobiography, and consists only in fictional "story" forms with a narratorial voice.[3] But narrative forms are so heterogeneous that to even refer to them as a 'genre' is inaccurate, since generic conventions differ greatly from each other: detective fiction and the epic narrative poem, for example, while both narrative in the sense of recounting events and ordering time, are structured in undeniably different ways. The breadth of narrative's territory can be explained in part by the idea that narrative is a primary means of organizing and representing the experience of *time*. Time, and events in time, are given form and coherence through narrative structuring. Of course, not all cultures structure the experience of time through the same forms of narrative.[4] This question will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, where the difficulty of defining narrative will be demonstrated.

Storytelling carries associations that *narrative* does not. Why then are the terms *narrative* and *storytelling* increasingly conflated, even in supposedly precise texts of philosophy and cultural and literary theory? The conflation of *narrative* and *storytelling* will be addressed further in Chapter Three, but it may help at this point to suggest briefly two explanations. The first is that the modern and postmodern distrust of narrative may have encouraged the use of

---

[3] Walter Ong, 1982, p. 139.

[4] See Carr, 1986, p.178-181; also p. 45: "...temporal configuration has been seen by some (Ricoeur... for example) as essential to narrative structure."

"storytelling" as a pejorative epithet.[5] The terms *storytelling, telling* and *story* carry certain negative associations. They are linked with persuasion, manipulation, and ideology; with lies, fictions, or half-truths, as in "he's just telling you a story" or "tall tales;" they are also linked with the coercive use of truths or information as in "telling tales on each other" or "telling on someone." *Storytelling* also suggests the naive credulity associated with childhood, "primitive" peoples, myth, and simplistic or superstitious notions of causation, and therefore with a presumed lack of modern sophistication and reflexivity.[6] It evokes an image of listeners enraptured or at least engaged by the storyteller and the story's enchanting power. With this image comes notions of the compelling normative force that storytelling may share with narrative in general; its ability to persuade, charm, distract, enchant, or mystify; its inherent tendency to exclude certain versions of reality in favour of other, perhaps more ideologically interested ones; its effectiveness in organizing the perceptions of its listeners under the conceptual framework of the story while appearing only to entertain and delight. To call narrative storytelling, then, may be to pull back the curtain and expose the wizard behind the narrative's special effects, to demystify the production of narrative and to better appreciate the rhetorical powers behind the enthrallment induced by the story. Narrative, increasingly identified as a structure underlying most forms of communication, has perhaps come to be renamed *storytelling* to alert us to its coercive potential; *storytelling* becomes code for *beware the power of myth.*

The term storytelling may also carry a more positive association. The identification of narrative with storytelling may represent a growing desire to conceive of narrative less as a static structured object than as a social process and an activity open to change and participation. The

---

[5] This will be discussed further in Chapter Three. In general these critiques demonstrate that narrative form does not "reproduce" reality but imposes on it a structure that reveals more about the structures of language and/or the ideological and cultural values of the speaker/author than about 'real' social realities. Narrative and storytelling thus are equated with ideology.

[6] Webster's Unabridged Dictionary specifically associates *story* with children: "a tale written or told esp. for the entertainment of children."

image of the storyteller passing on stories to a group also carries the idea of an evolving, dynamic series of tellings and retellings, an image not generally attached to the figure of the writer, author, or filmmaker. The sense that the storyteller and listeners are present to each other and involved in the collective making of meaning restores to the person who experiences the story a sense of action, participation, and responsibility in that story, a sense that "consumers" of culture, in particular of mass media entertainment, rarely experience. Unlike the actor, the storyteller is viewed as remaining responsive to the needs of listeners—to know what story is needed, for example—in a two-way communication that does not render the listener a passive receptacle for the story. The traditional expectation that the listener will remember the story and pass it on means that the listener in turn becomes a storyteller. Furthermore, storytelling's listeners are perceived as having contact with and knowledge of each other, making it possible for "storytelling" to refer to an evolving process of forming stories and histories in *community*. The term seems to act as a reminder that despite the contemporary experience of atomization, fragmentation or alienation, of individual freedom and the associated problem of belonging, and the uneasy predicament of the split modern subject, narratives are produced and received in a social context, so storytelling may signify the possibility of a shared sense of communal belonging and of a groundedness based on a shared history transmitted from person to person. Persuasion and ideology vs. shared culture; group conformity vs. community; entranced listening vs. active participation; reflexive interpretation vs. naïveté: these associations, positively and negatively charged, may all be present when the term storytelling is invoked.

Traditional storytelling

"Stone Soup"

> One day a young soldier, filthy, tired, hungry and destitute at the end of a long war, wandered in to town looking for a meal. The townspeople, hungry themselves after a

poor harvest, claimed they had no food to offer him. "That's fine," he claimed. "I have a recipe for stone soup, and I will make some if you will lend me a pot." Skeptical but curious, the villagers gathered to watch as the soldier boiled a great quantity of water in the cauldron, and then dropped several large stones into it. As he contemplated the boiling soup he muttered, as if to himself, "This soup will be delicious. The only way it could possibly be improved would perhaps be the addition of a little cabbage, or maybe a carrot." One by one the villagers returned to their houses to find scraps: a couple of bones, a few vegetables, some slivers of meat. Within hours there simmered a soup the likes of which had never been tasted in the village before—enough for everyone. That night, for the first time in memory it seemed, everyone slept satisfied.[7]

Traditional storytelling refers to two things: storytelling performed in the oral traditions of the past, and storytelling still practiced today in the 'pockets' of other oral traditions that survive today. Such pockets of oral tradition are seen to exist not only in lesser or newly industrialized parts of the world but also within highly industrialized countries. *Traditional storytelling* evokes different images for different people; some picture the villages of western Scotland and Ireland as well as Appalachian valley communities and similarly isolated regions of the southern United States; others think of First Nations oral traditions; others think of various "ethnic" cultures for whom storytelling is still "a way of life." In all cases, however, *traditional storytelling* refers to the narratives, and to the oral transmission of those narratives, in communities that have been heavily or completely reliant on oral communication. These traditions are viewed as somehow isolated from 'mainstream' or 'modern' culture, either by time, geography, language, or other factors.

The genres of oral narrative popularly associated in the West with oral traditions include myth (along with creation stories and other forms), epics, legends, folk tales, fairy tales, and trickster tales. Also included are wonder tales (a hybrid of myth and fairy tale, common in

---

[7] See footnote 10. "Stone Soup" is a tale found around the world. I heard this variant, which I believe comes from the Balkans, by an amateur storyteller on the open stage of a cafe storytelling evening in Seattle, Washington in 1996.

Russia and Ireland), tall tales, yarns, riddles, and proverbs, as well as lesser known forms such as monologues and recitations, ballads, narrative poems and satirical verses, folk ritual dramas, local and personal oral histories, genealogies, and linguistic expressions peculiar to dialects and languages, and folk remedies. Traditional oral narrative embraces these and many other forms. It is a curious phenomenon that it is usually the lesser known styles that are considered most "authentic" by non-specialist audiences.[8]

Contemporary views of historical oral traditions and their narrative production are marked by numerous errors and projections which prove extremely difficult to avoid. One such projection is the application to oral traditions of the modern distinction between "informal" and "formal" speech. Moderns imagine that traditional storytelling is divided between formal ritualized occasions of oral performance on the one hand and a perpetual and prodigious informal flow of talk and story on the other. It is often said about those from "traditional" contexts that even their "informal" speech demonstrates a dazzling artistry—conversation raised to an art form, as is said of the Irish. Yet in traditional contexts, oral exchange is never considered informal. As Walter Ong points out, "typographic folk believe that oral exchange should normally be informal... oral folk believe it should normally be formal." (Ong, 1982, p. 136)

"Oral tradition" is a more useful, if less specific, term than "primary orality," a phrase made widespread by Walter Ong's frequently-cited 1982 text *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.*[9] Primary orality refers to the mental processes and communication matrix of cultures untouched by literacy; that is, cultures without *writing*, let alone print or other

---

[8] p. 4 *Storytelling in Ireland: A Re-awakening*. Londonderry: The Verbal Arts Centre, 1995. This report provides a wealth of research on the state of traditional and revival storytelling in Ireland as well as other parts of Europe and North America.

[9] Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York: Routledge, 1982. p. 6.

literacy-dependent media. Since most cultures today are touched by the "linear" rational mental processes of literacy, however indirectly, primary orality applies to fewer and fewer global contexts, a fact that Ong acknowledges. The concept of *traditional storytelling* most often imagines these 'pure' oral contexts even when it refers more generally to oral traditions, both those which have disappeared as well as those that persist today in an uneasy coexistence with contemporary literate cultures and their print and electronic media. This is undoubtedly because, despite the contact of oral traditions with literacy, many of the narratives still performed in residually oral traditions (and collected and studied by anthropologists, folklorists, storytellers and writers) were born in contexts of primary orality. Their narrative structures, often surprisingly unlike the story lines, plots and characterization of contemporary narratives, bear the mark of the concerns and necessities of cultures without print. Among the many forces shaping pre-literate narratives, for example, was the need to arrange knowledge and lore in structures that aided memorization. Devices such as rhythm and rhyme, formulaic phrases such as "winedark sea" in Homer or in *Beowulf* (there they are known as *kennings*), and repetition at various levels of the narrative, all served to aid memory. The often intangible strangeness of these stories for a modern adult audience is a product of long-forgotten concerns of which memorability is just one example.

Those interested in finding "purely oral" traditional tales are often hampered by the difficulty of determining the cultural and historical origins of particular stories or even genres. Many centuries of intercultural contact, literacy and print have made such origins difficult to track, though folklore studies have traced the paths traveled by various tales with relative success.[10] The striking fact that the same story shows up in traditions around the world

---

[10] The collection of folklore studies is vast. Two helpful texts I have consulted for concrete examples and theoretical discussion are Alan Dundes' *Essays in Folklore Theory and Ethics* (Madras: Cre-A, 1990) and the collection *The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition*, Americo Paredes and Ellen Stekert, Eds. Austin: U. Texas Press, 1971. The still living tradition of "Aunt Nancy" stories of America's Georgia Sea Islands has been traced to the transport to America by slaves of the "Anansi" stories of West Africa. This is a

encourages the belief that certain stories are "universal" to culture or to the human mind. However, it seems more likely that stories have moved, by word of mouth as well as by print, along trade and migration routes. In the case of certain stories this is well-documented and supports a theory of "diffusionism" rather than a theory of universality. The folktale known as "Stone Soup," for example, has been spread by print and spoken word for over seven centuries, though it is frequently cited as an archetypal story.[11] However, it is certain that many of the "traditional tales" found today are neither culturally "pure" nor completely untouched by literacy or other more modern phenomena.

Traditional storytelling and *oral tradition* are modern categories. Much of what is now viewed as traditional telling would not have been conceived of as "traditional" or "oral tradition" by the people practicing it, and in most cases it would not have been named by a term like "storytelling." Members of oral traditions undoubtedly had terms for different genres and occasions of storytelling, but since in some cases oral narratives constituted a large part of the communication of the group, it may have been unlikely that they would have been classified as "oral tradition" or "oral," if they were classified at all. Trinh Minh-ha writes of this problem in her 1989 essay on storytelling and oral traditions titled "Grandma's Story."

> When asked, "What is oral tradition?" an African "traditionalist" (a term African scholars consider more accurate than the French term "griot"... which tends to confuse traditionalists with mere public entertainers) would most likely be non-plussed. As A. Hampate Ba remarks, the traditionalist might reply, after a lengthy silence, 'It is total knowledge' and say no more." She might or might not reply so, for what is called here 'total knowledge' is not really nameable. (*Woman, Native, Other,* 1989, p. 125-26)

---

commonly cited example of the folklore process, though the movement of "Jack" tales from Scotland to Appalachia in the 1700's is also frequently mentioned.

[11] "Stone Soup" is a folk tale often performed at storytelling festivals. I myself have heard Korean, Brazilian and Balkan (retold earlier in this chapter) variants of this tale at the 1995 Yukon International Storytelling Festival and other events. "Stone Soup" virtually stands for storytelling. It is the name of the oldest Winnipeg storytelling circle, as well as of South Carolina's state storytelling festival. A Vancouver dance group has taken the story's title for its 1997 production and has designed its choreography around the story-line. The print, radio and poster publicity for this performance claims the story is "universal across cultures" and is "timeless."

It is deceptive, however, to continue speaking of "oral traditions" or cultures as though they and their stories were homogeneous. Folklorists, narratologists and storytellers often make categorical statements about the character and structure of "traditional communities" and "traditional stories," but it seems important to remember that traditional oral narratives are radically heterogeneous in their forms and functions. To begin to understand storytelling's place in oral cultures, as well as its genres and structures, it is necessary to examine the differing social formations of oral traditions in more detail than can be given here. While students of storytelling often speak of the similarity and universality of "traditional stories," there are in fact radical differences among storytelling practices and narrative structures in hunter-gatherer, pastoralist, agricultural or feudal societies or in societies with any other mode of production;[12] between stories belonging to different cultures of similar social structure; between stories told by different social classes in a single social structure; between men's and women's stories. Stories may have much in common across cultures and across time, but strong differences in form and content are also evident. These differences are only beginning to be understood and theorized.

Those who have written about traditional storytelling have often done little to dispel the idea that traditional stories have universal features across space and time. "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin's well-known 1936 essay, explores in depth the European storytelling tradition of post-feudal times with its representatives "the resident tiller of the soil and the traveling seaman" and their descendant, the artisan craftsman of the feudal guild system. Yet despite this specificity, Benjamin generalizes *storytelling* to include Oriental storytellers of ancient times, Herodotus whom he calls "the first storyteller of the Greeks," the fairy tale and *The Arabian Nights*. "A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of

---

[12] Of course, it is not possible to neatly correlate mode of production with form, in the sense of a notion of a cultural dominant specific to each mode of production; see Jameson pp. 89-91 on the dangers of "synchronic" thought, that is, "monolithic models of the cultural unity of a given historical period." 90*n*

craftsmen." (p. 101) "[The story] contains, openly or covertly, something useful." (p. 86) "The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales." (p. 102) Benjamin's essay is well-used among students and fans of storytelling; it comes up in conversation with them and it is cited widely in storytelling magazines and journals. The essay is a notable instance of the opposition commonly posed between modern and traditional narratives, an opposition that tends to collapse many pre-modern forms into sameness. This is paradoxical given Benjamin's attempt to historicize the art of storytelling, though also unsurprising since his main effort is to throw into relief storytelling's difference from such modern forms as the novel and mass organs of information. While it is true that striking similarities exist across storytelling traditions, what is more striking is the widespread representation of the chasm separating past traditions from the present. I hesitate to overstate Benjamin's position on the old stories and his assertion of their shared properties, but it is useful to note the degree to which he generalizes traditional storytelling and to observe that his canonical essay has served to give others the permission to assert the timelessness and universality of traditional narratives.

When the terms *traditional storytelling* or even *oral tradition* are used, they frequently stand for the wisdom of a small, cohesive, communal, relatively unspecialized community and its traditions—regardless of whether the culture in question is a tribal society, a hierarchical kinship society or some other social formation. It is interesting that Trinh Minh-ha, whose essay is one of the few critical academic works on storytelling outside of anthropology, refers extensively to the pastoralist and early agrarian oral narrative traditions on which this image is likely based. Whether or not the idea of a truly communal society is invoked, the idea of traditional storytelling is attached to notions, developed or otherwise, of an "organic" society, one that was original or "natural," one untroubled by specialization and social hierarchy, one which enjoyed little marked separation between art and life, one in which everyday speech apparently still

exhibited the pre-lapsarian flow and vitality of the "water of life."[13] These characteristics clearly do not describe all cultures deemed to be oral traditions. Nevertheless the linkage of storytelling with early communal organic societies on the part of current storytelling theorists has come to be applied to those cultures and communities closer to our own time that still exhibit traces of pre-modern ways. These implicitly seem to be represented as sitting at the end of a long and continuous process of disenchantment. Not quite disenchanted, they nevertheless appear to be on the brink of losing the magic of past traditions.

The term traditional storytelling, then, calls up a whole way of life. And often *storytelling* does not merely evoke that way of life, it is seen to be the foundational, determining feature of the society in question. The view that a mode of communication holds a special, definitive place in a society—demonstrated also in contemporary terms like "the media generation"—is evident not only in popular conceptualization but also in the academic disciplines. There is a long tradition of academic work on the shift from traditional cultures to modernity in the social sciences, linguistic, literary and communication studies. Much of this work has recently focused more specifically on the revolution in forms of communication that accompany and contribute to that historical shift. A strand of this research actually reconceives the shift from traditional to modern societies as primarily a shift from oral to literate modes of communication and thought. This replacement of the contrast *traditional vs. modern* by the contrast *oral vs. literate* heralds a primary focus on technology's 'determination' of cultural forms; that is, an examination of how technologies such as writing or the electronic media encourage, create or make possible specific forms of culture and communication. Marshall McLuhan's popular work (1962, 1964) in this area deals extensively with the shift from orality through literacy and print to electronic media. Walter Ong, whose work is much influenced by

---

[13] For an example of this view see Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1994; also see Robert Bringhurst's introduction to *The Dreamer Awakes* by Alice Kane, Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995. Every issue of *Storytelling Magazine* and *Parabola: Journal of Myth* also exhibits this view.

McLuhan's, has also asserted the priority of the orality-to-literacy shift over other conceptions, arguing along with others that

> [S]hifts hitherto labeled as shifts from magic to science, or from the so-called 'prelogical' to the more and more 'rational' state of consciousness, or from Levi-Strauss' 'savage' mind to domesticated thought, can be more economically and cogently explained as shifts from orality to various stages of literacy.....[M]any of the contrasts often made between 'western' and other views seem reducible to contrasts between deeply interiorized literacy and more or less residually oral states of consciousness.[14]

Regardless of one's position on the notion of technological determinism, it is a fact that the idea of the determining force of technologies of communication has taken a strong hold on the public imagination over the past several decades. It is likely that it is the shift from print toward electronic communication, so accelerated over that period, that has given the earlier shift from orality to literacy a new and even urgent relevance. McLuhan's position on traditional oral communication is an interesting one, one that is only ostensibly less nostalgic than other views. Such phrases as "the global village" curiously conjure up the connectedness of communication in the traditional village, which is then combined with the quasi-utopian possibilities of new electronic media. Ong's term "secondary orality" refers to an age of telephone, radio, television and audiotape, a new orality that has "striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulaic repetition. These theories will be discussed further in later chapters, but it is interesting to note here their influence on contemporary perceptions of traditional oral communication—perceptions that may be nostalgic projections.

The concept of traditional storytelling frequently, but not always, carries a tinge of romanticism and nostalgia for simpler, purer, or just plain *other* times. This is the case even in rigorous academic work, and Lévi-Strauss is the most often cited example. Both popular and

---

[14] Ong, 1982, p. 29.

academic interest in traditional storytelling and other forms has tended to peak during periods of cultural romanticism, precipitated by rapid social change and economic upheaval. Marina Warner, author of the recent popular study of the fairy tale form *The Beast and the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, provides an excellent social history of folklore revivals, arguing that they appear at times of political or economic crisis.[15] At such times, forms seen to belong to the past take on a charm relative to our distance from them. Traditional storytelling, always a contradictory entity, is perceived to be both going and gone. It is curious that over several hundred years observers have consistently proclaimed the imminent disappearance of authentic traditional storytelling. In a recent interview in Canada's national storytelling journal *Appleseed Quarterly*, a contemporary storyteller observed of the maritime oral tradition that "[i]t's hard to describe storytelling as an art form in Nova Scotia; it's really more of a lifestyle, though perhaps it's dying out."[16] Such remarks are commonplace. Whether or not storytelling is truly lost, its end is continually mourned. The age of organic storytelling is over. Raymond Williams once observed that "[t]he only sure fact about the organic society is that it has always gone."[17]

It is only because oral storytelling plays a less central role in modern life that we now conceive of storytelling and the figure of the storyteller at all, in a typical case of you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone—or nearly gone. Walter Benjamin's essay opens with this observation:

> Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He is already becoming remote from us and something that is getting even more distant. To present someone... as a storyteller does not mean bringing him closer to us but, rather, increasing our distance from him. Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him, or rather, they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head or an animal's body

---

[15] See Marina Warner's *The Beast and the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Vintage, 1995. pp. xii-xxi, 409-418.
[16] "Interview with Clary Croft," p. 2 , *Appleseed Quarterly* Feb. 96, Vol. 6 No.1.
[17] Williams, Raymond qtd. in Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 36 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

> may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision... [T]he art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. (Walter Benjamin, 1968, p. 83)

To the contemporary ear traditional storytelling, it is argued, has a sound that is as hard to describe as it is instantly recognizable. There are a number of ways of approaching this sound. One is to argue that it is the sound of authenticity and is caught up in an exoticization of pre-modern or non-literate foreign or subcultural ways of speaking. Another may be that premodern speech, its proverbs, metaphors and poetic analogies, has the sound of *wisdom* for contemporary listeners. Walter Ong tells of a Lebanese friend remarking that the celebrated sayings, proverbs and stories of Kahlil Gibran, published in English as *The Prophet,* are not extraordinary sacred writings but ordinary speech. "Kahlil Gibran has made a career of providing oral formulary products in print to literate Americans who find novel the proverb-like utterances that... citizens of Beirut regard as commonplace."[18] Lastly, it is likely that many perceptions of traditional storytelling are associated with the memory of childhood stories and nursery rhymes, with their incantatory rhymes and formulaic phrasings.

Revivalist Storytelling

Understandings of storytelling range from perceptions about the content and meaning of stories to conceptions of how they "work." They range from descriptions of the particular nature of storytelling performance to academic analyses of storytelling's social functions all the way to popular sayings about storytelling's benefits such as "storytelling is mouth-to-ear resuscitation" or "storytelling is the shortening of a road."

> The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a "symptom of decay," let alone a

[18]Walter Ong, 1982, p. 26.

> "modern" symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is *making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing*. (Walter Benjamin, 1968, p. 87)

Revival or Revivalist storytelling usually refers to the deliberate efforts of contemporary storytellers and storytelling arts groups to preserve and promote the traditional art of storytelling. As such it includes the work of professional storytellers for hire, storytelling guilds, and groups; activities such as festivals and "concerts;" as well as the growing business of training amateur and professional storytellers.[19] Some, however, use *revival storytelling* more broadly to include the vast collection of consciously-applied storytelling practices described in Chapter One, a usage I prefer but one which is less common. However, in this section I will focus most closely on the activities and aims of storytelling revival groups, since within these groups, storytelling and the phenomenon of its revival is elaborated most consciously—and its contradictions made most plain.

Contemporary storytellers struggle for an understanding of their art, its styles and aesthetics, its functions, its history, its definition. For example, storytellers debate whether storytelling should be true to its roots or be made new, with some arguing that traditional stories and styles should be authentically reproduced while other storytellers experiment with new forms such as the "personal experience story." Contradictions abound. Despite taking the view that storytelling in past traditions was part of a whole way of life, some storytellers bristle at the idea that in the contemporary context anything other than formal, orally performed stories can be deemed "storytelling" as they often rigidly define it. Storytellers as a group tend to try to define storytelling at the same time as vigorously resisting its definition. They oscillate between a

---

[19] "Professional storyteller" denotes someone who makes a living primarily by telling stories; "amateur storyteller" denotes either someone who is only occasionally paid to tell, or who tells stories for pleasure, or who has not yet achieved professional status. (See *Canadian Storytelling Directory*, 1995/96 2nd Edn. p. 5).

need to make their art plain to a confused audience (and funders) and awareness of the reification of storytelling that such definitions herald.

Before elaborating on the contemporary revival of storytelling, a brief account of revivals past and present will help to put current developments into sharper focus.

Storytelling revivals

The current storytelling revival is not the first. While most contemporary storytellers point to the late 1970's as the beginning of the current revival of the storytelling art in the west, a preoccupation with orality and oral narratives reaches back to the earliest days of writing technology. From its beginnings literacy has concerned itself with reflecting on oral productions and committing them to print. The Old Testament book Ecclesiastes, named for its author, consists entirely of recorded oral sayings and proverbs. "Besides being wise, [Ecclesiastes] taught the people knowledge, and weighed, scrutinized, and arranged many proverbs... sought to find pleasing sayings, and to *write down true sayings with precision.*" (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10, my emphasis) Interest in collecting and recording oral sayings persisted in Europe through the Middle Ages. "Literate persons, from medieval florilegia collectors to Erasmus... and beyond, have continued to put into texts sayings from oral tradition, though it is significant that at least from the Middle Ages and Erasmus' age, in western culture at least, most collectors culled the 'sayings' not directly from spoken utterance but from other writings"[20] As will be discussed later, it appears that literate classes and cultures have always appropriated oral forms, extracting them from their context and transforming them in the process.

Each wave of interest in oral forms has of course had its own specific concerns and motivations. Of the collections of oral narrative known today as "folklore," among the earliest

---

[20] Ong, 1982, p. 16 to 17.

were published in France in the late seventeenth century during a craze at court for what was described as "childlike pleasures and make-believe."[21] One of the most striking aspects of this "folk revival" is that little attempt was made to rematerialize storytelling in an oral form. Indeed, it is a feature of much interest in orality and folklore that it consists largely in the collection of traditional stories or other lore for literary or other print publication. Today the number of North Americans who have attended live storytelling is easily outstripped by the number who own copies of Grimm, Aesop, *Bulfinch's Mythology*, collections of Zen or First Nations stories, *Women Who Run With the Wolves* or *Iron John*. The collection of oral narratives in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced a set of literary products that, while literary, did attempt to retain traces of oral narrative structure and style. Of these the best known is Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé,* or *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye,* published in Paris in 1697. Despite Perrault's fame, however, this fashion was in large part initiated by aristocratic women writers who produced well over half of the extensive material collected in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Of these, Marie-Catherine, Baronne d'Aulnoy was the most prolific, publishing over twenty-three of the volumes in an exhaustive forty-one volume collection known as *Le Cabinet des fées* (or *The Fairy Library*). Educated and privileged, adult men and women of the aristocracy were thought to have been seeking to "return to the pleasures of their youth through tales of magic and enchantment and the homespun wisdom of the hearth."[22] In 1714, the Abbé Fenelon, a court tutor, wrote to a friend that "the most serious men today enjoy fables—even those which are like fairy tales... We willingly become children again."[23] However, Robert Bringhurst, in his introduction to a recent collection of fairy and wonder tales titled *The Dreamer Awakes* points out that D'Aulnoy's *contes de fées* deliberately deployed folk and fairy tale for specific allegorical and satirical purposes, inaugurating a new literary genre. "D'Aulnoy's stories, written with immense skill, are

---

[21] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. London: Vintage, 1995. p. xii.
[22] Warner, 1995, p. xi.
[23] Ibid, p. xiii.

centred on the audience they seek, and on that audience's sense of privileged insight into worldly affairs."(17-18) In other words, folk and fairy tale were appropriated as vehicles for political commentary. The retellings in *Le Cabinet des fées* clearly transformed the original tales even where they deliberately attempted to reproduce their oral nature with "chatty asides, apparently spontaneous exclamations, direct appeals to the imaginary circle around the hearth, rambling descriptions, gossipy parentheses, and other bedside or laplike mannerisms that create an illusion of collusive intimacies, of home, of the bedtime story, the winter's tale." (Warner 25) Despite these alterations, the French collections came to form the foundation of the vast libraries of "folklore" that later became an important library resource for folklore studies as well as for the current storytelling revival.

A century after Perrault and D'Aulnoy collected their tales, the romantic movement was in full force in Western Europe. Nostalgia for the pre-industrial past launched redoubled efforts to preserve premodern and folk traditions—or at least to document them. A new desire for a direct encounter with authentic folk culture produced the idea of collecting oral lore and narratives "just as they were heard." However, despite this apparent search for authenticity, there is plenty of evidence that tales were considerably doctored during the process of collection and transcription from notes.[24] The familiar household names most westerners associate with storytelling derive from this period: Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm produced their collection *Die Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Children's and Household Tales*) between 1812–57, and Hans Christian Andersen's collection was compiled between 1837–74. Lesser known collectors included James McPherson (1736-96) in Scotland, Thomas Percy (1729-1811) in England, and Francis James Child (1825-96) in the United States. In general most folklore collectors were motivated not only by the industrial destruction of folk traditions in the countryside, but also by worry about declining morality in the rapidly growing urban centres of the industrial revolution.

---

[24] See Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

Many were looking to folklore for moral and ethical guidance, for the normative—yet palatable—authority of traditional wisdom and counsel. The middle- and upper-class collectors of this lore held varying views on the nature and origin of traditional tales. Like the medieval and enlightenment collectors who preceded them, many of these collectors held the peculiar literacy-biased belief that the oral tales were the remnants of an earlier text-based mythology now forgotten, a misperception only exposed in the early twentieth century.[25] But whether or not the tales were seen as leftovers of golden ages of myth or merely the traditions of simple folk, they were viewed as embodying, amongst all their oddity and seeming superstition, traces of a past purity and moral and spiritual force which the increasingly disordered, disenchanted, rationalized present was seen to lack. This concern belonged primarily to the city-dwelling middle class preoccupied with the moral instruction of their own children as well as those of the increasingly restive and threatening lower classes. By 1850 a major audience for the folk and fairy tale—in print form—was children.[26] (Warner pp. 409, 410) However, the fairy tale was never purely a children's form, even during the Victorian era. Many attempts to resuscitate folk narratives were motivated by romantic aims that were strongly nationalist in character, such as the work of the Grimm Brothers[27] which was, incidentally, utilized by Hitler a century later to construct a mythology of blood, toil and the uncontaminated purity of the traditional German Volk—a folk revival matched in grisliness only by recent mobilizations of Serbo-Croatian epic in the "ethnic cleansing" of regions of the former Yugoslavia.[28]

---

[25] See Walter Ong on the work of Milman Parry, pp. 16-17.

[26] See Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*. New York: Wildman Press, 1983. Zipes provides a fascinating social history of the Victorian literary fairy tale for children (see esp. p. 3) as well as an analysis of the fairy tale using methods outlined by Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious* (1981).

[27] See Marina Warner, 1995, p. 414 "...[T]he Grimm Brothers proclaimed their fairy stories the pure uncontaminated national products of the German *Volk* or German people, but we now know that many of their tales had been traveling through the world for centuries before the Grimms took them down."

[28] Warner, 1995, p. 410: "Fairy tale's simple, even simplistic dualism can be and has been annexed to ugly ends: the Romantic revival of folk literature in Germany unwittingly heralded the Nazi claim that 'their' fairy tales were racially homegrown products; in former Yugoslavia, the different factions are using folklore as one more weapon in their civil strife, raising heroes from the past, singing old ballads as battle cries, performing folk dances to a cacophony of competing regional music. Folk tales powerfully shape national memory; their poetic visions intersect with history, and in the contemporary embattled quest for

Twentieth-century revival

When asked when the current storytelling revival began, storytellers, story lovers and folklorists often mention "the breakdown of oral culture," by which it is assumed they mean the loss of oral traditions in rural areas or among working classes or 'ethnic' communities in Western countries. But there is little agreement about the date of that collapse. Many have suggested that it can safely be placed at the beginning of the twentieth century, while folklorists usually mark this date around the time of World War I and refer to it as "the break."[29] The obvious implication is that the loss of an embedded tradition of storytelling sparked a conscious effort at revival. Toronto storyteller Meryl Arbing gives the following account of the origins of the twentieth-century revivals:

> ...The world became more 'modern' and with the increased availability of radios and with the increase in general literacy, people became aware of the larger world. Certainly in the urban built-up areas this influence was more significant but even in isolated communities, such as on Prince Edward Island, the old order was rapidly disintegrating. Storytelling served the function of preserving the community or tying people together in the warp and weave of shared experience. But when their outlook changed to a wider one, storytelling began to lose that function. There was a move to institutionalize storytelling and the libraries were the obvious places.[30]

---

indigenous identity, underestimating their sway over values and attitudes can be as dangerous as ignoring changing historical realities."

[29] See also Hannah Arendt's essay on Benjamin in *Illuminations*, p. 46:
"The close affinity between the break in tradition and the seemingly whimsical figure of the collector who gathers his fragments and scraps from the debris of the past is perhaps best illustrated by the fact, astonishing only at first glance, that there probably was no period before ours in which *old and ancient things, many of them long forgotten by tradition, have become general educational material which is handed to schoolboys everywhere in hundreds of thousands of copies.* This amazing *revival*... which since the forties has been especially noticeable in *relatively traditionless America*, began in Europe in the twenties. There it was initiated by those who were most aware of *the irreparability of the break in tradition*...a "listening to the tradition that does not give itself up to the past but thinks of the present." The idea of the revival storyteller as collector deserves further research. Arendt goes on to say of Benjamin's approach to the past: "...Benjamin actually had more in common with Heidegger's remarkable sense for *living eyes and living bones that had sea-changed into pearls and coral, and as such could be saved and lifted into the present only by doing violence to their context in interpreting them with "the deadly impact" of new thoughts*, than he did with the dialectical subtleties of his Marxist friends." This last analysis is debatable, but I include it because it captures the problems and paradoxes associated with revival. (my emphasis throughout)

[30] Meryl Arbing, Toronto storyteller, email correspondence, 3 June 1996.

The practice of storytelling in libraries dates to the late nineteenth century in Europe and North America. In the late 1890's, American librarians discovered the value of using the told story as a literacy tool, and 'storytimes' appeared at libraries in Pittsburgh, New York, and Buffalo. In 1900, a British teacher named Marie Shedlock was invited to tell stories in New York City and to develop the storytelling art among American teachers and librarians. Shedlock's influence was surprisingly wide; many U.S. state library systems and storytelling organizations acknowledge her work as the foundation for their own work. Her visit led to the formation of the National Story League in 1903 in Knoxville, Tennessee, an organization devoted to "recounting tales and keeping stories alive in libraries and schools throughout the US—a mission they still fervently pursue."[31] The intimate relationship between oral storytelling and literacy is one of the odd paradoxes of storytelling "revivals." Yet in the West and in other parts of the world such as Japan, it is in libraries that "the flame of storytelling was kept alive," as one teller put it. Not only have the libraries housed the folklore collections that supply storytellers with their material,[32] but librarians receive professional training in telling stories—very often fairy and folktales—to children too young to read. Consequently it is also librarians (as well as primary schoolteachers) who have had the firsthand experience of seeing the effects of storytelling on children's intellectual and emotional development.

Current wave of revival

Storytellers and other revivalists have a difficult time conceptualizing the past two decades of storytelling activities, and many disagree about what the revival is and how it began. The National Storytelling Association, America's largest storytelling organization (formerly known as NAPPS or National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling;

---

[31] Jimmy Neil Smith, "The Storytelling Revival," NSA information package, 1991. p. 2.
[32] Revival storytellers talk about "going to 398.2" for their stories; 398 is the Dewey decimal number for folklore.

now known as The National Storytelling Association or NSA) has traditionally taken much of the credit for reviving storytelling in America, as can be seen in its promotional materials:

> During the late 1960's and early 1970's, there emerged throughout America a realization that we were losing our connection to the genuine, one-on-one communication of the told tale. The seeds for a re-awakening of interest in the oral tradition were being sown. And in 1973, in a tiny Tennessee town, something happened that rekindled our national appreciation of the told story and became the spark plug for a major cultural movement—the rebirth of the art of storytelling... since our lives are still intertwined with stories, it would seem that the art of storytelling should have a forever-unchanging place of honor in our history and culture. Yet this is not so. Despite its ageless power and importance, this ancient folk art has, until recently, been forgotten—lost in a sea of print, film, and videotape that is testimony to the media's skill at filling us up with images and ideas that were once the province of the oral tradition. (NAPPS, "Our History," 1992, p. 1, emphasis in original)

The current wave of revival is distinguished from many earlier storytelling fashions by its attempt to resuscitate storytelling's whole form: its narratives, its style, its oral performance, its full orality—the entire "lost art."

