CHAPTER 13

Washing the Dead Bed, from Poem to Digital Story

Janet Ferguson and Massimo Lambert

Background

In July 2017, I witnessed "Washing the Dead Bed," a Tobago Heritage festival ceremony (Small, 2011). In response, I wrote a reflective poem and then set it aside for three years. Recently, with the support of Massimo Lambert (videographer) and Robert Yeates (audio-technician), we converted the poem into a digital story. In summary, my aim in this paper is to explore the refractive and illuminative capacity of digital storytelling by signposting the soulful, spiritual, and community connections required to navigate the complexity of my late life learning as an Afro-Caribbean (Tobagonian) woman. Much like a cartographer, I want to map the transformational terrain of the poem and reveal the

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dynamic interaction of place, history, community through personal and participatory story-making.

The initial writing of the poem coincided with a number of significant life events. These upheavals included dramatic changes in my personal lifestyle, heightened career and family demands, cross-jurisdictional caregiving responsibilities, and the loss of older family members including my mother.

The experiences of uncertainty, loss, and grief triggered a period of introspection and experimentation with creative expressive forms and rituals drawn from my Caribbean heritage. Bolton and Delderfield (2018) notes that reflective writing is the mirror in which we recognize and work with our "other" selves. In this instance, my mirror was the poem *Washing the Dead Bed*.

Bourdieue (1984) cited by Field (2012) notes the salience of "dispositions" and the disciplinary role of "habitus." We are bound by the socio-cultural context of our biographies and sustained by constantly reworked "positioning narratives." The poem Washing the Dead Bed explores the impact of disengagement with habitus and the overwhelming sense of personal negligence and consequent displacement.

These mid-life feelings of disconnection are not unusual. In response to a widespread recognition of the twenty-first-century shift in longevity patterns, Bateson (2011) describes the "third age" and documents the challenges of navigating life after 55. Waxman (2016) rejects one-off time bound constructions of "mid-life crisis" and suggests instead the idea of a sustained middlescence life period of multiple challenges requiring skillful navigation. Conley and Rauth (2020) ask us to consider this mid-life period as an opportunity-rich life stage extending from 45 to 65.

There is an adult education history of drawing on narrative and the autobiographical for learning. Yet we should distinguish sharing narratives, from story-work and the participative practices that explore meaning, challenge assumptions, and reveal transformative possibilities (Chlopczyk, 2018a). Swarts in Chlopczyk (2018b) explains that storying distills memory in ways that facilitate the recognition of the instructive moments of lived experience.

In *Identity and Lifelong Learning, Becoming Through Lived Experience*, Motulsky et al. (2020) demonstrate the timely convergence of lifelong learning, identity formation, and narrativity. This is preceded by a sustained adult learning narrative turn stretching all the way back to

learning biographies (Dominice, 2000), life history inquiry (Biesta et al., 2011), and adult learning biographical research practices (Merrill & West, 2009). This has taken adult learning out of classrooms and into everyday life.

Bhat (2019) describes her transformative encounter with Storycenter's Stories of Home workshop. She explains that the hands-on learning experience included: "identifying a story, writing a highly focused story script, audio recording the script, selecting images, creating and editing the storyboard and producing a short digital film."

Storycenter, the founding home of digital storytelling, insists that digital story-work must be self-revelatory and insightful; stories are personal and written in the first-person voice. Digital stories are no more than three hundred words and reflect a commitment to aesthetic values (Lambert & Hessler, 2020). Digital story-work has much in common with Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning model in so far as both practices aim to facilitate the emergence of insight based on altered perspectives and consequent shifts in meaning making (Lambert & Hessler, 2017).

Methodology

This paper describes the curation of a digital story. The story-center practice model anticipates a group work process somewhat similar to Freire's (2013) "conscientization" cultural circles. While I wrote the poem, Massimo (videographer) and Robert (audio-technician) participated in the curation and assembly of the digital story. Massimo in his role as videographer and co-creator has been an integral part of shaping the digital story.

This paper offers snapshots of the poem to digital story conversion experience through the lends of Cranton's (2016, p. 25) three-dimensional content, process, and premise reflective model.

A multi-voiced elaboration of the process dimension is created by drawing on Formenti and West's (2018) delightful application of Bateson's concept of metalogue. This allows Massimo (ML) and I (JF) to share samples of the things we thought about and said to each other as we worked together in the story-making space.

The Cranton (2016, p. 25) and Formenti and West (2018, p. 27) combination is outlined here:

- Content

    What image/audio is used?
    What is the context of the image/audio use?

