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Multimedia Storytelling Methodology: Notes on Access and Inclusion in Neoliberal Times

Carla Rice, Professor, University of Guelph
carlar@uoguelph.ca

Ingrid Mündel, Managing Director, Re•Vision Centre, University of Guelph
imundel@uoguelph.ca

Abstract

In this article, the authors examine the impact of using their evolving multimedia storytelling method (digital art and video) to challenge dominant representations of non-normative bodies and foster more inclusive spaces. Drawing on their collaborative work with disability and non-normatively embodied artists and communities, they investigate the challenges of negotiating what 'access' and 'inclusion' mean beyond the individualizing discourses of neoliberalism without erasing the specificities of differentially-lived experiences. Reflecting on their experiences in a variety of workshops and on a selection of videos made in those workshops, they identify and analyze three iterative 'movements' that mark their storytelling processes: from failure to vulnerability, from time to temporality, and from individual voice to collective concerns. The authors end by considering some of the ways they have experimented with developing an iterative workshop method that welcomes difference while simultaneously allowing for an examination of the terms of the shared space and of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operating within that space.

Keywords

multimedia storytelling, neoliberalism, accessibility, inclusion, arts-based research, disability arts

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Carla Rice, Professor, University of Guelph
carlar@uoguelph.ca

Ingrid Mündel, Managing Director, Re•Vision Centre, University of Guelph
imundel@uoguelph.ca

The stories presented in our paper can be viewed online.¹

Introduction

In this article, we examine the impact of using our evolving multimedia storytelling method, developed at the Re•Vision Centre for Art and Social Justice at the University of Guelph, to challenge dominant representations of non-normative bodies and minds and foster more inclusive spaces and understandings of well-being and equity. More specifically, we investigate the challenges of negotiating what ‘inclusion’ means in the context of the overwhelming failure of the neoliberal project and the reversion to a nationalistic neoliberal economy under U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration and after the Brexit decision—what will likely intensify violence toward, and surveillance of, non-normative bodies such as racialized bodies, disabled bodies, and stateless bodies, and those in the intersections, in the interest of maintaining capitalism. Canada’s continuation of the neoliberal project of promoting diverse, inclusive language while maintaining unjust structures and policies and its conciliation with pressures (from within and without) to securitize its borders pushes us to ask how our efforts at inclusion in our workshops relate to the ongoing systems of racism, sexism, ableism, and colonialism that shape the material realities of non-normative lived experiences. We understand neoliberalism to be an assemblage of structures, practices, and affects governing human interactions rooted in the

¹ Go to <https://projectrevision.ca/notes-on-access>. Type in the password “inclusion” to access the album “Notes on Access and Inclusion”. Please note: the videos are intended for readers only and are not for public screening.

ideological belief that markets represent the best mechanism for resolving human problems and the more nationalistic form of neoliberalism as entailing a rapidly-evolving belief system—that the corporate-state's wealth and well-being can only be safeguarded through ever greater securitization of the nation (Breger Bush, 2016). This nationalistic form of neoliberalism may have particularly egregious consequences for disabled people and for disability arts movements in Canada and elsewhere since it mobilizes survival-of-the-fittest rhetoric to justify ablest government policies and values hyper-individualism and competition in the arts and culture sectors, which privilege artistic elites and further marginalize non-normatively embodied cultural creators.

Drawing on our collaborative work with disability, fat-identified, Indigenous, Inuit, Queer, and feminist artists and communities, and specifically centring multimedia stories created in our collaborations with disability-identified communities, we ask: how we can make space for misrepresented and marginalized perspectives and expand registers for understanding what 'access' means, particularly when the institutional structures that we operate within run counter to these attempts at expansion? How are 'access' and 'inclusion' negotiated beyond individualizing and, increasingly, nationalistic discourses of neoliberalism without erasing the specificities of differentially-lived experiences? Addressing these systemic questions through our arts-based project, we further ask: How does our method enact a messy, resistant, and contradictory relationship to neoliberal imperatives within the Canadian context as we attempt to straddle the potentially competing aims of centring previously dis/missed perspectives while bringing into sharp relief the deepening injustices confronted by those marginalized bodies? This article presents some initial reflections and ideas toward responding to this question, though, as we discuss here, this question is necessarily iterative and continues to animate our research

processes and is key in giving shape and movement to our stories. We are particularly attuned to the challenges and tensions of using art for social purpose and the perils of such approaches, particularly under neoliberalism, which, as others have convincingly argued, commodifies by assigning value to all human activities, including artistic and creative ones, based on their profit-making potential (Bishop, 2012; Yúdice, 2003). As such, we examine ways to develop a workshop method that welcomes difference while simultaneously allowing for an examination of the terms of our shared space and of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operating within that space in any given workshop.