Genres

Revival storytelling often features oral narratives, that is, stories deriving from oral traditions, as was mentioned in the above discussion of traditional storytelling. The question of whether the stories told by revival storytellers are actually faithful to such older forms—something which, incidentally, is nearly as impossible to determine as a story's origin—is frequently discussed. Revival storytelling also features many stories that may not be considered traditional. A useful 1995 report on the current state of the storytelling art in Ireland entitled *Storytelling in Ireland: A Re-awakening* compiled this broad inventory of revival forms:

> [A]cknowledged are myth, epic, legends, tall tales, yarns, anecdotes, jokes, riddles, proverbs, folk tales, fairy tales, wonder tales, and ghost stories. These are part of both traditional and 'revival' storytelling... In addition, we include monologues and recitations and some forms of performance poetry. Equally important in any inventory are picture-

> book storytelling and 'read-aloud' sessions for children, oral history and reminiscence work, community drama and ritual folk drama, and applications of oral narrative with special interest groups in any educational, social, cultural or community aspects. (p. 2)

This inventory is large enough to cover the broad range of forms described in Chapter One. Some revivalists would consider this list too expansive. Many professional storytellers prefer "revival storytelling" to involve primarily traditional forms and styles.

Certain "traditional" forms receive more play than others. Folk and fairy tales now outnumber other revived storytelling genres at storytelling festivals, as well as in print and professional uses such as education and health care. I will attempt to give a brief description of this set of closely related genres. Genre criticism is a muddy and controversial area, which cannot be dealt with in detail here. In short, difficulties arise from the slipperiness of generic categories and the fact that genres borrow from each other, even those which appear to display rigid adherence to specific formulaic structures. Generalizations produce as many problems as they solve; the opposition of fairy tale to myth below, for example, must be qualified by the fact that fairy tales consist of significant traces of mythical content and structure, not to mention the fact that myths are qualitatively different from each other despite similarities in structure. Furthermore fairy tale and myth together belong to the semantic category of "romance" which is so well represented in this current revival. Without reference to those genres that storytellers, story listeners, as well as story readers most often seek out, the revival becomes less comprehensible. However, it should be pointed out here that these genres by no means exhaust the full range of currently popular stories. The most striking thing about the storytelling revival is its generalized desire for *all* types of oral face-to-face narrative communication. However, it is undeniable that as literate westerners cast about for forms with which to meet this desire, they find fairy tale and other genres of romance particularly well-suited.

The terms "folktale" and "fairy tale" are used loosely if not interchangeably. This situation is exacerbated by a translation from the Russian of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp's study was actually a study of the "miracle tale" or "wonder tale," a particularly Russian form which incorporates features of both fairy and folk tales in combination with mythical elements. *Fairy tale* is a broad category which many westerners associate with classic children's bedtime fairy stories: "pinnacled castles, rose-wreathed princesses, their enchanted sleeps and dashing princes showing a leg... amourous romances and fabulous histories of giants."[33] They take place in a timeless enchanted world, usually with human beings as main characters. The stories of Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard, Puss in Boots, Cinderella and Tom Thumb are the best-known representatives of this form, though also included are jests and riddles, animal fables and proverbial cautionary tales. *Fairy tale* does not necessarily imply fairies; in French the equivalent term *fée* means more generally 'magic' and would describe for instance Bluebeard's magic key or Red Riding Hood's speaking wolf. Marina Warner, author of a popular recent study of the fairy and folk tale form, claims magical shape-shifting to be the core of the fairy tale form: More fundamental than "the presence of fairies, the moral function, the imagined antiquity and oral anonymity of the ultimate source[34] or the happy ending (though all these factors help towards a definition of the genres), metamorphosis defines the fairy tale." Readers of such currently popular books as *Women Who Run With the Wolves* will recognize this feature in the rusty lanterns transformed into a talisman; mortar and pestle magically changed into the winged vehicle of Baba Yaga; severed hands found and reattached; the slattern in a filthy donkeyskin transformed into the golden-haired princess.[35] The fairy tale offers the promise of transformation and liberation, though often in terms of fairly traditional aspirations, above all for fame and fortune.[36]

---

[33] Warner, 1995, p. xiii.
[34] Warner, 1995, p. 25: "...anonymity confers the authority of traditional wisdom accumulated over the past and acknowledged and shared by many on account of its truthfulness and capacity to teach and be useful."
[35] Warner, 1995, p. xv.
[36] Warner, 1995, p. 411.

The *folk tale* remains more solidly in the realm of practical human concerns, though it too may occasionally involve talking animals or other such mythical or fantasy figures, often for humorous or allegorical effect as in certain "trickster" tales. Folktales even more than fairy tales are associated with cultures without writing. They have been called the "prose fiction of oral literature" and exhibit an interest in folk *lore*—everyday culture, food, clothing, customs and beliefs. The folk tale is a broader category than the fairy tale. Like fairy tales, folk tales are found worldwide from Europe and America, the Arab world (stories from the *1001 Nights*, a folk tale frame containing folk and fairy tales), India, Africa and Asia, and innumerable other locations and traditions. Non-magical variants of these tales include "clever wife" stories, Zen tales, certain First Nations trickster tales, Scottish and Appalachian "jack" tales and other such 'wise fool' stories as the Middle Eastern tradition of "Hodja Nasrudin" stories.[37] Folk tales are often cryptic and absurd, but they are always perceived as salutary. As Philadelphia storyteller Tim Jennings observed, "Folktales are like dreams. They are often disturbing, seldom make sense, rarely make you look good, but we have to have them or we go nuts."

The *wonder tale* is a peculiar conjunction of fairy tale and mythical elements. Like many folk and fairy tales, the wonder tale exhibits elements of Neolithic/hunter-gatherer myth, echoes of pre-agrarian relationships with nature in which any attempt to control or withstand vagaries of climate and weather and natural cycles—the hubris of later civilizations—was seen to end in disaster. These myths, which North Americans most frequently encounter in certain First Nations stories, caution against hoarding, aggressive cultivation or destruction or other excessive human interventions in favour of a synchronicity with nature's patterns. At the heart of many wonder and fairy tales is the memory of an age of harmony with nature that is

---

[37] Someone asked Hodja Nasruddin, famous wise fool of the Middle East, "How did you become so wise?" And Hodja replied, "I go to the wise and listen to them. And if people listen to me, I try to find out what I've said." from Dan Yashinsky, "Shooting the Teller," *Appleseed Quarterly*, May 1995, Vol. 5 No. 2, p. 20.

demonstrated in traditional opening lines: *Back when the world was young, and the humans and the animal people could speak to each other... This here's a story that happened back when animals were more like people and people were more like animals and things were just plain better all around... A great while ago, when the world was full of wonders...* Like many students of traditional stories, I will expand the term "fairy tale" to encompass folk, fairy and wonder tale.

Walter Benjamin claims that "the first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales." "The first tutor of mankind," the fairy tale is the form which "lives on in the story." (Here Benjamin is clearly speaking of both folk and fairy tale.) For Benjamin what the fairy tale offers is aid against the oppressive authority of myth.

> The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest. In the figure of the fool it shows us how mankind "acts dumb" toward the myth; in the figure of the youngest brother it shows us how one's chances increase as the mythical primitive times are left behind; in the figure of the man who sets out to learn what fear is it shows us that the things we are afraid of can be seen through; in the figure of the wiseacre it shows us that the questions posed by the myth are simple-minded, like the riddle of the Sphinx; in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of the child in the fairy tale it shows that nature not only is subservient to the myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man. The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and high spirits.[38]

The fairy tale, then, is not unlike the protective talisman it offers its protagonists; a magic key offering entrance through doors which only appear to be impassable. As many theorists of narrative have observed, each tale also tells the story of its own making and its own operations. It is said that the fairy tale does not *impose* a world, like myth, but that it poses a question to the myth, disrupting the forgetful sleep the myth induces and asserting that the world is not as it seems. The act of telling the tale and posing the question is itself *fée*, unlocking the closed

---

[38] Benjamin, 1968, p. 102.

system of mythical language. The traditional tale, with its riddles and reversals, promotes lateral thinking or "thinking otherwise."

Fairy and folk tales demonstrate that even the weakest, most disadvantaged members of society—women, slaves, youngest children—can, with wit and cunning rather than authority or brute force, overcome even the most seemingly intractable obstacles and liberate themselves from their lot. Folk tales and fairy tales champion "lost causes, runts of the litter, the slow-witted and the malformed."[39] They attack received ideas in such figures as the hag who becomes beautiful once kissed; they demonstrate that refusing constraints does not lead, as the myth warns, to self-destruction. It is the social and political drive of these stories to which Fredric Jameson refers in his essay "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," when he characterizes the fairy tale as "the irrepressible voice and expression of the underclasses of the great systems of domination."[40]

Folk and fairy tale, however, carry both conservative and subversive potential as can be seen in the contradictory readings and uses to which they are put in popular as well as academic realms. The tales seem to offer the means to navigate a path through seemingly impassable terrain—to turn ideology on its head—but the rewards they offer invariably contain elements of the oppressive reality the protagonist has set out to overcome.

> The emotion we feel in fairy tales when the characters are granted their wish is a strange one. We feel the possible leap of freedom—I can have what I want—and the perverse certainty that this will change nothing; that Fate is fixed.[41]

---

[39] Warner, 1995, p. 415.
[40] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981. pp. 104.
[41] A.S. Byatt, 1995, p. 259.

To marry the prince, to turn the tables on the powerful, to go overnight from rags to riches: folk and fairy tale, when not in cautionary mode, offer "happy endings" that are fantastical yet paradoxically contain sufficient contact with reality to satisfy the sense that such magical transformations are within the realm of possibility. This particular use of fantasy places the fairy tale within the broad narrative category of 'romance' as Northrop Frye has defined it in *The Secular Scripture*. Frye considered the fairy tale a major genre in the romance or 'comic' paradigm, which interestingly he considers to be "the ultimate source and paradigm of *all* storytelling," that is, of narrative in general.[42] Fredric Jameson summarizes Frye's definition of 'romance' as follows:

> Romance is ... a wish-fulfillment or Utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections will have been effaced. Romance, therefore, does not involve the substitution of some more ideal realm for everyday reality... but rather a process of transforming everyday reality: "the quest romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality." Frye's initial emphasis on the transformation of ordinary reality already implies a corollary: if it is possible for the lineaments of the earthly paradise to emerge from ordinary life, then the latter must already have been conceived, not as some humdrum place of secular contingency and "normal" existence, but rather as the end product of curse and enchantment, black magic, baleful spells, and ritual desolation... On this view, the oral tales of tribal society, fairy tales... adventure stories and melodrama, and the popular or mass culture of our own time are all syllables and broken fragments of some single immense story.[43]

While the notion of a "single story" is contentious for the reason that it imagines a literary mode that is timeless and ahistorical, it is interesting to note that the above inventory of romance genres includes many of the more popular genres to be found in what is now called "revivalist"

---

[42] Jameson 1981, p. 105, my emphasis. Note: Not all traditional folk and fairy tales heard in the storytelling revival are classical "romance" stories; this is particularly true of the folk tale. Using Frye's schema, the categories of Irony and Comedy are also represented in the revival. Zen, Sufi, trickster tales, and Hodja Nasrudin tales are folk tales with strong comic and ironic features. In some cases in which folk and fairy tale share a similar structure, it is due to the fact that the folk tale is deploying the fairy tale story-line for comic or ironic purposes.

[43] Fredric Jameson, 1981, p. 105.

storytelling. The utopian element in these genres is not always explicit, and is sometimes rather slight, but every tale provides at least some degree of liberation from reality through imagination of alternative worlds and meanings.[44] One of the questions that will be raised later in this thesis is why, among the many groups resuscitating the folk tale, does the privileged western middle class now long to hear these liberatory narratives, to the point that it is participating in the attempt to resuscitate not only the tales but also their tellers?

Revival Storytellers and Storytelling

One of the more effective ways of grasping current perceptions of storytelling is to listen to revival storytellers talk about their work. Debates among storytellers best reveal the pivotal concepts and contradictions of the emerging storytelling art and its evolving aesthetics. The struggle of storytellers to grasp the meaning of storytelling dramatizes contemporary relationships to orality, to traditional forms such as myth and the folk tale, and to our own highly mediated context.

What follows is a brief description of the venues, performances, and audiences of storytelling events in order to give a concrete impression of this revival, a revival which, despite its own claims to be a "movement," still remains a fringe activity or a form of children's education and entertainment.

Venues and Events

Revivalist storytelling is performed in a wide variety of venues for a fairly broad selection of audiences. Storytellers appear at storytelling, music and folk festivals; at cafés and in theatres

---

[44] See also Jack Zipes (1983), p. 8 "The fact that the [peasants] as carriers of the tales do not *explicitly* seek a total revolution of class relations does not minimize the utopian aspect in the *imaginative* portrayal of class conflict. Whatever the outcomes of the tales are—and for the most part they are happy ends and 'exemplary' in that they affirm a more just feudal order with democratizing elements—the impulse and critique of the 'magic' are rooted in an historically explicable desire to overcome oppression and change society."

for evening performances; in seniors' homes, schools, hospitals and prisons; in living rooms in what are known as "house concerts". Of course many events take place which involve the telling of stories but which are not—yet—named storytelling. However a whole new class of activities now calls itself storytelling and begins to adopt storytelling structures. A notable example is a group of Canadian landed immigrants who entered the country as political refugees. They meet in a coffeehouse in Vancouver's East side to tell stories of their experiences and their flight to Canada, using a formal 'story swap' structure and framing themselves as a storytelling group. Storytelling festivals present storytelling in different ways. Some take place in rural or "heritage" settings, such as Alberta's Fort Edmonton, while others occupy rooms in urban locations such as Toronto's Harbourfront Centre.

The folk tale market[45]

It is sometimes joked that the audience at storytelling events is made up of other storytellers—which, if true, would only prove storytelling to be somewhat similar to other arts like theatre, visual arts and dance—but it is not entirely the case. Listeners come from a wide variety of fields and backgrounds. They include teachers and librarians, actors, writers, artists, musicians, community and social workers, counselors, folklorists, academics, members of organized religions and others. Teachers and librarians tend to be especially well-represented in storytelling audiences, as do women. The cultural, educational and helping professions are well-represented—they all perhaps have some sort of proprietary professional interest in storytelling. Audiences also include business people, professionals, recent immigrants, and many others. At some North American festivals listeners tend to be well-educated, white, and middle-class, though this is not always the case. Furthermore, in the United States there are festivals of black storytelling that cater primarily to black audiences, and in Canada and the U.S. multicultural and 'ethnic' organizations run their own storytelling events. Depending on the event, audiences

---

[45] The title of a marketing article about storytelling events: Blayne Cutler. "The Folk Tale Market," *American Demographics*, 12, October 1990, pp. 47-9.

range in age from children to adults of all ages. Most festivals feature storytelling for both children and adults, while many evening events cater mainly to adults. Recently adults in their twenties and thirties have formed a larger audience segment, which may be related to crossover between storytelling and spoken word café culture.

Concepts and Issues in Revival Storytelling

Revival storytellers and listeners bring with them strong convictions about what storytelling should be but are sometimes perplexed when they encounter in other storytellers convictions which are equally strong yet which are opposed to their own. Storytellers share a common desire to preserve or revive the art of storytelling but often disagree as to how that project should be carried out. Some of the more persistent debates about storytelling's nature and direction are described below. I have quoted a number of storytellers at length, rather than summarize their concerns, in order to give a clearer impression of their thoughts and their diversity. Many of the quotes to follow are taken from the internet listserv known as "Storytell," which despite the obvious contradiction of its non-oral nature is heavily used by storytellers. The list is administered by Texas Women's University and has a membership of between five hundred and a thousand storytellers, among them some of North America's best-known such as Laura Simms and Doug Lipman. While the list has vocal members from Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, as well as South America and Italy, it should be noted that it remains far more representative of the storytelling scene in the United States, which has unfolded in its own unique way, as will be discussed later.

Born, Bred, or Neither?

Contemporary storytellers who do not hail from an oral tradition—or even a culture known for a gift of the gab—are often unsure about calling themselves tellers.[46] Lynda Howes, a storyteller for over twenty years, recently remarked in an interview:

> I have not yet really started to think of myself as a storyteller. Oh, I know I have all the characteristics of a storyteller as I see it. I tell lots and lots of stories. I think of my life as a story. But I'm still waiting for "the Water of Life" to flow.[47]

Winnipeg storyteller Kay Stone describes the problem as follows:

> The ambivalence and self-consciousness expressed by many urban tellers is rarely found among those growing up in an oral milieu where storytelling is learned as part of culture and not separated out. In a society such as ours where oral storytelling is not fully a part of our lives, where opportunities for telling stories have to be sought out, and where formal training is far less established than for other arts, it is not surprising that many feel unsure of their identity as tellers.[48]

Such remarks prompt questions about the meaning of "storyteller." Apparently the model for the "storyteller" is the fluent teller of the oral tradition who takes in the culture's tales with his or her mother's milk, whose tales and telling are sunk deep into the life of the community and are sanctioned by tradition, and whose speech exhibits the 'natural' fluidity and vitality of "unaffected" peoples, as Walter Benjamin called them. Storytellers now often tell their stories in a context in which stories are not shared cultural material, are not legitimized by tradition, and are conceived (despite the efforts of storytellers to undo this conception) as leisure or entertainment activities. Furthermore the verbal and imaginative facility associated with oral traditions must be learned afresh.

Authenticity, Legitimacy and Authority

---

[46] Note: Storytellers are sometimes known just as "tellers" by those involved in storytelling; outsiders regularly imagine insiders to be speaking of bank tellers.
[47] Kay Stone, "Moments of Recognition" *Appleseed Quarterly* Feb 94, p. 17-18.
[48] Kay Stone, "Moments of Recognition" *Appleseed Quarterly* Feb 94, p. 17-18.

There is a certain inherent absurdity in the effort to revive an old art, an absurdity that strikes even those tellers and listeners committed to its revival. Tellers tend to realize that while a tale can be faithfully reproduced, its "original" context cannot. Habits of listening and narrative expectations have been altered. Typically the storyteller does not personally know the listeners in the room and may not share their cultural frame of reference. Furthermore, when stories are told in performance, for example at a storytelling festival, traditional styles from entirely different cultures and eras are told side by side in what might be considered a postmodern mishmash. Those who long for a more "traditional" setting for a storytelling session—perhaps one in which no money is exchanged, no tickets are sold, no corporate sponsors appear on the programme, and in which the audience is a community that shares common stories and understandings—find themselves caught in a number of contradictions. Revival storytellers themselves recognize these contradictions. Dan Yashinsky, a well-known Toronto storyteller and writer, reflects ironically on his status as contemporary storyteller:

> Motions, gestures, a fake talking stick ... that's all I've got at the best of times. I'm... barely versed in the customs and thoughtways that once governed my long lost art. [Storytelling is] not so much lost as abandoned, dropped down its own mysterious, cold-and-dark hole in history, practically unfindable in the age I live in... Storytelling itself has fallen into the hole of forgetfulness, and aren't we all here because we want to bring it home again? Sure, but half the time I feel ridiculous, like I've wandered in from the set of some sci-fi flick, a remake of Fahrenheit 451 maybe, or some really avant-garde fantasy about a crazy, self-proclaimed bard who memorizes wonder tales and voice-casts them directly by word-of-mouth into the narrative-starved ears of his data-blasted, amnesiac, fellow nomads on the wanderground of modernity. Or something like that... it's all just a half-baked—though whole-hearted—improvisation, this attempt to build a new habitat for my long-exiled but not-quite-forgotten storytellers... [49]

When what are considered to be traditional storytellers appear at contemporary venues, there is less of that sense of vague fraudulence, trespass, absurdity or inauthenticity that sometimes surrounds contemporary traditional storytellers. Instead there is often a sense of incongruity, or for some people even *anachronism*. Some listeners claim they feel they have had

---

[49] Dan Yashinsky, "Lives of the Storytellers," unpublished article, 1992, p. 4-5.

the experience of encountering the past. Occasionally traditional storytellers themselves are struck by the incongruity of their appearance at festivals or urban venues. In the many performances by "traditional storytellers" I have attended, I have noticed that many such storytellers, less strangers to irony than those who romanticize oral traditions would like to believe, deliver their stories in the ironic mode. A First Nations elder invited to tell stories at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 1995 began with a vague remark about the oddity for him of telling stories in such a place, and then proceeded to tell what he called "stories from my own tradition," which quite deliberately included several highly recognizable Jewish and European folktales which he altered marginally by substituting local settings and outrageously clichéd native names.[50] Command of folk, fairy and trickster tales no doubt disposes storytellers to recognize when they are being made to represent the exotic and mythical qualities of authenticity or otherness for an audience.

Storytelling's new aesthetics

As with most other cultural forms, with storytelling it turns out that people may not know storytelling, but they know what they like. Most storytellers and listeners bring with them strong preconceived ideas about how they want their stories delivered. Determining the origin of such tastes is difficult. In some cases storytellers and listeners clearly have an idée fixe about correct storytelling style which is apparently based on the notion of faithfulness to tradition. Styles of storytelling have historically been heterogeneous enough to authorize a multitude of different styles, but storytellers occasionally want to restrict aesthetic conventions, even when they are unable to point clearly to a specific tradition on which their norms and expectations are based. Aesthetics is an emotional question and revival storytellers often have to remind themselves that "there is no one right way to tell a story," as a recent Storytellers School of Toronto storytelling course description points out. Despite these reminders, regular and

---

[50] David Snow, Stoney band, Alberta, October 17, 1995, Banff, Alberta.

sometimes heated debates are conducted about gesture, voice, whether to stand or sit, to keep hands still or to use them expressively, to keep eyes open or closed, to use or not to use a microphone, to draw attention to oneself or to attempt to disappear behind the story. To participate in programming meetings for a storytelling festival is to encounter, in oneself as well as others, fairly entrenched yet often unarticulated ideas about what storytelling should sound and look like. Certain storytellers become the standard by which other tellers are judged. In Toronto, the style of well-known storytelling "elder" Alice Kane has undoubtedly enriched less experienced tellers, but the modeling effect of her example has also produced homogenizing aesthetic constraints. In an interview in *Appleseed Quarterly*, Toronto storyteller Itah Sadu remembers her upbringing in the oral context of Barbados and her subsequent collision with emerging aesthetic norms in Toronto's storytelling community:

> I had to struggle with the school of thought that says storytellers are quiet. Alice Kane is brilliant with that; she stands there, and her voice takes you to the high tops and down and you can hear the rivers flowing. That is Alice Kane. I remember going to the storytellers' night; I was very loud, and I shouted. They thought I was mad! Someone pointed out to me that the story was the voice, and I got all caught up in the school that says my voice is supposed to do this, that, or whatever. Then I went to tell stories at a Jamaican Senior Citizens activity programme. Well, the seniors are all old people, so I should be quiet, not loud; save that for high school. I sat down (I never, never sit down to tell a story) and I tried to tell this story. I don't feel like me. But this old Jamaican woman in the front she says, "Mmmmm, mmmmm!" I thought what the hell is wrong with her? Finally, she couldn't take it any longer, and she said, "Darling, you don't have any life in your body at all!" ... So I stood up and told my story my way.[51]

Certainly there are many tellers who believe that there is no one way to tell a story, but many have had to question their own aesthetic assumptions before coming to this understanding. The origins of such aesthetics are difficult to uncover. The quiet, undemonstrative style of both Celtic Scots-Irish and First Nations storytelling has probably had an effect. Popular

---

[51] Interview with Itah Sadu, *Appleseed Quarterly* November 1992, Vol. 2 No. 4, p. 7.

representations of storytellers in fiction and film have likely also produced many of the commonly held notions about correct storytelling style.

Art or Craft?

> The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work--the rural, the maritime, and the urban--is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel... This craftsmanship, storytelling, was actually regarded as a craft by Leskov himself. "Writing", he says in one of his letters, "is to me no liberal art, but a craft." It cannot come as a surprise that he felt bonds with craftsmanship, but faced industrial technology as a stranger. (Walter Benjamin, 1968, p. 91)

Storytellers are often unsure whether to designate their work as art or craft. Storytelling's association with folklore and with the craft milieu of oral cultures suggests to many the status of craft, which is commonly associated with folk, peasant, native peoples, etc. Some subsequently relate storytelling to 'folk' traditions—always a vague concept— and thus deem it a "folk art," yet this category now connotes a sort of ad hoc, naïve bricolage that is as distant from much storytelling as modernist painting is. At the same time the need for funding prompts storytellers to convince arts councils that storytelling is a "serious" art, despite discomfort with the implication that storytelling is elite or "high" culture, an implication which automatically strips storytelling of its authenticity and of-the-people vitality. In an odd twist arts councils are currently interested in awarding funds to "popular" forms which are seen to be less "exhausted" than more institutionalized forms, but only so long as storytelling "artists" can prove a level of rigor or training similar to that found in the other "arts," a paradox that is not lost on storytellers as they subject themselves to the demands of grant applications. It is difficult to place storytelling in terms of distinctions between art and craft, high and low or popular culture. Nevertheless, despite confusion about categories it seems that storytelling is usually posed as a

'serious' craft tradition that actively rejects mass or consumer culture at the same time as it rejects modernist high culture (or even postmodernist 'high' culture, for all its incorporation of mass cultural elements). Revival storytelling after all is preoccupied with past forms which are seen to be the true "popular culture" of past or present cultures: the past "authentic culture of which we have virtually lost the memory" and those current "marginal pockets of the collective social life of the world system."[52] Regardless of whether storytelling refers to esoteric storytelling traditions of Zen or Sufi, to the tales of peasant villages, tribal societies, seventeenth century settlers in America, or the working classes of centuries past, it is seen to have in common an embeddedness in collective life, which makes it difficult to categorize under modern classifications. What is certain is that the contemporary revivalist movement represents an implicit critique or at least rejection of *both* poles of the dichotomies high vs. mass culture, or high vs. low art. It sees these as dialectically related, and it looks for other liberatory cultural possibilities outside of them, even while it occasionally sides with either pole as it sees fit.

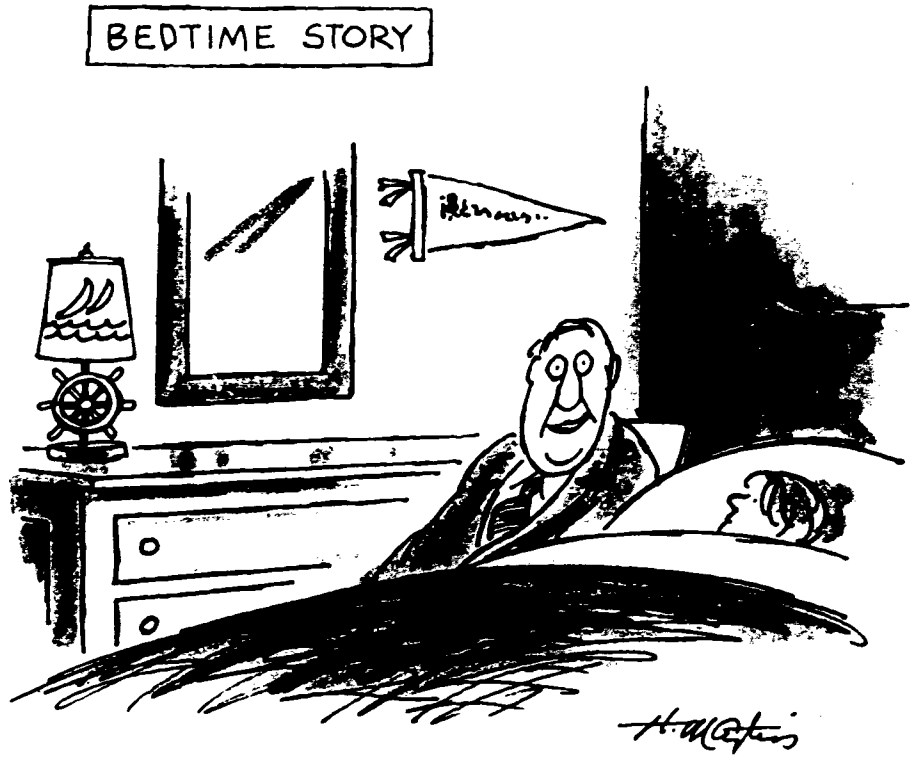
Traditional or Modern Tales?

One of the most contentious issues in revival storytelling has arisen over the recent proliferation of the "personal experience story." Storytellers often wish to adopt events from their own lives—or events they have heard about—as material for storytelling. Despite their familiarity with folk and fairy tale structure, storytellers do not always build their "personal experience" stories along the lines of the traditional tale. Personal experience stories embody "the absurdity of modern life," as one listener told me, and in this they bear a relation to other modern forms such as stand-up comedy. Certain listeners feel that the personal experience story, while it transmits something of experience, does not offer anything "practical" in the way the traditional story does in its problem-solving aspect. A recent letter to the editor of *Appleseed Quarterly* complained of the preponderance of personal stories at the 1995 Toronto Festival of

---

[52] Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" in *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge, 1992. p. 25.

Storytelling. Citing the title of one such story, the writer noted that the theme of every personal experience story she heard was "No One Can Be Saved." The character of that story differs little from that of this *New Yorker* cartoon:[53]



"Many years ago, an old Gypsy woman told me to withdraw all my savings and put the money on Fancy Gal in the fifth at Belmont. I did, and Fancy Gal came in seventh. Later, we lost our house in a hurricane. Your grandmother divorced me, and I began to drink and lost my job. Now go to sleep."

The tension between the desire to bear witness to the fragmentation, perplexity, pessimism and drift of contemporary experience on the one hand, and the need for the compact, useful wisdom of the traditional tale on the other, has been neatly foregrounded in this debate.

---

[53] *New Yorker*, July 17, 1993.

Many listeners do enjoy the "personal experience" story. However, its growth is also related to factors other than its popularity. In the United States in particular, development of traditional or already written material often does not qualify for grants while "original" works do.

A second question concerns the alteration of traditional tales. While traditional tales are always considered relevant to contemporary everyday life by storytellers and listeners, occasional attempts are made to increase their relevance by changing settings or even plot lines. This is a highly emotional issue for revival tellers and audiences. Some believe that unless stories are bent toward current conditions they will cease to circulate; others believe that centuries of retellings have polished the stories into a perfection whose power, integrity and simplicity will be lost through careless interference. Underlying the desire to alter the old stories is frequently the problem of their representation of women. Female storytellers wanting to recast tales from a feminist perspective were one force in the development of the "fractured fairy tale," to use a term coined for this form in the 1970's. Visitors to the storytelling tent at the 1996 Vancouver Folk Festival may have heard storyteller Melanie Ray tell a series of these tales. In this tradition are a number of literary "contemporary fairy tales;" the reader should see the collection *Caught in a Story: Contemporary Fairytales and Fables*.[54] A.S. Byatt's many contemporary fairy tales explicitly contrast traditional and contemporary story forms; her story of a Turkish genie's bewilderment at his English mistress' personal experience story in *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* neatly pictures this relation. "And that is the end of the story?" asked the djinn incredulously as the heroine concluded her tale. "That is where a storyteller would end it, in my country," she replies. In other stories, Byatt's heroines are familiar with the fairy tale and recognize when they are "caught in a story" in their own lives; they are subsequently able to change the course of the

[54] Christine Park and Caroline Heaton, *Caught in a Story: Contemporary Fairytales and Fables*. London: Vintage, 1992.

story itself. This does not always result in an entirely satisfactory resolution, however, just as in the following cartoon:[55]

Experience and the Practical

Storytelling revivalists often pose storytelling as the traditional—and best—means of transmitting experience. This does not imply that the stories are "true life" stories, though they may be; the story's ability to pass on experience that is *of value* to the listener is related to the "truths" contained in the story, whether it is true or fictional, as well as to the ability of the storyteller to provide the right story at the right time. The traditional story, in particular the fairy tale, offer what Benjamin called practical wisdom. As one teller remarked on the storytelling

[55] Cartoon by Carol Lay, *Terminal City*, June 12, 1996.

listserv, "...the tellers of old created the stories that have survived. These were purposeful and the purpose was to pass on the things of value they had learned in their lives." (Tom, 7/22/96) Information, reputed to be factual and practical, is viewed by revivalists as the enemy of wisdom and practicality.

Truth and Fiction

Storytellers and listeners are preoccupied by the paradox of the fairy tale's truths and lies. Classical opening and closing lines have been foregrounded and discussed. The most commonly cited of these are the traditional beginning of Arab tales such as the "1,001 Nights": "There was, there was, and yet there was not..." In North America the closing verse favoured by Alice Kane is often heard: "*The dreamer awakes / The shadow goes by; / When I tell you a tale / The tale is a lie. / But ponder it well / Fair maiden, good youth / The tale is a lie / What it tells is the truth.*" Literary theorists have pointed out that traditional and mythic narrative is under no obligation to keep the orders of truth and lie—or real and fictional events—separate. This does not imply ignorance; the near universality of these opening lines in folk and fairy tale suggest sustained reflection on such oppositions. (It is also, as storytellers have pointed out, related to the oppositional use of fairy tale as political allegory; subversive material is sunk into the story, and the audience must be reminded of its reference to actual conditions.) The ambiguity of fairy and folk tale, like that of poetry, allows it to appear more truthful than other forms because its use of language is less specific and more ambiguous, allowing it to hold more "truth" or meaning. It is likely that the "truth" of the fairy tale is being posed against the form of *information*, and some revivalists explicitly take that position.

Attempts to define storytelling

> What does it mean to be a storyteller today? Specifically, an urban performer practicing an art form that is not considered to be part of the mainstream. How does one come to call oneself a teller of tales now, when storytelling is so vague a term that it is widely misunderstood, *when some believe it means reciting memorized pieces, reading stories from books, or doing one-person theatre?* [56]

> I think a lot of people have a hard time thinking about storytelling. They actually don't know how to think about storytelling because they come from literary backgrounds or media which have different kinds of representation. They impose certain ideas on it but they don't actually know what they are talking about. [57]

Revivalist storytellers and audiences occasionally lament the wide use of the term "storytelling."[58] Many would certainly have objected to my inclusive introductory list of storytelling activities. Revivalists periodically attempt to limit the meanings of the term "storytelling" by devising definitions. These attempts usually fail or at least end in heated debates. Even on the question of what storytelling is *not* there is little agreement. Debates range from discussion of whether or not film, theatre and novels can be called storytelling—a memorable thread concerned whether actor Robin Williams is a storyteller—to discussions about which forms of live oral narrative performance should receive the official stamp of storytelling. It is easy to understand that an oral storyteller might want to exclude narratives found in media such as television, radio or the novel from the category of storytelling proper since these do not involve a storyteller in direct interaction with listeners. Film and television, while they clearly involve narrative and sometimes even oral narration, are not considered storytelling for the primary reason that they are non-oral, one-way communications without any physical exchange between storyteller and listener. It is more difficult to grasp why certain forms of live spoken or sung performance are excluded. Stand-up comedy and readings of creative

---

[56] Kay Stone, "Moments of Recognition" *Appleseed Quarterly* Feb. 94, p. 18, my emphasis
[57] Clodagh Brennan Harvey, author of *Contemporary Irish Traditional Narrative: The English Language Tradition*, quoted in *Storytelling in Ireland: A Re-awakening*. 1995, p. 19.
[58] *Storytelling in Ireland* report, p. 4.

writing and poetry are regularly rejected; occasionally even traditional narrative forms such as Newfoundland's tradition of recitation of narrative verse or the Southwest's hundred-year tradition of cowboy poetry are excluded from the category. Homer's *Iliad* was composed in iambic hexameter and sung, yet few singers of narrative songs, such as ballads, are invited to storytelling festivals unless they also tell spoken stories.