- Process

    How and why, are these choices made?
    What do you see?
    How does what you see shape your seeing?
    How did you come to think and answer like that?
    What are your assumptions?
    What do you believe? Who are you?

- Premise

    What is the underlying meaning or interpretative analysis?
    Washing the Dead Bed – Digital Story
    https://youtu.be/-QluWHV9g-s

Afterthoughts

Upon witnessing the Washing of the Dead Bed, I experienced a sense of release; something that needed to be said had been expressed. Back then, I had no idea of how digital story-making and reflective writing about the experience could reveal new insights.

This reflection is multi-layered; the poem, the digital story, and an exposition based on Cranton's (2016) reflective model have surfaced a constellation of stories that were not previously visible or available.

The lens provided by the content, process, and premise dimensions of the reflective schema has revealed the ways in which the particularities of my socio-cultural context had shaped the poem. The digital story-making work brought these to the surface.

For me a poem is an authentic expressive outpouring, a narrative exploration of the landscape of identity that paints images with words. In this instance, digital story-making brought to light a bricolage of hitherto unseen narratives.

This doubling back and deepening of awareness revealed the multi-layered socio-cultural context that informed the writing of the poem.

Digital storytelling enables us to convert powerful moments in our lives into creative multimedia expressions of truth and insight. Poetic

reflection, an inherent quality of this kind of story-making, distills memory and narrative and consequently brings a transformational lens to the practice of learning from experience.

Massimo Lambert (videographer), Robert Yeates (audio-technician), and I (the writer) created this digital story. Along the way we engaged in spirited exchanges that included significant questions and observations. As Massimo and I worked on the poem resolving the issues of the geographical distance (he lives in California, I was "CoVid sheltering in place" in Tobago), editing the poem so that it was concise enough for a digital story, and engaging Robbie the audio-technician, we were also building relationships across generational, cultural, and gender differences.

Most importantly, through our collaborative engagement, we were shifting each other's perspectives and broadening our understandings of the world (Table 13.1).

In closing storytelling, an emerging genre, is a unique feature of late-modernity, an admixture of creativity and digital technology inspired by the human compulsion to share lived experiences by telling stories (Table 13.2):

Table 13.1 Questions and the following observations and comments

Questions…	Observations and comments
• Do we have too many images that are getting in the way of telling the story?	• *In digital storytelling, less images tell more. Let's aim for 15 images (MLM)*
• Which ones should we remove, when we love them all? (JF)	• *This beautiful moving water river video I like, I'm keeping it, even if it does nothing for the story. [eventually it was edited out] It's your story you decide"! (MLM)*
• Can Zoom keep us connected across the complex math of East coast/West coast/Caribbean time zones?(JF)	• *How bad is the bad audio? Can we find studio quality audio technology in the middle of a CoVid shut down? (JF)*
• Do we need copyright to use family pictures, especially if all those people are dead? (JF)	• *Incredible, this feels like 2017 all over again and I never recognized that this is a "transplanted" West African ritual (JF)*
• Why are we laying on this Yoruba chant, I liked the quiet, sombre reflective tone? (MLM)	• *Here is a Tobago "wake" video: This is how we celebrate life in the midst of death, vibrant music is present in everything we do! (JF)*

Table 13.2 Washing the Dead Bed – Digital Story—https://youtu.be/-QluWHV9g-s

Content

Image: Blue Hole Park, Bermuda

Audio: none

Notes

Bermuda, my home away from home for more than 30 years, is a British colonial territory, settled in 1609

While they are associated with stagnation and flooding mangroves hold the potential for vibrant plant and animal life

Process

(MLM) Initially, we planned on using a short video of a stream to begin the story. I was tenaciously attached to it. When we switched to this image as an opener, it made the story more cohesive, connecting with the motif of in-between, liminal spaces of the land and mind; shorelines and memories

(JF) Massimo settled on this image and we agreed that it conveyed the tone and register of the opening movement of the poem

(JF) Mangroves provoke wariness and a sense of foreboding; mangroves and swamps figure prominently in Caribbean and African folklore and mythology as places of mystery and hidden secrets. They are also sacred threshold spaces

Premise

Dirkx (2001) explains that images help learners "connect the knowable conscious world to the unknowable or the unconscious"

Images facilitate subliminal levels of story-work by providing metaphors that take our sensorial awareness beyond the boundaries of everyday discursive terrains. This broadens and deepens the interface of reflective engagement