Storytelling as methodology

The Re•Vision Centre at the University of Guelph, founded by Dr. Carla Rice, is home to a number of research projects dedicated to exploring ways that a range of communities can use arts-informed research to advance social inclusion, well-being, and justice. Broadly, the Re•Vision Centre looks at the power of the arts to open up conversations about difficult or sensitive topics in health care, education, business, and the arts and culture sectors. The main way we do this is through the Re•Visioning Differences Media Arts Laboratory (REDLAB), which is a physical space at the University of Guelph and a mobile media lab for producing and editing digital media. Using REDLAB, participants in our storytelling workshops create multimedia stories, which are short videos (2-3 minutes) that pair audio recordings of personal stories with visuals and soundscapes (photos, video clips, artwork, music, utterances, gestures, and more). These workshops are designed for 12-15 participants and typically take place over the course of two or three days. They involve an in-depth framing of the themes or issues that bring storytellers together; a story circle where participants share initial ideas around the experience or

moment they would like to develop; writing exercises to help participants develop their scripts; tutorials on using audio, video, and editing software and equipment; and full technical, writing, and conceptual support for the workshop's duration to help participants from script development to finished video. Participants are recruited through networks relevant to each project. They may or may not be practicing artists but must identify (wholly or partially) as members of, or allied with, the specific aggrieved groups being centred. Facilitators and artists from relevant communities are frequently hired to co-run the workshops. To conclude each workshop, participants are invited to share their stories in a final screening and everyone leaves the workshop with their own video.

We are two differently-positioned, Canadian interdisciplinary critical scholars who have been conducting arts-based research for a combined 20 years. We are also white, settler, middle class women with working class roots. One of us is queer-identified and non-normatively embodied, and has close ties to Indigenous kin and community. The other is non-normatively minded and queer-identified. We live and work in Southern Ontario, on the treaty lands and territories of the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nations, and the Métis Nation. We have worked to develop arts-based methodologies in a range of research projects, including with disability communities on health care access (Chaplick, Mykitiuk & Rice, 2015; Rice, LaMarre & Mykitiuk, 2018; Rice et al. 2017; Rice, LaMarre, Changfoot, & Douglas, 2018); urban Indigenous students, teachers, and parents on challenging colonial and neocolonial systems of formal schooling (Rice, Dion, Mündel, & Fowlie, forthcoming); urban Inuit people on mobilizing Inuit cultural voice; disability and aging arts movements (Changfoot & Rice, forthcoming); and diverse queer women's negotiation of body ideals and management practices (Rinaldi et al. 2016; Rinaldi, et al. 2017;

Rice, et al, forthcoming). At the heart of our approach is the ‘coming together’ of storytelling and social change—the creating and sharing of new understandings of difference that disrupt dominant narratives and open possibilities for more just ways of living (Rice, Chandler, Liddiard, Rinaldi, & Harrison, 2018). Theoretically and epistemologically, the work of centring and platforming marginalized perspectives and experiences comes from a much longer lineage connected to popular education practices, decolonizing movements, disability arts, community-based theatre practices, life writing, and feminist historiography among others. From the outset, people have found the digital/multimedia storytelling method particularly germane to social change efforts. The act of making space for people to tell their own stories coupled with the translation of these stories into a widely shareable multimedia format has allowed renewed and varied engagements with systemic issues of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and colonialism.

For example, Indigenous communities have used digital/multimedia storytelling to disrupt stereotypes of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples (Wilcox, Harper, & Edge, 2012); decolonize research methods and shift what counts as knowledge; disseminate cultural knowledge through passing on traditional knowledge to communities/nations (Iseke & Moore, 2011); give expression to and witness the telling of colonial traumas (Beltrán & Begun, 2014); build new relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Castledon, Daley, Sloan Morgan & Sylvestre, 2013); and give Indigenous youth opportunities to create new understandings of the present and new possibilities for the future (Wexler, Gubrium, Griffin, & DiFulvio, 2013). Similar findings echo throughout digital/multimedia storytelling projects involving undocumented migrants in Ireland (Alexandra, 2008); teenage mothers (Gubrium, Krause, & Jernigan, 2014); and trans individuals on embodied identity, discrimination, and living beyond gender binaries (Vivienne, 2011). Brushwood Rose argues that the ‘story’ part of

digital/multimedia storytelling holds particular promise as narrative is an intermediate area of experience (2009). Stories convey both what we do and do not know about ourselves, creating a productive tension between our self-expression (meanings we convey) and our self-knowledge (our current knowledge of ourselves). This tension allows us to make discoveries about ourselves in the process of creating and viewing our stories, especially if we recognize that narratives are storied rather than unmediated reflections of experience (Brushwood Rose, 2009). In line with Brushwood Rose's theorizing, other analysts have offered rich accountings of the effects, and affects, of multimedia storytelling for storytellers and audiences alike.

Significantly, Re•Vision's multimedia storytelling spaces have supported the cultivation of disability arts movements in Canada. Although there is a vibrant disability arts scene in Ontario, until recently few spaces have existed where disability-identified artists could find disability arts community and receive professional development and exhibition opportunities. Because of this cultural and institutional gap, Re•Vision's disability-focused storytelling project—originally an arts-based research project intended to bring disability-identified people together to re/story disability beyond biomedical scripts—attracted disability artists who seized these workshops as spaces to access equipment, training, and peers and used them to create new work. Artist-participants have described the disability-focused storytelling workshops as well as the disability art they encountered and produced within these spaces as pivotal to their artistic development and self-identification as artists (Chandler, Changfoot, Rice, LaMarre, Mykitiuk, & Mündel, 2018). Thus, Re•Vision's storytelling as methodology workshops have contributed to cultivating disability arts through the facilitation of artistic training and the development of key artistic connections, which have (and continue to) lead to other disability arts projects and to advancing disability aesthetics.

