

## **ID Politics: The Violence of Modernity**

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### **Abstract**

Scholarship in feminism, anticolonialism, Disability and Mad studies, have repositioned storytelling as instructive to the present and to the ethics of care. Emplotted with time and space, like the acts and lives of others, stories make discernible those everyday encounters, sites of practices, and material conditions that usher power and pain. They destabilize essentialism, so, too, the asymmetries that ensue, and are therefore pivotal in the politics toward self-definition. It has even been argued that the concept of the story garners much of the attention once assigned to that of identity. But here, I juxtapose, I entwine, no, I embody competing multivalent social scripts, each a verse in itself, to nuance—albeit creatively—the story in this current age of governmentality and concomitant surveillance technologies. Paying homage to Patricia Hill Collins, I evoke intersectionality and endeavour to bring us back to identity politics ... analytically.

*Keywords:* biopolitics, identity, self-definition, empowerment, storytelling

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For Black feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins (2000, p. 110), the “theme of self-definition should preoccupy ... the struggle of living” as a first step to empowerment. In effect, it becomes essential to the very survival of “the individual in the advent of modernity” (Nabbali, 2013, p. 178) and, by extension, core to the discipline of sociology (Ray, 2010), from which stem the liberal foundations, even serve the moralizing discourses, of “helping” professions such as social work (Badwall, 2014, p. 6). “Far from being a narcissistic or trivial concern, this placement of self at the center of analysis is critical for understanding a host of [power] relationships” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 123) whence arise the reductive or totalizing—nay, disabling—metanarratives of deviance, disorder, dysfunction, impairment, lack, tragedy, worthlessness, and the like. What Hill Collins comes to describe as intersectionality privileges subjectivities as ground for knowledge, shifting epistemic space, so, too, a precondition or approach to social change.

The scholarship of psychiatric survivor and activist Erick Fabris (2012) positions transformative work more explicitly within the story, bridging anticolonial Indigenous pedagogics (Casteel, 1998; Dei, 2009; Wane, 2008) with Disability and Mad studies (Cushing, 2007; Estroff, 2004; Lee, 2013; Matsuda, 2007; Poole & Ward, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2008; Titchkosky, 2007). Storytelling assumes a captive audience, ergo a respected storyteller. Authority inheres by course in the ability to hold and engage fora, including that which may be implied for political practice. Moreover, the story gives us “a framework for understanding identity,

which in the move away from essentialism, offers scope” for the complex, plural, historicized dynamics between self and social structures (Wilks, 2005, p. 1254). It recognizes, as it does allow for, “identities to be fluid not fixed, to be in flux not static, to be open to interpretation rather than to contain closed definitions, to be uncertain and unstable” (LeFrançois, 2013, p. 109); to be the living testament of experience that they so inherently are. This provides opportunities “to learn from and learn to use the knowledge generated” within the margins, otherwise immune to, but operating through, privilege (Harding, 1991, p. 277). In stories, then, dwells the potential for coalition building, that “loving eye” (Lugones, 1987) from which to cultivate a “traitorous character” (Bailey, 2007, p. 154) and refuse to animate hegemonic scripts, thereby rearticulating ways of knowing and being that do not benefit from the abstraction of self nor subordination of other.

“Contesting the legitimacy of the dominant discourse is not new, of course” (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 116). “Most First Nations peoples traditionally come from an oral society” (Qwul’sih’yah’maht, 2005, p. 242). The stories handed down from generations have played a salient role in the resistance of colonization and genocide (Denomme, 2013; Nagy, 2013; Wilson, 1998). They give voice to those lives and times silenced, negated, ostracized, or outlawed, usurped, distorted, if not altogether erased. There are many more examples of storytellers speckled through history (e.g., Allen, 1683/1997; Belcher, 1796/1997; Haizmann, 1982; Kempe, 1436/1982). But it has only been of late that the concept of the story has woven itself into the fabric of the larger sociopolitical landscape, from radical writings (Nabbali, 2010; Shimrat, 1997; Zafon, 2005) to digital activism (Abramovich, 2012, 2014), the academe (Church, 1995; Frank, 2000; George, 2012; Hecht, 2006; Morris, 1992), its teaching (Reaume, 2006) and research methodologies (Adams & Jones, 2011; Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007; Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010), as well as public decision making (Barnes & Prior, 1996, 2000), peer supports (Chamberlin, 1978), and quality caregiving (Baldwin & Estey-Burt, 2012; Cattacin & Dovenig, 2014; Ghaye, 2010; Hall, 1997; Phillips, 1993; Redfern & Norman, 1990; Squire & Slater, 1983). Both medicine and, to a lesser extent, nursing have witnessed a mushroom of interest in storytelling (Berkenkotter, 2008; Brody, 1994; K. M. Hunter, 1991; L. Hunter 2008; Williams, 1998). Bioethicists, in particular, have placed great importance on stories in the development of therapeutic, emancipatory, and educational strategies (Arras, 1997; Beresford, 2000; Brody, 1997; Murray, 1997). Social workers have also explored the applicability of the story as a basis for practice intervention (Wilks, 2005); whereas civil society has harnessed it as a tool to bring about organizational order (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001), meaning (Gabriel, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), connection (The Storytelling Non-Profit, 2014), and, ultimately, inertia (Näslund & Perner, 2012), the sense of continuity and collective memory (Steward, Shriver, & Chasteen, 2002). It is accordingly “through storytelling that diaspora and diasporic subjects are constituted” (Berg, 2011, p. 69). Hence, it has been argued that the concept of the story garners much of the attention once assigned to that of identity (Hyden, 1997).

