

Silvi Shameti

Multicultural Education

Jody Cohen

5/16/14

Reclaiming Power and Presence Through Storytelling

“I wish there had been a reading group back when I was on the street,” says Natasha* as we leave the education classroom at Freshwater Correctional Facility*. Similar views have been expressed by other members of the reading group, and several have made the suggestion that we actually should take to the streets and start offering our resources to "at risk" youth to keep them out of trouble. Why do the women of the reading group seem to find our program so worthwhile and effective? To begin with, it involves two major dimensions: reading books that we think the women in the facility - as well as we - might find interesting (while taking their input into account), and presenting writing assignments that go along with the readings. Although we have struggled to define what exactly we wish to accomplish through our writing assignments and what we expect from our students, one thing is clear: the effect that these assignments have had on the women in the reading group cannot be ignored. Through the creating and sharing of their stories, I was able to witness the growth and development of so many females; I was able to see them find their voices and reclaim their agency - to tell their experiences the way they want them to be told instead of letting others make assumptions. These women reclaimed their truth, and told it through their own eyes, instead of letting others devour them with stereotypes. In a little classroom on the third floor of that correctional facility, I watched women come alive.

What is it about storytelling that evokes such a visceral reaction from those who encounter its effects? The answer seems to be as complexly layered and textured as humans themselves. For the

*Names have been changed.

longest time, storytelling was how we passed down our histories, how we wove and threaded our identities, our nations, and ourselves together to form unity and shared experiences. Storytelling is a unique form of communication and seems to take on many roles. The first is storytelling's ability to serve as fantasy. When someone is telling a story, they can create a new version of themselves or others; details can be embellished, changed, or left out, and people can take on the roles they wish they had or think they should have. The second has two layers: one, storytelling allows the teller to distance themselves from a thought, feeling, or experience and examine it detachedly and critically; two, this allows the storyteller to broach topics that would otherwise be too difficult or traumatic to approach on their own. Lastly, storytelling can be healing, therapeutic, and provide a vision for the future, in many ways: it gives people a voice and allows them to feel like they can use that voice to reach out to others and create change or meaning.

The first time I heard the women share their readings out loud, the reading group consisted of about twenty-one participants, and everyone was sitting in a circle that we had cleared in the middle of the small classroom. The assignment had been to discuss "homelessness and being at home." This is where the double-edged sword of fantasizing first came into play; many of the women did a great job envisioning homelessness through the eyes of someone currently experiencing it, but when it came to discussing the concept of "home," a lot of the stories we received discussed images of wholesome families and places filled with love, food, affection, and safety. How much of their descriptions are accurate is not something we can know, but this idea of romanticizing the outside world or life before prison seems to be a common theme of this kind of programming. The Medea Project, a theater program for incarcerated women run by Rhodessa Jones in which women being held in jail have the opportunity to write and perform a script based off of their own experiences, also uses storytelling as a

*Names have been changed.

major tool, and also addresses the topic of fantasizing. Sara Lander, another member of the team involved with the project, wrote an article called “The Medea Project: Mythic Theater for Incarcerated Women,” and included this passage after a similar assignment had been made in their program:

“Most women’s narratives described in tremendous detail not actual, but fantasy homes. Participant after participant shared stories about homes that exist only on *Nick at Night* reruns of *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie*....Miller’s *once upon a time* is situated in the temporality of myth, of the myth of the American dream replete with a house surrounded by a white picket fence. *Every* participant in the workshop described home as the place they wished they had grown up in as a child, the home they believe some lucky girl somewhere actually did grow up in. These descriptions of idealized homes are paradigmatic examples of the potential of myth to be interpreted in conservative, restrictive, and limiting ways. It is precisely this type of thinking and these types of social constructs that the Medea Project seeks to deconstruct” (485).