This image" highlights the complex micro-systems that simultaneously represent possibilities of stagnation and re-generation

Content

Image: Roxborough Cocoa Estate, Tobago
I did not walk the huddled squat of bow-legged cocoa
I did not tread
the veins of molted leaves
did not hear the sigh
of windblown bamboo

Notes

From 1866–1920 Trinidad and & Tobago was the world's third largest cocoa producer (Bekele, 2004)

Cocoa cultivation provided employment entrepreneurial opportunities for early generations of no longer enslaved people (Craig-James, 2008)

Cocoa's decline pushed islanders out of the region in search of opportunities

Migration is a salient feature of the Caribbean socio-historical landscape (Faure, 2018)

In the Arrivants, a poetic trilogy, poet-historian, Brathwaite celebrates Caribbean identity formation in the context of forced and voluntary migrations (Samakande, 2018)

"Regret and remorse can be either paralyzing or inspiring" (Bateson, 2011, p. 199)

Process

(JF) We chose this image to strengthen the opening lines of the poem

(JF) For me this image of "decline and abandonment" triggers a visceral connection with the shock waves of the sudden decline of the cocoa industry

(JF) I "see" the long shadow of the vagaries of imperial history. My great-grandfather was a cocoa farmer circa 1890 to the 1930s. Three generations of his descendants including myself have migrated

Premise

This tactile journey through a narrative of regret is achieved by combining sound and images in ways that engage "imaginal knowing" (Heron, 1992)

White (2007), a narrative therapist, suggests that story-work fosters the recognition of the "landscape of identity". Our stories raise questions about absences and presences

In my absence what has been neglected, what has been lost?

Digital storytelling curates images and sounds in ways that bring our backstories forward

Table 13.2 (continued)

Content		

Content

Image: Main Ridge Forest, Tobago Recognized as Crown
Reserve in 1776 The Main Ridge Forest Reserve; retrieved
(01/12/2021)

Audio:

I did not see the first light crawl
along the dew-dropped canopy
did not rub blue marbled soap
on a rippled washboard
I did not wash
the bed of the dead

Notes

TOBAGO RITUALS Mere Myths or Meaningful Practices?

"Washing the dead bed is also an important ritual. Women take
the clothes of the dead down to the river wash in an effort to
prevent the spirit of the dead from returning to haunt the living.
Washing of the dead's clothes must be conducted where the river
meet[s] the sea"

https://tobagorituals.wordpress.com/death/

Citing Canu (2013), Karangi, (2019) notes the defining influence of
African cosmology on both diaspora and continental Africans. He
explains: "African cosmology is the way Africans perceive, conceive and
contemplate their universe; the lens through which they see reality,
which affects their value
systems and attitudinal orientations" (Karangi, 2019, p. 1)

Process

(JF) Initially, we used multiple images of the river and nearby areas. We agreed that the flowing river images were too literal; they cluttered the narrative and overtold less important aspects of the story

(JF) Effective digital storytelling depends on a delicate minimalist curation of images, words and audio

(MLM) While the text conveys the author's inability to 'See', the image juxtaposes it with clarity, though blurry. This effect intends to remind the viewer that it was always there, though unseen

(JF) The image of the forest canopy conveys a sublimated sense of shame grounded in disconnection and regret

Content

Image: Sugar Works of the Roxborough Estate, Parish St. Mary's, Tobago

Audio:

last night

the full moon vanished

my mother called my name out loud

old women sang

one thousand verses

a steady stream

of poured libations

Background audio: Yoruba chant

Premise

"Washing the Dead Bed" is a ritual practice that has survived enslavement. This endurance illustrates multi-generational resistance to cultural erasure and the retention of Afro-centric practices that demonstrate an adherence to African cosmology

For me migration and disconnection with the island's day-to -day practices of collective and personal resilience reduced my opportunities for generative engagement and vigorous expressions of personal agency. The challenge of navigating midlife changes alongside this "coming apart" coalesc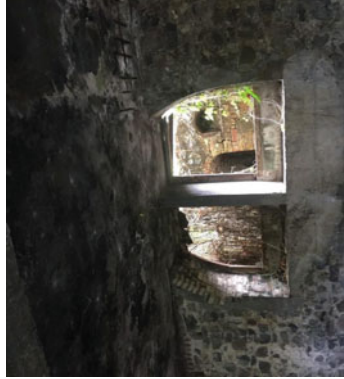ed into a tangle of seething undercurrents of regret Story-work can be the transformative space in which we work with feelings of disconnection, re-framing experience through the illuminative lens of digital story-making