The distinction between storytelling and theatre is perhaps the most commonly encountered. Theatre's exact recitation of lines and its use of what is referred to as "the fourth wall"—the barrier between audience and actors in conventional drama—are cited as important points of contrast with storytelling. Storytelling may involve set versions of stories, but it usually involves some degree of give-and-take with listeners that is absent from most theatre. Storytellers may use stages, microphones and other distancing devices, but they have a personal exchange with the audience that is lacking, for instance, in monologues or one-man plays. Stand-up comics, who regularly do have such contact with the audience—more than do many storytellers in fact—are not considered storytellers. People *outside* the storytelling revival most often point to stand-up comedy when asked to name contemporary manifestations of storytelling, but within revival storytelling there is the sense that stand-up is either a "degraded" form or that its stories do not have adequate form or the same powerful, salutary content that storytelling has, a content beyond 'mere entertainment.' Stand-up monologues, in other words, are seen to lack the narrative coherence and memorable compactness of traditional storytelling. Furthermore, the relationship between stand-up comics and their audiences is adversarial. Its mutual badgering and heckling throws storytelling's aesthetic of respect for the listener into sharp relief.

Even acts which are very close to traditional storytelling may be evicted from the storytelling world. A long STORYTELL thread in 1995 debated whether or not the performance troupe "Eth-Noh-Tec" was involved in storytelling, as it claimed it was. Eth-Noh-

Tec is a duo of American artists of East Asian descent who combine dance, mime, theatre and storytelling traditions from Japan, Korea and China in their work. Apart from being considered "inauthentic" by many revival storytellers, Eth-Noh-Tec is seen to make use of "the fourth wall." Many also exclude the storytelling that is performed within role-playing games. While such games as Dungeons and Dragons involve the oral telling of traditional stories, not to mention the figure of "the bard," they are regularly rejected for reasons no one has been able to make satisfactorily clear, but which seem to involve the idea that the storytelling is not performed *for its own sake* but is a means of establishing the dramatis personae of the games' narratives. The performance context lacks the open-ended give-and-take that is for revivalists the prime requirement of storytelling.

When the internet usegroup "*alt.arts.storytelling*" was taken over by short story writers and film industry screenwriters who flooded the group with their creative writing projects, oral tellers and other storytelling fans became exasperated. After several failed attempts at reconquering the usegroup, they fled to alt.arts.folklore or to the more recent Storytell listserv. Two tellers have recently made another attempt to remedy this problem by rewriting the "alt.arts.storytelling FAQ" or "frequently asked questions" information page. They redirect literary or screenwriters to other locations on the internet, and they remind readers that

> ...storytellers consider the literary tradition as something quite different from storytelling. This group is for those that tell stories to others, not for writers. Despite this version of the FAQ mentioning TV and books, storytellers do not consider these media as telling stories in the same way as an oral storyteller does. Such media are usually involved with story making, storywriting, etc. but not orally telling. Therefore posting stories here is NOT welcome unless they are oral stories, specifically in form and language suitable for oral telling to an audience. Creative writing should be posted to a writer's newsgroup such as misc.writing, rec.arts.books, alt.prose, rec.arts.mystery, rec.arts.prose.

The drive by revivalists to define storytelling is not merely academic. It derives from a number of concerns. The first of these is an objection to the widespread appropriation of the

term *storytelling* in advertising and the media. Advertising exploits the appeal of *storytelling* by making it a convenient signifier for any number of ever-changing meanings and referents, thereby emptying it of its specific ones. The broad use of the term to describe any medium of communication from Hollywood film[59] to advertising to journalism appears to situate storytelling everywhere, while at the same time actually erasing any awareness of the unsatisfied need for live, face-to-face exchange of stories. Furthermore revivalists object to applying the term everywhere because they not only conceive oral storytelling to be distinct from other forms, they may also pose it as an alternative to or even an implicit critique of them. But narrowing the definition of storytelling also serves another type of interest. Professional storytellers have a market niche to protect in the small, competitive emerging storytelling industry and have everything to gain from a setting of professional parameters:

> Frankly I wouldn't mind a delineation of storytelling. I have actually gone to festivals where a storyteller was advertised as entertainment. I was anxious to meet a fellow professional. Instead, I was entertained by someone who sang folksongs. Nothing else. Didn't even tell anecdotes between songs. Since storytelling is hot and in, and folksingers are out of favor, this guy redefined himself as a storyteller in song. Give me a break. (Rich K., 3/28/97, Storytell listserv)

> While we don't want to make a definition over-restrictive, we definitely need one. Everything is not storytelling. I don't know of anyone who thinks otherwise. Once you accept that premise, then you have restricted and defined what storytelling is. You have declared a limit. What we must do is find a consensus of where that limit lies. (Jim Maroon, 3/28/97, Storytell listserv)

> Who is a definition of storytelling important to? Why after thousands of years of storytelling is there now a clamor to define it? My sense is... that the strongest impetus is from the cadre of 'professional tellers' who have an obvious stake in distinguishing themselves and their art.... Let the academicians puzzle out definitions, disband the story police and let's get on with telling and enjoying stories, storytelling and storytellers. (Bob Kanegis, 3/29/97, Storytell listserv)

---

[59] Clive Barker, a director of generic horror films, appeared in recent advertising as "the most terrifying storyteller of our generation."

Revival Storytelling: A Summary

To briefly conclude this section on revival storytelling, the following is a summary of the concepts and perceptions of storytelling held by those who want to revive and promote it. Within revival storytelling, the traditional story is valued above all. It is seen to offer **wisdom and counsel** woven into a pleasing form that represents neither pure education nor entertainment. The told story, particularly if it is a traditional tale, seems to offer the benefits associated with the way of life of oral traditions: the sense of **community**, relatedness, connectedness, and shared destinies. Oral traditions tend to be associated with the idea of the "organic society," collective, communal and non-hierarchical, and in tune with nature. Revivalists for this reason shy away from the objectification of storytelling as a specialized artform, at the same time as organizing its performance in modern entertainment venues. Storytelling is viewed as **universal**; while stories may differ across cultures, they are seen to be translatable across cultures and languages. Sometimes the same story appears in many different cultures. For this reason storytelling is often seen as a bridge or a common ground between different cultures and societies. Storytelling and stories are seen to be **commonly owned** and freely shared. Their authors are collective and **anonymous**; the story is shaped by the thousands of voices that have tested and told it over hundreds of years. This produces a sense that listeners will remember the stories and join the chain of transmission. For this reason, among others, the listener is perceived as an **active participant** rather than a passive consumer. Revivalists see stories as providing **coherence**. In their clarity and compactness traditional tales provide a frame for interpreting everyday life, a means of making sense of experience and of confronting the chaos of contemporary society and the ultimate meaninglessness of *information*. Stories and storytelling are often posed by revivalists as an alternative to or a rejection of other forms, in particular a **rejection of the electronic news and entertainment media**. Above all, revivalists are united by a sense of the **power of speech and storytelling**, of its ability to heal, to connect, to teach, to delight.

Everyday Storytelling

> "Storytelling is something everybody does, like brushing their teeth and going shopping and talking to the neighbour." (Sean Kane, *Appleseed Quarterly,* May 1996, p. 2)

> No one knows any stories; interesting dinner party conversation has disappeared. The younger people hide when I ask them to perform anything."(CBC broadcaster Vicky Gabereau, in interview with Robert Bly) [60]

> ...In the many overlapping circles of families and friends in which I live, everyday storytelling is going strong... Last week I went to a funeral of a woman... Besides going to show honor and respect for an old friend, I went for the stories about her that I knew would be shared there. Though I tell mostly traditional tales, it's one of my ambitions to be able to craft and tell personal, family and historical stories as well as these people do. Without them I might not know it was possible." (Storyteller Judy Schmidt, Storytell listserv, 7/16/96)

> Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all round when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. (Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 1936, p. 83)

Individuals in the industrialized West are increasingly aware of their own storytelling. This is true whether they belong to a culture which they perceive to be lacking a storytelling tradition, or to one that hangs on to its oral traditions, or to one with evolving, creative contemporary practices of storytelling, speech and slang. Across divides of class and ethnicity, people increasingly recognize, and are being encouraged to recognize, the storytelling they are already doing in their own lives. Storytelling may never have been purely second nature, as some

---

[60] Vicky Gabereau, "Gabereau", CBC Radio AM 690, Vancouver, October 23, 1996.

would like to believe. However, it is doubtful that the idea of storytelling has ever been so consciously foregrounded as it is at present.

The omnipresent daily telling of stories is coming to be known as *everyday storytelling*. *Everyday storytelling* refers not only to stories, however, but encompasses the entirety of our everyday conversation, narrative or otherwise, so that all our talk is reworked as storytelling. The reasons for this move are complex.

The category *everyday storytelling* implies that there are other categories to which our daily stories are compared. *Everyday storytelling* first of all distinguishes our daily telling of stories from the structured narrative forms of the category "art." As the name storytelling is applied to a growing number of forms including film, television and fiction, and as performance storytelling becomes a recognized art form, it becomes necessary to find a new way to describe the oral telling of stories in everyday life, which are then specified as *everyday* storytelling. Once named, our storytelling comes to be conceptualized, and even practiced, differently.

Calling our conversation *storytelling* aestheticizes it and draws attention to its artistry, or even to its lack of artistry. When habitual, second-nature talk comes to be named storytelling it acquires a measure of conscious reflexivity.

Second, recasting daily oral communication as storytelling represents opposition to that form of communication known as *information*. The picture of autonomous senders and receivers exchanging factual information in the pursuit of their own self-interest gives way to a different image of people bound together through shared stories and the weft of experience. Sixty years ago Walter Benjamin wrote that information "confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way." Unlike storytelling, information receives its authority from verifiability. The intelligence of storytelling, whether "the spatial kind from

foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition," possessed an authority which gave it validity but was not subject to verification. Information's new authority has invalidated storytelling's claims to our attention. Yet information is often "no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible." Plausible, factual, and verifiable, "information" as delivered by the press is seldom "useful" or practical in the sense that a story is. The relation between the factual and the practical is sometimes referred to in communication studies as the information:action ratio. We receive astonishing amounts of information, but it is seldom possible to act upon it in any meaningful way. As Benjamin said, "[e]very morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories." (89) Though Benjamin claims information has forced storytelling to "recede into the archaic," our daily ability to exchange experiences in narrative form remains an indispensable part of everyday action and sense-making, one that individuals currently feel the need to consciously assert.

Attitudes to our everyday storytelling differ, as this section's opening quotes suggest. People fall into two camps. Many, like Walter Benjamin, feel that everyday speech has become impoverished. It is said that no one has anything to say anymore, no one is able to pass on anything useful, let alone counsel or experience, and that in the midst of the contemporary din our speech has withered and dried up. This condition is attributed to many causes, but most often the blame is placed on mass electronic communication and entertainment. As Dan Yashinsky put it, "broadcasters jam the tongue's frequency."[61] Regardless of the cause, however, the sense of the loss or impoverishment of our talk gives rise to a desire to put the skill and artistry of storytelling, and the kind of thinking it channels, back into everyday speech. Revival storytelling, too, is partially motivated by this desire.

---

[61] Yashinsky, Dan. "Lives of the Storytellers", unpublished article, p. 10.

For others there is a new appreciation of the artfulness of their own storytelling. Neither degraded nor unpracticed, its vitality is thrown into relief by the arid banality of commercial mass communication. Despite the passivity induced by habitual consumption of mass media products, everyday storytelling is not endangered. Individuals seem almost surprised to discover in their storytelling an irreducible means of sense-making and cultural and self-revelation. What the two groups have in common is a desire to assert the rights and the pleasures of exchanging stories face to face, against, among other things, the isolating and alienating impersonality of a monolithic and hegemonic media. The exchange of experiences through telling stories thus comes to be perceived as subversive or oppositional. As Alphonso Lingis says,

> Every conversation between individuals is subversive—subversive of some established order, some established set of values, or some vested interests. There is always an enemy, a big brother listening in on all our conversations, and that is why we talk quietly behind closed doors. There is nothing you or I say to one another in conversation that we would say if the television cameras were focused on us for direct broadcast.[62]

While Lingis himself recognizes elsewhere the extent to which everyday talk is also conditioned and determined by conventions and more or less coercive norms, the above remark echoes the sense of subversiveness that has come to be attached to the idea of face-to-face talk.

The new consciousness of storytelling, and the drive to name all our communication *storytelling*, is part of a process of aestheticization. Making an art of interpersonal communication objectifies that communication as well as the relationships it mediates. Even though awareness of everyday storytelling affirms the power of our speech against the overwhelming voice of the news and entertainment media, it also encourages us to see our own storytelling as an object and as *means* rather than as an end in itself. A recent article in the Globe and Mail newspaper by Newfoundlander Dan Lawson titled "A *telling* advantage in the Maritimes" boasted that in the new age of communication, the maritime gift of the gab is putting

---

[62] Alphonso Lingis. *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing In Common*. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994. p. 72. (See Chapter 4 "The Murmur of the World" pp. 69-105).

many east coast media- and internet-based businesses ahead of their linear, reticent and, well, boring Ontario counterparts. "The only *resource* Maritimers really have in abundance: chat. *Good old talking... The yarn-spinnin', joke-tellin'* denizens of the East Coast may slowly be inheriting the earth."[63] The fact that the jobs created in Newfoundland by these industries are not well-paying only gets a cursory mention. Lawson speaks affirmatively about new employment resulting from the placing of "call centres" in the Maritimes. Call centres are 1-800 number answering services outsourced to areas of lower rent and labour costs by businesses owned and administered elsewhere in Canada, and they are notorious for low pay and stupefying working conditions. In the age of communication, individuals have already come to realize that they can sell not only their labour power but also their very speech on the market; those on the margins whose speech is still vital can sell it, like the forests, as a natural resource, but not necessarily for a high price.

Selling us the image of our own storytelling

Popular images of everyday storytelling are everywhere. Recent television and print advertising which portrays average individuals as "storytellers" confirms that people wish to perceive themselves and others in that role. The process of reification described above is being accelerated by the influence of advertising, which turns everything into storytelling, uses storytelling to sell anything and everything, and makes storytelling mean everything and nothing. Since September of 1996, advertising has increasingly featured the figure of the everyday storyteller. In black-and-white or sepia-toned film, people from all walks of life tell their stories and offer homespun wisdom. Consumers are buying the idea that storytelling and its way of life lives on, and they are responding with pleasure to the idea of wisdom and experience passed on by word of mouth. Advertisements only mimic the counsel offered by the story. It hardly matters that by most definitions these are not stories but rather are fragments, statements or testimonials.

---

[63] Lawson, Dan "A telling advantage in the Maritimes" The Globe and Mail, Thursday Nov. 28, 1996, p. A22 (my emphasis).

A recent campaign of Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce television advertisements features average people speaking intimately of the benevolent support they have received from the bank and giving testimony to the bank's human face, its community-mindedness. As they speak, the word *Storyteller* appears next to their faces. A glossy double-page magazine spread advertising the B.C.Tel cellular phone company apostrophizes a young businessman and father as "storyteller with an audience of one." A second glossy print ad for the financial company Nuveen encourages the reader to link the passing down of family stories with the idea of financial inheritance. *The story has changed somewhat over the years as older generations of the family tell it to newer ones. But somehow no one ever gets too tired to tell it, or too bored to listen. In the end, it isn't so much that we're in the story; but that the story is in us.*[64] Such representations, of which the foregoing are only a very small sample, invoke the term "story" or "storyteller" to effectively signify personal connectedness and to share in the storyteller's cultural and moral authority. It seems hardly necessary to point out the irony of the use of the figure of the storyteller to promote banks and communications industries, themselves a significant part of the very processes of globalization, rationalization and monopolization, which the figure of the storyteller is conjured up to confront. It is, however, proof of the singular power of the image of the story and the storyteller to provide the illusion of coherence to the experience of anomie, chaos and social disintegration. The storyteller embodies this promise of coherence at the very moment that those collectives from which the image of the storyteller flows are wiped out. The extension of capital into the margins and untouched regions of the world has always been connected with a fascination with the image of the non-commodified other, but it appears that this is now insufficient; it may now be necessary to imagine the sound of the other's voice.

Form and genre in everyday storytelling

---

[64] See Appendix A.

The above has not made clear what kind of stories it is that we tell, when we do tell stories. Surprising little is known about everyday speech and storytelling, though it has received more academic attention in recent years. I will only address this question briefly, since in the case of *everyday storytelling* the focus here is more upon the *process* of exchanging stories of experience and the social relationships that are mediated by the storytelling process than on the stories themselves. However, I will briefly discuss the form of these stories below.

It is commonly held that everyday storytelling is informal and unstructured. However, it seems obvious that all communication is structured; without structure it could not communicate. However, beyond the fundamental structuring of grammar, everyday storytelling likely exhibits more advanced narrative construction. Can genres be discerned in everyday storytelling, assuming that the term genre can be applied to speech? Everyday stories—fragments of life stories, anecdotes, the mundane recounting of events, et cetera—are difficult to analyze in terms of genre, which is not to say that they do not fall into generic patterns. The feeling that "you know what's coming" in a friend's personal experience story probably has as much to do with the way the story is structured than the fact that you are know the teller or are familiar with the kind of events the story describes. Certain special narrative genres are easier to discern: urban legends and jokes, for example. Tracing the historical antecedents of the stories and lore in everyday speech is the concern of folklorists, who have concentrated of late on the urban legend. It is generally agreed that the urban legend evolved from a number of genres, most notably its country cousin the "tall tale." The urban legend however attaches a new element of paranoia, horror and anxiety to this older form, as can be seen in the "AIDS Mary" story or the one about the wet poodle and the microwave oven.[65] The urban legend also bears a generic relationship to the supermarket tabloid story. In North America the tall tale historically combined legendary,

---

[65] "AIDS Mary" is the contemporary version of the story of Typhoid Mary; it circulated during the mid-80's. A recent urban legend tells of the discovery of a scuba gear-clad body at the site of a recent forest fire; it is assumed that a firefighting water-bomber aircraft scooped him from a nearby lake and dropped him over the woods; I have heard two versions, one set in France, the other in Montana.

heroic elements with the story of the settlement of the American frontier. It is a little known fact that many of these homegrown legends were developed as advertising strategies at the turn of the century by economic interests. The heroic figure of Paul Bunyan is one such commercial creation. These days heroes cut a more comic figure, with legendary figures surviving as the Jolly Green Giant.

An individual's narratives, though they might appear to be unstructured and free-form, are always structured and coloured by the many genres with which the individual is culturally familiar. Much of the creative energy in contemporary everyday speech is applied to reproducing, satirizing and otherwise playing with such forms or genres, old and new.

Oral Histories

A large part of everyday storytelling involves the exchange of life stories. When these are sought in the interest of transcribing or recording them, they are called oral histories. The pronounced recent interest in oral histories, while it has many and varied motivations, is clearly related to the interest in everyday storytelling. Oral history is a broad category that includes family stories, community stories used in community building,[66] oral histories solicited by ethnographers and other interviewers, and even published life stories. Everyday stories and oral histories bring with them a sense of the democratization of the figure of the storyteller, since everyone may at some point become the teller. It is the recent proliferation of oral history projects that most convincingly demonstrates that the stories of ordinary people, the uncelebrated and the unfamous, have acquired a new cultural authority.

Autobiographies and oral histories are frequently equated, but the forms are different. The most obvious distinction is that the oral history is first spoken, whether or not it is later

---

[66] See Jack Zipes, *Creative Storytelling: Building Community, Changing Lives*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

transcribed or recorded. Even when an oral history is published, it still retains the distinctive imprint of speech while the more literary form of the autobiography may not. The transcribed oral history retains not only the sense of the presence of the speaker but also of the listener, so that the role of its reader is transformed. In writing about the published stories of Nikolai Leskov, Walter Benjamin comments that unlike the reader of the novel, the reader of traditional stories is not isolated but remains in the presence of the storyteller. These are only a few of the many distinctions between the two forms. It is a curious phenomenon, though, that the form we call the autobiography is currently taking on some of the characteristics of the oral history or everyday storytelling.

Oral history, community story, and family history projects often want to record the stories of the oldest interviewees "before they die." The oral history offers narrative coherence, and all the better if the narrative is one that encompasses a long life, especially one lived through many years of rapid social and technological change. The desire for the stories of elderly people is creating a niche market in publishing. The "as-told-to" autobiography of the Delaneys, twin 107-year-old black women, has recently topped bestseller lists in the U.S. While the Delaneys were well-known figures in Harlem, their book has been followed by a rush among other publishers to cash in on the mania for what seem to be straightforward chronicles of more ordinary lives. Jessie Foveaux, a 97-year-old woman who has led an uneventful life in Manhattan, Kansas, marrying, raising five children, and doing volunteer work at her local church, has recently capitalized on this trend by selling her life story to Warner Books for a one million dollar advance. Though an executive at Simon and Schuster who turned down the lengthy manuscript claimed it was "so boring it was unbelievable," bidding for the story was competitive. Warner finally bid high in anticipation that *The Life of Jessie Lee Brown From*

Birth Up to 80 will enjoy phenomenal sales.[67] Perceived literary merit is currently no substitute for the sound of the real.

The desire to record the stories of the elderly also plays a large role in the collection of family histories. Manuals, kits and software are available to families wanting to go about searching for their stories. It has been frequently observed that in North America the search for stories, family or otherwise, has been fueled by "baby-boomers" in need of stories for their children, and that the family story how-to industry is financed by that group. Some believe that baby-boomers are a major force behind the storytelling revival itself.

The desire to "record the stories before the old people die," which many cite as their motivation for gathering oral histories and the source of their interest in the past, old ways and folklore by no means encompasses the full range of the concerns that motivate those who produce or seek out oral histories. Many oral historians are explicitly interested in the present experience of individuals, young and old, whose stories provide an important counterpoint to more homogenized, dominant representations of history and of the present. As with storytelling in general, it can be mobilized for both nostalgic and other purposes. Oral histories are used to ground the collective identities of groups whose histories have been largely silenced by dominant representations; they are used by communities to struggle against forces that homogenize and disperse local histories—these are often called "community stories;" and they are on occasion used for specific political purposes such as establishing territorial rights in First Nations land claims cases. This is not to say that this storytelling is purely instrumentalized; often it is seen as an intrinsic, fundamental part of personal and collective identities which are increasingly threatened by the media and globalization.[68]

---

[67] "Million Dollar US advance paid for 97-year-old's story" The Vancouver Sun, Tuesday, April 1, 1997.
[68] I should add here that oral histories take many forms. While they involve a single teller speaking from his/her own experience, the stories are not necessarily "personal" in the way many Westerners expect. One anthropologist once noted that the oral history of a Pueblo Indian is about as personal as the story of a car

It is not possible to describe the various forms of oral history in depth here. However there are a few observations to be made about oral histories. One is that in their less structured inclusiveness, oral histories are seen to present a story that is more satisfyingly 'real' than those found in autobiographies of notable and extraordinary lives. Oral histories appear to give a satisfying sense of *experience*, experience grounded in a particular time, place and history. One young woman remarked to me that for her oral histories are an antidote to the experience of being "nobody nowhere." The appeal of the oral history derives from its participatory nature, its validation of unofficial histories, its concern with experience both personal and collective, and generally its sense of the lives of real people living through historical time. The oral history's appeal and validity are seen to rest in the *sound* of real speech. In a context saturated by images and pastiched samples of sound and voice, the rhythm of sustained talk and reminiscence has become a novelty.

Analysis of the categories of traditional, revival and everyday storytelling will be undertaken in Chapter Four. Chapter Three provides a review of theories of narrative as a means to more closely examine the functions and meanings of the narrative form.

---

tire. (Julie Cruikshank, 1990, p. x.) The 'subject' implicit in different oral histories has been extensively analyzed. Second, for many First Nations groups the term "oral history" may encompass family history, genealogies, myth and other narratives.

Chapter Three
Theories of Narrative: A Review

> To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture, and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself. So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report on the way things really happened, that narrativity could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent—or, as in some domains of contemporary Western intellectual and artistic culture, programmatically refused.
>
> Hayden White, *The Content of the Form*, p. 3

> The old tales reflect the human universe so richly, that if you have an obsession, and look at the tales, you will see your obsession staring back out at you. Freudians see the family romance, Jungians see archetypes, Marxists find class struggle, collectors find categories, old time linguists found the origins of language, old time anthropologists found decayed ritual, and so forth and so on...
>
> Storyteller Tim Jennings, Storytell listserv, 5/26/96

What is storytelling? Evidently, it is many things. *Storytelling* refers to the story itself, that is, words configured in a particular way either in speech or writing. Secondly, it signifies the practice of telling stories in a live, face-to-face context. And lastly, it evokes a collection of images, desires, values and imagined ways of life.

Storytelling as a practice of live oral performance communicates through its physical or social context as well as its various linguistic codes. Its meanings are produced by the social relationships that are mediated by the storytelling, the social and cultural context of the telling, the silent way the physical setting itself communicates, the framing of one story by the others that have gone before and will follow, and the extralinguistic features of the storyteller's performance. All of these serve to produce meanings that do not derive merely from the text of

the story itself, and indeed this is part of storytelling's appeal. A common saying among storytellers claims that "all are needed—the listener, the story, and the storyteller." One of the more curious elements of this resurgence is that the satisfaction derived from the *idea* of the relationships suggested by "storytelling" is often enough.

The desire for storytelling, however, is more than the desire for actual human contact—or the idea of human contact—with a storyteller and a community of listeners. It is also emphatically the desire for particular types of narrative, as publishers of fairytale collections and folklore texts have discovered to their benefit. The primary emphasis is often on the story—its pleasures, its practical wisdom, its helpfulness, its efficacy, its significance, its various powers.

Over the past five decades, while *storytelling* was acquiring some of the new meanings it now harbours, academic disciplines increasingly turned their attention to the question of narrative. This chapter will provide a brief review of some of these academic literatures. Narrative is such a broad category that undertaking a literature review on this topic is a difficult task. I will make reference to numerous perspectives but will focus most closely on those theories that take the narrative form as one of their primary objects of study. These are literary criticism, hermeneutics, structuralist literary theory, linguistics, narratology, poststructuralist theory, and those disciplines concerned with historiography—history and the philosophy of history.

Storytelling revivalists have used narrative theories for a variety of purposes, including quite simply the attempt to better understand the tales and place them in some sort of meaningful context. In some instances, though, research into narrative is an attempt to legitimize an interest in storytelling which still seems a somewhat unsophisticated or disreputable object of study. Upgrading one's interest in storytelling by lacing it with academic citations becomes more

common as storytelling programmes become institutionalized in the universities and as business and the professions seek to appropriate storytelling techniques. The fields most often cited are academic and popular psychoanalytic/psychological interpretations such as Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*; anthropological and structuralist theory, in particular Vladimir Propp's work on the folktale and Lévi-Strauss' work on myth; folklore, for tracing the 'origin' and histories of tales; and feminist studies of women's narratives.

Theories of narrative tend to have a textual bias. Relying as they do on written communication, the academic disciplines emphasize textual objects of study. When their methods are brought to bear on oral works, the focus, not surprisingly, is on transcribed stories rather than on the performance of stories in a social context. For this reason, such methods tend to obscure or misrepresent works that are oral in origin, though perhaps quite unintentionally. Yet, curiously, narrative and literary theories have shown a sustained interest in the narratives and thoughtways of 'traditional,' non-literate peoples. Formalism and structuralism are most notable in this regard. Coincidentally, such theories appear nearly simultaneously alongside various twentieth-century waves of storytelling revival. The 1970's, for example, a time of widespread interest in storytelling forms, also marks a high point in structuralism and narratology. This chapter will try to identify some of the shortcomings of these approaches for the study of storytelling and will also note those instances where narrative theory, recognizing its own textual and other biases, has attempted to face the non-textual other, in both its traditional and its current embodiments, on its own ground. Traditional oral cultures stand like a spectre behind the academic interest in narrative as well as the current revival of storytelling. Theorists have claimed that they study traditional oral narrative because it offers us the "prototype of all narrative." In some cases, it appears that the study of traditional tales is a search for our narrative origins.

Literary Criticism

The study of narrative has, until recently, been largely confined to the area of *literary* narrative rather than narrative as it appears in everyday speech and communication. Storytelling occupies a number of positions on the continuum between art and everyday life. For this reason, particular attention will be paid in this review to the split between these realms and practices as it is represented in various theories. Twentieth-century literary criticism and theory has taken a number of different approaches to narrative; only a brief summary is possible here. I have made extensive use of Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* in this review, and readers may want to consult this useful text for an illuminating review of these theories.

Literary criticism in Britain in the early twentieth-century was marked by a new focus on the text itself as an autonomous entity separate from its immediate social and historical context. Critics, analyzing literary works in reference to the canon of great works from literary "tradition," relied on their own "poetic" abilities and an impressionistic method to reveal connections both within the text itself and between the text and the literary canon. Their work made criticism itself *literary*. At the same time its aims were also moral and ethical; it explicitly gave as its motivating concern the increasing desacralization of English culture, the loss of religion and traditions, and the subsequent need to return spiritual and moral life to the people. It would do this through the teaching of English literature and the establishment of a literary tradition through which would flow a sustaining spiritual and mythical force. These critics effectively dehistoricized literature, though it would not be the first or the last school of literary theory to do so. Their work is worth mentioning because its treatment of the text as autonomous, an approach paralleled in a number of other important literary methods of this century, was made so explicit and, secondly, because of its profound influence on the way generations of students in the west were taught to apprehend narrative fiction.

While such work was to share with other literary theories of narrative a deliberate bracketing out of all external realities from the study of a text, it was isolated by its markedly "unscientific" method. Roughly contemporaneous with Eastern European Formalism, it did not share the latter's attempt to formulate a rigorous method for analyzing literary and narrative *structure*. The focus on structure is central to Formalist and structuralist literary theory as well as to post-war Anglo-American literary theory. Some of the major figures of the latter tradition are Northrop Frye, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, and Frank Kermode.

Northrop Frye's 1957 text *Anatomy of Criticism* attempted to systematize criticism by formulating the objective laws of literature, which were the modes, archetypes, myths and genres by which all literary works were structured. He identified the four major tropes of literature as Comedy, Romance, Tragedy, and Irony. Frye's approach, too, is ahistorical in its insistence that literature is an 'autonomous verbal structure' severed from external reality, and that "the modes and myths of literature are transhistorical, collapsing history to sameness or a set of repetitive variations on the same themes."[1] In its apprehension of these transhistorical patterns the theory decentres the human subject, the author and the reader, and in this it is anti-humanist. According to Eagleton, Frye viewed literature as a collective utopian dream, giving play to desires not satisfied in the social realm. His theory is at heart romantic, exhibiting a distaste for history itself and invoking "pre-urban images of the natural cycles, nostalgic memories of a history before industrialism."[2] For Frye, as for New Criticism, literature was viewed as displaced religion. Frye's approach, however, aimed for the respectability of that very science which his aesthetics rejected.

---

[1] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, pp. 91-93.
[2] Eagleton, 1983, p. 92.

Several of the classic texts of Anglo-American literary criticism are Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* of 1961, Kenneth Burke's 1962 *A Grammar of Motives*, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative* of 1966, and especially Frank Kermode's 1968 work *The Sense of An Ending*. Influenced in part by structuralist theories of narrative, which will be summarized below, this body of work attempted to provide a definition and analysis of narrative's structures as well as to draw out some of its social functions. In his study of the concept of narrative closure, Frank Kermode writes that "[i]n 'making sense' of the world we... feel a need to experience that concordance of beginning, middle and end which is the essence of our explanatory fictions." But such fictions degenerate, he says, into myths whenever we actually believe them or ascribe their narrative properties to reality, "whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive."[3] This body of work has provided useful definitions of narrative, which is generally perceived as a literary structure exhibiting a discernible *beginning*, *middle*, and *end*, as well as a *plot*. Plot, an ordering of events that are sometimes but not necessarily presented chronologically, involves a selective process by which different events and their distinct time-lines are harmonized and brought into a narrative 'line.' The above studies of narrative have been widely used in fields other than literary studies, as will be seen below.

Formalism, Structuralism, Semiotics and Narratology

I will review this group of theories of narrative in some detail since they have taken a strong interest in traditional oral narrative. Their focus is on transcriptions of stories as well as on printed literary work, therefore the sociohistorical context of stories, as well as the process of their oral transmission and interpretation, is not addressed. This curious fact will be discussed later on.

---

[3] Frank Kermode. *The Sense of An Ending*. pp. 35-36.

Formalism is the term given to the work of a school of Eastern European linguists and literary theorists who attempted to analyze literary texts "structurally," that is to discover the deep laws and structures governing the *form* of literary texts.[4] This approach marked a critical revolution in the study of narrative and poetic forms in its intent to assert the dominance of form over content. The predominant concern was to specify the techniques by which literary language operates and to distinguish these from modes of 'ordinary' language. Formalism's self-conscious attempt at a scientific approach to literary structure was in part a response to the subjective, impressionistic aesthetic philosophy of Symbolist art and poetry. As a result, Formalism was marked by a strong focus on the operations of the language of poetry, though the Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp's ground-breaking study *Morphology of the Folk Tale* attempted to schematize the fairy tale, a prose narrative form. Victor Shklovsky also applied formalist methods to narrative in his 1925 work *On The Theory of Prose,* in which he conceptualized the quite distinct laws governing the novel. Shklovky's is one of the first attempts at a "poetics" of fiction, and it greatly influenced later structuralist work on narrative.[5] A central Formalist concept is the notion of 'defamiliarization.' Defamiliarization refers to the ability of art to "make strange," to transform (in the case of literature) ordinary language by foregrounding its operations. Through the use of a variety of devices, ordinary language is 'deformed' or altered in such a way that the reader is forced into a reflexive meditation on language itself. Art renews our perceptions which, due to the fact that they are reified, have the tendency to produce an anaesthetic and even oppressive unconsciousness toward language. In poetry, a number of devices are used to draw attention to the linguistic form, to unhook words from their referents—the objects and concepts to which they refer—in order to foreground the materiality and "palpability" of those words. Shklovsky argued that in narrative, plot is the device by which the common story form is defamiliarized. The differentiation between plot and story is one of

---

[4] See Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics, London: Methuen & Co., 1977* for a useful overview of Formalism and structuralism.
[5] Hawkes, 1977, p. 65.

