Stories, Places: Storied Place and Placed Story

Carmen Blyth

"... the universe is not simply a place but a story—a story in which we are immersed, to which we belong, and out of which we arose."— Brian Swimme & Mary Evelyn Tucker

Introduction

According to storyteller and medical sociologist Arthur Frank stories "*enact* realities: they *bring into being* what was not there before" (Frank 2010, 75); they become lives, the lives of places and all that inhabits those places, capable of constituting conditions for either enriching or diminishing those lives. By inflicting themselves on places, their inhabitants, stories can limit or liberate them "according to whatever imagination the stories make available" (Frank 2012, 49): subject, object, subaltern, elite—all can be created, positioned, and "revision[ed]" (Richardson 1997, 299) by the story told. The story of *terra nullius*, for example, created and propagated by the settler colonizers and colonials of Australia by storifying matter as commodity there for the taking, uninhabited and ownerless as the story goes, enacted a reality of dispossession and established a hegemony of white Anglo male with all else 'othered', their stories pathologized, colonized.

However the reverse is also true: realities can enact stories, stories that when not silenced allow the 'other' to be heard, to be seen. These are stories that make visible (and compelling) the invisible—the links between place and inhabitant (Gruenewald 2003). Yet to decolonize¹ a story, reconfigure the story as one where subaltern has the potential to become a part of the subject (Barad 2007) with agency, within the context of the story told, can be (as in the case of Australia) a "narrative struggle" (Collins-Gearing and Osland 2010, para. 10) for the 'othered'. For place that had once been *hospitable* to its inhabitants—home—has been rendered *inhospitable* by the colonizers' stories, limiting 'others' to the margins of colonial life: liminal spaces—"a borderland . . . a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa, 1987, 3)—where imaginary resources with which to contest those myths of colonization are scarce (Fricker 2007), if existent at all.

¹ Coloniality as Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007, 243) says is different from colonialism and requires a different praxis referring as it does "to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of people, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day." The 'de-' in decoloniality therefore "indicates above all the need and the goal of the re-: epistemic reconstitutions, re-emergence, resurgence, re-existence. That is, neither new nor post" (Mignolo 2017, 5-6).

Yet the power of stories lies in their capacity to “*become true* as they are told” (Frank 2010, 49). For “the core truth” about stories is “not correspondence but performance” (Frank 2010, 41; see also Slaby, Mühlhoff and Wüschner 2017) and their very ability to balance multiple truths at one and the same time (Frank 2010). This is what lies at the heart of any story. Stories can thus provide a different way of knowing and a way of knowing differently (St Pierre 1997, 177), a way of contesting and decolonializing those stories, the discourses and practices, within places and spaces where the myths of Western colonization live and breathe, replicate and reproduce: schools and universities.

For a while now I have been “wondering” (MacLure 2013, 228) about, pondering this link between story and place, inhabitant and colonizer: the inextricable and intractable connections that come into being between them. And so in this brief diffractive piece where a constellation of concepts such as space, place, story, performance, hospitality, refrain, vibe, power to/power over, rhizomes, come together with ‘truth’ emanating from their entanglement, I hope to explore those connections and provide some compelling examples of story as place and place as story with particular reference to one particular place, a school², and the inhabitants of that particular school in Cape Town, South Africa. For in schools where matter, in all its forms, is “storied” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 1-2)—has its own story to tell—and storified, stories matter.