Spiritual Baptist

Forde (2019, p. 18), describes the Spiritual Baptist "mourning" ritual: "The spiritual world is best explored in the mourning ritual. During this long rite of seclusion, sensory deprivation, fasting and praying, ritual candidates conduct a journey to one or more of the nations or to other spiritual places"

(continued)

Table 13.2 (continued)

Process

(JF) Music strengthens the somatic resonance of the ritual. African cosmology affirms life in the presence of death. We discussed grief and ritual practices across cultures

(MLM) This image induced claustrophobia at first, leading me to choose slow, ominous music. The ensuing discussion about Tobagonian wakes catalyzed questions about funerals, and death and the overlap of grief and joy between

Content

Image: Lambeau River, Lower Scarborough Tobago

Audio:

crayfish listened
to the alligator's stories
river currents crossed
and wet the sea

Notes

As a child I repeatedly heard the proverb "when the crayfish tells you the alligator's belly has scales, you must believe it."

The general meaning of that proverb is that ecosystems are defined by interdependent relationships

"Brofenbrenner's Ecological systems theory suggests that "people are nested in and are an inseparable part of their community. People develop within these intertwined organizational, community, home and personal settings that are joined formally or informally to create a system or ecology in which they are shaped and, in turn can influence" (Bennett & Grant, 2016, p. 2)

Premise

The dreamscape of the poem's second movement draws on the Spiritual Baptist discerning practice of "moaning"; the introspective journey undertaken by initiates

Digital story-making journeys can facilitate aesthetic movement along familiar socio-cultural pathways of reflection and inquiry

Principled and authentic story-work respects the particularities of the stories, the storytellers and the socio-cultural context

At the turn of the nineteenth century my great- grandfather owned the properties that bordered both sides of this river's entrance to the sea

Process

(JF) Familiar image evokes memories of my early childhood morning walks, the sound of my grandfather's hip -holstered leather machete swinging against his trousered thigh
(JF) I see myself, gazing into the water listening to wild duck calls and thinking about my uncle's late evening hunting and fishing outings

Content

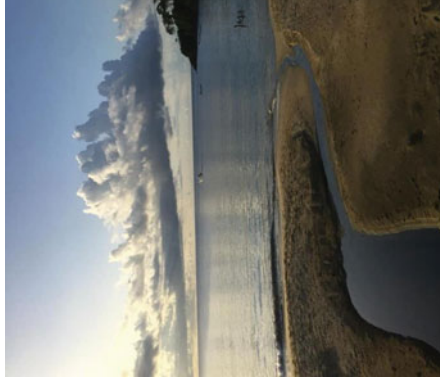Image: River mouth - Speyside Village, Tobago
Audio:
salt wrestled spirits
drifted away at high tide
dawn spat into the open mouth
of faced backwards buckets
drummed dance lines shook
bent low, never spilled a drop
Background audio: Yoruba chant fades
Notes
In his ethnographic description of the ritual Small (2011, p. 18) notes "The spectacle may differ with every community or culture but indeed the element of bereavement as performance remains universal"

Premise

The slave trade forcibly removed people from Africa in order to provide slave labor in the Caribbean and the Americas (Rodney, 1973)
Water is the reminder of our transatlantic journey
How did those who have gone before move beyond survival? How did my great-grandfather, a black man born one generation after slavery manage to achieve economic autonomy?
If he were here now, what would I want to ask him across time and generations? What can I, as his great-granddaughter, learn and carry forward from him?

(continued)

Table 13.2 (continued)

Process

(JF) The river mouth is a cleansing image
We agreed on the placement of this image, it repeats the water trope while simultaneously signaling possibilities beyond the horizon while highlighting connectivity
(MLM) The river mouth represents space where two worlds collide; the river as a finite, familiar village, the sea as an infinite border. In the context of the story, it represents memories as well, West African traditions kept alive over centuries of harsh colonialism

Premise

This final image on the dream sequence draws on an African cosmology that affirms life in the face of death. Singing and dancing emphasizes the capacity of the living to carry on in spite of loss and grief
These acts of practicing and yearning for African connections ensures a rejection of the Eurocentric "othering", the central feature of the colonial project
For those who have experienced the impact of colonialism this provides a liberating transcendence of the sense of shame and inadequacy fostered by relationships of subordination (Samakande, 2018)