What we find missing from much of the existing storytelling literature, however, is consideration of the ways that structural forces might work to constrain and enable storytelling in particular ways—of how the stories people tell (and receive) impact, and are impacted by, the systems and institutions in which they are embedded. Recent critiques of the potential dangers of digital/multimedia storytelling practices advanced by scholars such as Alexander Freund and Tanja Dreher suggest that this elision of systemic pressures in existing digital storytelling literature is perhaps not surprising. Dreher suggests that, “[d]igital storytellers are celebrated for ‘speaking up’ and claiming ‘voice,’ but there is little opportunity to explore the ways in which politicised voices might make a difference.” Freund argues that the recent obsession with storytelling across spaces and disciplines is indicative of dominant countercurrents in North America of “increasing social democratization and legal equality on the one-hand, and increasing economic inequality and the neoliberal ethic of self-reliance on the other hand” (2015, p. 117). Speaking broadly about trends such as StoryCorp in the U.S. and the increasing proliferation of digital storytelling projects across the globe, Freund (2015) suggests that “underlying the ideology of these stories is the neoliberal notion of a hyperindividualism that sees no role for the state or solidarity in the lives of individual(s) [...] Such stories preclude and reject any political analysis of inequality and injustice” (p. 108).

To this critique, we add our own observation of how scholars interested in storytelling as research methodology (or as cultural phenomenon) often frame this approach as emerging from various Eurocentric theoretical traditions, such as poststructuralist theory or narrative theory. What remains unrecognized and unacknowledged here is that Indigenous peoples on the lands now called North America for centuries have understood story as theory, as encoding people’s worldviews and conveying their deepest beliefs about the world. Following Indigenous

traditions, Indigenous scholar Thomas King (Cherokee) (2003) views stories not solely as entertainment but as carriers of people's knowledge and values—as speech acts that have the power to make and change the world. Building on this understanding, King goes on to caution us: "Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous." (2003, p. 3). From King, we learn that stories can have profound material effects in people's lives: they are the things that bring us together, define us, teach us about the world; yet they are the things that break us apart, that make us invest in ways of being in the world that are destructive to each other and to the planet. At Re•Vision, we investigate two pressing questions related to this problematic: how we move past the dominant narrative without producing a single counter story (whether congratulatory or diminishing) that similarly ensnares us and how we listen to each other and reflect deeply on the ethical implications of the stories we tell/share (Rice & Mündel, 2018).

Pushing into these critiques while still holding firmly to the potential of social change in working together through and with stories, the Re•Vision methodology, as it has been taken up across our multiple research projects and sites, builds on mounting evidence of the transformative possibilities of art-making practices on *individuals* to think more broadly about the possibility of using art to impact *systems* and *institutions*. We recognize that interest in storytelling can have an individualizing, re/colonizing, and depoliticizing edge and so our work to think about storytelling in terms of social change needs to attend very carefully and explicitly to the counter-impulses that celebrate individual voice and triumph *without* attending to political processes, economic structures, colonial processes, and systemic inequalities that (often invisibly) shape our work and selves.

While we speak elsewhere about the broader impact of providing a multiplicity of voices and perspectives, here we turn to think about challenges to and possibilities for inclusion

produced by our story-making processes specifically. In a constantly and intentionally improvisatory way, we experiment with different strategies for creating spaces that can remain open, flexible, and responsive, while also developing clear boundaries around processes and expectations. Importantly, we recognize and reflect on the ways that our failures and our vulnerabilities—as these emerge within and amongst participants and facilitators, and in dialogue with the institutional structures and protocols that define, constrain, and facilitate our work—are integral to the process (and not an unfortunate by-product). In this way, we work to bring together our visual and textual experiments in storytelling together with our investigation of the materiality of lived experience and of the construction of neoliberal subjectivity to create new pathways for speaking back to the oppressive narratives that structure our lives.

This is no easy task. Indeed, what does it mean to bring the disciplinary regimes and research frameworks of higher education into dialogue with the work of social justice organizing and critical activism? And how do we continue the dialogue rather than simply absorbing the one (activist insights) into the other (research paradigm)? In other words, how can we keep visible systemic pressures (from workplaces and educational contexts, to kinship networks and state funding regimes) throughout our processes—the pressures on people’s bodies, on their access to various spaces and resources, and on how they animate (or not) to their diverse experiences? In our discussion, we approach Re•Vision storytelling processes as a possible site for recuperating connection and agency within nationalist neoliberalism; our use of “story” and “storytelling,” however, extends beyond a literary conception of narrative to include stories that may not even use words or that present a narrative in the silences *between* words. Here we are interested in looking at the *movement* of the stories—between hope and despair, between individual voices

and collective concerns, between isolation and belonging—movement given form in the process of storytelling itself.

In what follows we identify and analyze three of these iterative ‘movements’ that necessarily mark Re•Vision storytelling processes: from failure to vulnerability, from time to temporality, and from individual voice to collective concerns. We engage with these movements by reflecting on our experiences in a variety of workshops and using our insights and analysis of a few stories made in these workshops. These movements are iterative in the sense that they are witnessed and experienced in repetitive and cyclical ways. They are not intended to describe the linear progression from an undesirable to a preferred state; rather, they are meant to capture movements from what is known to tentative and improvisational realities that are fleetingly enacted in each workshop space with the embodiments present. We make no claims that the latter are universally better realities for everyone; rather, they are ephemeral glimpses, for good and ill, of what temporarily changes when we collectively seek to privilege the embodied beings of those in the room.