“Storytelling, however, has a double-edged [sword]: it may lead to increased polyphony and a multitude of stories, but equally well serve [the interest of power],

being used to establish a ‘regime of truth’ that favours one story at the expense of others” (Näslund & Perner, 2012, p. 90). Such an alarm was rung some few years ago in Toronto, Canada, when an alliance of stakeholders—many, storytellers themselves—gathered to query the dangers of disclosure across the psy industry specifically (Costa et al., 2012). Of utmost concern was the rampant exploitation qua commodification of the biomedical linear, systemically sanitized “in an effort to prove that the golden road to recovery will reveal itself—but only if you take your medication and listen to your mental health care providers” (Costa et al., 2012, p. 89). “These [are] not stories of the ‘journey’ or of finding housing and fighting discrimination. These [are] individual advertisements for clinical” participation (Poole, 2011, p. 50), markedly void, in turn, absolved of the serious physical and social consequences faced by people with psychiatric histories (e.g., Nabbali, 2009; Burstow, 2006, 2013; Fabris, 2011; Finkler, 1997; Harper, 2005; Menzies & Palys, 2006; Michener, 1998; Perlin, 2000; Reaume, 2002; Shimrat, 2013; Wahl, 1999; Weitz, 2013; Whitaker, 2010). To steal the most intimate details of lived experience for profit, the Recovering Our Stories Collective lambasted, is “not just problematic but ‘pornographic’” (Costa et al., 2012, p. 86).

In a similar vein, critics have challenged the metamorphic potential of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada, with its focus on storytelling as the instrument of federal redress for virulent “assimilationist” eugenics, namely, the abduction and abuse of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children during the residential school era, among them more than 12,000 individual litigants of class-action suits (Corntassel, Chaw-win-is, & T’lakwadzi, 2009; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Morse, 2008). The TRC, which is scheduled to close on 3 June 2015, set out a five-year mandate in consultation with survivor groups to pursue the “need for ongoing healing” (Corntassel et al., 2009, p. 144), “unsettl[e] the settler within” the Canadian nation-state (Regan, 2010, p. 21), and establish “new relationships embedded in mutual recognition and respect that will forge a brighter future” (TRC, 2006, p. 1). To much regret, the proceedings have been pegged against a backdrop of relentless colonial violence, presumably as no surprise to Cherokee professor Jeff Corntassel and Cindy Holder (2008, p. 472), who have suggested that “modern truth commission strategies tend to ... engage in a ‘politics of distraction.’” The recent approval of the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipelines and Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain expansion proposals, not least destructive survey work, epitomizes the blatant disregard for the will, rights, laws, and lifeways of First Nations, more than 130 of which have unequivocally condemned the further development of tar sands infrastructure on their traditional territories (e.g., “Save the Fraser Declaration,” 2013; “International Treaty to Protect the Salish Sea,” 2014). “As Indigenous Peoples,” highlights Waziyatawin (2009, p. 176) of the Wahpetunwan Dakota from Pezihutazizi Otunwe, “we simply cannot reproduce or continue to survive if our populations are incarcerated, sterilized, and systematically attacked and our food sources—as well as air, waters, and lands—are destroyed.” Reconciliation away from responsive environmental stewardship is then itself “eradicating the existence of Indigenous Peoples, either physically, culturally, or both” (Waziyatawin, 2009, p. 176). Canadian coloniality is at once maintained and masked behind the veil of the

TRC. To wit, it is cloaked in rights-based discourse and rewarded (Cornthassel & Holder, 2008) by “narrowing the [field] of harms to be repaired” (Nagy, 2013, p. 53).

Social work theorist Brenda LeFrançois (2013, p. 108) “enter[s] the discussion on madness and psychiatrization,” likewise, on the “perpetuating [of] First Nations genocide,” through “walking the halls of ‘benevolent’ institutions, such as child protection and psychiatry”; structural agencies that she holds as “perhaps the most pernicious” in “feed[ing] off each other” to produce and reproduce the rigid logics, those insidious boundaries, that play into the patterns, arguably, at the core of the lived experiences “they are meant to support.” LeFrançois (2013, p. 115–116) resists the role of “the ‘good’ social worker, aka the white liberal [and placating] subject,” simultaneously a spectator and perpetrator of violence, by reimagining storytelling within her practice beyond intervention, as a disruptor or subverter of the organizing ethos “that are clearly classed, raced, and gendered” under which she is expected to work. She writes her *I* “not just to tell a story but to force” a reflexive turn, a (de)(re)construction of “how we all are in the world and how we would like to be differently” (LeFrançois, 2013, p. 118). Better, “*I*” makes visible the ways to go about being that difference between the lines we story; and so emerges “a kind of doing, a form of action” (Butler, 2005; cf. LeFrançois, 2013, p. 109).

