CHAPTER 1

Anchoring Storying: A Quest for Emotional Truth

Ambika Gopal Raj

Is it possible …?

Is it possible …
that words uttered,
thoughts pronounced,
feelings shown,
and emotions felt,
… become us?
Is it possible, …
that speech changes us,
molds us
and reflects our true inner selves?
Is it possible …
that actually words are what matter, more than actions?
That where these words are spoken matters as much as who?
Is it possible …
that identities are spoken
… into reality?

A. G. Raj (✉)
California State University, Los Angeles, CA, USA
e-mail: ambika.raj@calstatela.edu

A. G. Raj, S. H. Ulanoff (eds.), *Storying a Reflexive Praxis for Pedagogy*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06588-0_1

Is it possible …
that the purpose of memories is to keep people alive?
that how we remember is as important as why we remember?
Is it possible …
that voicing our stories is the essence
of who we are and who we will become?
Indeed I am a manifestation of my expressions.
January 12, 2022

I can't remember when I began using the word "storying" rather than "storytelling". All I remember is that when I used the word "storying" it felt right—it sat well with me, with what I do, what I believe in. It felt like I was sharing a part of *who I am* in order to make a connection, rather than narrating as the word 'storytelling' signifies. When I am storying I am expressing from a location of all that came *before* me culturally, historically, socially, empathetically, and emotionally. This is perhaps from the idea that 'location' and place have an impact on how a story comes into being, how it is situated, and how "[p]lace becomes an anchor to our memories" (Mitchell et al., 2011, p. 3). The words I choose, the gestures I make, the facial expressions I make, the tone of voice I use, and my stance engage with my past as it pushes through me into my expression of what I voice. This is storying to me. To be fully aware, present, temporally, spiritually, of that moment when I utter my words and the impact it makes when I voice it. Indeed, it is a privilege to have that moment, to have a voice, and to be heard.

Anchoring Storying in Qualitative Research

I identify storying as most connected with personal identity, with one's individuality as described by themselves, as voiced through their own words. Autobiography and auto-ethnography maybe two terms from qualitative research, particularly narrative inquiry, that have tried to define storying similarly, yet these terms do not 'feel' right; they still feel like an impersonation of what is essentially supposed to be distinctively humanistic. The term *storying* is more conducive to identifying all that is shared between researchers and participants temporally and emotionally while also admitting the power dynamic in all research relationships. Phillips and Bunda (2018) "argue for the place of story in research … storying honors the legacy of our ancestors engaging in theorizing and research from the

emergence of language" (pp. 4–9) as the notion of storying is more connected to being one with identity and reflexivity (Raj, 2019). Although, in defining narrative inquiry, academics have recognized that sites of research are sites where the study of 'lived experiences' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2007) happen, these lived experiences may not be understood *as storied by* the participants themselves, indicating the difficulty in defining narrative inquiry. Rather these become an *examination* of experiences in people's lives by researchers indicating the textual interpretations that are subject to what Phillips and Bunda (2018) call "authorized knowledge". To that end, across fields where human connections are imperative, such as in medicine, nursing, journalism, instructional sites, and so on, researchers and scholars are realizing the importance of *storying* lived experiences. But there is a subtle difference between lived experiences as voiced and 'languaged' in the words of participants (storying themselves) and lived experiences as reported by researchers who study them as phenomenon. Elbaz-Luwisch (2005) makes this subtle difference when explaining how in qualitative narrative research, experience is in the "midst of language" (as cited in Clandinin, 2007). That is, in narrative research, lived experiences are already formulated; it is 'languaged' through various media as theorized, categorized, and verbalized through the textual: as "authorized" representations (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). Perhaps, this realization of appropriation that misunderstood narrative inquiry may sanction, or the need for more complex ways of giving voice has prompted scholars across fields to prefer the term 'storying'.

While not using the term 'storying', Clandinin (2007) imply a similar argument for creating a more complex understanding of the phenomenon of experience. They recognize that location or the physicality of space is changed by the indelible power dynamics of who occupies that space and call it a "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 63). In this space, narrative inquirers enter 'always in the midst of a story' whether it is the researchers' stories or the participants' stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), thereby acknowledging the power dynamics. Hollingsworth and Dybdahl (2007) further explicate this notion of power dynamics in specifically "issues of relationships" and in "identity" (p. 154), showing how researcher's epistemological notions and their methodological stances are influenced by the relationships between the 'researched' and 'researcher'. As the dynamics of the relationship between "the knower and the known" changed, so did the story. Narrative inquiry thus becomes a constant negotiation between

the two. Craig and Huber (2007) also speak to the relational aspects of narrative inquiry acknowledging that experiences in shared spaces are changed by those telling the story as much as those listening and interpreting the story because of the relationships that must be negotiated in sharing the space/place. What seems to be common in these well-documented and mapped scholarly works are notions of Deweyan experience, particularly lived experiences, negotiating relationships, imagined spaces, issues of locations, as well as identities when speaking about narrative inquiry (Greene, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Freeman, 2007).