The school as storied and storified place

Everything in a school has stories to tell: not all will be legible, easy to translate (if at all), but many will provide compelling, “vivid”, articulate, powerful and moving (Cohen 2015, 275) tales of “co-existence, interdependence . . . extinctions and survivals” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014, 14). From the graffiti or lack thereof on desks and walls, hallways and restrooms, to those liminal places and spaces of doorways and doors, all ‘tell tales’ of inclusion and exclusion: nonlinguistic performativity in search of an active, willing listener—a home. So what stories does a school housed in buildings that date back to the Cape Town era of the late 1700s have to tell, buildings constructed by the Dutch and lived in with their families; buildings that have known many owners over a significant number of years, have witnessed enormous change take place—ecological, geopolitical and sociocultural—in this tiny south-western corner of the African continent? What stories do these walls and bricks, soil and grass communicate? What did/do those doors keep in, keep out, include, exclude; what difference did/do they allow to “connect”, merge for “the sake of exchange” (Rose 2002, 314)? How does school as storied and storified place interpolate and interpellate inhabitants and inhabitants place? In the sections that follow I use the notion of hospitality both in Derridean sense of “absolute hospitality” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 25; see also Derrida 2005, 6) and also in the way it is practiced locally as practical philosophy and philosophical practice by matter as text and text as matter (Barad 2007; see also Iovino and Oppermann 2014), as well as the Deleuze and Guattari (1987) notion of the ‘refrain’ to explore the questions raised above.

² I chose this particular school as the focus of my meditations as it is emblematic in its totality of how coloniality reterritorializes: with its very name, its storied colonial buildings, its colonial language of instruction, its Eurocentric curriculum, uniforms, customs and rituals, all pointing to the fact that epistemic reconstitutions, re-emergence, resurgence, re-existence are far from being embedded in the African context. The specific name of the school is not mentioned to ensure that the ethical rights of others are not infringed or violated.

The hospitable and inhospitable

The notion of hospitality and how it is practiced locally in South Africa differs from how it is practiced in the West according to Deumert and Mabandla (2017) in one major respect: unconditionality (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000; Derrida 2005)—that which is beyond duty or rights. The West with its middle-class urbanized Christian values retains the Kantian trace of tolerance, a socially held affect, posited by Kant in his *Third Article of Perpetual Peace* (1795), where the ‘stranger’ remains on the threshold—physically and metaphorically—made aware, corporeally and affectively rather than by word of mouth and/or written, that they are tolerated, virtually unwelcome ‘guests’ for whom the consequences of deviating from the behavioural norms required of the ‘guest’ can be dire. So too in South African Black urbanized upper and middle-class populations (Deumert and Mabandla 2017). Yet in South Africa those positioned as poor, working class exhibit a different praxis altogether (Deumert and Mabandla 2017): that of “absolute hospitality” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 25) where the ‘stranger’ is not seen as ‘other’ at all but rather different yet unconditionally welcome and welcomed (Deumert and Mabandla 2017): a stranger within (Derrida 1998, 2003; see also Anzaldúa 1987; as well as Ahmed 2000) with stories to tell.

However, it is not just inhabitants that make place hospitable to some inhospitable to ‘others’; storied and storified place creates boundaries, a “vibe” (Deumert and Mabandla 2017, 404), that can at one and the same time be welcoming and exclusionary, inclusive and exclusive, tentative, tolerant, curious, judgmental, and absolute. The “vibe” at this particular school is one of white Anglo male where ‘otherness’ at the superficial level of skin colour and sex is tolerated as long as the caveat of ‘essence’, that which is considered essential to belonging, is ‘right’. That English is taught as *the* home language points to what that essence might comprise. This is a school that is named after the English patron saint of crusades—slaying all that is strange, a stranger: not white, not Western—and presents itself as a (English) Grammar school, down to the very English school uniforms that can both constrain and liberate by the sense of ‘belonging’ it promotes or denies. So too the curriculum that offers only a patronizing nod to its “situated[ness]” (Haraway 1988, 581; see also Spry 2001, 710) in the African context and continent with its inclusion of Afrikaans and isiXhosa as languages additional to the English taught, a compulsory ‘home’ language despite students coming from many different linguistic backgrounds and home languages. The “vibe” (Deumert and Mabandla 2017, 404) as such is not just a personal corporeal presence but one that flows between inhabitants, a materiality of feeling that “sticks” (Ahmed 2004, 100) with students storified to the ‘norm’, the English grammar school norm where the historical experience of apartheid interpolates and interpellates them as nothing other than the stranger within, “strangers to [them]selves” (Kristeva 1991). This is a system that despite its political demise has managed to reconfigure itself, to “reterritorialize” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) what was there before.