Shklovsky's most useful distinctions. " 'Story' is simply the basic succession of events, the raw material... Plot represents the distinctive way in which the "story" is "made strange."[6]

Formalism's concern was not merely to abstract the laws of literary language but also to freely offer prescriptions for artistic production. Formalism declared the most "successful" literary works to be those which explicitly and self-consciously referred to their own construction. Within the Formalist view, of course, all works invariably speak on some level of their own coming into being and only appear to have a content that references imaginary or real events or realities. A reflexive awareness of this fact allows the literary work a greater capacity for defamiliarization. In terms of narrative, Shklovsky held up the eighteenth-century English novel, *Tristram Shandy,* as an ideal since its explicit content is the process of its own storytelling.

Roman Jakobson, a Russian Formalist linguist, represents the link between Formalism and structuralism. Jakobson migrated to Prague in 1920, joining a group of linguists who came to be known as the Prague school. Jakobson attempted to elaborate and further systematize Formalist methods using Saussurean linguistics. The work of Ferdinand de Saussure, published as *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916, introduced the notion that the relation between sign, or word, and its 'referent,' or the thing to which it refers, is an arbitrary one. Saussure showed that meaning does not inhere in any direct and transparent relationship between words and the objects 'out there' in the real world to which they refer. Rather, it is produced through the relations of words to each other in an autonomous, closed, self-referential system called language, which consists of signs. The sign consists of a sound or word image known as a *signifier*, together with the idea it signifies, or the *signified.* Each signifier carries a meaning only by reference or juxtaposition to the meaning of other signifiers. That is, words work within

---

[6] Hawkes, 1977, p. 66.

a system, relationally. Saussure also distinguished between *langue*—the whole objective structure of signs—and *parole*, individual utterances or uses of language which are made possible by the structure and laws of *langue*. This approach marked a departure from the traditional linguistic study of actual utterances and a shift to studying the system that underlies them. To study this system, those realities to which language appears to refer must be 'bracketed out' so that linguistic operations can be foregrounded. Obviously, viewing everything as a system of signs produces the impression that language is not "about" anything but itself; as Fredric Jameson put it, "structuralism is the attempt to think everything through... in terms of linguistics."[7]

The modern structuralist analysis of narrative began with the pioneering work on myth of the French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.[8] Lévi-Strauss argued that underlying the seeming heterogeneity of myth are a number of universal structures to which any single myth can be reduced. Structured like a language, myth has its own 'grammar' whose rules determine how each formal or thematic component may be combined. These underlying relations constitute the myth's "meaning."[9] Lévi-Strauss' position, furthermore, was that these relations are intrinsic to human mental operations. These operations, for example the formation of binary oppositions, structure myth along their own lines and function as means of classifying and organizing reality. One of the advantages of Lévi-Strauss' approach is that it rejects the notion that so-called primitive storytelling or *pensée sauvage* was largely confused or nonsensical and demonstrates the functioning of art or narrative in 'practical' terms. Myth for "primitive man" is a tool for producing an ordered conception of physical and social reality. Lévi-Strauss' extensive later collection of early myth, *Mythologiques*, has also served, as Fredric Jameson put it, "as a vast

---

[7] Jameson in Eagleton, p. 97.
[8] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* trans. C. Jacobson and B.G. Schoepf. New York: Basic, 1963.
[9] See Eagleton p. 104; Jameson, 1981, p. 77.

introductory manual of these unfamiliar and unsettling strings of episodes, so utterly unlike what our childhood versions of Greek myth led us to expect."[10]

French structuralist literary theory over the past thirty years has featured a strong emphasis on narrative. In the 1960's and 1970's this new "science" of literary narrative became known as narratology and included among its theorists the Lithuanian A.J. Greimas, the Bulgarian Tzvetan Todorov, and the French critics Gerard Genette, Claude Bremond, and Roland Barthes. These theorists have drawn extensively on the work of Lévi-Strauss as well as of Propp and Jakobson.

A. J. Greimas' major contribution has been to further abstract or codify the schematizations of semiotics and Formalism.[11] An heir of Vladimir Propp, Greimas showed that Propp's analysis of the fairy tale was caught up with categories deriving from the surface level of the stories—categories of character, plot and temporal ordering which only produce a retelling of the stories rather than properly abstracting their internal operations. In part by showing that 'functions' inside each tale may be enacted either by an event or by a character, Greimas removes the focus on character types with the new concept of the "actant," thereby replacing the inevitable projection of modern categories of character and the subject onto past forms with a focus on the story as a signifying whole. Greimas' object is the nature of the 'grammar' that generates individual works of literature, the "elementary structure of signification on which our humanity rests."[12]

Tzvetan Todorov and Gerard Genette in particular have focused on traditional oral story genres such as folk and fairy tales, and their work is often cited in folklore and storytelling

---

[10] Jameson, 1981, p. 113.
[11] See Jameson, 1981, p. 12.
[12] See Hawkes, 1977, pp. 87, 90, 92.

journals alongside that of Propp and Lévi-Strauss. Genette's major contribution has been to draw out the distinction between *narration* and *narrative*; that is, the difference between the *act and process* of telling a story on the one hand, and the story itself on the other. This distinction is particularly useful in that it foregrounds an important difference between oral and printed narratives. The absent narrator or voice-of-god narration is never a feature of oral storytelling in the same way as it may be in literary or other written narratives, even when the oral storyteller or the story's internal narrators seem to disappear behind or inside the story. The study of oral narrative enabled Genette to isolate meanings deriving from the act of narration itself, with all its rhetorical and socially communicative features. In terms of narrative, Genette has also usefully elaborated the old Formalist distinction between plot and story. "Story" or *histoire* refers to the actual chronology of a story's events in time, and "plot" or *récit* to the order of events in the text. (Eagleton, p. 106)

Todorov's work consists primarily in the attempt to work out a story 'grammar,' by which the 'syntax' of each story can be mapped out rather the way a single sentence may be broken down into its constituent parts of speech. Since language is the primary human signifying system, one that determines all others including narrative, it is to be expected that each narrative will be constructed according to the same rules. For this reason the study of narrative is seen to reveal the properties of language itself. Language being a universal human phenomenon, narrative too comes to be viewed as universal in its structures. (Hawkes, p. 97) A universalist, Todorov has often argued against the 'diffusionist' explanation for the appearance worldwide of particular tales. Despite his interest in general universal rules, Todorov's work concentrates on particular individual stories or texts and has been criticized therefore for a concern with 'parole' to the exclusion of the elaboration of the rules of the system of language.

Todorov is perhaps most well-known for his work on Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a written text which is an extended meditation on storytelling. Ten urban Italians take refuge in a rural

villa after fleeing an outbreak of plague. They maintain calm—or, as they put it, their sanity—by telling each other stories: ten stories each over ten days, hence the title. Todorov's work shows consistent interest in the "frame story," a form in which a collection of stories is contained under the organizing principle of a single story. Todorov has also analyzed at length the "1,001 Arabian Nights," the much-loved frame story in which Scheherezade, young bride of the pathological wife-killing King Shahriyar, preserves her life by telling a succession of stories to which the king himself becomes a kind of captive. Each night, under threat of death, Sheherezade begs for the permission to tell "one last story" to her younger sister. And each night, she ends each story at a point of tension so that the king, who stays to listen, must delay her sentence 'one more day' so that she may finish her story. Of course, her stories are an endless beginning, delaying, ending and beginning, and they never conclude. In a feat of imagination only partially produced by the threat of death, Sheherezade extends the chain of interwoven stories for 1,001 nights, by which time the king's sanity has been restored through the healing properties of her narrative cure. (Her stories also tell of Shahriyar's alter ego, the good and humble caliph Haroun el Rashid.) Todorov's approach is a detailed syntactical analysis, which yields the classic structuralist analysis that the content of the form of the *Decameron* and "1,001 Nights" is the act of narration itself. The subject of these works is the idea that "narration equals life: the absence of narration death," that for human beings, the end of narration is the figurative and real cessation of life.[13]

A.S. Byatt's 1995 story "The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye" is one among the many recent instances of the narratologist or structuralist linguist as protagonist in recent fiction.[14] The title story of a set of five of Byatt's own fairy stories, "The Djinn" (or "genie") is a sympathetic satire of narratology and narratologists at the same time as it is a reworking of and

---

[13] Todorov, *Grammaire du Décameron*, quoted in Hawkes, Terence. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen, 1977, p. 100.
[14] Byatt, A.S. *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories*. London: Vintage, 1995. pp. 95-277. See also Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Storyteller*. *Toronto*: Collins, 1989.

meditation upon the "1,001 Nights" and *The Canterbury Tales*, among other frame stories. It tells the story of a middle-aged narratologist whose business is storytelling but who is

> ...no ingenious queen in fear of the shroud brought in with the dawn... no meddah telling incredible tales in the Ottoman court or the coffee houses by the market. She was merely a narratologist, a storyteller of secondary order, whose days were spent hunched in great libraries scrying, interpreting, decoding the fairy-tales of childhood and the vodka-posters of the grown-up world..."[15]

While in Istanbul participating in a symposium of narratologists, the female narratologist visits a wishing stone in the Hagia Sophia and idly wishes for an invitation to give the keynote address at the upcoming World Narratology Conference in Toronto, at which Todorov and Genette would be present. Later, in an Istanbul market, she buys on a whim an old blue glass bottle which turns out, not surprisingly, to contain a wish-granting genie. Of course, since this is a fairy story, she is indeed invited to give the keynote address (significantly, though, without the genie's help, since this is a feminist fairy story). The following year in Toronto, she presents her talk while the djinn sits between the "handsome figure of Todorov and various orientalists... on the watch for western sentiment and distortion." Gillian's talk on "Wish-fulfillment, Fate and Death in the Fairy Tale" is confused and subverted by the presence of the genie, by her own confused wishing, and by her bewildering transformation inside a story which she is at the same time attempting to analyze. Among other things Byatt's story implicitly contains the by now well-known post-structuralist critique that structuralist methods represent no 'science' of how narrative 'works' or produces meaning, but that they produce retellings which are themselves stories, though stories of a different narrative type. Narratologists gather to "tell their stories about stories." After all, choosing sets of binary oppositions is a fairly arbitrary procedure in itself and is not governed by any foolproof, objective method. The recognition of such binary oppositions always comes from an interpretive framework lying outside the story, using

---

[15] Byatt, 1995, p. 101.

oppositions already apparent to the narratologist in her or his own cultural experience, an experience that is conditioned by hidden narrative structures of its own.

Structuralism has approached oral narrative with a number of useful tools and approaches. Its focus on oral narrative has to some extent freed it from what Ong calls a chirographic and typographic bias. This is a function of its focus on binary oppositions and other deep structures rather than on 'surface' manifestations such as plot or character, elements which are easily transferred from contemporary textual genres onto oral narratives to which they often do not properly belong. Structuralism's decentring of the individual (in its deemphasis of individual authors and individual interpretations) has aided in this as well; as Jameson has pointed out, structuralism exhibits a type of decentring of the individual which is also found in many traditional oral narratives, and in this it avoids the trap of projecting later categories of character or plot onto the older "decentred and preindividual narratives."[16]

Structuralist analysis however tends to bracket out the communicative aspect of the performance context of storytelling—or even writing—as discourse embedded in a particular social context. It fails to address the always contextual nature of meaning itself—the associations and meanings that each listener or reader actively brings to a text or performance from *outside*.

Structuralism effectively did away with the view that narrative "represents" reality directly. Narrative was seen instead as a means for 'producing' that reality or at least producing a set of organizing categories by which the disorder of 'reality' can be managed. The structuralist position on the human world is that it is so unstructured that it cannot be described at all. The early Barthes in a famous statement claimed that "art knows no static," by which he meant that

---

[16] Jameson, 1981, pp.112-13.

stories, through the process of structuring and selection by which they are created, eliminate the extraneous 'noise' and scrambled messages of human life and constitute an entirely different order of phenomenon.[17] From this standpoint the idea that fictional narratives can be "truthful" or can mimic real life is seen to be the worst kind of naïveté. Furthermore, literary and structuralist theorists argued that unless narrative is 'read' with the appropriate tools, it tends to put across a naturalized view of social reality, of cultural reality as 'natural' and as such immutable. As Kermode wrote, our fictions "degenerate into myths" whenever we actually believe them or ascribe their narrative properties to the real, "whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive."[18] Barthes in his influential early work on myth identifies in narrative the desire to establish moral authority, to put across a moral view of the world in the interest of a particular ideological position. The linguistic turn in social and political thought challenged historians, among others, to respond to the increasingly frequent charge that conventional histories pretend to represent history as it is but, in fact, recount historical events through the use of narratives which aim primarily to establish the rightness of their own positions.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is an approach that confronts problems of intentional and immanent meaning and of literary interpretation. Based in the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, its major figures are Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The work of Paul Ricoeur, which will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter, is also associated with hermeneutics. Hermeneutics addresses the question of whether it is possible to "understand" worlds which are culturally and historically alien; in other words, whether all understanding is relative to the historical situation in which works are encountered.[19] It aims to build a method of

---

[17] Barthes, Roland. "Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative," *Communications* 8, 1966, p. 2.
[18] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968. pp. 35-36.
[19] Eagleton, 1983, p. 66.

"reconstructing" meanings as they existed in the past and of encountering the past as it was for the agents inside it. Eagleton summarizes Gadamer's concerns as follows:

> For Gadamer, all interpretation of a past work consists in a dialogue between past and present... we listen to its unfamiliar voice, allowing it to question our present concerns, but what the work "says " to us will in turn depend on the kind of questions which we are able to address to it, from our own vantage point in history. It will also depend on our ability to reconstruct the "question" to which the work itself is an "answer," for the work is also a dialogue with its own history. All understanding is productive... the event of understanding comes about when our own 'horizon' of historical meanings and assumptions fuses with the horizon within which the work itself is placed. At such a moment we enter the alien world of the artifact, but at the same time gather it into our own realm, reaching a more complete understanding of ourselves.[20]

The difficulty with the hermeneutic method is that while it has insisted that meaning is always historical, it assumes the existence of a continuous thread between tradition and the present that allows the present to encounter artifacts of the past on their own terms. That is, the present is able to apprehend the artifact because its prejudices derive from the same past that produced the object of study. In the idea that history forms an unbroken continuum, free of decisive rupture, conflict and contradiction, hermeneutics erases the possibility of radical differences over history and among cultures. Furthermore "hermeneutics looks at the works of the past, not present... and sees in them a unity in themselves and their context and does not consider that they may be diffuse, incomplete and internally contradictory... Hermeneutics had devoted itself to sympathetically understanding the meaning of the past, but was there really any past to be known at all, other than as a mere function of present discourse?"[21]

The newest manifestation of hermeneutics is known as "reception aesthetics" or "reception theory." Its focus is the *reader*'s role in literature and represents a shift from earlier theoretical preoccupations with the author or with the structure of texts themselves. Reception

---

[20] Ibid. p. 70.
[21] Eagleton, pp. 73, 144.

aesthetics foregrounds the labour of the reader. It pictures the individual reader not as one who passively consumes meanings that inhere in texts but, rather, actively interprets those texts and participates in the construction of their meanings. Texts, for their "completion," require the creative ability of the reader to fill in gaps, infer from ambiguity or suggestion, resolve inconsistencies and read "between the lines." This is true even in those cases where writer and reader share a cultural context. The writer is unavailable to the reader for points of clarification, so that the reader must rely on her or his own cultural knowledge and ability to make links in order to "understand" or construct an interpretation of the text. When the reader encounters a text from a different historical period or culture, the cues, references and associations necessary for grounding the meaning of that text are even more absent. Furthermore, a single text does not supply a single meaning even for one reader; each rereading of a text is a different retelling since the experiences and perceptions of the reader change over time, and to each new encounter with the text he or she brings new approaches and abilities. The reader's interpretation, however, is never entirely arbitrary and is always controlled at least to some degree by the text. Nevertheless the activity of reading consists in large part of the effort to supply probable meanings. According to Wolfgang Iser, whose 1978 text *The Act of Reading* has made an important contribution to this field, the pleasures of literature rest in the disjunction between the codes by which the literary work is constructed and the codes that the reader applies to interpret them; those texts that foreground this disjunction and force the reader to question her or his own habitual interpretive codes are considered the most successful. In this Iser's work has much in common with the Formalist notion of defamiliarization discussed earlier.

Terry Eagleton criticizes Gadamer and Iser for a problem known as the "hermeneutical circle." As Eagleton puts it, "what you get out of the work will depend in large measure on what you put into it in the first place, and there is little room here for any deep-seated 'challenge' to

the reader."[22] In other words, in Iser's view, literature has a transformative power, but in order to be transformed, the reader would already have to exhibit the very critical capacity that Iser argues literature produces. To be transformed, the reader must already in some sense be transformed. Secondly, the seeming "open-endedness" of the hermeneutic reading process is only an illusion; ultimately it is the reader's job to render the text whole and internally coherent through a competent interpretation. Rather than drawing out the text's indeterminacies, the reader is seen to be primarily concerned with reducing its 'polysemantic' potential. Eagleton argues that Iser's concern is the unity and coherence of the reading subject, who through the activity of conferring coherence on the text is thus able to maintain internal balance and wholeness. By way of contrast, Barthes' 1973 *The Pleasures of The Text* presents the act of reading as extended 'erotic' play among indeterminate and dissolving meanings. The reading subject theorized by Barthes is one who tolerates dispersal and dissolution of self in a kind of playful, sexual abandon; the reader revels in "the masochistic thrills of feeling th[e] self shattered and dispersed through the tangled webs of the work itself."[23] The difficulty with this notion is that like Iser, Barthes is wholly concerned with private aesthetic experience removed from the reader's concrete historical context. Yet "literature" is fully embedded in social, political and economic conditions, both at the time of its production and its consumption, and the interpretation or reception of literary texts is conditioned and constrained by those realities.

Reception aesthetics' focus on the activity of the reader would seem to parallel storytelling's emphasis on the listener's active relation to the story and the storyteller, so I would like to consider it briefly in terms of storytelling. While reception approaches do not go very far in helping to account for storytelling's appeal or its forms, they are provocative in a number of ways. The reader's activity, as Benjamin said of the reader of the novel, is solitary. The reader may bring collective codes, habits and norms to bear on interpretation, but nevertheless remains

---

[22] Eagleton, p. 80.
[23] Eagleton, p. 83.

alone in the act of reading. Storytelling has an interest in the *collective* making of meaning, which is manifest in the fact that the storyteller is present to the listener(s) and listeners are present to each other. The ability of storyteller and listeners to discuss, contest or clarify their interpretations among themselves does not of course mean that there exists the desire or even the possibility of anchoring meanings in set or correct ways, but rather that there is pleasure or value in the experience of interpreting stories in the presence of others. The concept of storytelling, despite the fact that it is associated with the hoodwinking of passive and gullible audiences who swallow its representations whole, has in many contexts, past and present, consistently emphasized the listener's responsibility to actively question, interpret or "make sense" of the story in his or her own way. Unlike the book, whose physical objectivity gives the illusion that it contains concrete meanings, the idea of a storyteller and a listener more readily calls up the idea of the story's unfixed, fleeting and intangible character and, subsequently, the idea of the listener's active attempt to hear, to remember, and to interpret the story.

Fredric Jameson and Marxist Literary Analysis

As in hermeneutics, the question of the interpretation of past cultural forms is a central preoccupation of the work of Fredric Jameson. Jameson, in fact, proposes a hermeneutic method but of a different sort. His approach provides not only a means for exploring the question of present relationships to past forms in general, but it also takes an explicit interest in exactly those historical "popular" narrative forms that have lately attracted so much attention.

Jameson claims that the question of "the claims of monuments from distant and even archaic moments of the cultural past on a culturally different present" can only be answered by a reconstruction of the conditions in which works were originally produced.[24] Such a

---

[24] Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981. p. 19.

reconstruction restores to cultural works their specificity, their particular messages, struggles and desires, and their attempts to address and resolve specific social contradictions. Jameson's project is more than the mere description of the work's "historical background," which he terms the "antiquarian" approach. It is rather the placing of works in a historical continuum consistently marked by the struggle for power among social classes. Without such a reconstruction, cultural works of the past are merely read through the understandings and categories of the present. If present conditions of exploitation and struggle are masked, then readers will also find themselves unable to recognize such conditions in forms originating in the past.

> ...[O]nly a genuine philosophy of history is capable of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences and struggles, with those of the present day... Only Marxism can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it.[25]

Walter Benjamin's image of the traditional story as a seed which has lain dormant inside the pyramids but that once brought out into the damp air is found to have retained its full germinative power, differs from Jameson's view. For Jameson the story does not give up its meaning so easily. The proposal of a Marxist philosophy of history as the basis of a method of cultural interpretation signals the reading of the narratives of the past as allegories of the story of historical class struggle. As Jameson himself points out, this hermeneutic approach must contend with an "anti-interpretive" philosophical climate antagonistic toward master narratives and their recasting of cultural forms in terms of their own constructions of history.

---

[25] Jameson, 1981, p. 19.

Jameson's approach provides an analysis of literary theoretical methods as historically situated within broader intellectual and social developments. It proposes an analysis of the categories that methods such as structuralism bring to artifacts of the past in order to show that such present categories derive from concerns that are distinctly and specifically contemporary. In particular, Jameson places structuralism and narratology in the context of the changing conceptualizations of the subject.

> [A] dialectical critique of the categories of semiotic and narrative method must historicize these categories by relating what are apparently purely methodological issues and dilemmas to the whole current philosophical critique of the subject, as it emerges from Lacan, Freud and Nietzsche, and is developed in post-structuralism. These philosophical texts, with their attacks on humanism (Althusser), their celebration of the "end of Man" (Foucault), their ideals of dissémination or dérive (Derrida, Lyotard), their valorization of schizophrenic writing and schizophrenic experience (Deleuze), may in the present context be taken as symptoms of or testimony to a modification of the experience of the subject in consumer or late monopoly capitalism: an experience which is evidently able to accommodate a far greater sense of psychic dispersal, fragmentation, drops in "niveau," fantasy and projective dimensions, hallucinogenic sensations, and temporal discontinuities that the Victorians, say, were willing to acknowledge.[26]

The historicization of contemporary literary theory, according to Jameson, provides the means for demystifying current literary analytical methods and for foregrounding of the inability—or the partial ability—of such methods to respect the specificities of the original text. Jameson's approach operates not by rejecting such methods out of hand but by assimilating their insights into its own larger project of reconstructing and "unmasking... cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts."[27] Jameson's method is too complex to be summarized properly here, but even a brief review of several of its major features raises some interesting questions.

The question that is immediately raised for the study of the storytelling revival (as broadly defined) is that of how to explain the current popularity of traditional forms. In

---

[26] Jameson, 1981, pp. 124-125.
[27] Ibid. p. 20.

Jameson's view, cultural forms provide a means of raising social contradictions, but in a society in which class inequality remains a central feature, 'resolving' them at a symbolic level becomes an ideological resolution. Realism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was a fictional mode of critically addressing social realities. However, Jameson argues that realism became thoroughly institutionalized as an aesthetic norm, and as a result its capacity to produce a liberating construction of the present, or to subvert its own expectations, was lost. Following the lead of Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukacs, Jameson suggests that in the current context the genre of romance has come to provide the means of speaking of the present while imagining another future.

> [I]n "high" realism and naturalism... a perfected narrative apparatus...begins to confer on the "realistic" option the appearance of an asphyxiating, self-imposed penance. It is in the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism that romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative heterogeneity and of freedom from that reality principle to which a now oppressive realistic representation is the hostage. Romance now again seems to offer the possibility of *sensing other historical rhythms*, and of demonic or Utopian transformations of a real now unshakably set in place; and Frye is surely not wrong to assimilate to the salvational perspective of romance to a reexpression of Utopian longings, a renewed meditation on the Utopian community, a reconquest (but at what cost?) of some feeling for a salvational future.[28]

However, just as cultural forms are always produced in a context of some form of class tension and take hegemonic or popular, oppositional forms, so is the contemporary reappropriation of historical forms marked by new political struggles. This is sometimes made very explicit, as in the case of the appropriation of Native North American stories by the "dominant culture," for example, a practice which has been contested quite strenuously. Jameson is focused in particular on the adoption and containment of oppositional forms by hegemonic classes:

> The hegemonic forms ... can be grasped as a process of the reappropriation and neutralization, the co-optation and class transformation, the cultural universalization, of forms which originally expressed the situation of "popular," subordinate, or dominated

[28] Jameson, 1981, p. 104.

> groups. So the slave religion of Christianity is transformed into the hegemonic ideological apparatus of the medieval system; while folk music and peasant dance find themselves transmuted into the forms of aristocratic or court festivity and into the cultural visions of the pastoral; *and popular narrative from time immemorial—romance, adventure story, melodrama, and the like—is ceaselessly drawn on to restore vitality to an enfeebled and asphyxiating "high culture." Just so, in our own time, the vernacular and its still vital sources of production (as in black language) are reappropriated by the exhausted and media-standardized speech of a hegemonic middle class.* In the aesthetic realm, indeed, the process of cultural "universalization" (which implies the repression of the oppositional voice, and the illusion that there is only one genuine "culture") is the specific form taken by what can be called the process of legitimation in the realm of ideology and conceptual systems.[29]

It has often been remarked that revival storytelling, as it is manifest in certain festivals and audiences, is predominantly a middle-class cultural phenomenon. Fredric Jameson's analysis of the appropriation of popular forms as resource and material for the refuelling of exhausted hegemonic forms could be seen to explain the appeal of the always vital folk and fairy tale to educated middle-class audiences, and undoubtedly this is partly the case. It may be difficult to see exactly how the appropriation of the traditional tale is a strategy of containment, particularly in those instances when a revival appropriates forms which ostensibly originate not in any contemporary opposing class or conflict but rather in the *past*. From Jameson's point of view this may however be a case of safely removing present concerns into the past. Just as living cultures surviving on capitalism's margins are viewed as remnants of the past, so may the image of past groups stand in for opposing contemporary classes: immigrants, the lesser industrialized world, the urban poor, the dispossessed. The performance of tales belonging to the world's least privileged becomes in this view a means of symbolically resolving the growing pressures of globalization and widening divisions between rich and poor through a courteous meeting of cultures on the stage. However, the conceptualization of revival storytelling, for example, as a hegemonic form fails to recognize the tensions and contradictions within the practice itself. Instances of revival storytelling may themselves represent a popular practice that is not yet

---

[29] Jameson, 1981, p. 87.

entirely reified. Its class alliances are uncertain and contradictory since it is a practice in which different classes participate in different ways, though often meeting on the same ground. Revival storytelling poses itself quite specifically as a dialogue or exchange between cultures and groups and often stands in explicit opposition to "mainstream" representations and understandings. Like the fairy tale, it embodies normative as well as liberatory aims. As Jameson himself argues in *Reification and Utopia* (1979), cultural forms always embody both impulses, raising critiques and liberatory possibilities while at the same time containing or resolving them in a way that does not threaten the middle class' sense of its own destiny.

It is not entirely clear whether listeners or readers do or do not encounter these stories essentially as expressions of conflict and struggle, as forms which through "covert and disguised strategies... seek to contest and to undermine the dominant "value system." "[30] Jameson argues the necessity of reconstructing, through his method, the voice of the marginalized and oppositional

> ...from the fragments of essentially peasant cultures: folk songs, fairy tales, popular festivals, occult or oppositional systems of belief such as magic or witchcraft. Such reconstruction is of a piece with the reaffirmation of the existence of marginalized or oppositional cultures of our own time, and the reaudition of the oppositional voices of black or ethnic cultures, women's and gay literature, "naïve" or marginalized folk art, and the like.[31]

It is likely that the storytelling revival as it is most broadly defined derives from a genuine impulse to reaffirm *other* voices both past and present at the same time as certain practices within that revival shut down the liberatory potential of those voices through appropriation, homogenization and universalization. Each text, each performance must of course be analyzed for its own particular blind spots, repressions and potentials.

---

[30] Jameson, 1981, p. 84.
[31] Jameson, 1981, p. 86.

Historical Narratives and the Philosophy of History

In the 1960's and 70's a number of historians began to identify narrative structures in historical writing, provoking a crisis in a discipline which had purported to represent the 'outside world' or 'history' or 'reality' transparently or objectively. Older explanatory procedures of traditional historiography began to give way to methods represented by Benjamin, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, Habermas, Foucault, Derrida and Barthes. These approaches are largely derived from phenomenology, analytical philosophy and speech-act theory, deconstruction and discourse analysis. The latter models authorized new ways of looking at texts, of inscribing texts within discourses, and of linking both texts and discourses to their historical contexts. The work of historians importing these newer models provoked a strong reaction among those traditional historians who argued that the discipline of history ought to seek the status of a science and should avoid approaches that threaten the "objectivity" of historical accounts. In a climate in which knowledge must be seen to have a scientific basis in order to claim legitimacy or authority, an association with imaginative story forms meant a downgrading of the status of history as well as of the historian. This crisis was of course not confined to history. Hayden White, a historian of ideas, observes that

> ...the transformation of a field of study into a genuine science has always been attended by an abandonment of anything like an interest in inventing a story to tell about its object of study in favor of the task of discovering the laws that governed its structures and functions. According to this view, the prevalence of any interest in storytelling within a discipline aspiring to the status of a science was prima facie evidence of its proto-scientific, not to mention its manifestly mythological or ideological, nature. Getting the 'story' out of history was therefore a first step in the transformation of historical studies into a science.[32]

---

[32] Hayden White. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. p. 169.

White's 1973 work *Metahistory* is a sustained attempt to draw on the analysis of literary narratives, especially the methods and categories of Frye and structuralism, in order to analyze historical writing.[33] His analysis of classical history and nineteenth century philosophy of history demonstrates that such histories plainly exhibit the plot structures identified by Frye as Romance, Comedy, Tragedy and Satire. White argues that historians do not describe history 'as it happens,' as if it is an already-formed story waiting to be told, but that historians impose upon events a narrative structure that is alien to them. Narrative, as a literary artifact produced by historians, is read into the past, giving it a narrative structure that the past does not "really" have.

In White's view, narrative structure is unconsciously adopted by historians, who bring to their work those plot structures with which they are culturally familiar. Their use of narrative derives from the unconscious desire to attribute narrative coherence to 'reality.' His argument is worth quoting at some length:

> Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories...? Or does it present itself more in the way that the annals and chronicles suggest, either as a mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? ... It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult. What is involved, then, in that finding of the "true story," that discovery of the "real story" within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of "historical records"? What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that *real* events are properly represented when they are shown to display the formal coherency of a story? In the enigma of this wish, this desire , we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general, an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity. Historiography is an especially good ground on which to consider the nature of narration and narrativity because it is here that our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual. If we view narration and narrativity as the instruments with which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse, we begin to comprehend both the appeal of narrative and the grounds for refusing it... The

[33] Hayden White, *Metahistory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973. There were forerunners to White, most notably Erich Auerbach.

> notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries.[34]

Paul Ricoeur has attempted a similar project in his three-volume *Time and Narrative.*[35] Ricoeur brings his own theoretical work on language, especially literary language, and his background in the analytic philosophy of action and of history to bear on the relationship between fictional and historical narratives. His is a complex theory of narrative that cannot be fully summarized here. One of Ricoeur's contributions, however, has been to apply his method not only to classical history, as White did, but to the more recent work of the *Annales* school, which has explicitly claimed that its historical representations are non-narrative in character, and to detect narrative structure there.[36] The *Annalistes* attempted to produce histories resembling the seemingly "plotless" sequences of the earlier historiographic form of the annal. By this method they sought to avoid the imposition of the plots and metanarratives of Western historical and literary traditions onto the material of history. Ricoeur's analysis shows that these representations are not free of narrative structuring, even though they may not exhibit classic Western plot structures such as that described by the "Freytag's pyramid" or the Aristotelian model taught to high-school students: a conflict or tension builds to a climax, which brings about a resolution or reversal, followed by a relaxation or dénouement. While the annal and the chronicle are not full narratives, by Ricoeur's reasoning, because they do not possess the kind of structure with which a plot alone could endow them, they are "proto-narrative." White paraphrases Ricoeur "...the chronicle is already a figurated representation of events, a first-order representation of events that, like the "history" made out of it, has a double referent: events on the one side and a "structure of temporality" on the other."(p. 176) Ricoeur argues that the three forms of written history—the annal, the chronicle and the history "proper"—all impose a

---

[34] White, 1987, pp. 4, 11-12, 21.
[35] Paul Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (1984), vol. 2 (1985) Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984/1985.
[36] For helpful reviews of Ricoeur's theory see White, 1987, pp. 169-184 and Carr, 1986, p. 8-15.

structure on their material in that each is an allegory of temporality or the experience of time. They are not *fictional* allegories, since they do refer to "real" events, but they speak of such events in terms of various structured representations of temporality. Ricoeur makes useful distinctions between the three forms as well as arguing that the history proper, with its emplotted narratives, is a qualitative "advance" in historiography. This marks a point of departure from the modernist attack on narrative and its refusal of the narrative form in both literary and historical writing. Ricoeur's valuation of narrative requires some elaboration.

Ricoeur takes the position that the world of historical human action, though it does not exhibit the beginning-middle-end structure of developed narrative, is not simply chaotic as literary and structuralist theorists have suggested. The human world can be said to be marked by a "proto-narrative" structure of beginnings and events that lends itself to narrative configuration. This proto-narrative structure cannot, however, be seen to be 'true' narrative, since it lacks that device called *plot,* which brings order to our sense of time. Ricoeur holds that the everyday human experience of time is in part marked by a kind of "constitutional disarray," an experience that is "confused, unformed, and at the limit, mute." That is, the human world is experienced as a disparate collection of "agents, means, goals, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results, etc." which are not experienced as occurring or unfolding uniformly in time. Narrative harmonizes this discordance through the invention of plot, by which temporal order is bestowed upon discontinuous elements. As Ricoeur puts it, narrative is a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" and as such it does not 'represent' the world as it is, but rather introduces something new into it.[37] In this regard Ricoeur maintains to some small degree the distinction between art and life found in structuralist theory but also asserts some continuity between narrative and experience. The distinction between reality and experience is seldom made adequately clear and represents a

---

[37] Carr, 1986, pp. 14-15.

confusion between conflicting positions on reality. As the Canadian philosopher David Carr, who has produced a useful review of White and Ricoeur, points out:

> In discussing the "representational" character of narrative, theorists ... are sometimes unclear on exactly what it is in their view that narrative tries, but is constitutionally unable, to represent. "The world," "real events," are terms they often use. But this way of speaking introduces a very misleading equivocation. Narratives, whether fictional or historical, are typically about, and thus purport to represent, not the world as such, reality as a whole, but specifically *human* reality. But when the term "reality" is left unqualified, we are tempted by the strong naturalist prejudice that what counts as reality must be physical reality. What this suggests is either the random activity and collision of blind forces, devoid of order and significance, or alternatively, a reality totally ordered along rigorous causal lines without a flaw or gap in its mechanism. [38]

In Ricoeur's theory the continuity between the narrative form and historical events lies in the fact that narrative, like discourse in general, is a product of the same kinds of actions as those that produce "historical" events. A narrative is itself a form of action or praxis, which are according to Ricoeur the proper subject matter of a history. "Narrative discourse does not simply reflect or passively register a world already made; it works up the material given in perception and reflection, fashions it, and *creates something new, in precisely the same way that human agents by their actions fashion distinctive forms of historical life out of the world they inherit as their past.*"[39]

> The creation of a historical narrative, then, is an action exactly like that by which historical events are created, but in the domain of "wording" rather than that of "working." By discerning the plots "prefigured" in historical actions by the agents that produced them and "configuring them as sequences of events having the coherency of stories with a beginning, middle and end, historians make explicit the meaning inherent in historical events themselves....Historians...not only are justified in telling stories about the past but cannot do otherwise and still do justice to the full content of the historical past.[40]

---

[38] David Carr. *Time, History, Narrative*. p. 19.
[39] White, 1987, summarizing Ricoeur, p. 177, my emphasis.
[40] White, 1987, p. 174.