Negotiating Versus Creating

Negotiating a space is vastly different than creating a space to be heard, where storying *can* happen, where storying *does* happen. Naming is important and who does the naming is even more important as historians, scholars, and anyone who cares about equity will confirm. Storying does not signify negotiating, rather storying signifies emotional meaning-making. Storying conveys that knowledge is situated, dynamic, relational, and constructed, that storying is a form of cultural-historical identity. In other words, the term storying distinguishes the lived experiences sanctioned through storying oneself, from those sanctioned and explicated through narrative inquiry. It is not my intent to discredit any scholarly works thus far that have expounded on narrative inquiry or narrative theories, rather my understandings of storying have been built from the foundations of these works. I find resonance with "[s]torying [as] embodied relational meaning-making" (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 43) and I believe that storying builds a deep connection between who does the storying and who listens to the storying or who the act of storying is intended for. In this sense, "meaning is never definitive as listeners will create meaning that is applicable to their lives and experiences" (Phillips & Bunda, 2018, p. 10). Storying reflects the humanizing, lived, continuous, intentional, experiences of people. Storying is validating because not only the teller, the listener is also empowered to make and construct their meanings through their unique positionalities. As Phillips and Bunda (2018) indicate, all history is in a sense storying. That is, what has been passed on to us from time immemorial—the ancient, aboriginal, native knowledges—and ways of doing, speaking, and thinking that have been passed on through songs, legends, myths, sayings, and stories are what connects us as humans, as peoples, and as societies

(Phillips & Bunda, 2018). The constant re-interpretations of each iteration, the ratified knowledge that is both sanctioned and unsanctioned, connect us indelibly with all that came before us, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. In this sense, storying is the bond that connects us: that creates a continuum of the past to the present to the future.

Emotional Truth: A Rendition of the Theory of *Rasa*

What is the nature of this continuum, this connection, this cultural-historicity? To me, it is the moments of authenticity that we find in each other's stories; it is the experience of legitimacy that is passed on from the teller to the listener: the tangible connections between the voiced and the perceived, the moments of creating and building trust in what we are hearing, in what is being articulated. In my previous work, I have called this *emotional truth* (Raj, 2019) and it is akin to the ancient Indian theory of *Rasa*. In Sanskrit, the ancient Indian language, *Rasa* simply translates to *jus*, or essence, or flavor. However, this theory was first expounded in a text on the performing arts called the 'Natya-Sastra' (roughly translating to *The Rule-Book of Performing Arts*), which is believed to have been written around 200 BC or around the first millennium. *Rasa* theory as explained in the *Natya Shastra* says that when a performer of any art is so deeply immersed in their performance that their soul becomes one with the performative act, then they are able to transport the audience into a consciousness or awareness that is akin to spirituality. There forms a deep temporal, impenetrable connection within the world of the performative act, where each feels what I call emotional truth.

I conceptualize emotional truth to be the perception of authenticity that is passed along from the teller to the listener creating a space that validates both and builds trust for all involved (Raj, 2019, p. 7). This progression of emotion is truthful, genuine, and legitimate in that it creates an evident, indelible connection for all involved. Emotional truth is the almost sacred moment when there is a shared feeling of we "get it", the palpable sensation deep within our core that touches us. "When the story comes from a place that is entrenched in the deep emotional core of the teller, it reaches out … in a tangible connection" (Raj, 2019, p. 105). I believe that the concept of emotional truth is what anchors storying—it is what helps me understand and explain my feelings of "I get it now".

Finding Emotional Truth with Scholars Through Storying

In keeping with the tradition of storying, I must acknowledge the thinkers, writers, peoples who have brought me to this point of anchoring my conceptions of storying. I must acknowledge all those whose works I have read, all those who have storied with me through their scholarly work and through their teaching. I must acknowledge the emotional truth I have felt with the writings of many, a few of whom, I will story about in the following paragraphs.