Sean Reynolds, a social worker also involved with the project, then asked the women describing these stories, “Who is going to make the muffins and bake all that bread? And, where are you going to get the money to buy all that nice stuff and not work, but sit around all day all safe and happy?” Rhodessa and Reynolds seem to be challenging the ways the women in the jail see their home lives in the hopes that they will be able to come to terms with a more realistic view and take a more critical approach towards their experiences. At our placement, however, we have struggled with deciding what kind of approach we want to take when it comes to this issue. On the one hand, fantasizing can offer a way for the women to reconcile their ideas of home and where they came from into something more soothing or comforting. Fantasizing could contribute to the healing process because it allows the women to explore

what they are looking for in a home, and what kind of home they might like to build if and when they have the opportunity to do so. It allows the women to create a future for themselves and the people they care about. However, it is also important to maintain a healthy dose of reality; in the quote above, it seems as though Reynolds is warning against developing an idealized situation that most people - whether incarcerated women or not - would have a hard time achieving, because unrealistic expectations can cause disappointment that could feed negative behaviors like addiction or forms of self-harm. Also, it is important to think about where these expectations of home life come from, and why the women seem to think they are necessary. Who decides what makes a good home? Is it done individually, by each of us, or does society set certain grounds for us to build our fantasies on? Taking a more critical approach with their own experiences and childhoods could enable the women to face their futures with a more realistic and critical eye, as well; planning for life outside of prison consists of a delicate balance between maintaining hope and positivity and learning to prepare for the challenges that will be faced.

Another issue of fantasizing has to do with the transient nature of the environments in which these stories are told. At Freshwater, some of the women have not even received a sentence yet, but continue to remain in the correctional facility as they await their trial. To them, the facility must feel like an institutionalized purgatory, where they wait to find out whether they will continue their stay, be moved to a different facility, or - in the best possible scenario - leave. It has been hard for me - and likely for many of the women, as well - to not consider this time in their lives transient, temporary, and the facility a place where they are held back from leading their “real” lives. For many of our writing assignments, the stories they give us are consistently about what their lives were like outside of prison - their childhoods, their families, their friends, even their addictions, their struggles, and their mistakes - or what

*Names have been changed.

their lives will be like after they return home. I have attended reading group at Freshwater almost every Friday for an entire semester now, and I have heard very little about what actually happens in the inmates' daily goings-on. What I do know comes in a very unstructured format - in the gossip shared between inmates from different cell blocks who normally do not have the chance to communicate with each other and the words traded back and forth across the classroom table. When we discuss whether the women would be interested in reading material about formerly incarcerated females' experiences, they reply, "We're already in prison. We don't need to read about it. We're living it." While this is a sentiment I can fully comprehend, something about the idea of putting aside their current experience in favor of past experiences, future ones, or reading about worlds very different from the ones they've inhabited (on the surface, because in fact the books we have read also illuminate the similarities in experiences) seems to me as though it is a way of not properly or wholly integrating their time in jail as a part of their identities or life stories, when it does, in fact, play quite a large role.

Fantasization, however, is only one element of the usefulness of the detachment that storytelling can provide. Warner writes,

"Each story in the storytelling ritual is an example of what Schechner calls restored behavior. When Jones asks the women to choose an episode from their lives and analyze it in relation to the production's foundation myth, she is asking them to restore behavior.This process allows the women to isolate a memory and then to distance themselves from it, creating a space where critical reflection is possible. ...The projection of a particular aspect of an identity enables the women to insist upon their value as humans despite the suffering they have endured or caused, and it helps to ensure that the restoration of the behavior, the retelling and re-enactment of the story, will not overwhelm the participant, which could result in further traumatization" (489).

*Names have been changed.