David Carr provides a useful review of the debates on narrative within history, with a particular focus on the work of White and Ricoeur, in his 1986 work *Time, Narrative and History*. Carr includes himself among the 'narrativists' or those who recognize the intractable presence of narrative structure in historical as well as other representations. However, he wants to argue that events in the human lifeworld have more than merely the proto-narrative structure described by Ricoeur. Carr's argument involves extended phenomenological description of the 'human' experience of events as they unfold in time in order to demonstrate that narrative structure is inherent to the human grasp of temporality and, by extension, of history, the past, and "the world." His attempt to argue for the narrative structure of everyday experience is useful despite consistent confusion about what constitutes narrative. Carr cites Kermode and Ricoeur in order to make the general claim that proper narrative structure is marked by a defined beginning, middle and end. He provides examples intended to show that the manner in which individuals experience events, and sequences of events, already involves a narrative structure; indeed, that *perception itself* involves not disordered sense data but an awareness of beginnings, middles and ends:

> There is no "pure" perception; the idea of a mere or "pure" sequence of isolated event...may be thinkable or conceivable, but it is not experienceable. The idea of an "event" is already that of something that *takes* time, has temporal thickness, beginning and end; and events are experienced as the phases and elements of other, larger-scale events and processes. These make up the temporal configurations, like melodies and other extended occurrences and happenings, that are the stuff of our daily experience. Even though as temporal they unfold bit by bit, we experience them as configurations thanks to our protentional and retentional "gaze" which spans future and past.[41]

Carr's contribution lies in his idea that human life as it is experienced 'outside' the category of art displays such features as beginnings, middles, and ends, and that a quasi-narrative concordance of past, present and future is part of the everyday grasp of life as it takes

---

[41] Carr, 1986, p. 24.

place in time.[42] His emphasis on continuity between art and life and on the narrativity of everyday life confirms the commonsense view that stories can be "lifelike" or that they convey "truth." Even when narrative is explicitly fictional, it is commonly held to be capable of representing the way certain events, if they had really happened, might have unfolded. This commonsense notion of narrative's verisimilitude is precisely, however, that aspect of narrative considered dangerously mythical by structuralist and other critics of narrative. In his emphasis on the continuity between art and experience, Carr does not adequately address the political and ideological functioning of fictional or historical narrative, or the charge that narrative structure masks its ideological operations behind the guise of the *real* and the *true*. He addresses but ultimately downplays the idea that the narratorial position is one of authority, especially in relation to the reader or listener.[43]

However, his position that individuals "live" stories coincides directly with the current popular practices and conceptions of storytelling described above. The only academic work which bears a strong similarity to Carr's philosophical perspective comes out of those areas of educational and neurological research that have explored in some depth the fundamental place of narrative ordering in learning, perception, cognition and brain functioning in general. But the hold of literary theory and structuralism on theories of narrative makes Carr's position an unusual one in its insistence that stories are not merely artificial constructions but are lived. Carr quotes Louis Mink who states that

---

[42] Throughout Carr's argument the distinction between events as such, and our experience of them, is blurred. The difficulty is most evident when his examples of our *experience* of temporal events involve human-made 'objects' that are themselves already structured like a narrative. The example of hearing a melody, an example he takes up from Husserl and attempts to refine, presents the difficulty that the classical western composition he has in mind not only has a designated beginning and ending but is itself a fully developed and even emplotted narrative. Carr's description of the act of listening to or 'making sense' of a piece of western classical music misses or downplays the fact that the piece of music itself—its theme, its variation on or deviation from that theme with all the attendant tension that such a departure produces, and finally the ultimate resolution of these elements and tensions in a final movement—demonstrates many of the features of western literary and even historical narrative.

[43] Carr, 1986, p. 58.

> [S]tories are not lived, they are told. Life has not beginnings, middles and ends... Narrative qualities are transferred from art to life... There can be no untold stories at all, just as there can be no unknown knowledge. There can only be past facts [sic] not yet described in a context of narrative form... [N]arrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of individual imagination.[44]

Even Trinh Minh-ha, in her tribute to storytelling titled "Grandma's Story" in which she speaks of the inextricable relationship of life and storytelling, questions the idea of experience as narrative, at least in the sense of fully emplotted narrative:

> Life is not a (Western) drama of four or five acts. Sometimes it just drifts along; it may go on year after year without development, without climax, without definite beginnings or endings. Or it may accumulate climax upon climax, and if one chooses to mark it with beginnings and endings, then everything has a beginning and an ending. There are, in this sense, no good or bad stories. In life, we usually don't know when an event is occurring; we think it is starting when it is already ending; and we don't see its in/significance. The present, which saturates the total field of our environment, is often invisible to us. [45]

Life is, of course, always ongoing. It is not always possible to assume the position of narrator—the *ex post* or retrospective narratorial position—while events are occurring. Yet individuals do perceive themselves to be living stories, and "autobiography" with its static connotation of life as a book may not suffice as a concept with which to grasp the persistent telling and retelling with which understandings and actions are framed. Stories are *told* in an ongoing fashion as means to evaluate events and frame actions as they unfold in time. Hayden White writes that "to experience time as future, past and present *rather than as a series of instants in which every one has the same weight or significance* as every other is to experience "historicality." (p. 179) It is difficult indeed to imagine any experience, other than the highly pathological, as a series of instants of equal significance.

---

[44] Mink in Carr, 1986, p. 42.
[45] Trinh Minh-ha. "Grandma's Story" in *Woman, Native, Other*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 143.

Carr's model, with its focus on the way in which individuals perceive their experience and actions in narrative form, helps to emphasize the relationship between narrative and the ability to take action. Instead of a view of the subject persistently and even helplessly reproducing and confirming the system of language—and by extension society—Carr's emphasis is on embodied individuals and groups organizing temporal experience through the strategies of coherence provided by narrative. This sense of coherence, even though it is always partial and subject to revision, allows individuals to conceive of meaningful action, both individual and collective. It is not surprising then that Carr conflates the terms narrative and storytelling throughout, for in his focus on everyday experience and understanding rather than on literary and cultural texts, he is foregrounding the participatory, creative activity of understanding rather than the idea that subjects are perennially constructed and reconstructed by texts. As suggested earlier, *storytelling* connotes among other things a social context for action and an *active* process of negotiating meanings.

> The fact that we often need to tell... a story even to ourselves, in order to become clear on what we are about, brings to light two important things: the first is that such narrative activity, even apart from its social role, has a practical function in life, that is, it is often a constitutive part of action, and not just an embellishment, commentary, or other incidental accompaniment. The second is that we sometimes assume, in a sense, the point of view of audience to whom the story is told, with regard to our own action, as well as the two points of view already mentioned, those of agent or character and of story-teller. .... Louis Mink was thus operating with a totally false distinction when he said that stories are not lived but told. They are told in being lived and lived in being told... Sometimes we must change the story to accommodate the events, sometimes we change the events, by acting, to accommodate the story. It is not the case... that we first live and act and then afterward, seated around the fire as it were, tell about what we have done, thereby creating something entirely new thanks to a new perspective. The retrospective view of the narrator, with its capacity for seeing the whole in all its irony, is not in irreconcilable opposition to the agent's view but is an extension and refinement of a viewpoint inherent in action itself.[46]

---

[46] Carr, 1986, p. 61.

The notions of action and process direct attention away from the *narrative* and toward the act of *narration*. Narrative after all requires not only a temporal configuration of events but also a narrator and a possible audience; the concept of story seems to involve not just a sequence of unfolding events but the existence of three distinguishable points of view of those events: those of storyteller, audience and characters. All of their "narrations" are implied, even those of listeners, for they will be expected to retell the story even if only internally, for understanding is also creating. As White observes, any account that omits the reasons, the thinking and understanding of history's human actors, for example any scientistic account like that of the Annalistes, is simply not able to tell the whole story of human history; in its focus on large-scale anonymous physical and social "forces," it is all scene and no actors. The presence of a narrator contrasts with the "objectivity" of scientific or 'realistic' narratives, whose authority rests in their "voice-of-god" narration and the absence of all reference to the narrator. "In the narrative discourse, then, we can say, with Benveniste, that "truly there is no longer a 'narrator'." The events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. No one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves." With the introduction of human actors comes narrative. "Whenever human beings acting as agents enter the scene, it becomes impossible to resist the lure of narrative for representing 'what is happening'."[47]

Communities, groups and individuals have found the telling of stories indispensable in the struggle against the suppression or loss of their own histories, as was suggested in Chapter One. As Carr suggests, narrative provides a sense of coherence in the face of fragmentation, a means of framing action and experience in meaningful form, and the material for a collective exchange or conversation. This use of stories is by necessity not confined to the naïve reproduction of old forms. As in the fractured fairy tale, the archeological imperative of reclaiming old stories is accompanied by their deliberate transformation. The fictional work of

---

[47] White, 1987, pp. 3, 174-175.

women—of women of colour in particular—often employs storytelling in a deliberate, reflexive, and ambivalent manner. The novels of Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich are notable in this regard. At the same moment as this work establishes the importance of storytelling to the preservation of cultures and traditions and to the so-called empowerment of groups and individuals, it questions and reworks the older stories that it adopts. Most often these novelists construct characters who are struggling in a world of contrasting cultures where identity becomes problematic. This problem is replicated in the reader's experience because she or he is presented conflicting narrative codes and finds herself in a hermeneutical impasse where the problem of meaning is foregrounded. What sets these writers apart is their ability to incorporate subversive strategies—plotlessness, metafiction, magical realism, achronicity—without being obscure or abandoning the form of the traditional tale altogether. Literary critics increasingly foreground such categories as "oppositionality," "subversion," and "transgression." These terms carry enormous weight but there is rarely agreement on their meaning. Some critics locate literary oppositionality in specific textual properties, others in the act of narration itself, the social relationships mediated by storytelling. Storytelling, they argue, transforms the social relationships it mediates by reconstructing readers—or, in this case, literal and figurative listeners.

The use of narratives, particularly traditional stories, is always in danger of producing a nostalgic, exclusionary, essentialist, reactionary, or even nationalist search for roots. Yet if one looks, for instance, at the fiction of women of colour, it is clear that it has extensively reworked and questioned traditional and contemporary oral narratives by a use of multiple narratorial positions, experimental reconstruction of stories, and contradictory juxtapositions of voices and tales, preventing any easy identification with a single narrative point of view. In Fredric Jameson's terms, these novels may be seen as attempts to exploit the utopian potential of traditional genres while escaping both their reactionary resolutions and their reified structures. In the end, however, readers make exactly the readings they want to make. The work of Zora

Neale Hurston, with its extensive incorporation of Black American folk tales and folklore, for example, has been made an object of nostalgia and has been interpreted widely as a romantic construction of black experience, even though it can be seen as a critical revision of the romance genre, particularly in such novels as *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* The same is true of the work of Louise Erdrich, who uses metafictional writing practices as a commentary on old romantic plots in which the heroine is saved from spinsterhood by a man. The unravelling or reversal of such plots is central to most of her novels, from *Love Medicine* (1982) to *Tales of Burning Love* (1996). The work of Hurston and Erdrich and others is plainly skeptical, detailing narration's limitations as well as its potential for ethical and political transformation.

In the mid-1980's Teresa de Lauretis, a theorist of film and literary fiction, produced two influential articles on the use of narrative in women's cinema.[48] These articles noted a split in women's filmmaking between straight documentation of women's experience and modernist, avant-garde, non-narrative practices of intervention in the representational conventions of narrative cinema through a foregrounding of the filmic apparatus. Out of this split arose new practices in which filmmakers utilized narrative structures but in experimental and disruptive ways, not entirely unlike some of the representational practices of the women writers described above. According to de Lauretis, women filmmakers had come to find narrative structure indispensible for not only the representation of women's experience but also for the intervention in the construction of that experience. "[H]ow do we account for women's apparently irresistible attraction to narrative, from Anne Radcliffe to Alice Walker, from Germaine Dulac to Yvonne Rainer?"[49] In short, her argument is that narrative provides a sense of coherence that is a precondition to a sense of the possibility of political action and social change. She distinguishes

---

[48] See Teresa de Lauretis' two influential articles on the political uses of narrative in cinema: "Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics and Yvonne Ranier" and "Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory," both in her *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.
[49] Teresa de Lauretis, "Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer," 1987, pp. 107-108.

coherence from narrative closure, or the ideological closing off of multiple points of view or difference. De Lauretis' arguments are too complex to summarize easily here, but it is important to note her influence on the changing fortunes of narrative.

Conclusion

This review has tried to draw a connection between theories of narrative and the concept of the story. It seems important to review some of the most significant approaches as part of a search for productive or provocative possibilities for theorizing storytelling and the story as a narrative form. This review has raised some interesting questions in relation to storytelling practice, but in the end has not significantly helped to account for the current popularity of storytelling, or what are understood to be its unique, specific attributes. The recent shifts of attention in literary theory from the text to the activity of the reader, from the narrative itself to the process of narration, and from the narrative as literature to narrative as a mode of communication in everyday life, all parallel, perhaps only coincidentally, the contemporary interest in storytelling. Study of these shifts may prove helpful in the ongoing efforts to theorize the practice of telling stories.

Chapter Four

Long Ago and Far, Far Away: Storytelling, the Past and the Cultural Other

As Chapter Two suggested, the popularity of storytelling, or we may even say "desire" for storytelling, is often accompanied by the wish to transform a disenchanted present. Though some pose storytelling as "pure entertainment" and make no further claims for its value, others hope to find in storytelling a means of reanimating or re-envisioning the present through the encounter with other times, places and ways. The desire to hear stories is, not surprisingly, frequently caught up in nostalgia, romanticism, attraction to otherness and the exotic, and a search for origins and authenticity.

The reification of culture is the condition for which storytelling is posed as an antidote, yet inevitably storytelling practices themselves fall victim to the relentless cycle of commodification, as have many other cultural forms. On the other hand, subcultural or marginal practices have always defined themselves against the market and the mainstream. Storytelling, however, seems a peculiar object of appropriation. Its commodification implies the commodification of everything else; there is almost nothing that cannot now be framed as storytelling, so that the rapid assimilation of its image into cycles of consumption throws the commodification of everyday life into relief. Second, until recently traditional storytelling seemed an unlikely object of mass consumption. Associated with children, the primitive and the backward, with slow repetition, boredom, and an unsatisfying lack of visual interest, straight unadorned storytelling was an odd candidate for the promotion of banks, stocks and electronic gadgets. In its stress on the ear and the voice rather than the gaze, storytelling was perhaps imagined by many as a challenge to the image-oriented processes of consumption, yet

every attempt is being made to transform storytelling, too, into spectacle. The commodification of storytelling is neither unique nor total. It does, however, seem to represent an acceleration of the appropriation of meaningful spheres of everyday existence.

There are many theoretical positions on the commodification of culture. This chapter makes a preliminary attempt to suggest how these approaches might be applied to the study of storytelling's activities and representations. One cultural studies approach to commodification suggests that if practices are popular, they are automatically oppositional or they are doing something right—*if they work, why not?* More critical approaches frequently take a dim view of popular cultural practices and critique their motivations and representations as nostalgic, romantic, or otherwise ideological. To some extent, these approaches find what they are looking for, whether that is subversion or ideology. If this chapter takes a position, it is that both strands of theory serve to reveal and explain different phenomena in what is a diverse and contradictory field of practices and ideas. Even if the object of study were to be narrowed to a single event or practice, it would still be marked by internal tensions and contradictions. As Fredric Jameson argues in his essay "Reification and Utopia," cultural forms offer both liberatory potential as well as the foreclosing of that potential through "strategies of containment."[1] This chapter will attempt to identify those moments at which the possibilities opened by storytelling are shut down. A short case study of a large U.S. storytelling organization will help to focus the analysis.

The National Storytelling Association (NSA) is the largest and most influential revival storytelling organization in the United States. Of all storytelling bodies, events and practices, the NSA perhaps best exemplifies the cycle of appropriation and commodification of popular forms mentioned above. The NSA is, however, a contradictory entity, and the tensions

---

[1] Editorial sidebar, *Storytelling Magazine*, Spring 1992, p. 20.

between its stated aims and its actual functions are felt very strongly by participants in the storytelling revival. A study of the NSA provides a unique means of encountering the dynamic of the storytelling revival, yet the NSA's activities are both like and unlike other revival or contemporary storytelling practices. The organization has influenced other groups and shares many of their aims, but it has a unique power, influence and political structure. Many who participate in the storytelling revival are deeply wary of the NSA. In terms of the commodification, homogenization and institutionalization of the art of storytelling, for many the NSA represents a worst case scenario.

A Cautionary Tale:

The National Storytelling Association and The National Storytelling Festival

> During the late 1960's and early 1970's, there emerged throughout America a realization that we were losing our connection to the genuine, one-on-one communication of the told tale. The seeds for a re-awakening of interest in the oral tradition were being sown. And in 1973, in a tiny Tennessee town, something happened that rekindled our national appreciation of the told story and became the spark plug for a major cultural movement—the rebirth of the art of storytelling.[2]

The National Storytelling Association (NSA) and the National Storytelling Festival (NSF), arguably the two most influential storytelling institutions in North America, are based in the small mountain town of Jonesborough, Tennessee, the "oldest American town west of the Appalachians" and the self-proclaimed "birthplace of America's storytelling revival."[3] The story goes that the National Storytelling Festival was born in 1972 when Jimmy Neil Smith, a local journalism teacher, heard a well-told tale about Mississippi coon-hunting over his AM

---

[2] Jimmy Neil Smith, NAPPS, "A Short History," p. 1.
[3] Jimmy Neil Smith, "Our History", NSA, p.5.

car radio and decided that the art of storytelling "needed a home." The first Festival—named the *National* Storytelling Festival after organizers discovered that there was no other such event in the U.S.—began on a Friday night in a crowded high-school gymnasium with an audience of a thousand or more listeners. The next day's stories, equally popular, were performed on an old farm wagon surrounded by bales of hay for bleachers. ("Our History," p. 2) At the time, there were few professional storytellers in the U.S., so Smith recruited a number of local farmers, teachers and others known for their tales. By the festival's end it was clear that it had already become an annual event, with tellers and listeners planning to return the following year. Within three years visitors were making pilgrimages to Jonesborough in surprising numbers, arriving from all over the continent as well as overseas. On the last day of the third festival in 1975, Jimmy Neil Smith and a group of storytellers gathered to form the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS), "to support storytelling and storytellers." ("A Short History," p. 3) NAPPS took over the work of producing the annual festival, and it also began to involve itself in the aggressive promotion of storytelling as a visible art form by organizing tours, concerts, and conferences, lobbying funding bodies to recognize storytelling as an art, and later by publishing books of and about storytelling as well as *Storytelling Magazine*, America's most well-known magazine on the subject. By 1994 NAPPS had grown large, wealthy and prestigious, and its name had come to seem folksy and amateur. That year it changed its name to the more professional "National Storytelling Association" in time for its upcoming move into the newly renovated Chester Inn, a 150-year old heritage inn and the "oldest standing inn in the state of Tennessee." The NSA's remarkable success in attracting funding and membership has most recently allowed it to develop a "National Storytelling Centre" to be located in a nearby park which also houses Andrew Jackson's relocated 1788 log house. It has also been able to open an expensive new "Museum and Interpretation Center" on Jonesborough's Main Street, complete with exhibition space "dedicated to the rich history and traditions of storytelling," as well as a café and gift shop, interactive computer and video displays, a monumental central atrium and a

sophisticated performance and convention centre with a state-of-the art sound, lighting and broadcast system. With an annual budget of US$ 1.7 million and a 12-member staff headed by director Jimmy Neil Smith, the NSA is Jonesborough's major industry (and it is interesting to note that in addition to his position as director of the NSA, Smith has for several of the past twenty-one years served as town mayor). It is estimated that the Jonesborough "edifice" is worth US$ 4 - 5 million all told. The NSA has recently received further grants to expand its "National Storytelling Centre" with its four core programming areas—presentation and interpretation, information, education, and community programming.

NSA literature claims that despite the popularity and visibility of the Festival, it is actually the NSA and its myriad promotional, networking and organizational activities which have managed to rekindle storytelling. "It's through the networking and connecting influences of the association that storytelling is gaining impetus as a respected art form in modern America." ("Our History," p. 3) It would be very difficult to prove that the NSA is in fact solely responsible for the revival of a "lost art", but there is no question that it has been successful in raising the profile of storytelling in the U.S. Apart from the Festival, one of its more well-known productions is the annual National Storytelling Conference, "an information-packed four-day event designed specifically to help storytellers learn more about worldwide storytelling traditions and the practice of storytelling." The conference is extremely well-attended, attracting several thousand participants annually, not only from the United States but also from Canada and abroad. The conference offers workshops, panel discussions, performances and lectures as well as the sale of enough storytelling spin-off products (tapes, books, props and clothing) to give it the air of a trade fair. The NSA's activities also include the publication of its popular bi-monthly *Storytelling Magazine*, the newsletter *Inside Story* (formerly *Yarnspinner*), the *National Storytelling Directory and Guidebook* which it calls "the most comprehensive guide there is to American storytellers and storytelling opportunities," and the *National Storytelling Catalog*, "an ever-changing selection of the best in storytelling

books and tapes, educational materials, and gifts." The NSA also publishes numerous other storytelling books, tapes and educational materials in its National Storytelling Press and runs the National Storytelling Library and Archives, "the nation's only clearinghouse of information on the traditions, practice, and applications of storytelling." ("Our History," p. 3-4)

Tiny Tennessee Town

The phrase "tiny Tennessee town" has entered the lexicon of the American "storytelling movement" to stand for the birthplace of the NSA and perhaps of the storytelling revival itself. It conjures up images of hidden southern towns time forgot, towns Appalachian or otherwise where an oral tradition might conceivably survive. While certain storytellers inside and outside the United States view Jonesborough's sentimental history with impatient skepticism, the town is nevertheless widely perceived by tellers and listeners alike as the heart of the revival; the NSA in its own literature quotes the *Toronto Sun* as declaring that "Jonesborough is the 'capital' of North American storytelling." ("Our History" p. 5) This is true in the sense that the government and bureaucracy of United States storytelling are headquartered there.

"Tiny Tennessee town" also conjures up the great American story of rags-to-riches entrepreneurial success. The NSF and the NSA are the products of a successful attempt to reverse the economic decline of one of America's decaying rural towns. The economy of Jonesborough, "Tennessee's first town," was for most of this century based on supplying goods and services to farming people in the surrounding countryside. In the late 1960's malls and strip centers in nearby Johnson City lured customers away and the local economy quickly eroded, sending Jonesborough's town centre, with its historic shopfronts, into decay. In the early 1970's the municipal council and the chamber of commerce, like their counterparts in so many other North American towns, made plans to convert the local economy to tourism by preserving the town and restoring its historic Main Street. As the NSA's history booklet tells it, "the town leaders *surmised that Jonesborough's future must lie in its past*" (P. 2, my

emphasis) and subsequently founded the Jonesborough Civic Trust to administer the town's renewal. The Trust's first project was "Historic Jonesborough Days," a weekend-long annual festival celebrating Jonesborough's history and heritage. While surprisingly popular, the festival alone did not provide adequate year-round revenue, and the Civic Trust, of which Jimmy Neil Smith was a member, began to cast about for another event. In 1972 Smith hit upon the idea of a festival of storytelling, an idea that was endorsed by the Trust and initiated in 1973.

The Heritage Industry

> As we approach AD 2000 and the end of the millennium, the 1990's will witness an increasing and increasingly morbid *fin-de-siècle* search for roots in the past, for meaning in what has happened in the twentieth century... *nostalgia at a personal and local level will consequently be rampant; and doubtless various commercial provisions will grow to service it.*[4]

Jonesborough, Tennessee has clearly been successful at its own brand of heritage tourism, one which combines the restoration of an "old town" with the revival of a "folk" cultural form. This hybrid enterprise is now the thriving town's major industry. Storytelling is clearly the centerpiece of this heritage industry, and it should not be surprising that storytelling as it is presented in Jonesborough is indelibly marked by the history and the aims of the NSA. Like many heritage restoration projects, Jonesborough and the NSA have constructed an image of a stable, traditional, conservative past, an image which serves to justify current conservative political agendas such as the drive for a return to traditional or "family values" or a nostalgic popular nationalism that effaces awareness of pressing struggles in the lived present. Despite the fact that many of the Festival's first storytellers in the early 1970's were

---

[4] Peter Fowler. *Then, Now*. London: Routledge, 1992. p. 161, my emphasis.

living, contemporary members of the embattled local agricultural economy, Jonesborough presents their storytelling as a delightful art of the "past." This "past" or "heritage" is the dissembling distant relative of *history*, whose struggles, conflicts and miseries the concept of "heritage" denies, even while claiming to offer history. The Jonesborough edifice presents the image of a stable, conservative, small town pre-war America. Its promotional materials suggest a peaceful, romantic rural setting, a rich and respectable civic past, and a cheerful town atmosphere benevolently presided over by the paternalistic governance of town leaders who on one occasion are actually referred to as "town fathers." Jonesborough is fully engaged in storytelling on more than one level.

Current academic discussion about the heritage industry was stimulated by Robert Hewison's book on the heritage industry, *Britain in a Climate of Decline* (1987). Placing himself in the tradition of the critical approaches to nostalgia of Marx and Nietzsche, Hewison is deeply critical of *heritage*, a practice he views as ideological and anti-historical. Hewison proposes that heritage is the result of a nostalgic search for security in a context of rapid change. Nostalgia, he argues, masks current (not to mention past) conditions, and is most often experienced at times of discontent, anxiety and disappointment—times of society-wide "identity crisis." In response to the uneasiness of the present, heritage provides a deeply stabilizing influence. While the historical view draws meaningful connections between past and present, thereby grounding experience in a real, temporal continuity, heritage is a fantasy realm severed from a troubling present, and as such it lends itself to ideological uses. "The development of heritage not only involves the reassertion of values which are anti-democratic, but the heightening of decline through a *stifling of the present*. A critical culture based on the understanding of history is what is needed, not a set of heritage fantasies." For Hewison the past is "bogus history."[5] In his view the substitution of present-day culture by artifacts of the

[5] Hewison in Urry, p. 22.

past should be seen as a decline in a grasp of the historical, of continuity and change. As Fredric Jameson says, we are "condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach." The decline of the past as an ethical or political inspiration and basis for action paralyzes the present.[6] Jonesborough offers what it claims to be a direct route to the past: its voice. At the same time, it adds to its collection of stories the spectacle and display of the past's material objects.

Bob West, who has written extensively on the "museumification" of Britain and its conversion into "Ye Olde Leisure Park," describes 'the past' as a place "seen retrospectively in soft focus."[7] Like the English open-air museums West describes, Jonesborough is engaged in the business of museum tourism and the manufacture of heritage. Heritage, as pointed out above, is an antiquarian version of the past, a version that imbues old things and stories about them with exchange value. History, on the other hand, while always a work of some fiction, "at least allows for the possibility of telling a *different story*; a story perhaps to inform the *present* of progressive ideas and struggles against the old oppressions of class, race and gender."[8] The abdication from the present described by West and Hewison is plainly evident in Jonesborough. Unlike the museums West describes, however, Jonesborough never makes a serious attempt to cloak its interests in the high academic seriousness and objectivity of History. Its legitimacy is borrowed from the fabulation and fantasy of the folktale, Appalachian and imported. Jonesborough's authority rests upon storytelling's status as the true popular culture of the past and upon its embodiment of the moral and ethical solidity of folk tradition and the past's store of wisdom and counsel. This "wisdom" is parlayed into a tool that can be employed anywhere, as is demonstrated by the storytelling workshops regularly offered by the N.S.A. to corporations and small businesses.

---

[6] Jameson, 1984, p. 71.
[7] Bob West, "The making of the English working past: a critical view of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum", in *The Museum Time-Machine*, ed. Robert Lumley, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 37.
[8] West, p. 38, my emphasis.

It is one of the paradoxes of nostalgia that those times for which we feel most nostalgic were themselves times of considerable disturbance. What Jonesborough does have in common with the heritage sites West describes is a nostalgic encounter with historical periods marked not by stability, but by misery, change and dislocation. By transforming difficult eras into soft-focus representation of picturesque poverty, folk endurance or heroic work, museums encourage a similar reconstruction of the present as free of pronounced conflict or exploitation. From this standpoint, heritage views of the past serve to justify the order of the present. The museums of West's study provide a nostalgic view of eighteenth and nineteenth century labour as heroic, while downplaying class tensions and the misery of industrial work, not to mention any sense of the historical relationship to or continuity with struggles of twentieth century labour. At the Ironbridge Gorge Museum visitors are not expected to notice parallels with contemporary sweat-shop labour in the industrializing world, for instance. Jonesborough's museums and historical displays, too, offer a romantic, idealized image of local "heritage," including quaint displays of First Nation stories and storytellers, as well as a heroic valorization of settler agricultural and industrial work, both free of any intrusive or grisly memory of exploitation and conflict. More importantly, though, Jonesborough frames the past through the fantasy provided by the folk tale, a form born in the context of the dispossessed and exploited peasant and industrial working classes. Unlike West's industrial museums, Jonesborough need not rely on employees in period costume to bring its museum to life. Jonesborough has Ray Hicks.

Ray Hicks is the NSA's best-known storyteller. Hicks was a small-time Tennessee farmer known locally for his folk tales when he was "discovered" in 1973 by Jimmy Neil Smith and invited to make his first "public" performance at the inaugural National Storytelling Festival. Hicks had no formal education and had never owned a car. He performed in his overalls, his Tennessee accent and his plain storytelling style exemplifying the down-home

atmosphere that saturates every NSA publication, display and production. Hicks has performed at every National Storytelling Festival since its beginnings in 1973, as well as at other festivals in the U.S. and abroad. He will be performing again this year, though he is now quite elderly. It will cost the festival's largely middle-class audience approximately forty dollars to hear Hicks tell his stories: "Thayer wus three brudders. Ahwun a da brudders bought a payer a boots. He wawr um a while. An he dayed."[9] Because Hicks is illiterate, his stories are seen to be "intact" or untouched by "foreign influences."

West and others have argued that museums and other institutions such as *National Geographic* cast ideology in the guise of science and education in order to legitimize the fascinations, longings and voyeurism of middle- or lower-middle-class audiences.[10] The NSA does not have a primary purpose of public education, though it is part of its mandate. It does not even make claims to academic expertise in the field of folklore, nor does it represent itself as purveying entertainment or mass culture. Rather it represents its mission as protecting and promoting the storytelling art, past and present, and it justifies this mission through the grand claims it makes for storytelling as a panacaea for all social ills, and as an efficient tool for any number of purposes from education to business to creating bonds in the family. The membership solicitation letter of the NSA describes the way in which stories transform lives, and it offers a testimonial by a woman who says she was saved by storytelling. The letter reads:

> Storytelling changed her life... Storytelling can help you reach just about anyone...I'll bet you use stories almost every day. You've seen how stories can play a powerful role in our lives... Where do you turn to learn how you can tell stories and use storytelling to change people's lives?.. If you are not fully satisfied with your membership in the NSA, I'll refund your membership dues.

---

[9] As transcribed by Blayne Cutler, "The Folk Tale Market", *American Demographics, Oct. 90.*

[10] See Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

The editorial of the *Utne Reader*'s Special Issue on storytelling remarked that:

> Storytellers and their many promoters insist that the New Orality is more than mere entertainment—it's the latest talking cure for all that ails us. If you're bothered by alcoholism, racism, sexism, a broken home, a head injury, or even a bad diet, a good story might help... The press on storytelling—breathless to a word—would lead you to believe that oral narrative is the key to a kinder, gentler America.[11]

The NSA's rhetoric of tradition, the past, and the betterment of society does not sound much different from the conventional rhetoric of liberal or conservative politicians aiming to build populist, consensual nationalism. As such, Jonesborough and storytelling in general may be used as a political resource through which identities, national or local, may be constructed and forms and relations of privilege legitimized and celebrated. For many of its visitors, Jonesborough doubtlessly provides a view of the world that they want to see confirmed. However, it is also true that many come just for the storytelling and skip the rhetoric. The tension between the populist conservative tone of Jonesborough and the stories that are actually told there disrupt any monolithic construction of the past the NSA has managed to build. I will address this tension below.

Erasing the Present

Ray Hicks lives in the present, but he is presented as though he channels the stories of the past, a past for which he stands in even though he is still living. Contact with "traditional" tellers who are undeniably participants in the present gives some listeners the sense of witnessing *past* wisdom and speech, and it sometimes supersedes the awareness that traditions still coexist with modernity. As philosopher David Carr says of aboriginal cultures, "[n]ow so-called 'primitive' societies, which exist in the present all over the globe, are relegated to the past by being regarded as leftovers from an earlier stage of humanity. What is in fact

---

[11] *Utne Reader* editorial quoted in Blayne Cutler, "The Folk Tale Market", *American Demographics, Oct. 90,* p. 20.

synchronous is arranged on a diachronic scale."[12] When traditions are seen to cohabit with modernity, they tend to be perceived as "disappearing" or as mere remnants of past societies. This view, which sees the stages of history succeeding each other diachronically and forgets that different social formations exist synchronously, derives from a philosophy of history based on a notion of progress, interestingly a heroic or epic historical narrative.[13] At Jonesborough and other locations of revival storytelling, knowledge of the coexisting, not to mention oppositional, relationship of social groups is suppressed by relegating current voices, with their store of still-living narratives, safely into the past. The motto of the NSA reads *Storytelling: An Ancient Art for a Modern World.* Storytelling may have ancient roots, but it persists in the contemporary context. "We must concede the ancients their place... But their place is not simply back there, in a separate and foreign country; it is assimilated in ourselves, and resurrected into an ever-changing present."[14]

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the sense of time, including an awareness of the present as continuous with the past, is intimately linked to the possibility of formulating and taking action. Nostalgic, heritage and tourist products do not only represent nostalgia but also a loss of "faith in ourselves" and a "fatal loss of dynamism." Fredric Jameson refers to this paralyzing periodization of history as historicism. As Hewison points out, historicism is a product manufactured by heritage museums.[15] The problem of passivity in the face of consumption, that process for which storytelling is marketed as an antidote, is reproduced by the revival of storytelling as an artifact.

Roots and community

---

[12] Carr, 1986, p. 182.
[13] Jameson, 1981, p. 18, 97.
[14] Urry, p. 112.
[15] Hewison, 1989, p. 20.