Imagination and the Arts: A Meeting with Dr. Maxine Greene

It had been just over a year since I had come to the United States as a graduate student pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Drama at the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison. The School of Education at UW-Madison organized a day-long conference to honor the legacy of Dr. Maxine Greene. Her famous book *Releasing the Imagination* had recently been published and her writings traversed the fields of both the arts and education. Graduate students from across the school were invited to do short presentations showcasing the use of imagination in teacher education.

My partner and I designed a drama activity around immigration and the concept of 'illegal aliens' or undocumented persons. In the activity, we first engaged with everyone in a 'getting to know you' game and then we role-played immigration officers looking for an undocumented person. We passed around a picture of my partner, whom everyone had just engaged with in the game as the undocumented person. The ethical question of if we should give him up to the authorities was posed. Subsequently, as a group we discussed how our intentions are sometimes motivated by our deep-seated attitudes. We engaged in conversations about how our actions are limited by our biases. We also discussed how these attitudes affect our interactions as teachers.

To my surprise, Dr. Greene not only attended my session, but she also participated and stayed throughout the whole forty-five minutes engaging in the activity and discussions. I will never forget the presence of this small framed, soft-spoken woman and her generosity as she shared the space with me—a newly minted graduate student from India. While my partner and I had planned the activity, we had not entirely thought through the ethical consequences of this role-play, which essentially cheated the

participants into questioning their attitudes, into pressing them to make difficult decisions, perhaps making them uncomfortable. As novice teachers and novice presenters, we both clearly had not taken care to build in a way to create trust amongst us and the participants; we had simply thrown the participants into a difficult ethical situation and then were asking them to untangle themselves from it. I realize that now, more than twenty years later. And perhaps this is why I still remember that incident as if it were yesterday when Dr. Greene came up to me, looked me in the eye, and said "You cheated us!" in a sort of mock manner. In that moment and in my reflecting about why she said what she said, I realized the power of imagination. Even though my activity was an imaginary exercise, it created such a deep empathetic reaction. In the ensuing discussions with everyone (there were about twenty participants in all), Dr. Greene's charisma was greatly manifest. I have spent many years reflecting back on that incident and trying to remember how I handled it. What I learned from Dr. Greene was that in the activity I had inadvertently "othered" (Fine, 1994) my participants. And that in order to truly reflect on my actions of othering, I must interrogate my position, my identities, my actions and words *with imagination*. I must become aware, critically conscious (Freire, 1970) of the ways in which I story myself in relation to others and how I story others in relation to me. I must become critically conscious of my own cultural-historical self, my cultural-situatedness, temporally and physically in relation to, and in points of connection to, others that I interact with (Greene, 1995) in/through storying. Storying is the authentic quest that one must go through to build deep connections with *who they* are, *how* they came to be, and *why* they came to be.

Mythological stories from different cultures tell us about hero journeys that go on these quests—the Odyssey and the Ramayana are two examples. Cultural legends are told about ordinary people's journeys into "finding themselves" and through that quest they come to certain philosophical understandings—the story of Prince Siddhartha becoming The Buddha is an example. These cultural-historical tales are our histories; these become our stories; the memories of these tell us of how we came to be (Phillips & Bunda, 2018). These are moments that anchor our storying.

Curry Leaves and Dr. Michael Apple

It was on a cold, snowy Wisconsin morning that I first met Dr. Michael Apple. As a graduate student in the Theater Arts department, Dr. Apple's

class was not one that was on my planned curriculum. But my advisor had this idea that I should perhaps take a broad variety of course-work as the field of educational drama was just coming into its own. Dr. Apple was offering a special topics seminar on education and the arts or something of that sort. I went to meet Dr. Apple in his office to petition to be in the class, as I wasn't enrolled in the School of Education. I met this man with a tanned, freckled face. He had a thick curly beard and curly locks of hair and his brown piercing eyes stared back at me through thick brown-rimmed glasses. The tiniest of smiles played on his lips as he invited me to sit.