From failure to vulnerability

We start our discussion of one of the ‘movements’ that mark our story-making processes with a discussion of failure. More specifically, we consider attempts within some stories and workshop processes to move from individualized conceptions of failure and success to acknowledging shared vulnerability as a potential site of connection and voice. Our understanding and use of voice (or perspective) here is influenced by Nick Couldry’s articulation in *Why Voice Matters*:

I offer ‘voice’ here as a *connecting* term that interrupts neoliberalism’s view of economics and economic life, challenges neoliberalism’s claim that its view of politics as

market functioning trumps all others, enables us to build an alternative view of politics that is at least partly oriented to valuing processes of voice, and included within that view of politics a recognition of people's capacities for social cooperation based on voice. (p. 2)

From a disability arts and culture perspective, we recognize the need to consider carefully questions surrounding voice and power in relation to non-verbal members of the disability community and, indeed, non-verbal participants in our workshops. Thinking with Couldry and holding to our disability rights and social justice commitments, we assert that what makes Couldry's analysis relevant to our context is that he is careful not to negate attention to individual expression by making a reductive appeal to a broad notion of community that privileges the 'good' of the collective over the individual. Instead, Couldry acknowledges that the *neoliberal* privileging of the individual is in fact an erasure of individual value and vantage point—values that have become determined by capital. For us, something that is critical to our story-making process is that people tell their own stories within a *collective/collaborative* framework. There is an interesting rub between the centering and telling of marginalized vantage points and the careful framing, editing, and positioning that each storyteller navigates to share their story. Voice in the workshop is at once singular, particular, and also embedded and interconnected with a web of both absent and present listeners. What we mean here is that storytellers individually and collectively consider imagined audiences of their stories as well as reflect on hegemonic narratives and ethical questions about the experiences they seek to re/tell.

Part of the work to recuperate a connected understanding of voice/perspective, then, requires a movement away from re-inscribing reductive notions of success or failure—around

what kind of stories participants can tell, of engaging with the equipment in the 'right' way, of disciplining our bodies/minds to behave in particular ways in the shared space. For example, we have learned that a nine-to-five schedule is not workable for all participants, facilitators, and artist supporters; nor is it possible for all participants to complete their projects in a three- or four-day workshop timeframe. We have found that opening to different ways that time might be inhabited is necessary to push back against neoliberal logics that demand productive "on time" (not-too-slow-or-too-fast) body/minds (Rice, LaMarre, Changfoot, & Douglas, 2018). If we are to move away from re-inscribing individual failure or success of the neoliberal subject in our workshop spaces as we wrestle with complex forms of storytelling and the performance of multiple selves, we need to bring recognition of the vulnerability of *all* bodies into our process. In starting from an understanding that all bodies are vulnerable, we also need to consider the ways in which specific bodies in our workshop spaces are *differently* vulnerable. As Margrit Shildrik writes, "In previous work, I have argued strongly for the inherent vulnerability of all bodies, but in considering here a more overtly politicised context, it becomes possible to readdress the questions posed by Jasbir Puar: 'which bodies are made to pay for "progress"?' Which debilitated bodies can be reinvigorated for neoliberalism, and which cannot?'" (2015, p. 10).

The question of who "pays" for progress within neoliberal logics cuts to the core of our work. It's key that we use our story-making experiments to make evident the *uneven* production of disability—to make apparent which bodies can be reinvigorated for the market and which cannot—while also acknowledging the production of disability and presence of capitalist logics within the workshop spaces themselves (Puar, 2012a). Part of this work requires us to "critically assess how communities place limits on the facilitation of crip/queer people's participation"

(Mitchell, Snyder, & Ware 2014, p. 298). David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, and Linda Ware point out how social spaces that appear open to everyone, that “unveil architectural, aesthetic, and moral spaces of inclusion”, nevertheless, “paradoxically, strictly police ways of being different for the bodies they include” (p. 298).

We have become acutely aware of how practices of inclusion can police ways of being different in the storytelling space. Elsewhere, we, along with other researchers and artist members of our project, have outlined ways we try to make our workshops open to all: we welcome disability in and desire the disruption that it can make; we strive to make spaces barrier-free; we follow our own practiced accessibility guidelines; before and during workshops, we ask participants what would make the workshop accessible and comfortable for them; we think about what would make the workshops accessible to us; we work with an ever-expanding understanding of accessibility; and we begin workshops with a discussion of how everyone can contribute to making an anti-oppressive, safer space (Rice et al. 2015). What we have not yet written about are seemingly incommensurate differences that have emerged during workshops: how the flickering fluorescent lights in one space that caused some storytellers with chronic illness to develop migraines were required by other Deaf storytellers to access sign language interpretation to ensure their fuller inclusion; how hugging, as an important mode of connection and perhaps condition of inclusion for some participants with intellectual disabilities, conflicted with other participants carrying histories of violence who required verbal negotiation prior to physical contact to secure their safety and inclusion; how sexually explicit talk that represented the very condition of visibility and meaningful inclusion for some queer story-makers clashed with others’ requirements for more contained, ethically/politically reflexive talk about bodies and sex; and how our invitation for participants to tell ‘their own stories’ was explicitly rejected by

some participants in our Inuit workshop out of participants' desires to tell their stories together, with others, as a way to mark the interconnectedness of selfhood, of the relationality of identity.