People seem to turn to storytelling in order to search for *roots* or a grounding in place and time. The standardizing, universalizing tendencies of global capitalism produce a sense of groundlessness, and groups attempt to remedy this condition through the recreation of community, regional identity and local culture. The reconstruction of home is frequently accompanied by nostalgia, exclusionary practices, and kitsch. "It is hard to stop the slide into parochialism, myopia and self-referentiality in the face of universalizing tendencies.... [V]isible and tangible marks of identity are then cultivated and maintained through such events as the community spectacle, *the re-enactment of ancient rites* and the reveling in local heritage and history."[16] In 1991 the NSA's *Storytelling Magazine* ran a special issue entitled "Roots." "In this modern and virtually mythless society, we yearn for our ancestral roots, for a true sense of community. Without them we cannot know who we are." The feature article was written by the American psychoanalyst Rollo May, who quotes Nietszche extensively.

> Man stripped of myth... must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities... What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb?[17]

The search for roots takes many forms, some pernicious, others perhaps not. A local history project airs long-silenced experiences; the effort to encounter past or other ways through storytelling is motivated by a romantic, voyeuristic desire for otherness; a nationalist use of traditional stories serves a primary aim of scapegoating others, as in Nazi Germany or Bosnia. Regardless of its form or intent, storytelling is currently the royal road to roots. Storytelling does not merely promise roots, but holds out the possibility of rebuilding communities and collectives as a community of listeners who share the process of storytelling, if not a

---

[16] Trevor Barnes and Roger Hayter. " 'The Little Town That Did': Flexible Accumulation and Community Response in Chemainus, British Columbia." *Regional Studies*. 26:7. pp. 650.
[17] Nietszche, quoted by Rollo May in "Roots," *Storytelling Magazine* Special Issue, Fall 1991 p. 16, 17.

sanctioned tradition of stories. It may even promise "unity," a double-edged sword in the hands of an uncritical identity politics.

The relationship between nostalgia and storytelling has not been explicitly theorized, but the study of nostalgia in heritage and tourism provides a starting point. Storytelling in its many forms, including revivalist versions, is both like and unlike these practices. The very idea of storytelling, however, has a privileged relationship to the concept of nostalgia. Storytelling is almost automatically associated with the past or the premodern and with childhood; furthermore childhood and the premodern are further linked by the fact that the stories told to children are so frequently derived from premodern oral traditions. This double association of childhood and the past has undoubtedly served to enhance storytelling's appeal in uncertain times. For adults the idea and the practice of storytelling retain that soothing intimacy that for many is reminiscent of childhood. The association of childhood with these stories only heightens their disreputable, frivolous, escapist reputation, which perhaps says more of our view of childhood and the other than it does of storytelling itself. In a review of Italo Calvino's extensive collection of *Italian Folktales,* John Updike recently wrote: "their inner glint, their old life, is escapism. They were the television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples." This is not only in complete opposition to Calvino's stated view on the stories but also shows little understanding of their complexity, sophistication and seriousness.[18] Traditional stories, even and especially fairy tales, are neither escapist nor frivolous. They partake in fantasies that have until recently only been legitimate for children, but those "fantasies" are not exclusively childlike. When adults actually encounter traditional tales, it often becomes clear that stories have a life quite other than the nostalgia-saturated term "storytelling" suggests. The tension between the nostalgic image of storytelling as childlike, and its sophisticated, powerful, adult and often brutal reality, is plainly evident

[18] Warner, 1995, p. 461.

throughout revival storytelling and even in Jonesborough. This tension suggests that the dismissal of this practice as entirely and simply nostalgic fails to properly recognize the contradictory nature of current practices of storytelling. Nevertheless, storytelling's appearance everywhere from revival storytelling to advertising clearly bears some relationship to nostalgia.

Nostalgia, as remarked above, suggests both longing for society's archaic past and for the individual's ancient history—that is, for the primitive and for childhood. The mapping of the stage of childhood onto the "earlier stages" of the "development" of societies is a common error most likely deriving from ideological notions of progress and human development. Even for those who reject the eschatological view, it is an undeniable fact that in the West, tales from the past resurface in the present in tales for children. Walter Benjamin wrote: "The fairy tale to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind."[19] Fredric Jameson remarks that from the standpoint of a future society, today's "stories of fierce market competition and the expressions of commodity lust and of the triumph of the commodity form—*will be read as children's books*, recapitulating the barely comprehensible memory of ancient dangers."[20] Trinh Minh-ha provides the following quotes from anthropological sources:

> The fact that the story is the product of primitive man explains in part why the children hunger so for the story...Wherever there is no written language, wherever the people are too unlettered to read what is written... they still believe the legends. They love to hear them told and retold... As it is with unlettered peasants today, as it was with tribesmen in primitive times and with the great in medieval castle halls, it still is with the child.[21]

Of the relationship of storytelling and children, Trinh writes:

---

[19] Benjamin, 1968, p. 102.
[20] Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, p. 103-104.
[21] Trinh Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, "Grandma's Story" P. 124.

> Associated with backwardness, ignorance, and illiteracy, storytelling in the more "civilized" context is therefore relegated to the realm of children. Primitive means elementary, therefore infantile. No wonder then that in the West storytelling is treasured above all for its educational force in the kindergarten and primary school... Not only has the "civilized" mind classified many of the realities it *does not understand* in the categories of the untrue and the superstitious, it has also turned the story—as total event of a community, a people—into a ... lesson for children... Indeed, in the "civilized" context, only children are allowed to indulge in the so-called fantastic or the fantastic-true...[22]

Evidently, however, storytelling has become acceptable for adults. Previously regarded as childlike and disreputable, a practice that Walter Benjamin claimed had become a source of embarrassment, storytelling is suddenly legitimate. A CBC radio show recently "rediscovered" Hans Christian Andersen as a writer of stories for adults.

> He hated telling to children, and refused the building of a statue of himself reading to children, but that's how we see him now, thanks in part to Danny Kaye's portrayal of him as a kindly cobbler, which he was neither. He was tortured and neurotic. He wrote fairy tales for adults. They became known as children's stories, particularly later after they were changed and lightened. The problem started when the Victorians found his stories too crude and obscure for children and altered them.[23]

The CBC narrator also related, clearly with surprise, that Sir Lawrence Olivier had publicly performed folk tales. According to the story, when originally approached by a theater to tell the tales, Olivier is reputed to have said "I don't do children's stuff." After hearing the material, however, Olivier came to view the fairy tale as clever social commentary in allegorical form, and he went on to make several very popular public tellings. Lorne Brown, the editor of *Appleseed Quarterly* and a storyteller, echoes the idea that traditional stories are not for children. "Most fairy tales do not have fairies. They were probably never originally

---

[22] Trinh Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other*, "Grandma's Story" P. 124, my emphasis.
[23] CBC program on Hans Christian Andersen July 10, 1996, 4:00 pm.

intended for children, but fairy tales have been relegated today to the nursery. And thanks to Walt Disney, many people think that fairy tales are simply cute entertainment for children, with a few scary parts thrown in for excitement."[24] Marina Warner explicitly connects her adult interest in the fairy tale with her childhood experience of it, though she too came to understand it was not a child's form. While attracted to fairy tales since childhood, she became even more drawn to them as she grew older "because they began to represent childhood, that vividness of experience in the midst of inexperience, the capacity for daydreaming and wonder. I have since discovered that there is nothing in the least childlike about fairy tales."[25] Jack Zipes' social history of the fairy tale convincingly argues that the form only came to be associated with children when privileged European classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appropriated it for the purpose of "civilizing" their children and educating them in the complex social codes of the elite. Nevertheless, the tradition of reading and telling fairy tales to children attaches a certain nostalgia to the fairy tale form and to the act of storytelling itself. Whether or not the content of stories had its origin in adult matters, storytelling itself is nostalgically associated with the comforting figure of the storyteller as nursemaid, parent or grandparent.

The link between storytelling, childhood and nostalgia is strengthened by the perception that the traditional tale has more than a tinge of unconscious primary processes, the condensations and displacements of dreams and ancient myth, the stuff of dreams and fantasies, memories of pre-oedipal attachments. Narratological and psychoanalytic interpretations of the folk and fairy tale make much of its wish-fulfillments and its fantasies of plenitude. Benjamin remarks on Leskov's idealization of his mother, as well as his interest in worlds where nature speaks benevolently to the human and where boundaries are set aside. The unconstrained play of primary processes is found in the strangely linked episodes and

---

[24] Lorne Brown, *Appleseed Quarterly*, Disney issue, Feb 95 p. 19.
[25] Marina Warner, *The Beast and the Blonde*, p. xiv.

metamorphoses of archaic myth and with traditional tales, and hence these are associated with dreams, early childhood before socialization and language acquisition, and the primitive. From this standpoint, the traditional tale is perhaps the ultimate object of nostalgic longing, and interest in it is always suspect. Derrida has critiqued the nostalgia of Levi-Strauss and Heidegger: "an ethic of a nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech."[26] *On Longing*, Susan Stewart's extended discussion of nostalgia, also links the childlike and the primitive. "The location of desire, or, more particularly, the direction of force in the desiring narrative, is always a future-past, *a deferment of experience* in the direction of origin..."[27] Yet in folk and fairy tales, and for the one who likes them, nostalgia may not be that regressive longing which paralyzes the listener, precludes active negotiation of meaning, and results in the inertia of fantasy and spectacle. The narrative elements of dream and fantasy, while they may share in the impulses of the imaginary, are frequently deployed in a practical and strategic manner. It is interesting that Benjamin notes Leskov's subtle mockeries of the idea of "the voice of nature." Folk and fairy tale are sophisticated and self-aware in terms of their own longings. Folk traditions invoke yet also disrupt nostalgia in complex ways. Nostalgia as a concept must be reconsidered; like utopia, it has acquired a pejorative meaning that obscures its ambiguity and its heterogeneity, as well as its potentials. Furthermore, listeners who come to the fairy tale out of nostalgia may leave with something else.

The often misunderstood connection between storytelling and nostalgia requires more study. While much of the desire for storytelling is nostalgic, and indeed certain presentations of storytelling are plainly nostalgic, the automatic dismissal of practices as nostalgic may in many instances fail to recognize that liberatory or utopian impulses may look very much like

---

[26] Gayatri Spivak, p. xviii in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.
[27] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993.

nostalgic ones. Storytelling, we might argue, is both the perfect purveyor of nostalgia and its antidote. One-sided critiques of nostalgia, heritage and tourism fail to consider this potential.

Tourism and Authenticity

Tourist practices, like heritage and other modern consumption practices, are propelled by the drive to consume other places and times. As such they may be reactionary and ideological, preoccupied by the perceived loss of the moral conviction, authenticity, spontaneity, and community of the past, and accompanied by a profound disillusionment and abandonment of the present and a fear of the future. Their collective nostalgia for real places and real historic roots fuels the search for an illusive, usually pre-modern authenticity.

Work on tourism by Dean MacCannell, John Urry and Erik Cohen has emphasized the concept of authenticity. Much of this work is framed by theories of modernism and postmodernism, and it is not surprising that it is oriented toward the gaze and the visual field, that is, the consumption of visual signs and objects. This produces some interesting questions in relation to storytelling which I will discuss in the next section.

In brief, theories of modernity and postmodernism have placed emphasis on the loss of tradition and its institutions. In the absence of traditional supports for both individual and collective identity and meaning, the sphere of consumption dominates experience. Since the 1960's, the growing centrality of the image and of consumption fills the cultural frame so completely that the world become *its* world; the image is everything.[28] Consumption becomes not merely the consumption of products, but the consumption of *signs*. At the same time there is no core or centre; experience subsequently loses depth and dimensionality, flattening into

[28] See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Red and Black, 1983; and Daniel Boorstin, *The Image*. New York: Penguin Books, 1962.

the experience of only surfaces and of simulations of the *real*, a real which is perceived to be somewhere else but yet never reachable. The play of surface and image marks "the death of the subject," that is of the autonomous subject grounded in a sense of predictable, solid social realities and structures of meaning. The sense of grounded location in time and space dissolves in the face of the homogenizing influence of the media and of the extension of the commodity form, with its uniform substitution of exchange value for use value, by which the most meaningful elements of life lose their distinctive identities and meanings and enter into the marketplace as mere products and services. Capitalism, with its relentless commodification, erodes the traditional sources of the stability of self—religion and family—and menaces any meaningful relationship with history. This erasure of traditional meanings and values is linked with a growing sense of artificiality and inauthenticity and produces a nostalgia for distinctive, grounded local and community identities. As Fredric Jameson argues, in decentred time and space, living is grounded through objects of nostalgia.[29]

The so-called loss of the real produces a nostalgia not only for past, simpler times, but for meaning itself. Because the cultural field is so completely marked by slipping surfaces and images and by a sense of unsatisfying artificiality and sameness, the quest for meaning veers *outside* present time and place, and attempts are made to discover practices and cultures in which meaning and the real are still seen to exist—the culturally marginal and specific, the subcultural, the regional, and generally the temporal and cultural other—paradoxically converting them into products of consumption and into objects of nostalgia and longing. What we long to consume is their authenticity.

---

[29] Jameson, 1984, p. 65.

The concept of authenticity was adopted from contemporary existential philosophical anthropology into the study of tourism by the sociologist Dean MacCannell.[30] MacCannell's use of the term suggests that authenticity, like some real essence or quality, is embedded in cultural products and experiences which are not "commodified." Tourists, however, never encounter authenticity because their hosts, in anticipation of touristic desires, stage a simulated authenticity for their consumption. While this staged authenticity may satisfy many tourists, the authentic *other* they may believe they have encountered is nevertheless always "inauthentic." Later work on tourism by Erik Cohen and others has argued that authenticity does not inhere in objects and experiences but is always a socially constructed category and is always negotiated. Authenticity, in other words, is a feature of the *presentation* not of the thing itself. As Cohen argues,

> "Authenticity" is an eminently modern value whose emergence is closely related to the impact of modernity upon the unity of social existence. As institutions become, in Nietzsche's words, "weightless" and lose their reality," individuals begin to embark on "a quest for that unity between the self and societal institutions, which endowed pre-modern existence with "reality"... The alienated modern tourist in quest of authenticity hence looks for the pristine, the primitive, the natural, that which is as yet untouched by modernity. He hopes to find it in other places since it is absent from his own world.[31]

Authenticity is also a professional concern of curators and ethnographers, for whom it is principally "a quality of premodern life, and of cultural produces produced prior to the penetration of modern Western influences."[32] Cohen quotes a curator of African carving as declaring authentic "any object created for a traditional purpose and by a traditional artist but only if it conforms to traditional forms... it should not be manufactured specifically for the market." Commodification is precisely the process that destroys authenticity, at the same time

---

[30] D. MacCannell, "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings." *American Journal of Sociology* 79 (3) 1973, pp. 589-603.
[31] Erik Cohen, "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism" *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 15, pp. 371-386, 1988. p. 373-4.
[32] Cohen, 1988, p. 375.

as being the condition of possibility of the category of authenticity itself. Furthermore, authenticity becomes the very commodity that many types of tourism offer.

Some contemporary storytellers and listeners are consumed by the quest for the real and the authentic, and storytelling's image is appropriated as a sign of that authenticity. "Authentic" traditional storytelling is in high demand by audiences and can be seen as forming a kind of resource for revivalist storytelling events. Tellers from oral traditions are often invited to tell stories at storytelling festivals, at conferences, at universities or at other events. Duncan Williamson, who comes from an oral tradition of 'travelers' from western Scotland, has visited North America and Europe on numerous occasions and has made hundreds of appearances at universities and festivals, including the local Vancouver Storytelling Festival. "Aboriginal or indigenous" storytellers play a large role at many festivals, and storytellers from immigrant or other cultures are often invited to bring their narrative traditions to "mainstream" audiences. Differing degrees of authenticity are tolerated. However, although cultural authority rests in part on the perception of their authenticity, these storytellers play with the question of authenticity quite explicitly and deliberately. It is not always "authenticity" itself but awareness of the tension between authenticity and inauthenticity that intrigues the audience. Perhaps the very foregrounding of this dilemma is somehow actually a reassurance of the ability of the present to speak authentically.

For MacCannell, the tourist is the modern embodiment of the religious pilgrim; tourism becomes a modern surrogate for religion in its quest for the authentic and the sacred. This quest may lead either to the past or to the cultural other, or preferably to both. The equation of the spiritual and authentic with the other is a form of exoticization. Diane Wolkstein, arguably one of the two or three best-known storytellers in North America, author of numerous books and collections of stories and officially designated "Storyteller Laureate" of New York City, made the following remarks in a 1991 interview:

> Bali and Haiti. You've mentioned the two cultures that affected me the strongest. I think because their religions suffuse their entire lives... Ceremonies. The way everyone lived. They really lived inside their religion... And there's the Hopi... I think that's one of the strongest cultures in terms of people living inside their religion. Where I am drawn to are places where people are immersed in a spiritual vision. You said that *"Story" is your religion.* I suppose it's mine too. I thirst for ceremony and ritual. I don't find it in the world that I live in. I love to be in the presence of it—when it is *real*—in *other cultures which I feel are very... living still...* I try to create these magical places through story. Probably because I live in a place that's completely un-magical. Maybe if I lived in Akaba I would never think to do that. Why would I need to?[33]

Here Wolkstein is storyteller as "existential tourist," Cohen's category for those tourists (usually well-educated and upper middle-class) who are most intent upon encountering pure authenticity uncontaminated by the contemporary realities of loss of tradition, appropriation by high culture, cultural homogenization or commodification. Many non-traditional storytellers, seeking an antidote to these phenomena through an authentic brand of life and speech, apprentice themselves to those who are said to be "the real thing": African griots, traditional Asian storytellers, or First Nations elders. The concern among contemporary non-traditional storytellers for faithfulness to past and present "tradition" is in many cases an invocation of the criterion of the "authentic." Such storytellers, like certain tourists, embrace the other as their "elective centre," aiming to "switch worlds" or "go native."[34]

Authenticity: Folklore and Fakelore

> For a long time, authenticity was an issue -- the scientific folklorist, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, sought to catch the accent of the 'common people'; and authenticity was equated with the pristine, the autochthonous, the tale pure and unadulterated by elite ideas.[35]

---

[33] Diane Wolkstein, *Appleseed Quarterly*, August 1991 vol 1 No 3, p. 6-7, my emphasis.
[34] Cohen, 1988, p. 375.
[35] Warner, p. 24.

> Leskov is the writer most deeply rooted in the people and is completely untouched by any foreign influences.[36]

The concept of authenticity implies the existence of fakes. Storytelling struggles with the notion of the fake on a number of levels. The first is the problem of determining whether "traditional tales" are folklore or "fakelore," a preoccupation which drives many storytellers to research in anthropology and folklore studies. The notion of the fake also inevitably extends to the resistance against deliberate alteration of tales as well as the construction of new forms such as the personal experience story. However, despite the above arguments, storytellers and storytelling audiences are also tolerant of what might according to these theories be deemed inauthentic: the voice of the present, the urban, the satiric or ironic use of the traditional story, etc. Storytelling in this sense represents what Cohen refers to as "emergent authenticity," and he points out that such phenomena as revivals, over time, may become "authentic."

The addition of storytelling to heritage projects

Storytelling is Jonesborough's novelty item, the addition which makes it different from other heritage or museum sites. But storytelling in Jonesborough is more than merely another cultural product, even though it has certainly been for the NSA a product whose marketability seems to be inexhaustible. Storytelling, even in Jonesborough, remains something other than a mere display. For a heritage and museum industry that may have reached market saturation (Urry p. 51), storytelling engages visitors in a way in which static displays and even workers in fancy period dress do not. Storytelling, as will be discussed in the next section, offers the sense of the *real*; real contact with the past, with local culture, and with *experience* grounded in place and time. A number of heritage and museum sites have begun to experiment with

[36] Gorky on Nikolai Leskov, quoted in Benjamin, 1968, p. 101

storytelling. Not all of these frame storytelling in the way that Jonesborough does, nor do they all rely on forms such as the folk tale.

The Boott Cotton Mills Museum of Lowell National Historical Park in Massachusetts presents visitors with videotaped oral history interviews of retired mill workers. The museum director claims that the museum had wanted to avoid a focus on machinery and other static displays by presenting the "life experiences" of those who had personally worked in the mill. It sponsored an oral history project which eventually spanned many years and involved a large portion of the local population as interviewers and researchers. The museum's director Marty Blatt comments that "These people speak with a certain lived experience. There is a truthfulness, an edge... to what they say." In one of the video installations, Sidney Muskovitz, a 29-year veteran of the mills, declares "I wouldn't want to have anybody working here, not even a dog... The lint, they called it, it was always flying around us, and we inhaled that." Another interviewee says "I got put on weaving the first week and was paid four pennies. I was supposed to earn more than that, but ... I was penalized for having made "seconds," which you had no control over." Celia Thing, a mill worker for twenty-one years, remembers: "You couldn't bring no lunch or nothing because if you left them on the windowsill, they'd be all full of cockroaches—so many of them in there. So that's why we never brought our lunch. *Never*." [37] Blatt remarks, "What our culture offers as historically significant—by the press, business, or government—tends to confer status, power and authority to the entrenched, the powerful, like politicians or business figures. Not to the ordinary man and woman. Not to the working class. It's nice for people to be recognized." The juxtaposition of Jonesborough and Boott Cotton Mills would seem to suggest that the distinction between the revival of traditional tale forms and the seeking of oral histories is exactly the distinction between regressively nostalgic constructions of the past and engaged, political histories. But this

---

[37] Kate Shaw, "Recalling Forgotten Lives," *Storytelling Magazine*, Fall 1993 Vol. 5 No. 4, pp. 14-18.

distinction will not hold, because even at Jonesborough, non-fictional stories of exploitation are heard, just as they are heard throughout revival storytelling.

Many storytellers bring the stories of their communities to larger, "mainstream" audiences because they want their stories told and their opposition to official histories registered. Black storytellers James Rucker and Rex Ellis self-consciously attempt to tell history, not heritage, by giving voice, as they put it, to the forgotten ones. Rucker was involved with the civil rights and antiwar movements as a young man and was inspired by the speeches of Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X. He decided then to teach history to black students in the form of stories. Rucker argues that official curricula paralyze students' awareness of history because of their omission of the experience of the exploited and their everywhere-and-nowhere "voice of God" narration. Rucker's work in large part involves historical reconstruction of contemporary oppositional cultural forms; his histories demonstrate the classic oral history combination of folktale, personal experience story, song and history. He often sings an old song called "Hambone" which he calls the great-grandfather of rap music. The song's origin is in the practice by slave owners of offering ham bones to favourite slaves during lean times. The bones were passed from slave to slave. Rucker claims his storytelling effaces neither the past nor the present, and that this is made evident by the awakening in the students of their own ability to tell their stories in community and frame their experience as situated in history. In his own community Rucker is a permanent fixture, telling stories over and over in a long-standing commitment to a particular place and time. It is one of the oddities of the storytelling revival that he and his stories of misery, of those who have survived and sometimes prospered in the face of adversity—the basic theme of the folktale—also appear one day a year at Jonesborough, where their new context threatens to transmute them into heritage products. Rucker's community work may be part of the new interest in storytelling, but it is perhaps inaccurate to call it "revival storytelling" except when it appears at festivals.

Authenticity and Nostalgia Reconsidered

Analyses of heritage and tourism practices are framed by critical theories of modernity and postmodernism. As such they are often deeply suspicious of popular practices as ideological, regressive, nostalgic and parochial. Both Urry and West, however, criticize Hewison for his blanket dismissal of popular attempts to encounter history and difference, arguing that heritage sites and other practices never exclusively present the monolithic, monovocal voice of the dominant. Different visitors gaze upon the same set of objects in different ways, and those sites which celebrate a non-elite popular culture serve to foreground groups normally written out of history. However, the paralyzing ideological masking of historical and present realities must be treated seriously. In terms of storytelling, what is not needed is a celebratory cultural studies approach that validates its "popular" cultural practices as automatically oppositional or liberatory. This positive view has been well-covered by the storytelling press. What is needed is an acknowledgement of the devastating effects of the systematic homogenization of culture and the domestication of difference at the same time as an examination of the potential of "arts of memory" like storytelling to foster community cohesiveness, historical awareness and the grounds for collective action. Cultural analysis must engage with such contemporary practices to help ensure that their potential is not lost.

Storytelling is a reified folk art as well as a democratic, everyday means of transmitting experience in the face of the silencing voice of the media. It is a means of healthy cross-cultural encounter in a bracketed space outside hardened political conflict or racist categories. Moreover it can be viewed as an absurd contradiction or an instance of the most exaggerated romantic nostalgia. Storytelling's listeners, who are not mere consumers, are not unaware of its contradictions. The thrill of the story is not entirely a function of an unexamined exoticization of temporal and cultural others; it is an experience of the jarring but tolerable

collision of different worlds and the speaking of difficult realities in a context in which they can be safely heard. It remains to be seen whether these practices build social interrelationships and fuel efforts toward change, or whether their ideological framing only serves to defuse or contain such impulses. It is likely that they will do both; storytelling has always worked in all of these ways. In any case, notions of authenticity and nostalgia perhaps need to be revisited so that liberating experiences of "other" social formations as well as of their narrative forms can be recognized and encouraged.

The traditional story in particular offers a mode of thinking—*story thinking*, we might call it—which is demonstrably different from what Walter Benjamin called the "perplexity" of contemporary narrative forms. Sean Kane, the nephew of the much loved Toronto storyteller Alice Kane, teaches in the undergraduate storytelling programme at Trent University. While recognizing the romantic motivations behind the longing for storytelling, Kane claims that the encounter with the traditional story (which he calls oral narrative) allows for a dialogical interrogation of the present.

> Storytelling .... is something everybody does, like brushing their teeth and going shopping and talking to the neighbour. It is also a self-consciously revived folk art. As such, it has a certain romantic innocence to it, and yes, sometimes even a trace of anti-intellectualism. And the idealism that simply by listening to stories - any story - will magically make you a better person. It will "refine your sensibility," to use Jane Austen's quaint phrase. Yet stories are very powerful and dangerous things - we need to reflect on them....By researching and telling a story from oral tradition, the student stands in that space romantically but is also critically aware of what she or he is doing. So whether you make yourself into a harp that the story blows through like a wind or whether you become a performer squeezing a story through the latest urban ironies, you take responsibility for what you are doing." ... I don't presume Oral Narrative will save the world any more than storytelling can. But [it] pulls people outside the assumptions of technological civilization. Maybe they can take its measure from the outside, from the vantage-point of ancestral humanity. They can face the world, knowing what has been lost and gained by being human at the threshold of the twenty-first century... [in our program we try to address] the politically aware end-user, who dwells not in the so-called hoax of

> the past but in the activism of the present... altogether it's an exciting time to be a teacher of things of the past in their pastness, as well as in their presentness.[38]

Jon Spelman, a Vietnam vet turned war-story teller, also accepts storytelling's romantic and nostalgic impulses. "Some people think storytelling should be nostalgic or romantic... and it is. But storytelling is so many other things too. Sure, we need to laugh and be entertained by stories, but we also need them to remind us of what it's like to be human."[39]

Storytelling and the gaze?

> "Kafka listened to tradition, and he who listens hard does not see."
> Walter Benjamin, 1968, p. 143

In its focus on the gaze, work on tourism, heritage and museum practices fails to fully address the phenomenon of storytelling. If culture is pervaded by the image and its relentless consumption, what role does the ear play, or the spoken word? Nostalgia, exoticization and the romantic are best reproduced by the figural. Mass consumer culture's self-perpetuation is based on the constant subordination of language-based discourse to signification based in image. Consumption itself is theorized as *visual*; consumption of culture is actually the consumption of the *image* of objects. (Urry p. 120) Storytelling is more than the consumption of its own image. While, on the one hand, we are currently fully engaged in the consumption of the *image* of the storyteller, on the other, the experience of hearing stories face to face, particularly traditional stories, has not yet entirely settled into the standardized patterns of familiarity which would allow classic consumption. There is some question whether that degree of impatient, habitual reception ever fully applies in the storytelling

---

[38] Sean Kane, *Appleseed Quarterly* May 1996, p. 2-4, my emphasis.
[39] Jon Spelman, "War Stories: Nam" *Storytelling Magazine*, Spring '91, p. 6.

context, with that unrehearsed quality which always has the ability to surprise or keep listeners off-centre. The traditional substitution of the consumption of the image for the thing itself only applies to storytelling if we accept the idea that the mass media's current use of the image of storytelling will actually exhaust the meanings and potential of the activity of storytelling itself.

Storytelling is appealing because in important respects it privileges the voice; not only the voice of the teller, but the internal voice and creativity of the listener. While the gaze is passive, listening is not. Storytelling engages not the visual but active, internal visualization.

It is said that modernism is associated with the word while postmodernism is associated with the image, modernism with secondary and postmodernism with primary processes. Storytelling is a particular combination of image and the word, of primary and secondary processes which sets it outside many of the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism.

Storytelling and paradox

It has been observed many times that it is a mark of the current culture that distinctions upon which firm meanings were once grounded, distinctions between real and imaginary, fact and fiction, original and copy, subject and object, true and false, cause and effect, have been dissolved. As temporality is flattened and the past becomes synchronous, as we consume signs of reality, tradition and lived experience, storytelling occupies a strange ground indeed. Never an exact copy, it is a copy both with and without an original. It is a reproduction permanently handmade, limited by space and time by its live character and the constraints of memory and endurance. But the story is not only unlike the copy, the simulation, the atemporal; in its two-sidedness, dissimulation and trickery, it always begins by addressing the fragility of oppositions even while invoking them. The structuralists have made too much of the simple

conservative dualisms of the fairy tale. The fairy tale has paradox as its inception, and mocks dualism rather than merely instating it. "There was and there was not... kan ya ma kan" the Arabian Nights begin, bir var mis, bir yok mis in Turkish... These are the tales currently making the rounds in the festival circuit. The form of the story does not offer coherence so much as allow the contained pleasure of uncertainty.

Commodification: The selling of the story

> Commoditization of areas in the life of a community....folk and ethnic art become touristic services or commodities...commoditization allegedly changes the meaning of cultural products and of human relations, making them eventually meaningless.[40]

Storytellers often remark, particularly in the United States, that stories are quickly used up on the traditional tale circuit. It is also often said that the tales are indestructible and have a life of their own. Nevertheless, efforts are made to protect them from overuse, from "Disneyfication," and from appropriation. A tension for revival storytelling lies in its own recognition of the assimilation of storytelling into the market at the same time as it recognizes its own part in that process. Reflecting more deeply on its own participation might perhaps yield new practices more resistant to the neutralization of storytelling's possibilities.

Storytelling and the market

Storytelling's appropriation by the media, advertising, and Disney Corporation, as well as its professionalization, institutionalization, and conversion to intellectual property by storytellers and writers, has been very swift. In the United States, storytellers and listeners have begun to predict the imminent end of the revival.

---

[40] Cohen, 1988, p. 372.

Storytelling has always played a role in buying and selling. Walter Benjamin reminds us of the "by no means insignificant share which traders had in the art of storytelling; their task was less to increase its didactic content than to refine the tricks with which the attention of the listener was captured. They have left deep traces in the narrative cycle of *The Arabian Nights*." (p. 101) It is perhaps misleading, however, to equate the patient practice of narrative skill by medieval traders with the methods of the contemporary mass media. Every year, Disney reduces another folk tale to a formulaic, saccharine animation, and every year Vice-Presidents of major U.S. advertising and PR agencies fly to Jonesborough to collect techniques at the National Storytelling Festival. Advertising and promotional agencies now claim that *the story is everything*. "You can't sell *anything* without one," an executive recently told me. The business card of a local "concept" agency called **e & s** is a little four-page storybook in white and silver which reads:

> **e & s** - Envisioning & Storytelling Inc.
> Dean Sawatzky, Producer—Converging Media
>
> en-vi-sion'ing: (envizh'an ing) to assist another to imagine something not yet in existence: to visualize the future: to picture in the mind
>
> st-ory-tell'ing: (stor'e tel ling) impacting on all of the senses, including the emotions, to communicate a concept, idea, account or happening[41]

As one storyteller wrote, "storytelling is now a highly recognized tool used by teachers, therapists, and *business*. They are not going to stop using it. It works and it works well. Better than most of their other tools." (PJ, 7/16/96, my emphasis)

Ownership of stories

Stories, like textiles or tools or meals, are generally unsigned. Storytelling's anonymity, its supposed lack of concern for 'authorship'—or at least its willingness to distribute

[41] See Appendix A.

authorship and ownership evenly—is part of storytelling's appeal for tellers and listeners. Angela Carter, a writer long preoccupied with the fairy tale form, prefers to perceive storytelling in this way.

> Ours is a highly individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. "This is how I make potato soup."[42]

Yet storytellers, while placing the greatest value upon collective ownership of stories and on the stories' origin in the collective rather than the individual (which also traditionally provided the story's authority, since it was held in common and sanctioned by the whole community), inevitably find themselves caught in the phenomena of the transformation of cultural form into property. "Versions" of tales are jealously guarded. Certain well-known North American storytellers who have published their own versions of stories will either invoke copyright law to prevent other professional tellers from using their stylings, or will use unwritten but increasingly institutionalized 'ethics and etiquette' guidelines which demand that other tellers wishing to use the story must attribute the story to its collector or originator, or, if it has been published, must exhibit a copy of the book and name its title and author before "reproducing" the story. Tellers who have "made a story their own" often become concerned when others begin to tell the same story. Storytellers have the impression that stories have a short shelf-life and quickly become exhausted. In the closely knit world of "professional" storytelling, mistakes in this area can quite easily lead to career trouble. Storytellers themselves recognize the contradiction of "owning" stories when on another level those stories are deemed to "belong to the people," and frequently they suffer guilt and regret over it as the following internet exchange demonstrates. This listserv thread was initiated after many months of

---

[42] Carter quoted in Warner, 1995, p. 418.

complicated discussion about copyright laws and the rights and responsibilities of storytellers. Messages were posted to the list under the subject line "The Man Who Hoarded Stories," referring to a folktale with Korean and Kazakh variants about what happens to a man who selfishly hid stories in a bag. I find the following exchange especially interesting because it captures so accurately the tone and content of ongoing debates on this topic. For this reason I have quoted it at length in order to let the reader experience a sample of this debate first-hand. Tim Jennings and Tim Sheppard are well-known storytellers from Philadelphia and London, England, respectively. Emphases in italics are mine.

> We learn a lot about copyright from this list, but as storytellers, have we really fully debated what all this legal shmegal stuff does to the folkloric process? I know we touch on it here and there, but the posts do seem to center more on protection than on passing it on. Do we believe in abundance or limitation? I'm trying to develop my own repertoire, but there are some stories that I love so much that I've wanted to share them. So I ask, and usually receive the gift most graciously. But there was one episode that still has me questioning how I will respond when the table is turned and someone asks me for a story. I heard a Rather Big Name (RBN) tell what could only be called a tall tale. So I picked it up and tried it out on a few local audiences, intertwining it with other tall tales, all in my own style (and always giving credit to my source, the RBN). Well, it went over so well, I thought maybe some day I might record it, so I wrote the RBN for permission... He explained that it took him quite a while to track down the mountain feller who told this whopper, and he spent quite a while making it his own and now it is one of his signature stories... and NO I could not use it, record it or ever tell it except maybe to a small group of friends.... But what about the process of the oral tradition? Was this story not passed around some small corner of the mountains for years before this RBN got it? Did this RBN explain to the mountain tall-taler that he was collecting stories to do professionally and that he would now be assuming full copyright for this story? .... Should any individual have that power over what was obviously once a free-roaming story on the winds of Appalachia?... We have been griping a lot about paying royalty fees to ASCAP, which probably does not pertain to a lot of us, YET. When that yet arrives, *will we really have fully debated our beliefs about the oral tradition?* (David Matlack, Silver Springs, Florida 8/22/96)

(In the following response, Tim Sheppard quotes from David Matlack's post and answers his queries:)

> >But what about the process of the oral tradition? Was this story not passed around
> >some small corner of the mountains for years before this RBN got it? Did this

>RBN explain to the mountain tall-taler that he was collecting stories to do
>professionally and that he would now be assuming full copyright for this story? ....