I was able to enroll in his class—there were only nine of us and all the others were in-service teachers pursuing a Ph.D. in education. I was the only person of color in the class. We had class once a week, at around 5 pm. As it was winter, in Wisconsin, it got dark by 3 pm and so we decided that someone would bring snacks or dinner or some sustenance. It was in this class that I was introduced to critical pedagogy; here is that I began to understand how power, hegemony, critical positions, cultural understandings, and so on affect us at macro and micro levels. I remember Dr. Apple talking to us about farmers in South America starving and struggling to eat as their produce was corporatized to the extent that they couldn't afford what they grew. These ways of viewing were new to me; these recognitions of power politics were eye-opening to me. Each day, Dr. Apple began the class with showing us silent film movie strips of cartoons that he juxtaposed with serious current world events, as we ate our meal that we shared for the evening. I tried bagels and cream cheese for the first time! On one of those occasions, I cooked a three-course meal for the class. In my eyes, it was a very simple South Indian meal—yellow daal (lentil), green beans sautéed with coconut flakes, and white rice. To them, it was a three-course meal! I remember Dr. Apple and others eating with great gusto as they tasted home-made Indian food for the first time. Curry leaves are used abundantly to season South Indian food, giving green beans and daal a distinctive flavor. The leaves have no taste by themselves and are really meant to be discarded after seasoning. I pointed that out to them and Dr. Apple confidently said—"Yes I know, these are Bay leaves, you can't eat them". For a moment I didn't know what to say … mixed feelings of contradicting authority versus recognizing wrong information flashed through my head as I hesitantly said, "No, these are curry leaves, not bay leaves". We left it at that, although I don't think he was convinced.

Curry leaves notwithstanding, Dr. Apple's class on democracy, education, and the arts completely changed my outlook on how and what knowledge production and construction mean. The fact that we spent the better part of the class looking at old film negatives from the 1940s and 1950s—I can't explain it, but somehow it made perfect sense for this class. It was the perfect background to story and question our constructions of knowledge. This class introduced me to Freire (Critical Consciousness), Shor (Critical Literacy), Tatum (Race and Feminism), and much more—concepts and constructions that I interrogate with through storying and developing my pedagogy to this day.

"Show up", said Dr. Gloria-Ladson Billings

As I look at my well-read, worn, marked up, and almost in tatters copy of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, on my shelf today, I am reminded of the phone conversation I had with Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings as I was trying to get into her special topics class, which was over-enrolled. The fact that she actually picked up the phone—I clearly remember the cadence of her voice as she said to me "Show up and we will see". Her words ring metaphorically in my praxis and pedagogy to this day. "Show up" your whole self, show up and reveal who you are, your vulnerabilities, your fears, with humility in the construction of knowledge. Show up and acknowledge your cultural, historical, biased, raced, classed, and sexualized self. Show up was a metaphor for her brand of culturally relevant pedagogy: her philosophy that was entrenched in culturally and critically knowing yourself, your students, in ways that transform knowledge constructions, ways to be culturally competent.

I did show up for the first couple of classes that fall, but due to unforeseen circumstances, I was unable to fully attend her course at UW-Madison. I moved to the Ohio State University in September of that year to continue my doctoral studies. However, I believe that Dr. Ladson-Billings' call to show up deeply influenced me, my research on storying my personal identities and my pedagogy, as is evident throughout my dissertation (Gopalakrishnan, 2001). Show up has undergirded all my teaching and activities as a professor of education these past twenty years, where I have honed my own cultural awareness and identities, to formulate cultural competence with my students and peers in creating storying activities for self-awareness as pro-active cultural relevance.

Tuesday, Refugees, and Dr. Cecily O'Neill

David Wiesner's award-winning picture book *Tuesday* has minimum words with full page, colorful, wildly imaginative, intensely engaging paintings that have so many details as is characteristic of all his picture books. Splashed across the last two pages is a painting of what looks like a crime scene under investigation with detectives, forensic examiners, newscasters interviewing a witness, and so on. This is the mural that Dr. Cecily O'Neill began with in her three-week summer workshop on process drama. I clearly remember her British accent tinged with a Welsh tone as she posed a question to all of us—some twenty-five odd graduate students and teachers. "What do you think is happening here?" Over the course of the next three weeks, I remember the intensely, emotional process drama that she lead us through. Who would imagine that one could connect *Tuesday*, a tale about flying frogs, to taking on the attitude of a refugee? The smoothness with which she lead us to comprehend what it may have been like to walk in the shoes of a refugee; the potent compassion that she ignited in us for imaginary people. That was powerful!

I vividly remember the role-play as I sat tightly huddled along with ten others feeling what it might have been like to be on a boat as a refugee. I could smell the people around me, the sweat mixed with my own feelings of trepidation. I vividly remember that moment in the freeze-frame or tableau that we created in groups of five when we knew we had to say goodbye to all that we had ever known thus far. When we knew in our gut, we would never be here in this place, in this moment ever again. I remember the passionate writing, the depth of our understanding through the frame of this drama process.

This process of experiential learning that educational drama affords has been culturally sustaining for me. Over the years, I have many others to acknowledge in how their craft honed my praxis in educational drama, but this particular workshop with Dr. O'Neill I remember to this day.