Content

Image: Café picture - Books & Books, Coral Gables Miami
Audio: all the while
I was seated in a cafe
designer sunglasses
cream panama hat
my hand folded morning paper
set the world down
in four rectangled window panes
all tucked neatly at the elbow
morning coffee
on a lace metallic table

Note

The Panama hat was a migration status symbol flaunted by migrant returnees visiting from Aruba, Panama and other regional jurisdictions where seasonal employment was readily available

Process

(IF) It was difficult to settle on this single image. Much of the poem's original script in this section was removed. This included a description of cafe life and the surrounding area. We agreed that these details cluttered the 'digital story'. They were distracting and undermined the movement of the action

Digital stories are limited to 300 words

(MLM) Initially, I found this image to be dull, and resisted using it for an entire stanza. In retrospect, that is its purpose. This moment in the text is about absence. The emptiness of the cafe allows the imagination to follow the poem, placing its objects on the tables

Premise

This is the loitering spot for the marginalized voyeur who belongs everywhere and nowhere. The life affirming dance associated with the ritual "Washing of the Dead Bed" is replaced by "the café" as a universal trope of disconnection

We can move beyond a singular story of Caribbean migration and displacement to the universal themes of marginalization and anomie

As mature adults it is possible hold the position of "marooned migrant" irrespective of our nationality or origins

Despite navigating an assortment of challenges we can find ourselves at mid-life cut off from re-vitalizing community networks and rituals; ill-equipped for encountering late modernity

(continued)

Table 13.2 (continued)

Content
Image -Bermuda Banana doll made by Ronnie Chameau
(Bermudian dollmaker) for the Lifelong Learning Centre,
Bermuda College (2018)
Audio:
a Banana woman
with indigo eyes
read my spooned espresso grounds
Drawing on folk memory the image is a combination of two
Trinidad and Tobago folklore figures:
the Douen, "a mythical figure that lives in swamps and near
rivers"
the Lajabless, "a devil woman who comes out at night to prey
on unsuspecting men"

Process

(JF) In selecting this image from my collection of photos I was not thinking about mythical figures. I was reluctant to use a specific figure for fear of being too literal by matching words and images

(MLM) The banana woman doll conjures up spirits, reminding me of Pueblo Kachina dolls from the American Southwest and Corn husk dolls from Oaxaca

Premise

The "banana woman with indigo eyes" is the disrupter of the voyeuristic distancing described in the previous café scene. She is an outsider. Much like an adult education practitioner/digital story facilitator, her role is the practice of "helpful disruption" (Newman, 2006) describes the difficulty of finding a simple explanation of the facilitative and instructional role of adult educators Block and Markowitz (2012) in their field-book liken" process" consultants to fairground fortune tellers who vanish at the end of the fair

Formenti (Formenti and West, 2019) explains her turn from the practice of psychology to adult education by noting the developmental and emancipatory promise of adult learning theory and practice

Content

Image: 100 year old cup and saucer

Audio:

from the bottom of a blue rimmed cup

Note

Place here: about Tobago history - plantation economies, indigo, cotton, sugar, cocoa, cash crops "as wealthy as Tobago planter"

(continued)

Table 13.2 (continued)

Process

(JF) This is the last cup of my Grandmother's personal "espresso collection", she purchased more than 100 years ago from a door-to-door salesman

(JF)The image of a cup that brings together the colonial histories of Caribbean sugar, cocoa, and coffee. These Cash crops were sources of extracted wealth that contributed to the growth of cities in France, England and Spain

Content

Image: - image of blowing curtain *"spirit passing"*

Audio:

you are lost" she said

"they are looking for you"

the spirits called your name out loud

and you must go

Note

In a world which casually recognizes the ability of the spirits to slip imperceptibly between the material and the spiritual realms a moving curtain is a gentle reminder of the eve- present protection and guidance of the ancestors

Premise

The banana woman with indigo eyes reads "the [coffee] grounds". Her presence sign-posts the convergence of normally separated spheres

As migrants, as women, and as members of marginalized minorities we often exist in spaces in which we are defined by oppressive and subordinating relationships

What kinds of questions do we have sitting at the bottom of our blue-rimmed cups? Who reads our [coffee] grounds?