If he had, I can well imagine the storyteller beating him with a large stick for such hubris and telling him never to darken his mountain again until he had become a real storyteller.

>Should any individual have that power over what was obviously once a free-
>roaming story on the winds of Appalachia?...

It calls to mind *the imperialism of a well-organized nation arriving at some small vibrant culture*, and announcing that it now owned everything. "Any objections? Tough, we have guns." (Tim Sheppard, London, UK 8/23/96)

The problem of sharing/owning stories is only partly a legal one. My own feeling is, this is a dilemma.... We've been hearing a lot from "the stories belong to the people" side; now let's look at the other side. It takes me a couple of years to work a story up to the point where it really knocks people out, and then others want to use it. I have a very finite number of these stories. This is how I make my living, which is why I'm able to make these stories so highly crafted. It's true, nobody's going to tell it just like me. It's true, everybody gets 'em somewhere. It's true I'm a greedy pig for wanting to guard my story. But I do, and when I let it go it's often grudgingly. If somebody grabs that story, and runs with it, it kind of "uses it up" (because doggone it, *traditional stories on this circuit, like traditional tunes on the old-time music circuit, have a hey-day and a twilight and then are passe—paradoxical isn't it?*) That means I did the work and they got the benefit. (Tim Jennings, Philadelphia, 8/24/96)

It just shows the values of the times. *Everyone wants novelty, novelty, novelty.* Is it the storyteller... who feels he is short-changing the audience by telling them a story they have heard before? Or do the audience really feel bored by a story on the second telling? *If Tim J. is right that traditional stories are a fashion item, to be discarded after their season, then storytelling in America is going not into a new golden age, but into meltdown...* I find it hard to believe that with the enormous population of the States there are enough storytellers to saturate the "market" and force you to compete for stories and rights.... Perhaps the twin pressures of efficient nationwide access to media/entertainment information-overload, and the demand for "stars"... is polarizing the market - allowing an elite class of superstars to command influence, and forcing them to compete... I'm just trying to see behind the complex diversity of everyday life to find the general underlying forces at work... This need to protect one's own territory doesn't seem to be an issue in Britain.... We have a huge oral tradition to draw from, and that colours our perceptions of stories etc. The purpose and ethics of storytelling is to share share share. We have well-known storytellers who tell the same stories as others - they just tell them in their own ways...There is always some rivalry... But with millions of stories to choose from, and millions of people who _still_ haven't heard of storytelling, staking out story territory and getting protective of it seems like building a fortress around the earth in case a planet from another galaxy happens to

> arrive and muscle in on our orbit.... We have a tangled web [of] copyright laws that tellers can feel justified, *even obligated* to use (laws are 'right', right?)... I know I can be accused of ignoring the brutal practical realities of earning a living, etc. But I believe that it is most important to understand the fundamental principles at work first, and get them right. Then all that flows from them will have an integrity, inevitably. To my mind, generosity of spirit is at the very heart of storytelling.
> (Tim Sheppard, London, UK 8/25/96)

Individual authorship, protection of intellectual property, concern for originality, the contradictions between oral tradition and accelerated commodification: the difficulties of reviving an authentically "popular" cultural form in the current context are fairly well laid out in this exchange. It should be observed that the issue of ownership and copyright is considered by many Canadian—and, it seems, British—storytellers to be a distinctly American one; such issues do arise among revival storytellers in Canada, but not to the same extent, though the U.S. debate has now put the issue on the agenda of Canadian groups such as the Storytellers of Canada, for whom "ethics" now tends to mean copyright and artistic ownership rather than, for example, cultural appropriation. But in the United States as well numerous storytellers have objected to the mania for copyright. Conrad Bladey, a Maryland storyteller, has founded an organization of storytellers known as TOTSNIIC: Tellers of Traditional Tales Not Interested in Copyright, which maintains a list of TOTSNIIC members who can register with him for a one-time fee of fifty cents and by signing the TOTSNIIC Agreement. Bladey's open letter to storytellers, issued over the Storytell listserv, begins:

> The time has come to set apart tellers of tales within the Oral Tradition from those who are working within the traditions of story acting, story recitation and story copyrighting. These three traditions worthy as they may be should not be confused with the telling of tales within the oral tradition as it has developed over the centuries. Within this ancient tradition there has never been nor shall be any sense of copyright. While a teller may have from time to time wished to cite a source the

> practice was not necessary. Tellers were engaged to bring not a story so much as an experience.[43]

Bladey also proposes "TOTSNIIC Only" festivals. To my knowledge this movement never got off the ground. His position, however, while especially flamboyant, is not materially different from that of many other tellers who are opposed to the institutionalization of storytelling and its conversion into intellectual property.

Opposition to copyright, though, does not always occupy the high moral ground. Copyright has become an important recourse for groups whose stories have, like some natural resource, regularly provided others with profitable material. The question of the rights of those from whom the stories are collected is addressed briefly in the above exchange in reference to the Appalachian storyteller paternalistically characterized as that "mountain feller." Much of the uneasiness of the debate about ownership likely stems from the barely repressed spectre of past accusations of cultural appropriation and theft of copyright. First Nations groups in particular have been vocal on these issues in both Canada and the U.S. and have strongly asserted their moral and legal "ownership" of their own stories. At present most revival storytellers tread very carefully on this ground, though they sometimes take less care when dealing with other cultures. Historically, First Nations groups whose stories were tape-recorded, filmed or transcribed by anthropologists or folklore collectors over several centuries were left with no legal access to, or in some cases remuneration from, their own cultural material. In response to lobbying by a number of First Nations communities, Canadian copyright law was amended in 1996. With the new amendments, "oral works" will now be minimally protected despite the fact that they do not fill the traditional copyright criteria that works must be in a "fixed form" (tape, print, film, video). Mere possession of the tape recorders and audiotape on which stories are recorded no longer automatically awards

---

[43] Conrad Bladey, Inquiries cb0005@epf12.epflbalto.org; see also Storytell archives

ownership and right to copy to collectors. Though certain anthropologists, writers and collectors have since the 1960's voluntarily shared or surrendered copyright to tribal councils,[44] many bands have had difficulty getting hold of tapes, transcriptions, or rights to material that had been gathered in their own communities. Descendants of those "subjects" who collectively dedicated thousands of hours of storytelling now suffer the loss of that cultural material, which currently lies in private or institutional hands. Many First Nations storytellers, like many revival storytellers, recognize the obvious contradiction in the protection of "oral" creations as intellectual property, yet as one local native teller told me, not more so than in any of the other collisions between tradition and modernity which she regularly experiences.

Who can tell? The Professionalization and Reification of Storytelling

It is not only control of stories that preoccupies many storytellers but also control over the designation "storyteller" itself. As professional revival storytellers come to depend on the public's familiarity with the terms "storytelling" and "storyteller," and as they begin to compete with each other for work, many become increasingly anxious about indiscriminate use of the term.

> Every day another village or hearthside teller declares "I'm a storyteller!" It is not unhealthy to stop and wonder what it means. It would be a blessing to have guidelines in place to give structure to our emerging tellers. (Papa Joe, United States, 3/29/97 Storytell listserv)

---

[44] For comparison see Glavin, Terry, and the People of Nemiah Valley, *Nemiah: The Unconquered Country*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1992. Copyright page reads "Text copyright© 1992 by the Nemiah Indian Band"; also see Cruickshank, Julie. *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*. Vancouver, UBC Press, 1995. The cover reads "Julie Cruikshank in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned"; but copyright was not shared.

> The idea of guidelines being put in place to give structure to emerging tellers, as I see it, stands a good chance over time of narrowing and limiting the whole emerging and exploring - the cutting edge - of storytelling. (Gordon Hall, New Zealand, 3/29/97 Storytell listserv)

George Blake, a Toronto teller who grew up in a black Caribbean community surrounded by storytelling, says that when he arrived in Canada he "wondered why urban tellers were so concerned about naming themselves "storyteller"... I never heard the term "storyteller" when I was a boy in Jamaica, though I was exposed to hearing stories from elders, teachers, and my contemporaries."[45] In some areas of the West, revival storytelling has become institutionalized to such an extent that storytellers are ranked based on training and years of experience, so that groups wishing to hire a teller may supposedly determine what they are getting for their money. The New South Wales Writer's Centre in Australia has devised a three-tier hierarchy in which storytellers are designated "accredited," "professional" or "master" storyteller, supposedly corresponding to a medieval structure of "apprentice, journeyman or master" storyteller. "Master Storyteller" can be earned by submitting "100 paid-assignment testimonials on official letterheads from a variety of commercial settings over a 5-year period as well as be critiqued first-hand by an accreditation panel, funded by the government's Ministry for the Arts."[46] The drive toward standardized credentials and accreditation has recently been taken up by the NSA in the United States, provoking resistance from many tellers but gaining support from others who claim that they fear the preponderance of "bad" tellers will damage the reputation of storytelling in general. This indicates one road down which storytelling may find itself when resistance to standardization or accreditation is not voiced strongly enough.

---

[45] Kay Stone, "Moments of Recognition" in *Appleseed Quarterly* Feb 94 p. 15. Kay Stone is a Manitoba storyteller.

[46] "Inside Story," Newsletter of the NSA, December, 1995.

At a meeting of the Storytellers of Canada/Raconteurs du Canada in Fredericton, New Brunswick in May of 1995, many storytellers expressed an interest in limiting those who can call themselves "storyteller" and be hired for storytelling gigs. The rationale provided was that storytelling is a powerful tool and is easily abused. An example was given of a particular storyteller who entered the Ontario primary school system with an agenda of addressing child abuse. The storyteller apparently used fairy tales and pointed commentary to stir up anxiety and confusion among children who later required intervention from a trained counselor, long after the storyteller had blithely moved on to the next school. While inept handling of storytelling is regrettable, it seems that attempts to control who can be considered a storyteller run deeper than a concern about storytelling's dangers.

While it is often said that "everyone is a storyteller," the unspoken proviso appears to be that not everyone is a *professional* storyteller. This, of course, is little different from the prevailing situation in other fields of art in which artists may claim that everyone is an artist but become anxious if those who have not followed the same institutional path as themselves begin competing for grants. The contradiction here, however, lies in the carefully controlled impression that storytelling is *unlike* those other arts; less institutionalized, more organic, owned in common, free to all.

Anti-Revival

Approximately twenty years from its beginnings in Europe and North America, the current storytelling revival is generating criticism from within its own ranks. A 1995 questionnaire sent out to several hundred individuals involved in storytelling in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland produced, among other things, a range of fairly hostile reactions to the revivalist art of storytelling.[47] It is perhaps not surprising that there should be less

---

[47] *Storytelling in Ireland: A Re-awakening*. Londonderry: The Verbal Arts Centre, 1995.

support for, and more suspicion of professional revival storytelling in Ireland than in the United States. Not only is there in Ireland the sense of an unbroken chain of tradition, and therefore a clearer impression of revival storytelling as something new, but the commercialization of storytelling there is not as advanced or as striking as it is in the United States. Many of the questionnaire's respondents, while seen as participants in a reawakening of storytelling, would not consider themselves, nor would they be considered, "professional" storytellers, and as such they bring a different perspective to the debate.

Ciaran Carson, an "old-time village storyteller" who is sometimes invited to tell in contemporary venues, wrote about the extraction of storytelling from its context and its importation into new places where its form is altered or misunderstood. "Storytelling goes on everywhere—how far removed from the context can storytelling occur is the question. It occurs, occurred, in the pub or the house by the fire, and is only apparently informal. The structure seems to be haphazard and informal but it isn't. Once set apart from that, on a stage, it can be strange and bizarre."[48] Other objections were voiced more strongly. On the subject of the new professional revival storytellers and their organizations Nuala Hayes wrote that "[s]torytelling is not a movement. It should grow organically or it is someone's ego trip."[49] This implicit critique of the inroads of a modern individualism (not to mention a star system) into storytelling will be taken up later. Complaints against the 'entertainmentification' of storytelling were particularly common, with the implication that there is something rather suspect about storytelling events or festivals. Bairbre Ó Floinn wrote: "Revival storytelling sessions hold no attraction for me. They don't engage me personally. However, community workers on the ground—librarians, teachers, youth leaders, etc.—who use storytelling in their programmes, I have nothing but respect for the work they do."[50]

---

[48] *Storytelling in Ireland*, p. 9.
[49] *Storytelling in Ireland*, p. 6.
[50] *Storytelling in Ireland*, p. 5.

It is particularly interesting that in Ireland the preservation of storytelling is not equated with revivalism. "It's quite a difficult problem. A new model of storytelling has emerged, and absolutely taken off—but it is getting criticism from [those] interested in preserving the tradition."[51] "The tradition" is seen as the informal telling of stories embedded in everyday practices as well as the forms and styles of trained "shanachies" and other classes of traditional tellers. It does not include the telling of traditional tales in entertainment venues, nor the telling of new genres of oral narrative such as personal experience stories. "Revival" implies a loss that, from the Irish standpoint, perhaps, cannot be made good.

The Revival is Over

In America, as may be evident from the above debates about copyright and professionalization, many storytellers suspect that the "revival" is doomed. Jim Maroon, a storyteller from Texas, initiated a listserv thread titled "End of the Renaissance" by cryptically remarking that "[s]torytelling has always been around and it always will be around. But the storytelling renaissance hasn't, and from where I sit, it looks like that renaissance is in big trouble. I give the revival another 15 years, tops, and probably more like 10. It's a fad. We have the moment, and we have failed to seize it."[52] Jim Maroon's analysis places blame for the destruction of the revival on storytellers themselves, rather than on broader processes such as professionalization and commercialization. Most storytellers feel a sense of personal responsibility for storytelling, but not all conclude that the situation rests in their own hands. Regardless of the causes to which the decline is attributed, however, the revival is perceived to be threatened. Despite the fact that they support themselves by telling stories, many storytellers appear to bear this philosophically. In the end they seem to take some solace from the idea that whether or not the revival storytelling movement lives on, storytelling itself is

---

[51] *Storytelling in Ireland*, p. 2.
[52] Jim Maroon, Storytell listserv, 96/07/11.

impervious to its periodic revivals, destructions, disneyfication, co-optation, or commodification.

> The ongoing story renaissance is probably already sowing the seeds of its own destruction. Unless the performing storytellers create places where the adult public can hear storytelling on a regular basis...not just at a festival... then the renaissance will end... Even if this happens, like any renaissance it will come to an end; but I agree... stories will be told and will come back around." (BG, 96/07/21)
>
> "There are some nice things about working in a form as old and as tough as storytelling is. It's very hard to mess up. I mean, you can mess up a storytelling performance, and if you work very hard, you can mess up a story for a whole generation, and if you work very very hard you can mess up storytelling for a culture for several generations (I'm thinking of Disney) -- but what's that to STORYTELLING? -- a blip, that's all. (Tim Jennings, Vermont, 7/10/96)
>
> What is it that we are talking about here? Do you think storytelling is going to stop? Or just turn into the Storytelling Art form Developed in the Late 20th Century? ... Storytelling is now a highly recognized tool used by teachers, therapists, and business. They are not going to stop using it. It works and it works well. Better than most of their other tools... The places where I work are not going to stop hiring storytellers. If they can't find them in a directory, they will find them in the village where they found them before the renaissance. Anybody remember where Jonesborough found their storytellers for the first few years? ...Throughout history there has been a demand for storytellers. Only a few are discovered and supported by the king. The rest make their living doing something else and add value to our lives by telling stories where stories are needed. Our art is not different from the other arts. All the best known artists are dead. What do you want? (PJ, 7/16/96)

Tim Jennings also writes that as opposed to professional storytelling, which is quickly exhausting its own potential, storytelling as an everyday activity and as an element of the building of community identity is safe. Furthermore, traditional stories are part of this "grassroots" activity and are "beginning to circulate informally once again." (7/25/96)

Professional revival storytelling, on the other hand, is undergoing rapid transformations due to the market's demand for novelty, as was suggested earlier. "Oral tales become trite.

They're so easy to reproduce and remember, they easily get overused—that's why tellers started moving towards personal experience stories—they're easier to defend." (7/29/96) The personal experience story, from this viewpoint, comes to be seen merely as a reactive maneuver in response to the way the market rapidly "uses up" cultural forms. However, it may also be one of the ways in which the potentials of storytelling are protected from a "revival" that is static and unresponsive to present needs. As one teller put it,

> I think it is necessary to look at the tradition of storytelling as separate from the telling of traditional stories. The telling of traditional tales is an important part of [contemporary] storytelling. Without those tales and their telling, storytelling might not be as healthy and alive as it is today. But when the tales that are now traditional were first told they were not traditional. They were tales about the then current reality and were attempts to describe that reality in terms that made sense to both the tellers and the listeners. I believe the renaissance will be upon us when new stories that will become traditional are flourishing... [W]hile we are experiencing a resurgence of storytelling, we will not have a renaissance until the wisdom that is stored in stories is being added to by new stories that survive the test of time.[53]

Toronto storytellers Itah Sadu and Dan Yashinsky have recently developed a "subversive," sixty-minute-long, original story titled "Screw in Your Ear." The story was performed on the demoralized picket line of a year-long Ontario steelworker's strike. Woven from structures and elements of various narrative traditions including rap and Middle Eastern folk tales, the story explicitly addressed the realities of the strike while incorporating historical narratives from historical and current labour conflicts. Both Sadu and Yashinsky are also revival storytellers who perform at storytelling festivals, and it is possible that "Screw in Your Ear" will eventually be performed at performance venues as well. Whether or not the story eventually becomes contained or neutralized within the atmosphere of the revival festival, its life does not end there, and it may in fact be the case that the practice of telling stories, which the festivals have nurtured, will continue to move back onto the streets.

---

[53] T.M., Storytell listserv, 7/19/96.

This chapter has attempted to suggest a number of critical approaches to the revival storytelling movement. It has concentrated on those forms and phenomena which appear to be most subject to processes of commercialization, commodification and appropriation. It should be remembered that practices of storytelling outside the professional storytelling circuit have not in most cases been assimilated and transformed to this degree, and that, in fact, there is a felt tension between practices "on the ground" and those that are increasingly reified as "art." Nevertheless, it seems clear that the two practices are participating in an explicit dialogue with each other, and that both in their own way are deeply committed to what they view as the transformative potential of storytelling. In an environment currently saturated with the idea and image of storytelling and the storyteller, it will be interesting to see how the potentials of storytelling are protected from the market's ability to flatten cultural forms.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

It is to be hoped that the various kinds of analysis undertaken in this thesis have provided some insight into the phenomenon of storytelling. Because storytelling raises questions in so many different disciplines, there are numerous other avenues that could be explored. However it is to be hoped that this analysis has helped to situate the problems and potentials of this evolving form. I also hope that one of the products of my work is to interest other theorists in taking up some of these questions and exploring them further within the field of cultural studies. It is surprising, given the range of interests of cultural studies, that no one has taken up this prevalent, emerging phenomenon.

This conclusion will briefly summarize some of the main arguments of my thesis and will review the sources of storytelling's current popularity. While I have challenged and critiqued certain storytelling practices in this work, my concern is not by any means to dismiss stories or storytelling. On the contrary, it is my belief that the practice of telling stories has value. As people begin to apply storytelling more widely, however, it seems important to look carefully at the way in which cultural forms are taken up and transformed. After a brief summary of the major arguments of this thesis, this conclusion will suggest some of storytelling's contributions and potentials. Many of these demand further research.

This thesis has focused on the ways in which storytelling is increasingly reified and commodified, standardized and institutionalized, taken up by Disney, advertising, and management, and transformed into a new and increasingly homogenized artistic form of oral narrative performance. Storytelling as a form of the people, as a popular response to hegemonic versions of history, now provides an endless source of raw material for a global

corporate capitalism seeking to renew and perfect its ideological self-legitimation. Storytelling's vitality, its cultural and formal difference, and its engaging tensions are now exploited and contained by Disney just as they were once bent to bourgeois purposes by Hans Christian Andersen, but with the distinction that Disney's corporate reach is global, its access to the means of communication infinitely greater, its silencing of other stories or other versions of stories all the more complete. At the very moment that *storytelling* represents in the West a final unreified—perhaps even unreifiable—frontier, it is assimilated everywhere as a commodity and as instrument for any and all purposes.

As cultural forms in the West become increasingly commodified, the search for "authentic" and non-reified culture is intensified, and the gaze turns toward "others" whose culture is seen to remain outside the corrosive reach of the commodity form. For Westerners the storytelling of the *other* seems to provide not only the pleasure of a safe encounter with difference and with the image of a truly collective social formation; it is also seen to be an important source of ethical norms and wisdom felt to be lacking in the West. *Storytelling* has quickly become the exoticized object of a nostalgic, romantic longing for the image of an idyllic and increasingly threatened way of life. At the same time, while storytelling seems to promise a real encounter with the *other*, the courteous performance and exchange of stories may often serve only to mask political tensions and struggles between those who consume stories in the West and those marginal, disadvantaged groups both inside and outside the West whose storytelling is now so prized.

Storytelling, however, is not so easily exhausted. By a constant renewal it always rises out of the ashes of reification, though not necessarily in its original form. The telling of stories is an irreducible feature of culture and of human relationships themselves, and as such it is ineradicable. Storytelling can always be found embedded in the individual and collective struggles and dilemmas of everyday life. It is indispensable to the effort to conceive of action,

to find a location in history and perhaps, as some say, to the effort to find meaning in life. The widespread perception that oral storytelling resists forces of commodification, even when it appears in paid performances, may be less naïve than it seems. Theodore Goossen, editor of *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*, commented on a storytelling performance he saw in Toronto while on a book tour: "Storytelling is clean. You hear the story and you pass it on. *You don't do it for commercial gain.* You do it for the story. It's *clean.*"[1] It may be that our speech, our face-to-face storytelling, will always be more than one step ahead of its commodification, or at least we may perceive it so. Yet we may only now be conscious of storytelling because commodified forms are making inroads into our speech.

The appeal of storytelling, however, must lie in something more than merely the promise of uncommodified, living speech. In what follows I will suggest a number of explanations for storytelling's appeal. These explanations require further study and elaboration.

Chaos and Coherence

It is said that the postmodern subject tolerates an increasing sense of fragmentation and groundlessness, a loss of sense of location in time and space, a sense of the indeterminacy of meaning, and the absence of social and ethical norms. It would seem, however, that this condition is not tolerated without some compensatory source of stability. I would suggest that stories and the relationships fostered by storytelling are one such source. Identity, problematic in a context of fragmentary experience and a lack of reliable, legitimate social institutions, comes to be seen as constituted by a complex of stories. These stories, both the "true" and the fictional, are seen to provide the nexus of meaning from which the trajectory of a life or a culture can be synthesized or grasped. As the *New Yorker* put it, stories

---

[1] Note from the Editor, *Appleseed Quarterly*, Vol. 7 No. 2, Summer 1997, p. 17. my emphasis

> ... protect us from chaos, and maybe that's what we, unblinkered at the end of the twentieth century, find ourselves craving. Implicit in the extraordinary revival of storytelling is the possibility that we need stories—that they are a fundamental unit of knowledge, the foundation of memory, essential to the way we make sense of our lives: the beginning, middle and end of our personal and collective trajectories. It is possible that narrative is as important to writing as the human body is to representational painting. We have returned to narratives—in many fields of knowledge—because it is impossible to live without them.[2]

This appears to be true not only for those exploited groups and classes whose histories and cultures have been marginalized or suppressed, but also even for a Western middle class increasingly disenchanted with so-called "information," official histories, and exhausted forms of art and communication. Nevertheless, it may be that the politics of identity among marginalized groups in the West has foregrounded the necessity of storytelling for the process of grounding of identity and forming or strengthening communities. While identity is always to some extent woven from stories, the process is now complicated and interrupted by the abrupt loss of traditions through immigration or by the silencing effect of mainstream media. Chinese-Canadian Vancouver rap artist Jeet K. recently spoke of his work as a search for identity, as "trying to trace roots out of shreds of stories."[3] There are two aspects to this quest: the concrete sense of one's history and culture as it is acquired through told stories, reminiscences, and oral histories; and secondly the necessary coherence provided by the narrative form itself, regardless of the specific story or history.

Sixty years ago Walter Benjamin argued that of all threats to storytelling, information is the most menacing. Information's claims to objectivity and factuality once gave it a legitimacy that storytelling had come to lack. Yet an increasing number of people now perceive information, particularly that of the news media, as storytelling of a deceptive

---

[2] Bill Buford, "The Seductions of Storytelling: Why is narrative suddenly so popular?" *New Yorker Magazine* June 24 - July1 1996, p. 11-12, my emphasis. See also Robert Coles, *Storytelling Magazine*, Fall 1992, p. 9.

[3] Shilling, Grant. "Trying to trace roots out of shreds of stories." *Terminal City* No. 193, May 30 - June 5, 1997, p. 7.

kind—storytelling thinly disguised as fact. Not only is information suspect, but it seems to bear less and less relevance to the particular time or place, locale or community in which it is consumed. As it grows in quantity, information carries less and less practical value. Its sheer volume in combination with its general inapplicability to everyday decisions transfixes its listeners and viewers but offers them little of value. Without defenses against the perpetual stream of information, people lose the means to find meaning in their experiences, lose their capacity to remember, and have difficulty imagining reasonable futures. Oral storytelling, with its embeddedness in context, offers a means to encounter and transmit experience, to look for *truth*, however fictional, symbolic or partial. Stories offer the means to order experience by providing a narrative frame for events, in other words, by prioritizing them in terms of a story-line or plot. It hardly matters that the stories an individual or group employs are contradictory or formally incommensurable with each other. It is the process of constructing and exchanging stories which draws out the beginnings, middles and ends of experience. This is not to say, of course, that some stories are not more powerful than others. What has given traditional tales such longevity is their proven ability to carry truth.

Taking action

In the midst of the preponderance of information and the experience of chaos or fragmentation, the telling of stories also has the function of framing actions. Stories, whether of a fictional, fantastical, historical or autobiographical kind, contribute to a synthesis of experience that provides a ground upon which actions can be conceived. As Chief Simon Baker said recently in Vancouver, "you can't do anything unless you can see where you are. Stories give you that." Of course, storytelling, too, is an act. Unlike *narrative*, the word *storytelling* is a verb form. It serves as a reminder that language is something we *do*. When speech is conceived as an action that we take in particular, specific circumstances, "[m]eaning... becomes 'decidable' and words like 'truth', 'reality', 'knowledge' and 'certainty'

have something of their force restored to them."[4] In other words, as Terry Eagleton put it, our speech is "indissociably interwoven with our practical forms of life." Walter Ong observes that among cultures of primary orality, language is conceived a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought. The old Hebrew term *dabar*, for example, means both 'word' and 'event.'[5] A story carried orally "must remain timely; that is, it will be told by real people in real places to real listeners for real reasons..."[6] Furthermore, the telling of stories harmonizes the *ends* to which we direct our efforts. As David Carr argues, teleological ends and temporal ends—the ends we aim for, and the ending of the story we tell—often coincide, though they belong to levels that are conceptually different.[7] In other words, our actions themselves are directed toward ends that we conceive as part of a narrative, that is, as the story of how we got here and what we want to do next. This view suggests that the telling of stories aids in the taking of action because it mirrors, confirms or supports the means by which everyday actions are already planned, means that are already proto-narrative in structure.

Carr's view might explain the appeal of storytelling not only for individuals but also for groups attempting to find a location in history and to collectively frame political action. Teresa de Lauretis (1987) has observed that within feminist art production, despite the widespread, cogent, modernist anti-narrative discourse, narrative has proved indispensable in the representation of experience in all its particular, specific heterogeneity, and for the project of planning and working toward new futures, even when those futures appear as multiple or partial pictures rather than as a single master narrative.

The question of storytelling's relationship to action requires more study, but it can be safely concluded that storytelling and the ability to take personal and collective action are

---

[4] Eagleton, 1983, p. 147.
[5] Ong, 1982, p. 32.
[6] Dan Yashinsky, Angela Sidney chapbook, p. 5.
[7] Carr, 1985, p. 48.

associated with each other. It is possible that the connection may be as simple as the inspiration of personal contact with the story and the storyteller. As an environmentalist/ storyteller remarked in *Storytelling Magazine,* "Stories should raise hope...and challenge members of the audience to take whatever personal actions they can.... at some level, that's what storytelling is—a call to action... If it touches you, that's a call to action."[8]

Collective action

Storytelling has regained importance in recent decades as marginalized groups in particular attempt to frame action and to build internal cohesion and gather strength. Trinh Minh-ha writes:

> For cultures long marginalized because of race, gender and class, the unifying and communal effect of transmitting stories never ceased to be vital to their cohesion and literal survival. For these cultures, the traditional way of processing information by filtering it through the mechanisms of retellings, discussion and interpretation has retained its value... beginning a dialogue which will eventually alter political and cultural oppression.[9]

Storytelling appears to be uniquely able to record and report socio-historical circumstances.

> Storytelling, the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community, constitutes a rich oral legacy, whose values have regained all importance recently, especially in the context of writings by women of color. She who works at un-learning the dominant language of "civilized" missionaries also has to learn how to un-write and write anew. And she often does so by re-establishing the contact with her foremothers, so that living tradition can never congeal into fixed forms... so that what is understood as the Past continues to provide the link for the Present and the Future... [This is] tradition as on-going commitment...[10]

The desire for storytelling does not perhaps represent a conservative longing for tradition but rather a reconceptualization of tradition as shared and remembered history. Stories and

---

[8] Suzanne Martin "Green Grow The Stories" in *Storytelling Magazine*, Spring 1992, p 20.
[9] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989. p. 135.
[10] Ibid. p. 148.

storytelling traditions are not fixed but are constantly retold. However, they are uniquely designed to enter into memory and become transmissible over time. As Benjamin observed, "memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation."[11] Yet stories are not unchanging or unquestioned, for that which is rigidly preserved ceases to circulate; every telling is a reworking, and understanding means creating.[12] As the fiction of women of colour demonstrates, the old stories, both fictional and historical, are retold out of a desire to encounter history, but at they same time their forms and content are interrogated and reworked. Storytelling is a politically indispensable form of historical reflection or praxis.

Alternative futures

Storytelling, however, is not always confined to the telling of one's own stories, the stories of one's own culture or class. Stories circulate; they do not respect borders. The current popularity of storytelling may be related to the impact of immigration and multiculturalism in the West. This is the result not only of the contact or collision of cultures and the consequent spilling over of narrative forms, but also the pressing need to find ways to speak across difference. Stories are not "universal," though the phenomenon of storytelling may indeed be. Hayden White addresses this question in his essay "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality:"

> Far from being a problem, then, narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific. We may not be able fully to comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we have *relatively less* difficulty understanding a story coming from another culture, however exotic that

---

[11] Walter Benjamin, 1968, p. 98.
[12] Trinh Minh-ha, 1989, p. 121

> culture may appear to us. As Barthes says, "narrative is translatable without fundamental damage," in a way that a lyric poem or a philosophical discourse is not.[13]

If narrative is the mode by which other ways of knowing are approached, then it should not be surprising that in the West the utopian impulse or the project of imagining alternative worlds has become intertwined with the idea of storytelling, storytelling that belongs either to others, or to the past, or both. Storytelling is perceived as a link with the past, with the past's now displaced values and modes of knowledge, and with the potency of alternate realities and ways of knowing. Anthropological knowledge provides "eidetic variations" (or 'possible world' variations) on our own culture of experience, and helps to free us from our own cultural and conceptual limitations. It is believed that there could be no universal wisdom from other cultures and other epochs that could speak to our present, historically unique situation, but it is likely that we shall find again and again that the ancient wisdom of other cultural traditions and other cultural epochs can be enormously instructive. The problems of the interpretation of "other" stories can not be dealt with here. I only suggest an explanation for a phenomenon in which storytelling is viewed as a pathway to liberatory understandings. It is clear that the encounter with difference must be sustained as part of an ongoing commitment if *other* narratives are to yield new ways of working in the world. Storytelling seems to provide a means of communication for carrying out that continuing commitment.

The sharing of stories across difference cannot be reduced to the idea that a Western middle class longs romantically for *other* modes of speech or ways of knowing. The exchange of oral narrative is a far more fundamental and widespread phenomenon, one which is central to the ongoing definition and evolution of cultures, communities, and ethnicities. In other words, the sharing of stories is perhaps not only the one-way street of the consumption of the

---

[13] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality" in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. p. 1.

exploited by the privileged, but a necessary beginning from which groups will find new, non-exclusivist ways of telling. Edward Said suggests that:

> If we no longer think of the relationship between cultures and their adherents as perfectly contiguous, totally synchronous, wholly correspondent, and if we think of cultures as permeable and, on the whole, defensive boundaries between polities, a more promising situation appears. Thus to see Others not as ontologically given but as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, our own not least. Cultures may then be represented as zones of control or of abandonment, of recollection and forgetting, of force or of dependence, of exclusiveness or of sharing, all taking place in the global history that is our element. *Exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can therefore provide us with new narrative forms or, in John Berger's phrase, with other ways of telling.*[14]

For many in North America, the storyteller par excellence, the paradigmatic example of the storytelling art, is the figure of the First Nations elder. It is likely that First Nations critiques of industrial capitalism's mode of resource extraction and the posing of First Nations land stewardship as an alternative approach, both of which are framed in terms of traditional stories, have foregrounded the necessity of encountering alternatives through other narratives. The dissemination of First Nations stories has been widely used by the environmental movement and is probably the most concrete example of the posing of alternative approaches based on "other" cultural traditions. The appropriation of First Nations stories may have a . Whether or not the disruptive potential of such stories will be successfully recontained, for example by their use in advertising of green consumer goods or banking,[15] remains to be seen.