It is conceivable to read the rubs of differences that we are describing as signifying their incommensurability—in other words, as indicating that such differences are in some way inherently irresolvable and non-ameliorating. Yet rather than accept this finding at face value, our commitment to disability rights and justice, and other forms of social justice along lines of difference, has pressed us to interrogate the very conditions under which differences might come to be discrepant. Operating under neoliberalism's productivity-obsessed, time-starved logics, where products and outputs are valued over processes and people, we recognize that in situations in which differences have materialized as incommensurable we have also lacked the time and skill to deepen our inquiry into how they may have been shaped, at least in part, by the very conditions of their emergence (including the workshop space). Oriented to the end-goal of ensuring that storytellers each completed a story in the workshop's tight timelines with many competing demands on everyone's time, we attempted to resolve each of the rubs using compromise—for example, by turning the fluorescent lights down in one case and, in another case establishing the ground rule that people needed to engage in verbal negotiation prior to making physical contact. While bargaining allowed people to complete their projects in the collective space, it also drew on the logics of competition insofar as it treated access in the way that inclusion, under neoliberalism, is typically taken up: as zero sum game where one participant's 'loss' is another's 'gain.' This has left us wondering about what other sense-making systems might underpin more improvisational ways of proceeding in encounters among seemingly irreconcilable differences. If we drew on non-competitive, non-time starved, non-zero sum logics, for example, how might access and inclusion be enacted? Might working through the

very terms of our togetherness allow the particular bodies present in the workshop space to co-construct from the ground up temporary assemblages of inclusion? How might these materialize and what might their effects be?

As we have argued elsewhere, the work we have done in/ through some of our earliest workshops played a role in contributing to and furthering conversations around disability arts at a time when there were limited spaces defined by, with, and for disability-identified artists (Chandler et al, 2018); our discussion here is intended to underscore the importance of creating the kinds of spaces that open to disability artists and disabled futures, while *simultaneously* acknowledging the necessity of attending to the domesticating neoliberal constraints that mark the emergence and movement of disability arts and artists more broadly. Beyond our workshops, we wonder how neoliberalism's competitive, time-starved, and increasingly nationalist logics might affect and undercut the production of an intersectional disability arts movement in Canada more broadly, such as by celebrating hyper-individualistic, elitist artistic production that affirms, recuperates, or at least does not critique certain ideas of disability and of the nation and by marginalizing more interdependent, collectivist processes/projects that challenge multiple political status quos at the intersections of disability and other alterity.

We have learned that despite our efforts and best intentions to create inclusive spaces—and in truth, because of them insofar as our commitments set the terms for preferred and undesired ways of being in the space—we inevitably exclude those who have difficulties embodying the terms, however expansive these may be. We have learned that inclusion is an elusive endpoint that “cannot be mandated under universal design best practices because difference cannot be fully anticipated, planned for, known, or mastered” (Rice et al, 2015, p. 523). We also have learned that failure—whether we fail to anticipate certain differences or fully

foresee and plan for their inclusion—is necessary because it creates the very conditions of possibility for vulnerability, for openings to more nuanced understandings. As facilitators, researchers, and artists, we acknowledge our vulnerabilities but, echoing Shildrick, do not assume vulnerability is equally inherent in every body, and nor do we approach embodied vulnerabilities as undifferentiated, equivalent, or symmetrical. Symmetrical vulnerability assumes sameness, which erases critically important differences in vulnerabilities as these materialize (following Puar 2012b, p. 63) in the entanglements of bodies and worlds.

Asymmetrical vulnerability, in contrast, recognizes vulnerability as a condition of living under neoliberalism while it seeks to understand differences in embodied vulnerabilities, which, if we see these as produced by the intermingling of corporeal and social forces, may or may not be possible to redress, transcend, or overcome. This sliding scale of vulnerability is produced through, what Puar describes as, the “interdependent relationship between bodily capacity and bodily debility” under neoliberalism (2012a, p. 149) where heightened demands are placed on some populations for bodily capacity, agency, choice and where other populations are “targeted for premature or slow death” through ongoing and sharpening structural inequities (2012a, p. 153).

Recognizing our vulnerabilities as researchers, facilitators, and artists as we attempt to understand how our embodied experiences of vulnerability may differ is also integral to our process as to avoid the potential romanticization of participatory research—in this case, of both studio- and community-based research practices that produce disability art—of reinforcing binaries between self/ other, researcher/ participant, professional artist/ naïve creator, and victim/ helper. What this double move means varies. It might mean engaging alongside participants in creative writing exercises to acknowledge shared and different vulnerability and lived experience

across the participant/ facilitator divide. It might mean ensuring that facilitators and researchers involved in the project own, without centering, their relationship to the issues and communities framing a given workshop. It means having academics and community partners make their own stories before they ask more “vulnerable” participants to inhabit this space and these expectations. It might mean that artists have signed themselves up as research participants with the express purpose of gaining access to the equipment, training, peers, time, and payment that they need to create their art and have little interest in advancing the research dynamics of our project. It might require that we pay artist fees, which are much higher than research-participant honorariums. It means bringing ourselves and our experiences into the workshop space as researchers, artists, and facilitators in ways that undermine our own positions as ‘experts’ and ‘knowers.’ It means always centering the knowledge and expertise of participants gathered in the room over other kinds of knowledge. And it means making space for individual voice and value as we move from expressing personal joys and traumas to collectively reckoning with how to challenge the systems that structure our lives. Health sciences professor Hilde Zitzelsberger’s video, made in a cultivating disability arts workshop, illustrates how acknowledging vulnerability might invite storytellers to work—in the sense of criss-crossing, traversing, and transgressing—the multiple binaries into which they are slated.