But here, *I* juxtapose, *I* entwine, no, *I* embody competing multivalent social scripts, each column a verse in itself, to further nuance the story in the politics toward self-definition. My lyricism, akin to that of LeFrançois (2013), is one of disobedience, while the intention is to trouble, indeed implode, the very moxie of storytelling in this current age of governmentality and concomitant surveillance technologies (Foucault, 1979, 1991, 2008). Where papers trail us like never before, registries digitize, medias interconnect, context’s forgotten, time’s ignored, labels proverbially bleed, assumptions prescribed, bodies appropriated, minds manipulated, reconfigured, or else denied, our stories do not liberate us. Whether of recovery, reconciliation, that “autoethnographic ‘*I*’” (LeFrançois, 2013), or what famed French philosopher Michel Foucault (1978) might have described as the confession, they are “the illusions of closure, of completion” (Kinsella, 2007, p. 51); the great purveyor of human vulnerability, self-sacrificial and rather coercive in their effects. “The obligation to confess,” Foucault (1978, p. 60) demonstrated, “is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the [result] of a power that constrains us.”

Historically predicated upon torture, or penance and sacrament, in the order of civil and religious disciplinary traditions (Foucault, 1978), the sharing of personal truths continues to entail “opening oneself up to the interpretation—and almost certainly the judgment—of others” (McKinlay & Taylor, 2014, p. 110). This reads unmistakably across such reports as those in November 2013 when Ellen Richardson was refused from boarding a flight to the United States of America as part of a Caribbean cruise with family (CBC News, 2013; Solomon, 2013). Richardson (2009) had previously storied her psychiatric history, yet found herself pilloried for a “medical episode in June 2012” under U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act, Section 212 (Hauch, 2013). Sixty-five-year-old Lois Kamenitz had a similar experience in 2006, as do dozens of other Canadians each year (Bridge, 2011; CBC News, 2014;

Keenan, 2014; Preston, 2009). Even well-known psychologist Andrew Feldman was indefinitely banned from entering the United States in 2007 as a result of a journal article in which he admitted to having tried hallucinogenics forty years earlier (Solomon, 2007). The geography of such mechanisms of state control not only remains elusive and opaque, but also reifies particular moments, often-ambiguous hypotheticals, and becomes a putative source of social misinformation operating at every level (e.g., individual, family, community, discursive, policy). Integral to empowerment is less the story than it is the process of decolonization and subsequent true democratization, that relinquishing of superimposed ideologies to the privileging and protecting of the sum not few, with equal and equitable access, like benefits. “Identity,” as follows, and perhaps to temperate the reading full circle on the word of Hill Collins (2000, p. 125), “is not the goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition.” Be as it may.

I have an identity,  
 I have an ID;  
 Formerly recognized and affirmed,  
 Indeed government-issued.

It opens with a name,  
 Three names more specifically;  
 A given, middle, and family name,  
 Well, “family” name,  
 The last name of my father,  
 Bequeathed to him by his father,  
 Unto whom it was imposed by a stranger,  
 For that “ease” of tribal affiliation...  
 Demarcation...  
 Surveillance...  
 Control.

I have a Berber name.  
 I have coloured skin.  
 I have almond-shaped eyes.  
 I have a buzz cut.  
 I have an overbite.  
 I have missing teeth.  
 I have tattoos.  
 I have fat.  
 I have a loud voice.  
 I have opinions.  
 I have a menstrual cycle.  
 I have university degrees.  
 I have wrinkles.  
 I have trauma.

I have sorrow.  
 I have scars.  
 I have pain.  
 I have chronic pains.  
 I have discomfort.  
 I have fatigue.  
 I have a gait.  
 I have debt.  
 I have guilt.  
 I have shame.  
 I have regret.  
 I have publications.  
 I have poor concentration.  
 I have anger.  
 I have hate.  
 I have nightmares.  
 I have stress.  
 I have loss memory.  
 I have uncertainties.  
 I have no income.

I have an identity,  
 I have an ID;  
 Clinical, legal, educational, financial, now digital  
 Moments in passing,  
 Fleeting events  
 Flattened, frozen, fragmented  
 Elsewhere “synonymized,”  
 Even acronymized,  
 Formerly recognized and affirmed,  
 Indeed government-issued.  
 I carry it with me at all times  
 Bewildering goals...  
 Disempowerment...  
 Control.

A story.

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