Process

(JF) The curtain blowing, open door image reminds me of belief systems that affirms the existence of a multi-dimensional world in which we are never alone, the spirits are always in attendance; we remain connected to the ancestors

(JF) We had no difficulty selecting and agreeing on this image. It works well and conveys everything we want to tell by showing (MLM) This image shows the wind as a vehicle for spirits, ancestors that bring themselves to us in dreams. It shows a shared, transcultural understanding of spirits presenting themselves in doorways, visitors unseen

Premise

This is an exploration of ancestral presence within the context of an intergenerational acknowledgement of African cosmology

The assertion "you are lost" is underpinned by a subtext of rescue and recovery. Hence "the spirits called your name out loud" is an irrevocable confirmation of "belonging"

We can relate to ancestral presence if we set aside reliance on the objective measurement of time and privilege the more fluid interpretation of the temporality of experience

Participants and witnesses are in the past and the present simultaneously; knowledge is transmitted across dissolved boundaries of linear time and space; participatory engagement and movement within this performative space of an act of coming to know

Content

Image: Convict bath house, Hospital Island, Bermuda

Audio:

It is midnight

I have walked backwards
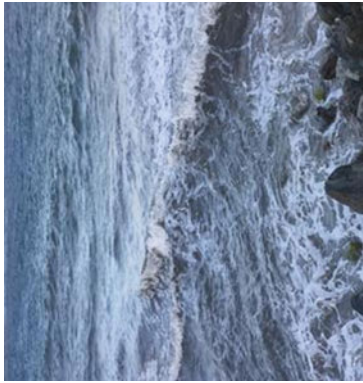
into the forest

Note

Walking in the Forest

"If you were to meet Mama Dio in the forest and wish to escape her, take off your left shoe, turn it upside down and immediately leave the scene, walking backwards until you reach home"

Triniview Our Folklore is Predominantly of African Origin

http://www.triniview.com/TnT/Folklore.htm

(continued)

Table 13.2 (continued)

Process	Premise
(JF) Images of convict bath house …walking feet Massimo was able to produce an image of a journey to re-connection—with illustrative action steps (MLM) This image invokes a spiritual gateway, or portal. In the context of the story, it symbolizes an evolution from questioning to understanding. With its transition to color, the image conveys a new day, bridging the circle between midnight dreams and dawn revelations	This solid, walled and bricked representation of achievement in the context of measured time is presented alongside the temporality of the experience of "walking backwards into the forest" A respectful and mindful entry into "the unknown" honors community memory while affirming an African cosmology defined by the tropes of "creole" resistance and African retention While admitting the absence of a universal definition of transformation Nerstrom (2014) confirms the value of accommodating somatic, affective and spiritual interpretations alongside rational cognitive interpretations of transformative learning
Content Image: Lambeau Village, Milford Road- eroding shoreline adjacent to the river Audio: **I am looking for the river mouth** **That is looking for the sea** **I am listening for the drum** **That listens for the song of women** **And hears the crayfish tell the alligator's secrets**	

Process

(IF) An active shoreline that contrasts with the mangrove swamps at the opening of the digital story

(IF) We can see movement and change

(MLM) The choice to overlay a transparent image of Janet's ancestors over the image of the sea contrasts with the previous overlay in the cocoa house, and coincides with Janet's reflection on feeling a deep release after writing the poem

Premise

There is movement towards a different way of being characterized by an open readiness to sensitively encounter a landscape that previously provoked feelings of disconnection; guided by the recent transformative encounter there is an acute awareness of what to listen for, how it can be heard and what it means

Nerstrom (2014, p. 327) replaces Mezirow's ten-phase model of transformative learning with a non-sequential four-phased schema

Her emergent approach emphasizes "becoming":

"Adopting and acting upon a new perspective, we view ourselves and others through a more encompassing lens. Transformative learning becomes a new experience leading to openness for it to occur again" Nerstrom (2014, p. 328)

Content

Image: stone cairns built in my grandparents' yard
Audio: my heart is open,
I am ready
to wash the bed
of the dead

Note

Throughout the Covid "shelter in place" lockdown. On my best days, I built four cairns

Table 13.2 (continued)

Process	Premise
(JF) Enduring stones that predate my existence They convey a pervasive sense of timelessness (MLM) The cairns were a serendipitous conclusion to the story. Initially we discussed using the image of Janet's family members, but it felt too literal, and was limited by the quality of the images, and glare. The image of cairns, symbolic of ancestors, were a much more powerful choice	The poem ends on a note of surrender and reconciliation completing the transformative movement from disconnection to re-integration The cairns are similar to shrines encountered along the banks of local rivers often left after ritual spiritual baths. Perhaps the impulse to build cairns is an expression of my subliminal link to the island's cosmology of Afro-retentions informed by defining patterns of resistance and resilience Reflection on the making of the digital-story brought this significant middlessence navigation trope forward

"It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"

—Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Coleridge

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