Through a sepia-toned photographic collage of a female-presenting body, professor Hilde Zitzelsberger’s piece, *My (Im)possible In/vulnerability*, presents storytelling both as a trap and as a site of becoming in a meta-engagement with disability history and politics. (To view go to <https://projectrevision.ca/notes-on-access> and type in the password “inclusion”). Zitzelsberger’s examination of imperfections, of (im)possible in/vulnerability, is mirrored in the visual grammar of the film. In the story’s images, body parts begin whole and partial, then fragment and layer on

top of each other, blurring in and out of focus. The impossibility of naming and knowing the bodily self is evident alongside Zitzelsberger attempt to name and know a kind of embodied truth that is not fixed, rigid, or definitive. Taking us through (part of) her body history, the film exposes the consequences of identification through posing a series of rhetorical questions. What Zitzelsberger tells through such musings is a story about her discomfort inside and out of a range of identity categories, both offering and resisting. Beginning the piece, her nervous laughter interrupts and punctuates an otherwise self-assured narrative delivery. The piece ends with a return to her laughter, this time a full infectious laugh that signals release—perhaps a release from the need for perfection—from any attempt to line the fragments up into a coherent whole

The film's exposure of the slippage between embodied experiences and rigid identity categories points to both the difficulty of, and need for, new understandings of how we name and occupy spaces of difference and vulnerability. How can we acknowledge and tell vulnerable histories without being collapsed into categories of otherness that perpetuate existing perceptions of what it means to be disabled, marginalized, vulnerable? How can we tell stories in ways that do not oversimplify how we work and love in the world, as both insecure and self-assured, broken and healed? How can we connect across our conditions of shared vulnerability with human and other life forms while creating space for recognition of different vulnerabilities and for redress of the historical, social, and neoliberal economic forces that produce and magnify those differences? "The story lands on a final evocative paradox: "I feel so much self-judgment when I reveal my failures, shame when I reveal my imperfections. But I feel so alive in my skin when I do." By refusing to resolve the paradoxes that mark her bodily experiences, Zitzelsberger offers new vocabularies for representing both embodiment and vulnerability, opening these categories to multiplicity, volatility, and difference. With these in-between vocabularies she also

gestures towards and pushes against the coding of disabled bodies either as redeemable or as disposal under neoliberalism by calling our attention to the pressures for productivity and perfection placed on some bodies (those like hers) and on the conditions of bare life imposed on others (Agamben, 1998) deemed as ‘impossibly’ vulnerable, non-vital and expendable.

Following from Zitzelsberger’s reflections, we see the critical importance of not only finding new language for representing vulnerability and failure but for structuring this into our processes. We usually include a check-out at the end of each workshop day to assess where participants are at in their story-making process and to determine what kind of support they might need the following day. We marked this as a fairly straight-forward/ pragmatic practice; however, during one of our workshops, a participant became overwhelmed when it was their turn to talk about where they were at with their story. Hearing how far along others were in the process was making them feel incompetent and like they were being left behind. This was not a lone experience. In all workshops, some version of a similar reaction has occurred, usually in private where a given participant might share with facilitators doubts and concerns about their abilities to complete the process. In the more public instance described, we (facilitators and participants) chimed in with various versions of pep talks, and one of us said “don’t worry, we’ve never had a workshop where someone hasn’t completed a story.” In retrospect, we were on some level feeding into the very neoliberal narrative of “overcoming” and of success being marked by everyone reaching the finish line. Reflecting afterwards on what had happened, we began to weave in a new narrative about explicitly welcoming failure *in* to our workshop process (inspired by explicit framing that Re•Vision post-doctoral fellow Patty Douglas used in her workshop on autism, inclusion, and education), acknowledging that ‘finishing’ the story need not be the goal. We now initiate every workshop with an acknowledgement of the vulnerability of

the process, regardless of what kind of story participants are coming to tell, and we actively speak about how we welcome failure *into* the process. While these examples are only minor rhetorical strategies, they point to our bigger desire to complicate and push against the subtle 'individuals triumphing over adversity' undercurrent to the three-day, goal-oriented story-making process.

From time to temporality

In our workshop process over many different iterations, there is also the persistent presence of a different kind of time, in the space of the stories, in the university classroom, art gallery, or meeting room where the workshops take place, and in the 'not yet' of better possible futures often conjured in the temporary *dys/u/topia* created over the three or four days of story-making (Rice et al., 2017). The 'not yet' of better possible futures is a promise that is, by turns, hopeful and empty. This focus on the 'not yet' of better possible futures, of the community that is yet to come, can be an important way of opening us to spaces of becoming, but it can also mark the dark side of neoliberalism's alleged triumph over history: in the constantly deferred promises and hopes exemplified by, for example, collective frustrations with no longer feeling like agents of our own time, being on call to work pressures and emails, not being *on* time. There is also a kind of restless urgency of *needing* to tell our stories, different stories, real stories, stories that push back at damaging narratives and perceptions that are stitched onto our bodies, woven into our identities. Indeed, the desire for things to be 'timely,' may be the opposite of what we need in our workshop spaces and story-making processes. Instead we work to consider how we can become *out of step* with neoliberal time, to remember and re-inscribe a qualitatively different

relationship to time, not one that either fully embraces the restless, feverish pace of late capitalism *or* that participates in producing conditions of precarity and instability.