As such the Deleuze and Guattari geo-philosophical notion of the “refrain” (Plateau 11 1837: Of the Refrain) is relevant here as the refrain of schools past—English grammar schools—has taken flight to land anew from whence it departed. The refrain, habits as much individual as they are social and cultural (Janz 2001) and material, is the stories

matter tells and retells that show us for what we are, leads us down different paths yet to the same ontology of story as something always a part of matter, that protects as it ventures out along “‘lines of drift’” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 312) with their “different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures, and sonorities” (p. 312): features that draw the listener in as does the refrain from any popular melody that we hum along with without realizing, and which when not fixed—not striated and striating, not sedimented and sedimenting—allows the body to deterritorialize. This is refrain as ontology, an ontology:

that provides tools to describe transformative, creative forces and movements... it presents a world understood as a complex of interconnected assemblages (earth, territory, forms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization), where the overriding norm is that of deterritorialization. (Patton 2000, 9)

However the refrain is as much a part of “horror stories” as it is of “fairy tales” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 312), positioning storyteller, whatever its form, as victim, or agent with the potential to challenge and thus to deterritorialize and/or reterritorialize their ‘life’ stories and hence their ‘lives’. Thus the paradox of the refrain, of these habits, is “the possibility of both rupture and sameness, in other words, *difference and repetition*” (Mazzei 2016, 151). And in this particular place at this particular time it repeats. For the place may have changed, deterritorialized (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3), its doors storified to admit a few of those previously excluded (the female, the coloured) but this refrain, striated and sedimented, acts to reterritorialize, recolonize, and restorify the ‘guest’ as ‘unwelcome guest’ with management—predominantly white Anglo male with one sole token coloured woman administrator appointed (Frank 2012, 2000; see also Fricker 2012)—the keepers of and at the ‘gate’. You might be allowed in but terms and conditions apply.

Power as in-formation

Such schools often posit that their practices are inclusive of all, different and alike. Such a pedagogy/ideology of supposed “colorblindness” (Schofield 2007; see also Aragón, Dovidio and Graham 2016, 2) where all are said to be seen as equal with difference not acknowledged at all although seemingly quite progressive is rather part of “flexible and malleable neoliberal assemblages” (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo and Rowan 2014, 39) which by virtue of their covertness are much more divisive, exclusionary and potentially destructive than an overt pedagogy/ideology of apartheid where difference is seen as ‘other’, with the ‘other’ subordinated and subordinate to what is considered the sociopolitical and discursive ‘norm’, excluded yet not indifferent to their very difference. For by ignoring difference/diversity, what is different and valued by ‘others’, “‘in-forms’” (Masumi in conversation with Mary Zournazi 2002, 224) the ‘other’—forms them, colonizes them, from the inside out to see difference as less than, shameful and valueless. Such internal colonialization means that the ‘other’ others themselves with no need for the dominant’s ethical condemnation (Leder 1996) and is a colonialization, a conditioning, that forms and sediments “the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 215) to perpetuate the status quo. It is what Masumi (Masumi in conversation with Mary Zournazi 2002, 224) following Foucault calls “power to” rather than “power over”:

Power comes up with us from the field of potential. It 'informs' us, it's intrinsic to our formation, it's part of our emergence as individuals, and it emerges with us—we actualise it, as it in-forms us. So in a way it's as potentialising as what we call freedom, only what it potentialises is limited to a number of predictable paths. It's the calculable part of affect, the most probable next steps and eventual outcomes. (Masumi in conversation with Mary Zournazi 2002, 224)

As Foucault ([1980] 2000, 275) reminds us: power produces rather than represses, regularizes rather than diversifies. And to produce a subject power requires "the destruction of what we are as well as the creation of a completely different thing, a total innovation."