Storytelling and Community

[14] Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors" qtd. in Smadar Lavie, *The Poetics of Military Occupation*. p. 1

[15] The Bank of Montreal's recent television advertising campaign features a young First Nations girl who comments: "Imagine if everybody kept their word. When I say I'm going to do something, I do it. You can actually count on it." While not a story, her words are shorthand for the responsibility and ethics associated with First Nations cultural traditions. (BCTV, months of February to June, 1997)

Storytelling is an art of social interaction. As Dan Yashinsky put it, "The strength of the word of mouth is a communal strength."[16] For storytelling to happen, there must be a teller and at least one listener, unlike written narrative which can be created and can exist without any immediate, present audience. But as Walter Benjamin observes, even a printed oral narrative retains the trace of its original relations and gives to its reader the sense of being in the presence of the teller. Some have argued that the *sound* of storytelling, whether external or in the mind's ear, bears the mark of its original communal character. David Levin, a phenomenologist who has written extensively on listening, observes:

> The ear contributes to the reproduction of social and cultural life: social cohesion, generational continuity, the preservation of cultural traditions, and the transmission of an accumulated wisdom, speaking in the voices of folklore, fairy tales, myths and legends, family history... At the dawn of western civilization, history was entrusted to an oral/aural tradition of sages and poets, elders with voices pleasing to the ear... Once upon a time, hearing belonged to history.[17]

The yearning for storytelling is a longing for community and for a collective sense of history. When asked the reason for the storytelling revival, storytelling groups will often say that people have a great need for personal contact in an age of atomization and alienation, and that stories not only provide common ground but also the opportunity for people to come together with each other and with the storyteller. Walter Benjamin wrote that people had become unable to transmit their experiences to each other; that experience itself had fallen in value. Writing on the heels of World War I and the Depression, and three years before the beginning of World War II, Benjamin had perhaps a privileged insight into the numbing and bewildering enormity of historical events, events which seemed impossible to fit into the shape of a story or to metabolize into "experience." But it is difficult to imagine a situation in which the transmission and exchange of experiences is completely absent. The need to form connections

---

[16] Yashinsky, Dan. "Another Long Tale About Crow" in *This Magazine*, March/April 1992. p. 24.
[17] David Michael Levin, *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics*. New York: Routledge, 1989. p. 270.

persists in the face of the catastrophic events of the twentieth century and the profoundly alienating impersonality of the mass media, but that longed-for connectedness is difficult to achieve. The educator and social worker Robert Coles recently remarked that: "Insofar as people are cut off from one another and can't pour out important parts of themselves to one another storytelling will diminish. Storytelling diminishes whenever person-to-person connectedness diminishes. The *sine qua non* of storytelling is human mutuality, human connection, and the wish for that."[18]

Public vs. Private, and the I that is We

The public validation of everyday storytelling and oral history perhaps represents a kind of unarticulated refusal of the public/private split in modern life. As people become more aware of the split between their own stories and the narratives in the media, many appear to be rejecting the imperative to keep "personal" stories private. The slogan "the personal is political" might be rewritten "the personal is the collective," and indeed that is one of the slogan's meanings. Storytelling stands for the possibility of reconceiving the idea of the individual, at the same time as its popularity may be a by-product of the decentring of the subject in recent decades. It seems, however, that the experience of decentring has not resulted in the acceptance of the fragmented or "schizophrenic" text as a truly postmodern mode. Rather, it is the decentred oral narratives of past (or sometimes present) collective social formations which have attracted the interest of the public. It might be tempting to suggest that the decentred subject encounters decentred oral narratives with a certain recognition. This suggestion may be premature. The decentring of the subject does not necessarily imply the emergence of collective forms of life. Fredric Jameson argues that the truly decentred subject would appear only in a future formation that is truly collective, something that most peoples in the West are not at this point even able to picture. The relation between storytelling, subjectivity, collectivity and identity needs to be explored in more depth. What is clear,

[18] Robert Coles *Storytelling Magazine*, Fall 1992, p. 10

however, is a prevalent concern for forms in which the individual, or the teller, speaks in isolation from others and from shared norms.

Peacable speech

"Peacable speech" as Barthes termed it in the essay "Writers, Intellectuals and Teachers," is the notion of courtesy and decorum in interaction and conversation. Much is made of the peace, the goodwill, the social bonding, the calm and the defusing of aggression which is witnessed while storytelling is taking place.[19] Storytelling's aesthetic of respect and listening may serve an ideological function. Its stress on courtesy may function to shut down oppositional impulses. For Barthes, courtesy is a class value based on a liberal idea of dialogue and the notion of the regular meeting together of speakers divested of all sense of aggressiveness. The idea of goodwill or respect is in opposition to the notion that conflictual conversation may be needed for liberation and historical awareness. The historical character of storytelling as a kind of "talking back," as bell hooks put it, may be effaced. In the light of the fact that stories are courteously exchanged between groups in the West whose economic and political interests are by no means the same, the notion of peace and decorum takes on a particularly ominous aspect. Even when stories performed across such divides address inequalities or other such issues, the form of the encounter may serve to ideologically contain any threatening tensions and contradictions. Storytelling groups and other proponents of storytelling must seriously consider the position of all communities involved in what might appear to be simple, harmless instances of "community-bridging," etc. There must be an ongoing commitment beyond the pleasurable exchange of stories.

The political model proposed in academic work on the New Social Movements includes the useful concept of "strategic alliances." In British Columbia, the edgy, cautious and

[19] For an extraordinary description of this phenomenon, see "Jan Andrews talks with Yaya Diallo" in *Appleseed Quarterly* Vol. 5 No. 2, May 1995, pp. 1-12. Yaya is originally from Mali; he settled in Montreal in 1967.

often conflictual relationship between First Nations and environmentalists has been resolved in individual instances through the telling of stories. Long-standing conflicts often block communication even when it is desired by both (or all) parties. Storytelling in these cases serves the purpose of bracketing out the aggression produced by entrenched opposition in order that strategic alliances can be forged where they are useful. It would most interesting to compare and contrast storytelling with other models of negotiation and communication such as Habermas' "ideal speech situation" and to discover why it works as effectively as it does.

Story Thinking

Storytelling has a certain ability to bracket out the everyday, or the entrenched attitude, and to open up a kind of ritual space. When it is not utilized to silence others or to quiet legitimate opposition by imposing peacable speech, it may usefully serve to dispel anxiety and aggression and make way for creative thinking, which I have termed "story thinking." A growing body of research has shown that the storytelling context, in combination with certain set storytelling phrases (*Once upon a time... I remember when...*), initiates a frame of mind in which lateral thinking, openness to unexpected possibilities and paradox, and creativity are facilitated. The receptive state of mind induced by the telling of stories, particularly when they are allowed to be bracketed off from the disturbances of everyday life by a collective request for a story,[20] is often referred to as the "story-listening trance." This state of mind is easily tracked by neurological CAT and PET scans and has been shown to involve intense visualization in the frontal lobe, a fact that has received much attention of late in the popular press. The positive effect of this state on cognition and creativity is dramatic and in children is quite astonishing. I once asked Jan Andrews, a well-known Ottawa storyteller, what really happens when people hear stories. There is, after all, much rhetoric about storytelling's' infinite number of salutary effects. She replied that storytelling produces a state of "creative quiet." In

---

[20] Traditionally, stories were only told when the storyteller believed the listeners were ready; see Dan Yashinsky's *Shooting the Teller*, *Appleseed Quarterly* Vol. 5 No. 2, May 1995 for examples.

this state of quiet, which is the farthest thing from a passive and credulous swallowing of narrative whole, is an effort to remember the story and an instantaneous interpretation, or retelling, of the story in the context of the listener's own experience. Quiet is now uncommon. Walter Benjamin observed that storytelling not only produces but also requires quiet and long durations of time in which stories can unfold. "Boredom," he wrote, "is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience." Experience, like storytelling, needs time in order to be fashioned properly. Italo Calvino has remarked that with storytelling, "one should not be in a hurry."[21]

The story unlocks creativity because, especially if the story is a perfected one, it resonates with other stories and opens the floodgates of the storytelling reservoir, as any university seminar leader or cocktail party guest will have noticed. The storyteller Dan Yashinsky, writing about Martin Buber's description of the telling of a story, asks:

> What makes the story so compelling? Buber doesn't tell us what they heard, but rather how the listeners heard the tale: "[U]nder the touch of its words, the secret melody of each person was awakened, the ruined melody which had been presumed dead, and each received the message of his dispersed life, that it was still there and was anxious for him... [T]he story gave back to its listeners a sense that their lives have a greater pattern than can be seen in its everyday details, a "secret melody" which we manage in our daily existence to ignore and ultimately forget... [22]

For any student of critical theory or even theories of narrative, this description of the effect of storytelling is undoubtedly ominous. The narrative Buber describes might be imagined as a regressive, conservative or dangerously ideological one, caught in the act of interpellating subjects. However, there is surely a sense in which the hearing of stories does foster creative and critical potential in listeners. The "truth" of stories may simply relate to their ability to

---

[21] Dan Yashinsky, "Another Long Tale About Crow," in *Become a World: A Tribute to Angela Sidney*. Whitehorse: The Northern Research Institute, Yukon College: 1994.
[22] Ibid. p. 23, 24, 25.

awaken stories which are yet to be told or impetus yet to be realized. As Trinh Minh-ha writes of First Nations novelist Leslie Marmon Silko:

> Silko as a storyteller never loses sight of the difference between truth and fact. Her naming retains the accuracy and magic of our grand mothers' storytelling without ever confining itself to the realm of factual naming. It is accurate because it is at once extremely flexible and rigid, not because it wishes to stick to certain rules of correctness for reasons of mere conservatism (scholars studying traditional storytelling are often impressed by the storyteller's "necessity of telling the stories correctly," as they put it). *It is accurate because it partakes in the setting into motion of forces that lie dormant in us.*[23]

One of the benefits of all storytelling, even when it is the most mundane of revival storytelling performances, is that it awakens an echo in its listeners. It may be less important to ask what a story means and more important to ask how it works.

Storytelling, while not theoretical in the common sense of utilizing logical operations and defining its own terms, appears to function in many ways as a type of critical thinking. Stories, whose characteristics include the important feature of memorability, provide individuals with a framework through which to think their experiences and other incoming information. Not master narratives, stories provide partial pictures of the world and a practice of thinking that is situational and that provides a store of "other" options. The memorable structure of stories provides a way of cognitively coping with paradox. Stories are very often too complex to be "understood," even when they are not ostensibly very poetic, metaphorical or symbolic. They have the peculiar quality of containing complexity within a form simple enough to be remembered, so that one may tell a story without really "understanding" it. Unlike theoretical understandings, which unless grasped properly are forgotten, it is possible to channel complex notions and patterns through stories, which over the years yield new understandings as stories are revisited. Undoubtedly, this sense of pattern is what makes *story*

---

[23] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989. p. 148.

thinking particularly appealing in an age of psychic and social fragmentation. Lastly, as Walter Benjamin observed, the best stories are not burdened by explanation, but have a "chaste compactness" which allows the listener to provide her or his own interpretations. The model of interaction by which a story is told but an interpretation is not forced on the listener seems to fill a longing to construct one's own narratives rather than function as a consumer of stories. A storyteller on the Storytell listserv recently quoted Ray Apodaca, an Apache man, as saying "In the white man's schools, they teach children what to think; we tell them stories and ask them to think for themselves."[24]

The job of the folk tale is not yet done...

Todorov's theory of genre takes the position that a genre makes a reappearance when it is well-positioned to challenge an orthodoxy similar enough to the one it challenged in its own time.[25] This thesis has been too wide-ranging to explore this idea in detail, though in many ways I have returned to it again and again. It appears, however, that because folk tale takes on myth, and because the myths under which the West labours currently seem so oppressive and so fantastically destructive, a wide range of positions are attempting to use this particular narrative form as a means of posing a challenge to orthodoxies (efficiency, progress, science, capitalism), as well as a means of coming to understand their own challenges. Storytelling perhaps promises a means of grasping complex conditions for those who perhaps do not have either interest or faith in theoretical models. This idea needs further elaboration, but it is to be hoped that it points to a direction for further research. It is perhaps time to think again about these tales as we search for wisdom, guides to action, and meaning in them, all the while making them new.

---

[24] Ray Apodaca, Apache, Native American Symposium, Institute of Texan Cultures, 1992, quoted. on Storytell listserv, 12/12/96.

[25] For this idea about genre see Hawkes on Todorov p. 103, or Jameson's *Political Unconscious* (throughout).

In structuralist terms, oral narratives are both unfamiliar and familiar. The storytelling revival involves both a defamiliarization and refamiliarization. Many of us have encountered storytelling as children, but the stories we encounter now may not be the Grimm or the Andersen versions to which we are accustomed. The wish to encounter "other" stories involves both a sense of reassuring familiarity and striking difference. The live oral storytelling performance context that many now seek has an added defamiliarizing effect in that many adults are now unaccustomed to formal storytelling performance. Furthermore, the folk tales, Zen tales, and Hodja stories that are now so popular are all draw attention to themselves, their structure, and to the storytelling context in which they appear. It appears that audiences do wish to consciously reflect on their own reception and interpretation of narrative, and that the interest in storytelling is related to that pursuit.

Cleaner, safer, better: storytelling at the millennium

Finally, it seems important to consider the wish for storytelling as a utopian impulse. "Utopia" has certain profoundly negative associations with those speculative narratives of liberation which Lyotard has grouped with other master narratives. While *storytelling* connotes collective life, it does not appear to be tied to any single, particular social formation. *Storytelling* connotes a practice, one which is seen to have liberatory potential. This potential, however, is sometimes defined negatively. Vancouver storyteller Nan Gregory once remarked "I can do it and not harm the world."[26] Similarly, Trinh Minh-ha writes that storytelling "never takes anything away from anybody." In a time when it is difficult to speak in an extended way with others, in a time when extended conversation itself has come to seem subversive, storytelling appears to be one of the only salutary practices we have left. However, storytelling is also associated with more active, 'liberatory,' 'transformative,' 'transgressive' or even 'subversive' tendencies. Despite the fact that narrative structure in general and the retributive, scapegoating

[26] *Appleseed Quarterly* Vol. 1 No. 2, May 1991, p. 11.

structure of the folk tale in particular are not without their dangers, the overriding perception is that stories offer the beginnings of a transformation in communication and that storytelling represents a challenge to those with the bigger voices: the press, the media, and those powerful groups with access to those organs. Such transformations and challenges are rarely outlined in detail. It is seldom clear whether 'transformation' is ethical or political, for example. While storytelling has clearly played a historical role in the political self-affirmation and organization of collectives and communities, and will continue to do so, it appears that storytelling's association with collective identity and action is often imported to the level of the personal, the interpersonal and the ethical in the individual's attempt to acquire a sense of collective life. The utopian impulse that underlies current applications of storytelling is bound up with an unarticulated notion of community. Community is invoked everywhere when people speak of storytelling, but it is seldom defined. The preoccupation with community demands that the term be defined. Its lack of definition may suggest in some instances that the potentials of communities, whether exclusive or inclusive ones, are not being realized. That is, 'community' is conjured up as an image or a mirage, without ever appearing as a product of a specific history or concrete political aims and actions. The relationship between notions of storytelling and community require further study.

The transformative or utopian character of folk and fairy tale is always contingent upon its context and uses. Folk and fairy tale will inevitably undergo change and transformation, despite the best efforts of folklorists and storytellers. The so-called archetypal figures of the tales will undoubtedly undergo change as well. As Felix Guattari wrote of narrative:

> Unconscious figures of power and knowledge are not universals. They are tied to reference myths profoundly anchored in the psyche, but they can still swing around toward liberatory paths/voices...[27]

For the time being, it appears that our thinking about liberation often takes a mythopoetic form: our politics must remember that stories and history are not as distant from each other as they may have seemed. There is a certain joy inherent in the process of storytelling, one which derives from its ability to provide a sense of ground, direction and communal destinies. The potentials of this joy for pedagogy, collective action and everyday living must be reconsidered.

And now, my story has gone that way, and I've come this way...

Are you getting tired of this story yet? No? Well, I've had enough. If you want any more you can make it up yourselves. The rat's tail is off. That's the end.[28]

---

[27] Félix Guattari. "Regimes, Pathways, Subjects" tr. Brian Massumi, in journal *Incorporations: Zone 6* New York, 1992, pp. 16-37, p. 35.
[28] Traditional folktale endings.

APPENDIX A
Popular Representations of Storytelling

1. "The story has changed somewhat..." Advertisement, Nuveen & Co., *Harper's Magazine*, October 1996.

2. "I am a storyteller with an audience of one..." Advertisement, Cantel/AT&T, *Maclean's Magazine*, September 12, 1996

3. "Sharing summer stories..." Catalogue page, Take Two Clothing Co., Spring 1997.

4. "The Storyteller," event poster, Vancouver, B.C., April 1997.

5. Business card booklet, "Envisioning and Storytelling, Inc." Vancouver, B.C., 1997.

6. Packaging, Lipton's "Storyteller" tea, 1997.

7. Cover, promotional brochure, The National Storytelling Association, Tennessee.

[BLANK PAGE]

[BLANK PAGE]

[BLANK PAGE]

[BLANK PAGE]

[BLANK PAGE]

[BLANK PAGE]

[BLANK PAGE]

APPENDIX B

CONFERENCES, FESTIVALS, ORGANIZATIONS, EVENTS

For an extensive listing of Canadian events, tellers and groups see:
Canadian Storytelling Directory/Repertoire Canadien des Conteurs, 3rd Ed.
Published every two years by the Vancouver Society of Storytelling
13 - 2414 Main Street, Vancouver, B.C. V5T 3E3
(604) 876-2272 C$10.00

For an extensive listing of U.S. events, tellers and groups see:
National Storytelling Directory and guidebook
Published annually by the National Storytelling Association, P.O. Box 309, Jonesborough Tennessee 37659 U.S.A.

SELECTED STORYTELLING EVENTS

"1,001 Friday Nights of Storytelling"
St. George the Martyr Church, 205 John St.
8:30 p.m. every Friday night, all welcome, by donation.
Canada's most famous regular story swap, continuous since 1978

Banhoh Talking Island Festival
of Storytelling, 67-313 Kiapoko Pl, Waialua, Hawaii 96791

Beyond the Border - The Wales International Storytelling Festival
St. Donat's Castle on the Severn Sea - co-produced by head of London's premier storytelling venue, The Crick Crack Club, first weekend in July.

Copenhagen Storytelling Festival
East Jutland Group - Nordic and Viking Mythology group

Corsican Storytelling Festival
Notti di i Foli, or "Storytelling Night"
Foli = fable, story, tale; villagers gather at church around bonfire on feast of St. John, procession to three small village squares on terraced hillside.

Cracker Storytelling Festival
935 Tangerine, Bartow, Florida 33830

Festival of Black Storytelling
PO Box 13463, Philadelphia PA 19130

Glistening Waters Storytelling Festival
PO Box 444 Masterton, New Zealand

Harvest Moon Storytelling Festival
Cherokee Nation, PO Box 1449 Tahlequah, Okla. 74465

Hoosier Storytelling Festival
Stories, Inc. PO Box 20743, Indianapolis, Ind. 46220

Jewish Storytelling Arts & Jewish Storytelling Festival
c/o Leslie Robbins, 96 Chudleigh Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M4R 1T3

"Keepers of the Lore" Conference
Joseph Campbell Festival of Myth, Folklore and Story
33 Souhegan Street, Milford, New Hampshire 03055

Listen Up! Toronto Festival of Storytelling
"One City, A World of Stories"
The Storytellers School of Toronto
791 St. Clair Avenue W., 2nd floor, Toronto, Ontario, M6C 1B7

National Storytelling Festival
National Storytelling Association, P.O. Box 309, Jonesborough Tennessee 37659

Storyfest, Department of Speech
University of Hawaii, George Hall 226, Honolulu Hawaii 96822

Storytelling in the Garden, every Sunday 1 pm, June - Sept.
Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden, 578 Carrall St., Vancouver, B.C.
"Stories inspired by Chinese myth and folklore, for children and adults alike"

Tall Tale Liars Festival
Oakland, Maryland

Three Apples Storytelling Festival
Box 48 Harvard, Mass. 01451

Vancouver Storytelling Festival,
Vancouver Society of Storytelling,
13-2414 Main St, Vancouver, B.C. V5T 3E3

Yukon International Storytelling Festival
Box 5029, Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, Y1A 4S2, (403) 633-7550
* held annually on weekend nearest summer solstice

UNACCREDITED STORYTELLING SCHOOLS/COURSES

Cape Clear Island International Storytelling Workshop
County Cork, Ireland
011-353-28-39157

Emerson College - School of Storytelling
Six-month storytelling course,
Forest Row, East Sussex RH18 5JX England

The Storytellers School of Toronto (TSST)
791 St. Clair Avenue W., 2nd floor
Toronto, Ontario, M6C 1B7
(416) 656-2445

SELECTED UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS/COURSES IN STORYTELLING

University of Alberta, Edmonton.
Department of Library and Information Studies

Antioch College

University of California, Berkeley.
Department of Folklore.

University of California, San Diego.
Departments of Folklore and Theatre

East Tennessee State University
Storytelling Program - MA/M.Ed. in Storytelling

University of Hawaii, Honolulu
Department of Speech

Kent State University

Lesley College, Mass.
MAand BA in storytelling
The Creative Arts in Learning program, storytelling specialization.

New York University
Department of Performance Studies

Northwestern University

Ancient Lifeways Institute - Graduate Program/Certificate in Storytelling
and Department of Theatre

University of Oregon

University of Pennsylvania
Department of Folklore and Folklife
Courses in the ethnography of storytelling

Rutgers University
School of Communication, Information and Library Studies

Sacred Heart University
Fairfield, Connecticut
Master of Arts in Teaching: The Art of Oral Tradition
"A dynamic, one of a kind program offered on weekends and summers to accommodate teachers, librarians, media specialists, therapists, social workers, clergy, and storytellers from every walk of life."

San Jose State University
Department of Theatre Arts

Sonoma State University
Department of Extended Education

University of Southern Maine
Center for the Study of Lives

University of Winnipeg
Department of English

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aarons, Victoria. *A Measure of Memory: Storytelling and Identity in American Jewish Fiction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996.

Baker, Augusta and Ellin Greene. *Storytelling: Art and Technique*. New York: Bowden, 1987.

Barnes, Trevor and Roger Hayter. " 'The Little Town That Did': Flexible Accumulation and Community Response in Chemainus, British Columbia." *Regional Studies*. 26:7. pp. 647-663.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. London: Paladin, 1973.
_____. "Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative," *Communications* 8, 1966, 1-27.

Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
_____. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books, 1986.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.

Birch, Carol. *Who Says? Essays on Issues in Storytelling*. Jonesborough: August House, 1994.

Bly, Robert. *Iron John: A Book About Men*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1990.

Bolen, Jean S. *Ring of Power*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

Boyarin, Jonathan, ed. *The Ethnography of Reading*. Berkeley and L.A.: University of California Press, 1993.

Brighouse, Jean Alison. "Coast Salish Children's Narratives: Structural Analysis from Three Perspectives." Vancouver: University of British Columbia, MSc. Thesis, 1990.

Buford, Bill. "The Seductions of Storytelling: Why is Narrative Suddenly so Popular?", *The New Yorker*, June 24 - July 1, 1996.

Campbell, Joseph. *Myths to Live By*. New York: Viking, 1972.

Carr, David. *Time, Narrative and History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Cascardi, Anthony J. *The Subject of Modernity*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Cohen, Erik. " 'Primitive and Remote' Hill Tribe Trekking in Thailand" in *Annals of Tourism Research,* Vol. 16, pp. 30-61, 1989.
_____. "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism" *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 15, pp. 371-386, 1988.

Cruikshank, Julie with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith & Annie Ned. *Life Lived Like A Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990.

Cutler, Blayne. "The folk tale market" *American Demographics*, 12, October 1990, pp 47-9.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red, 1983.

De Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Dundes, Alan. *Essays in Folklore Theory and Method*. Madras: Cre-A, 1990.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Easthope, Anthony. *Literary into Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

Erickson, Thomas. "Design as Storytelling." In *Scenario-Based Design: Envisioning Work and Technology in System Development*. Ed. J. Carroll. New York: Wiley, 1995. pp. 37-58.

Estes, Clarissa P. *Women Who Run With The Wolves*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.

Harrison, Robert Pogue. *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Irvine, Craig Alan. "Hegel's Master Storytelling." Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University, 1994. (Ph.D. dissertation)

Finnegan, Ruth, ed. *The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry*. London: Penguin Books, 1988.

Foley, John Miles. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Fowler, Peter. *Then, Now*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Fulford, Robert. "Playing literary mind games with the tale of storytelling." *Globe & Mail*, Wednesday, April 30, 1997, p. A17.

Friedman, Philomena. "The Education of a Vazaha", *House Beautiful*, November, 1996.

Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Goldman, Robert. *Reading Ads Socially*. New York: Routledge, 1992

Gornick, Vivian. "Tales On the Street: Confessions in the Company of Strangers." *New Yorker Magazine*, pp. 71-77, September 9, 1996.

Hahn, Lewis E. *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1995.

Hawkes, Terence. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen, 1977.

Hewison, Robert. *The Heritage Industry*. London: Routledge, 1987.

hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
_____."Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" *New Left Review* 146 July-August, 1984.
_____. "Reification, Utopia and Mass Culture in *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Kane, Sean. *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1994.

Kellner, Douglas, ed. *Postmodernism/Jameson/Critique*. Washington: Maisonneuve Press, 1989.

Kermode, Frank *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Toronto: Vintage International, 1989. (copyright 1975)

Lavie, Smadar. *The Poetics of Military Occupation: Mzeina Allegories of Bedouin Identity Under Israeli and Egyptian Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Levin, David Michael. *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Lingis, Alphonso. *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing In Common*. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994. ("The Murmur of the World" pp. 69-105)

Lumley, Robert. ed. *The Museum Time-Machine*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Maier, John. R. "Two Moroccan Storytellers in Paul Bowles' *Five Eyes*: Larbi Layachi and Ahmed Yacoubi" in *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 1 no. 3, May, 1991.

Mandler, Jean Matter. *Stories, Scripts and Scenes: Aspects of schema theory*. Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1984.

McAllister, Kirsten E. *Cultural Production and Alternative Political Practices: Dialogic Cultural Forms and the Public Sphere in the Japanese Canadian Community*. M.A. (Communication) Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1993.

McCarthy, William B. *Jack In Two Worlds: Contemporary North American Tales and Their Tellers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.

McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

_____. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

Mieder, Wolfgang. *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Routledge, 1982.

Paredes, Américo and Ellen J. Stekert. *The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition*. Austin and London: The University of Texas Press, 1971.

Pinkola Estes, Clarissa. *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.

Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Vintage, 1993.

Propp, Vladimir. *The Morphology of the Folktale*. (2nd edn.) Revised and edited by Louis A. Wagner, trans. Laurence Scott. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1968. (Originally published Leningrad, 1928)

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 and vol. 2, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984, 1985.
_____. *From Text to Action*. Chicago: Chicago University Press,1991.

Röhrich, Lutz, Ed. *Storytelling in Contemporary Societies*. Tübingen: G. Narr. Verlag, 1990.

Ross, Andrew. *Technoculture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books in Association with Penguin Books, 1991.

Seesequasis, Paul, Ed. "Prophecies and Stories: A Compendium of new fiction and ancient wisdom," Special Section in *Aboriginal Voices: Magazine of Evolving Native American Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Feb/Mar/April 1995.

Shank, Roger C. *Tell Me A Story: A New Look at Real and Artificial Memory*. New York: Scribners, 1990.

Spielman, Roger Willson. "The Social Organization of Conversational Narrative: A methodological contribution to linguistic discourse analysis via conversattional analysis." PhD dissertation, UBC, 1984.

States, Bert O. *Dreaming and Storytelling*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Stone, Kay. "Moments of Recognition" in *Appleseed Quarterly*, Vol. 4 No. 1, Feb. 94.

Stotter, Ruth *About Story: Writings on Stories and Storytelling 1980 - 1994*. Oakland: Regent Press, 1994.

Tayler, Ann, ed. *Become a World: A Tribute to Angela Sidney*. Whitehorse: The Northern Research Institute, Yukon College,1994.

Throgmorton, A. *Planning Persuasive Storytelling*. New York: Ballantine, 1992.

Todorov, Tzvetan. "The Poetics of Prose," and "Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogical Principle" in *Literature and its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
_____. *When The Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Turner, Mark. *The Literary Mind.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Urry, John, "Gazing on History" and "Tourism, Culture, and Social Inequality" in Robert Lumley, ed. *The Museum Time-Machine*. London: Routledge, 1988.

Walker, Janet. "Talespinners: Storytelling Reborn—Sageing, not Ageing," *Common Ground Magazine*, #61, March, 1996.

Warner, Marina *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers.* London: Vintage, 1995.

Watson, Dave. "*Storyteller* Delivers Kinky Tales." *The Georgia Straight*, April 3-10, 1997. p. 55.

West, Bob. "The Making of the English Working Past: A critical view of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum" in *The Museum Time-Machine*. ed. Robert Lumley. London: Routledge, 1988.

White, Hayden. *Metahistory.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.
_____. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

Yashinsky, Dan. *The Storyteller at Fault.* Toronto: Ragweed, 1992.

Zipes, Jack. *Creative Storytelling: Building Community, Changing Lives*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995.
_____. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*. New York: Wildman Press, 1983.

STORYTELLING, FOLKLORE COLLECTIONS, and RELATED FICTION

Bulfinch, Thomas. *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Age of Fable*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 1987.

Byatt, A.S. *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye: Five Fairy Stories*. London: Vintage, division of Random House, 1995.

Calvino, Italo. *Italian Folktales*. Selected and retold by Italo Calvino, trans. George Martin. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.

Carlisle, Andrew. *Eleven Stories for Outside*. Montreal: Burning Editions, 1992.

Carter, Angela, ed. *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*. New York: Pantheon, 1990.

Clarkson, Atelia and Gilbert Cross. *World Folktales: A Scribner Resource Collection*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980.

Domanska, Janina. *What Happens Next?* New York: Greenwillow Books, 1983.

Erdrich, Louise. *Love Medecine*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1984/1993.
_____. *Tracks*. New York: Harper Perennial,1989.
_____. *Tales of Burning Love*. New York: Harper Perennial,1996.

Kane, Alice. *The Dreamer Awakes*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995.

King, Thomas. *One Good Story, That One*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1993.

Horne, Stephen. *This Silver Thing With Expert Skin*. Montreal: Burning Editions, 1995.

Llosa, Mario Vargas. *The Storyteller*. Toronto: Collins, 1989.

MacLennan, Toby. *How Will I Know I'm Here*. Montreal: Burning Editions, 1994.

Park, Christine and Caroline Heaton, eds. *Caught in a Story: Contemporary Fairytales and Fables*. London: Vintage, 1992.

Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. London: Granta Books, 1991.

Schami, Rafik. *Damascus Nights*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
_____. *Storyteller*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1981.

Warner, Marina. *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1994.

Weisman, Joan. *The Storyteller*. New York: Rizzoli, 1993.

Williamson, Duncan. *Tales of the Seal People: Scottish Folk Tales*. New York: Interlink Books, 1992.

Yashinsky, Dan. *Next Teller: A Book of Canadian Storytelling*. Toronto: Ragweed, 1994.

_____. *The Storyteller at Fault* Toronto: Ragweed, 1992.

_____. *Tales for an Unknown City: Stories from One Thousand and One Friday Nights of Storytelling*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990.

_____. "Another Long Tale About Crow" in *This Magazine*, March/April 1992. (also printed in *Storytelling Magazine*, May 1994 issue.)

Yolen, Jane. *Favorite Folktales from Around the World*. New York: Pantheon, 1986.

INTERVIEWS

Dan Yashinsky, Whitehorse Storytelling Festival, June 21, 1995.

Ruth Stotter, phone conversation, June 8, 1996; Director, Dominican College Storytelling Certificate Program, Stinson Beach, California.

Susan Burns, Editor, Vintage Books (division of Random House), Toronto Editorial Office, by telephone, September 23, 1996.

CHILDREN'S EDUCATION / LIBRARY STUDIES / REFERENCE

Association for Library Service to Children. *Storytelling: Readings/Bibliographies/Resources*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1978.

Association for Library Service to Children. *For Storytellers and Storytelling: Bibliographies, materials and resource aids*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1968.

Dyson, Anne Haas and Celia Genishi, Eds. *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in Classroom and Community*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 1994.

Engel, Susan. *The Stories Children Tell: Making sense ofd the narratives of childhood*. New York: W.H. Freeman, 1995.

Fox, Carol. *At the Very Edge of the Forest: The influence of literature on storytelling by children*. London: Cassell, 1993.

Greene, Ellin and George Shannon. *Storytelling: A Selected Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland Press, 1986.

Iarusso, Marilyn Berg, and Stories Committee of NYPL, Eds. *Stories: A list of stories to tell and read aloud.* New York: New York Public Library, 1990.

Kinghorn, Harriet R. and Mary Helen Pelton. *Every Child a Storyteller: A Handbook of Ideas.* Englewood, Colorado: Teachers Ideas Press, 1991.

Meyer, Richard J. *Stories from the Heart: Teachers and students researching their literary lives.* Mahawk, NJ: Lawrence Elbaum Associates, Publishers, 1996.

Wallace, David K., Ed. *Journey to School Reform: Moving from reflection to action through storytelling.* Washington, D.C.: NEA Professional Literature, 1996.

Watts, Irene N. *Making Stories.* Markham, Ont: Pembroke Publishers, 1992.

THEOLOGY/SPIRITUALITY AND STORYTELLING

Atkinson, Robert. *The gift of stories: practical and spiritual applications of autobiography, life stories and personal mythmaking.* Westport, Conn: Bergin & Garvey, 1995.

Feehan, James A. *Preaching in Stories.* Chester Springs, PA: Dufour Editions, 1989.

Goldberg, Michael. *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1982.

Hoffman, John C. *Law, Freedom and Story: The role of narrative in therapy, society and faith.* Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986.

Loughlin, Gerard. *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Nelson, Paul. *Narrative and morality: A theological inquiry.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987.

Thoma, Clemens and Michael Wyschogrod. *Parable and Story in Judaism and Christianity.* New York: Paulist Press, 1989.

STORYTELLING JOURNALS, MAGAZINES, NEWSLETTERS ETC.

Appleseed Quarterly: The Canadian Journal of Storytelling
Published four times a year by The Storytellers School of Toronto (since 1991)
791 St. Clair Avenue W., 2nd floor
Toronto, Ontario, M6C 1B7

"Inside Story"
National Storytelling Association newsletter
NSA, P.O. Box 309, Jonesborough Tennessee 37659

Parabola Magazine
Myth and the Quest for Meaning

Story Art: A Magazine for Storytellers
National Story League, 555 Todd Avenue N.W., Warren, Ohio 44485

Storytelling In Ireland: A Re-awakening
Report by Pat Ryan
Commissioned by The Verbal Arts Centre, Londonderry, 1995

Storytelling Magazine
National Storytelling Association, P.O. Box 309, Jonesborough Tennessee 37659
since 1991

Storytelling World: Journal of the Storytelling Art
Dr. Flora Joy, Editor
Graduate Storytelling Program, East Tennessee State University Box 70647
Johnson City, TN 37614

S T R E T C H I N G the Truth
Quarterly Literary Newsletter for Northwest Storytellers
980 E. 44th Avenue
Eugene, Oregon 97405
$10/4 issues

Tale Trader
International Order of E.A.R.S.
12019 Donohue Avenue, Louisville, Kentucky 40243

For an extensive listing of Canadian events, tellers and groups see:
Canadian Storytelling/Directory/Repertoire Canadien des Conteurs, 3rd Ed.
Published every two years by the Vancouver Society of Storytelling
13 - 2414 Main Street, Vancouver, B.C. V5T 3E3
(604) 876-2272 C$10.00

For an extensive listing of U.S. events, tellers and groups see:
National Storytelling Directory and guidebook
Published annually by the National Storytelling Association, P.O. Box 309, Jonesborough Tennessee 37659 U.S.A.