Thinking about what is exactly necessary about the broader Re•Vision project, the effort to make space for telling different stories/ stories of difference together becomes double-edged. We suggest that actively re-thinking dominant stories that shape our lives is in fact urgent in the current moment, that re-engaging time and history and an understanding of our various contexts and local conditions is critical for pushing back against the seeming inevitability and universality of neoliberalism. However, on the other hand, an over-emphasis on urgency, necessity, immediacy may leave us little room to think more slowly and carefully about how best to grapple with systemic injustice in ways that give space for listening, attentiveness, and careful, ethical accountability to each other. As Darcy Alexandra succinctly points out, “the ‘promise’ of digital storytelling has primarily focused not on listening, or even visibility per se, but on the power and possibility of ‘voice.’ But what impact does ‘voice’ have if no one is listening?” (2008, p. 43). As such, we need both to attend more urgently to the conditions of the present, and to allow more space and time to reckon with the complex terms of our humanness and of our responsibility to each other and the world.

Eliza Chandler’s story, *Shift*, illustrates exactly the complex and contradictory pressures of neoliberal time on bodies in ways that resonate with our reflections on the workshop process itself. (To view go to <https://projectrevision.ca/notes-on-access> and type in the password “inclusion”.) Chandler focuses on her shifting experience of time in art school where “time moves incredibly slowly, and incredibly quickly.” For Chandler, making visible her embodied experience of disability exposes the feverish pace and normative requirements of art-making to ‘produce’ something unflawed and in a timely fashion, requirements that rub against her ‘un’

disciplined body, her body that betrays her attempts at containment: her "stiff and cracking fingers;" her "trips on the many winding staircases"; her "messy, spastic, never still body." Chandler's process of naming and of telling, while critical for making visible a particular coordinate of experience, also serves powerfully to anchor her in time, in history, and in relation to others, in the face of the temporal dislocation brought on by neoliberal logics. Importantly, when Chandler decides to centre her disability, these pressures to hide, to contain, to speed up, do not disappear: rather, they change, showing her agency as a subject who continues to be imbricated in neoliberal logics, not one who has magically transcended or overcome the 'barriers' of her body. Chandler's story pushes quietly into the dual work of confronting the debilitating forces of normative logics, "neoliberalism's heightened demands for bodily capacity" in Puar's words (2012a, p. 149), while also acknowledging ongoing challenges of living herself into new narratives of subjectivity and togetherness.

Within the workshop space, while the neoliberal clock compresses our time together and pressures us to orient to product more than process, temporality also emerges as a site of possibility for envisioning, and enacting, disability activist arts and social justice. At the conclusion of every storytelling workshop, we screen the films made together. Drawing on the concepts of "aesthetic community" and "relational aesthetics" from Jacques Ranciere (2009) and Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) respectively, Carla Rice, Eliza Chandler, and Nadine Changfoot have written about how the collective experience of creating and sharing stories gives rise to an "aesthetic community, a community whose artful constitution is primarily sensory and unrepresentable in words and that beckons towards a future of possibilities." (2016, p. 62) Bourriaud theorizes (2002, p.16) "relational aesthetics" as arising from the art-audience relationship because art "creates free areas and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those

structuring everyday life.” Whether during workshop screenings or those held with other audiences, we have experienced how storytellers’ different renderings of the specificity of their experiences have filled the space with multiple and complex sensations and meanings. We have also witnessed how facilitators, storytellers, and audiences alike talk very little after viewing collections of stories; often viewers are unable to bring the rich polyphony of sensations transmitted in the room under the control of language and analysis (Changfoot, 2016), even when we have prompted them to do so. We assert that such moments of pre-linguistic understanding, moments that defy language and evoke sensations that do not easily map onto existing narratives of disability, open space for future narratives and possibilities. Yet rather than evoking the ‘not yet’ of possible futures, we suggest that the storytelling space itself enacts a palpable sense of better circumstances in the present by virtue of the conditions co-created in the space and the resulting films themselves.

We recognize that this sense of aesthetic community enacted in storytelling workshops is ephemeral; in these spaces, as we have noted previously, disability and difference are desired, but when the workshops end, we are still confronted with neoliberal ableist logics that circulate in culture. We think that storytellers and facilitators might enact our/their preferred ways of being and becoming in part “through the temporary suspension of the everyday, where sensate experience of embodied difference is largely outlawed...where it is rarely possible to express and explore personal reflections entwined with the social, economic, and political in a meaningful way.” (Rice et al, 2016b, p. 65) In this way, the ephemeral spaces created through storytelling might resist neoliberal time by bringing another future, one premised on another relationship to time, into the present.

From individual voice to systemic concerns

In our final section, we unpack a bit more what it might mean to push against individualizing impulses in our workshop process to move to an understanding of our story-making acts as co-creative, where participants, researchers, and facilitators craft stories and make-meaning *in dialogue* with each other and with the broader stories that shape people (differently). This move implicitly pushes against the autonomous, self-interested ideal neoliberal subject. As political scientist Wendy Brown writes, "The model neoliberal subject is one which strategizes for her- or himself [sic] among various social, political, and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options. A fully realized neoliberal citizenry would be the opposite of public-minded: indeed, it would barely exist as a public" (2009, p. 43). Brown's point underscores that the neoliberal subject's "freedom" lies in their ability to move and choose between available options, not to question the terms of those options themselves. Even more, Brown's figuring of a neoliberal citizenry shows how the agency of the neoliberal subject is predicated on the active erasure of concepts of the public or the social.