Some final thoughts

Hospitality as productive power, one that resists the gravitational pull of Western doxa, is about understanding that commitments to diversity that do not bring about that which is promised are best understood as non-performative (Ahmed 2012). The all-too-often use of student demographics to demonstrate and celebrate diversity and equality as something already accomplished is however a clever (though dishonest) strategy that obscures the reality within, creating the fantasy that discrimination is indeed 'over' and a thing of the past. The creation of documentation attesting to diversity and equality in and of itself confirms this to be a matter of fact in the minds of the institution. Nothing could be further from the 'truth'. And so it falls to the stranger within to perturb this fantasy, perturb possibilities of acting other and 'other'. The fact that the stranger is already within ensures that the 'danger' posed is one of political "auto-immunity" (Derrida 1998, 2003), a challenge at once ontological as it is ethical and epistemological, with the institutional body politic under attack by its very self: a deconstruction of the self by the self. For storying and storytelling are deeply performative, physical experiences, intra-relational and more often than not shared. In this respect they are "virtual social imaginaries as much as (...) autobiographical reports on actual events" (Andrews and Duff 2019, 129). And they create places of opportunity: placed yet placeless places—concrete and territorial yet a part of the social imaginary—where difference abides and governance, policy, and administration no longer trace lives. These are places of opportunity that allow African notions of hospitality, that which underpins the southern African 'philosophy' of *Hunhu/Ubuntu*, to be neither consumed nor compromised in an effort to work against the normalizing tendency of schools to privilege presence over absence, Western ways of knowing, being and doing over an entirely different material reality.

In linking the Zulu/isiNdebele word *Ubuntu* with its Shona equivalent *Hunhu*, the South African Ubuntu scholar and philosopher Mogobe Bernard Ramose entwines the notion of Hu— and Ubu—, that of being, with that of —ntu and —nhu: knowing: the ontological with the epistemological (Ramose 1999, 50): knowing in being. Both words (*Hunhu/Ubuntu*) also speak to the character of a person, their conduct and as such also entwines the ethical with the ontological with the epistemological. As such the Western conception of Ubuntu that views it as an anthropocentric philosophy could not be more misguided as it is at once philosophy and praxis, a philosophical practice and practical philosophy that sees humanity as part of the never-ending unfolding of life forces and knowledge within

a “dynamic, relational, and necessarily uncertain/unknowable future” (Wu, Eaton, Robinson-Morris, Wallace, and Han 2018, 11). From an African perspective one's being is always relational, always informed and formed through an active engagement with the cosmos in its entirety (Wu, Eaton, Robinson-Morris, Wallace, and Han 2018), colonizers included. And to ignore this is to negate the very humanity which binds us all together to the world in all its materialdiscursive entirety (Ramose 1999).

To “move beyond the conditional acceptance of difference is at the heart of the ethics of hospitality” Deumert and Mabandla (2017, 404) state and to allow difference to interconnect and merge for the sake of exchange, “to facilitate interdependence” (Rose 2002, 314) vital if we are to decolonialize the places where the colonial refrain remains the same: intact. For it is only in so doing that the refrain will effect the “holding together of heterogeneous elements” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 323) that allows for deterritorialization to fold and unfold. And it is only under such conditions, where the ‘other’ can tell their stories in their own ways dispelling myths of inferiority (Maldonado-Torres 2017, 130), that place and inhabitant become “a-grammatical and a-signifying” (MacLure 2016, 173), a “potential threat to order” (MacLure 2016, 175) that can cause the colonizers' stories to stutter, to make false starts, to pause (MacLure 2016, 176), to facilitate what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call “rhizomatic” assemblages to manifest, an “embodied flow of pauses and rushes” (Hickey-Moody 2013, 278) to emerge and make decoloniality, currently virtual-potentiality-in-the-making, a reality.

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