The Brownies' Book *Magazine and Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop*

There was an office opposite to the graduate students' office full of books. There were shelves from floor to ceiling, big wide tables stacked with books and even the floor under the table stacked with books. This office belonged to Dr. Hickman and Dr. Bishop—two prolific scholars on children's literature. The books fascinated me—all colors, so many genres; it was a veritable library. Luckily for me, I had the pleasure of taking several courses with both of these scholars and learning not only about children's trade-books,

but through these books I was transported into the sometimes realistic and sometimes imaginary worlds of Mildred D. Taylor, Jacqueline Woodson, Walter Dean Myers, Tom Feelings, David Wiesner, Pat Mora, Yuyi Morales, Alma Flor Ada, Sook Nyul Choi, Allen Say, Katherine Paterson, and too many others to name here. I learned about awards such as the Caldecott, Coretta Scott King, Newbery, Pura Belpré, and many more. In fact, I would say that I learned American history through the multicultural children's literature that I read in these courses and through the other books that I got inspired to read because of these courses.

It was in a seminar on African American Children's Literature that Dr. Bishop introduced us to *The Brownies' Book* magazine. I remember her calm, even toned voice, her eyes kind and soft as she spoke about the gross indignities and struggles that African American, indeed all authors and illustrators of color, faced. She brought in books—oh so many books—that we could hold, feel, and absorb. She brought in an original issue of *The Brownies' Book* magazine, in production for just two years between 1920 and 1922, from her grandmother's collection! This was truly history in the flesh! And it was history that even the students of today are not privy to. I feel privileged to have known this side of American history that one would not usually find in textbooks of today. Dr. Bishop's ways of teaching and mediating cultural history through children's literature has been exemplary for me. I still follow in her footsteps as I read-aloud choice books to all of my classes.

Concluding Thoughts on Anchoring Storying

Storying it appears is the new buzzword of the twenty-first century. Once the forte of wandering minstrels, bible stories, cultural myth and legend, stories were kept out of scientific research, institutions of learning, and corporations. Even in anthropological endeavors, where folklore and lived experiences were warranted, storying was stripped of its humanity, emotions, and reported as dry factual observations.

However, in the last few decades, seemingly like the butterfly effect, everyone has adopted storying. Everyone is concerned about the humanness of storying. There are corporate storytellers who train managers, there are marketing executives who create stories, there are nursing and medical personnel who are taught qualitative narrative inquiry, and so on. Paul (2012) reports that the value of stories and fiction is getting new support from neuroscience as well. "Brain scans are revealing what happens in our heads when we read a detailed description, an evocative metaphor or an emotional exchange between characters. Stories, this research is

showing, stimulate the brain and even change how we act in life" (Paul, 2012). The research that Paul is referring to are studies conducted by brain and language specialists in Spain and France in the beginning of this century which prove that storying not only makes us more empathetic but the experiences that we have with reading words and stories are akin to reality as far as the brain is concerned. In other words, storying offers us a way to connect emotionally and imaginatively. We are as it were, a manifestation of our words, of our storying worlds.

References

Clandinin, D. J. (Ed.). (2007). *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology*. SAGE.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.

Craig, C. J., & Huber, J. (2007). Relational reverberations: Shaping and reshaping narrative inquiries in the midst of storied lives and contexts. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 251–279). SAGE.

Elbaz-Luwisch, F. (2005). *Teacher's Voices: Storytelling and Possibility*. Information Age Publications.

Fine, M. (1994). Working the hyphens: Reinventing the self and other in qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 70–82). California: Sage.

Freeman, M. (2007). Autobiographical understanding in narrative inquiry. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 120–145). SAGE.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Gopalakrishnan, A. (2001). *Wide-Awake: A self-reflexive study examining culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University.

Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts and social change*. Jossey-Bass.

Hollingsworth, S., & Dybdahl, M. (2007). Talking to learn: The critical role of conversation in narrative inquiry. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry: Mapping a methodology* (pp. 146–176). SAGE.

Mitchell, C., Strong-Wilson, T., Pithouse, K., & Allnutt, S. (Eds.). (2011). *Memory and pedagogy*. Routledge.

Paul, A. M. (2012). New York Times opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html

Phillips, L. G., & Bunda, T. (2018). *Research through, with and as storying*. Routledge.

Raj, A. G. (2019). *The storying teacher: Processes and benefits for the classroom and beyond*. Cognella Academic Publishing.