Re•Vision facilitator, artist, and social work student Cait Mitchell's multimedia story provides an example of this movement from individual to systemic reckoning. (To view go to <https://projectrevision.ca/notes-on-access> and type in the password "inclusion".) She presents a narrative of her lived experience of grief and madness (or, in her words, "mental illness"), starting from the site of her individual trauma imbricated in her family's history and then gesturing out to the collective forces of trauma, "of multiple and compounding losses" wrought by systemic forces of "institutionalization, incarceration, colonization, genocide, suicide." Rather than disconnecting grief and healing, Mitchell brings these together in reciting part of William

Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" to start her story: "It is right, it should be so. We are made for joy and woe. And when this we rightly know, through the world we safely go."

Mitchell's story speaks to her experience of multiple family tragedies—her grandfather dying in a plane crash, her great grandfather dying by drowning, her brother dying from blood clots while travelling home by plane from a trip out west. Cait's act of remembering her family stories—of situating herself as coming from a white settler colonizer family marked by intergenerational tragedies and implicating that same family in colonial violence—carefully avoids collapsing these traumas even as she recognizes the interwoven histories and legacies of white settlers and Indigenous peoples. Her film names these traumatic systemic forces---both separate(d) and inextricably inter-related: "Institutionalization. Incarceration. Colonization. Genocide." In her cataloguing of the immediate forces of trauma in her life ("grief has changed who I am and how I see the world"), she simultaneously moves to open up a space for taking collective responsibility for the isolating and individualizing effects of colonial and patriarchal (among other) traumas, the forces that, in her words, make her "feel isolated, alone, lonely, unfit, unruly." By acknowledging these forces as both individually felt and systemically produced, Mitchell is emboldened to honour her own personal wounds *and* point toward broader efforts for collective action and healing: "Intergenerational, ingrained in our landscapes, woven into the fabric of our being."

Conclusion

It has become key to our project to listen beyond the celebration of individual triumphs, while still holding space for risks each storyteller takes in sharing and co-constructing their stories during the workshops. In all the movements we sketch here, then—that is from failure to

vulnerability, from time to temporality, and from individual expression to systemic concerns—we draw attention to the critical importance of learning and enacting different kinds of listening/attending. In all cases, neoliberal pressures to individualize and instrumentalize stories and storytelling processes we engage in make it imperative, in the words of Dreher, to “focus analytical attention on processes of receptivity, recognition and response as they connect with more familiar processes of speaking” (2012, p. 159). A question that we often pose both before and after our workshop process and in our sharing of stories at conference, events, and meetings is, what is our responsibility as listeners to the stories that are shared? How this responsibility is articulated varies in each context and requires multiple kinds of listening—from holding participants’ individual journeys in voicing particular experiences; to thinking about the institutional and political listening necessary as these stories are “loosed” into the world (King, 2003, p. 10); to considering the implications of the stories being taken up in policy conversations. In all cases, our responsibility (as facilitators, as researchers, as artists, as neoliberal subjects) extends beyond the individual storytellers and acknowledges our complicity with the various systems that collude to produce us and inevitably structure our interactions and patterns of speaking and listening.

Through these three short meditations on various movements that have emerged in our many story-making experiments, around vulnerability, time, and co-creation, we have been working to open up space to reflect on the pressures and challenges of creating inclusive workshop spaces for differently embodied people while also acknowledging our ongoing embeddedness in unjust neoliberal structures and logics. In “Crippling Queer Politics, Or the Dangers of Neoliberalism” Robert McRuer speaks about neoliberalism’s tenacious refiguring of capitalist critique, disability, and difference at the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi, pointing

out that “disability could be the site for both an activist movement and the extension of neoliberalism into a space that was specifically formed to provide an alternative—another world [...] All of us can become neoliberalism’s magic sign if we live long enough” (2011/2012, para. 13). This surfaces an ongoing need to create spaces that experiment with accessibility and that enact disability futurity in the present, albeit in improvisational, artful, necessarily imperfect, collectivist, and fleeting ways. Chandler et al argue that “At its core, disability arts, produced by disabled people, disrupts thick cultural assumptions that disabled people are passive, non-agentive, and unified in our experiences. Disability arts resists these assumptions as they put forth many representations of disability, one of them being disabled people as artists” (2018, p. 253). Following from this, the Re•Vision workshop model’s commitment to placing disability-identified artists in lead positions and deliberately practicing accessibility in all its complexity has filled a key gap in Toronto’s disability arts and culture movement as we provided free, accessible arts training led *by* disability artists *for* disability artists. While our narratives and our spaces are marked by neoliberal contradictions, by the push and pull between individual experiences and collective responsibility, between celebrations of change and progress and neoliberal appropriation of diversity and difference, between our roles as researchers, facilitators, storytellers and our experiences of failure and shared and asymmetrical vulnerabilities, these contradictions have become what defines our practice. As we see and watch these contradictions emerge, we work hard to move with them, to stay curious, to make purposeful our encounters with new kinds of listening and with new processes for storying our lives.

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