This idea of projecting one piece of identity and holding it up to the light for examination in a critical and removed way is a really meaningful tool for approaching difficult and traumatic experiences. In my placement at Freshwater, this concept has shown to be important in terms of the women's self-acceptance of themselves and their past decisions and their ability to move forward. Several of the women who come to our reading group have faced and battled with addiction - some were born into a family in which the issue was present - and their open discussion of the times in which they had to deal with the issue face-on seems to give them the opportunity to find value in themselves despite the choices they've made. Natasha is one of the participants who is very vocal about her past and the path that led her to Freshwater, and this voicing is often accompanied with a retrospective manner in which she seems to say that that is a life she may have once been a part of, but is now fully ready and willing to leave behind. This form of resolution achieved by separating herself as a human being and the issue that she faced seems to me to be at least partly a result of the development of her storytelling skills through her continuous participation and engagement in our reading group.

Natasha's enthusiasm for our reading group was evident to me the day that I stepped into the education classroom at the Freshwater facility. In fact, it felt to me like the reading group was the first chance that many of the women involved had to tell their stories. I felt as though a number of them had not been asked to share their opinions and have those opinions be valued many times before. The women residing in places like Freshwater have been made to feel invisible for the duration of their time there (and maybe some have felt invisible before they even arrived); their individuality has been swapped for an identical uniform worn by each inmate, and their identities have been reduced to the charges they were sent in on or the block they reside on. This reading group seemed to open up a whole new side of them and inject some vivacity into their moods (of course, not every class was a hit,

*Names have been changed.

but when they were, the energy in the room was very palpable.) To me, the most meaningful effect of storytelling was how eager it made the women to describe their own experiences, and how willing they were to listen to the experiences of others. The fact that they had constructed these pieces of themselves to be consumed by us, the audience, is a feat of strength in itself, and simply being able to engage in the act of writing without being told that it has to look or sound or be a certain way gave them the power to put forth a version of themselves as untainted by others as is possible (of course, not counting the fact that they were responding to our prompts). As they began to open themselves up more and more, some of the women began creating their own projects outside of our writing prompts and asking us for input. Two of the women, Angelique* and Chanelle*, devised written “cautionary tales” in which they used their own experiences in order to reach out to others. This idea that they could affect another person’s actions by telling their own stories - whether fictionalized accounts or not - suggests that they felt they had the power and ability to create change and movement in a place that attempts to stifle those very aspects. Perhaps some, like Natasha, had already had experience with creative or memoir writing, but for many, it was the first time they had provided this kind of work - and once they began, their ideas expanded. To me, this is one of the most therapeutic aspects of storytelling; the idea that one has the ability to create one’s identity and to share it with the world; the idea that the world will make space for one’s stories, that it will expand and grow to fit them in and add them to the collective human experience in a way that connects everyone’s struggles - that is what ultimately brings comfort and closure in an environment whose goal is to take away those very feelings.

Storytelling comes in many forms and has been a very important and moving part of our reading group. I will still never forget the class in which Angelique performed (with some help from fellow participants) a narrative she wrote where she engages her grandmother in dialogue in a way that she felt

*Names have been changed.

she could not do in real life. In that dialogue, she expressed her feelings exactly the way she wanted them to be expressed, without holding back, and it was one of the times where I felt most emotional during class. The pervasive effects of storytelling are clear for a good majority of the women involved, and one of the best things about storytelling is that everyone has the ability to become a storyteller, and it is something that cannot simply be taken away.

*Names have been changed.

Works Cited/Bibliography

Warner, Sara L. "'Do You Know What Bitch Is Backwards?': Mythic Revision and Ritual Reversal in the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women." *Dialectical Anthropology* 26.2 (2001): 159-79. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 May 2014.

Warner, Sara L. "The Medea Project: Mythic Theater for Incarcerated Women." *Feminist Studies* 30.2 (2004): 483-509. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 May 2014.

Williams, Rachel. "Narrative Art and Incarcerated Abused Women." *Art Education* 57.2 (2004): 46-52. *JSTOR*. Web. 16 May 2014.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3194115?ref=search-gateway:ebebf407a4d47c71f62089a34886af17>>.