Making Space for Stories: Communities, Narrative and Action

by Angus Leech

> *"...home is not a place only, but a condition of the heart. Barren, frozen, burning, trembling or sinking - it is a house of breath. A living place, ghosted with histories and fused with the bones of our fathers. Loved or hated, home is a part of us, a living cell slowly dividing into memory. An ache, or a warmth; a sound or an echo; a dream or a nightmare."*
>
> - Harry W. Paige, "leave if you can"

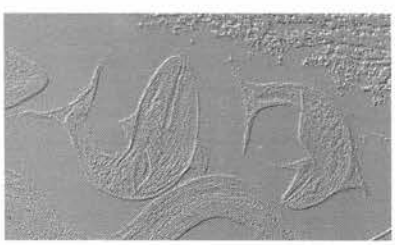
Human communities are inherently, intrinsically storied. The statement is at once obvious and in need of elaboration. That communities are composed of individuals and groups who tell each other stories almost goes without saying. Yet the role of these stories in influencing the interactions, identities and worldviews which exist within, and essentially define communities is a matter for some ponderance, and perhaps inestimable importance.

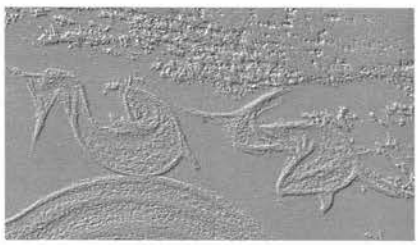
There has, of late, been a virtual explosion of interest concerning the idea of narrative within what are commonly referred to as the 'human sciences' (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). Participants within fields as diverse as Psychology, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Feminist Studies, and History (and, of course, interdisciplinary Environmental Studies) have begun to incorporate heightened concern for narrative methods and epistemologies into their work, and I will draw upon several such authors in the discussion which follows. The purpose here: to illuminate some of the ways in which narrative functions within the dynamics of culture, and to suggest that the inherently storied nature of communities has implications for organising and action. [Note that, throughout this essay, unless otherwise specified, the terms "narrative" and "story" are regarded as equivalent and used interchangeably.]

To start things off, Maines and Bridger (1992) offer some introductory opinions with respect to the narrative character of community, from a social science perspective. The following insights are primarily theirs.

Most authors who have taken up this discussion agree that "narratives are a primary mechanism for transforming the flux of experience and segmentation in social orders into meaningful wholes"(p.363). In other words, we understand the world through stories. They are one principle means of ordering objects, events, facts, and places into meaningful wholes. Stories help us to negotiate and interpret our lives. They are our navigational instruments in a sea of possible realities.

With this general perspective in mind, it is possible to highlight ways in which storytelling is relevant to both group consciousness and that difficult-to-define phenomenon which we might refer to as "community." We learn about society and our status and roles within it primarily through stories. Stories link people, events and time, providing versions of reality which "contribute to the flow of meaning that rests at the heart of any society" (p.366). Stories help to build group solidarity and challenge authority, define identity and distinguish community members from outsiders; they create links, tying us to events, places and other people, weaving messages and values into memorable plots fit to be passed on, fluidly, under breaths or over loudspeakers. Narratives are, above all, essentially collective acts. They are "fundamental aspects of the cultural order," and, following the ideas of Max Weber, "forever interlinked with political and economic orders" (p.364). That is, they are inherently political, inextricably tied to our ideologies, social structures and ways of making a living. Narratives are tools of persuasion, functioning upon the basis of their coherence and believability. In sum, stories are "indispensable to social organisation in that they are one class of practices through which such organisation is created, maintained, or modified" (p.366). As Maines and Bridger finally point out, the role of narrative is so fundamental to social dynamics that "communities cannot exist without stories" (p.366). Julian Rappaport (1993), notes that several scholars have gone as far as to suggest that narrative may in fact be the *defining characteristic* of community.





Considering the above comments, the potential relevance of narrative to community organising and action begins to suggest itself. While the possible applications of a narrative viewpoint with respect to the broadly defined communitarian movement are numerous, I have chosen to begin my own explorations herein by concentrating upon the role of narrative in community-based social action, empowerment and cultural retention. Of the various possible paths of discussion of which I am becoming aware, this seems to be one of the most developed in the literature. While the discussion of community and narrative in the sources upon which I draw has been largely academic (perhaps too academic, considering the topic at hand), my overall intention is to argue that "community narratives" should and do play an essential role within practical approaches to community building and activism.

categories of narrative

In carrying this conversation further, it will prove useful to define and distinguish between some of the main types of cultural narrative. Rappaport (1995) distinguishes *between*

"community narratives", *"personal stories,"* and *"dominant cultural narratives."* While attempts to draw such boundaries are recognised as problematic, the intention is not to invoke absolutes. Rather, it will simply serve toward clarifying the following discussion to be able to speak in terms of some general nodes within the field or spectrum of story, community and mass narratives being of principle interest to the points to be made later on.

Community narratives may be understood as stories that are common among a group of people, potentially being shared through social interaction, texts, and other variable forms of communication, including pictures, performances, and rituals. In general, community narratives tell members something of themselves, their history and views of the future. In earlier work, Rappaport emphasises that such narratives are inherently functional within communities, in that "they communicate to members and others what the community is like, how it came to be that way, and (sometimes explicitly) what behaviour is expected" (1993; p.249). It is this essence of functionality which makes community narratives so relevant, probably necessary to community work, as will be discussed shortly.

Dominant cultural narratives (or 'mass' narratives) are defined by Rappaport as "those over-learned stories communicated through mass media or social institutions that touch the lives of most people, such as television, newspapers, public schools, churches, or social network gossip. These narratives are known to most people in a given society and serve as an influential backdrop against which more localised community narratives and personal stories are told" (1995; p.803). Dominant cultural narratives are those imposed upon communities from external sources and forces, and "for some people, these dominant cultural narratives, even if they are very negative, remain so powerful that despite their own desire to escape from them it is difficult to find alternative personal or community stories to replace them" (1995; p.803).

Personal stories are explained by Rappaport as "an individual's cognitive representation or social communication of events that are unique to that person, for example, one's own life story, organised temporally and thematically." Personal stories do not, of course, exist in a vacuum, but are profoundly influenced and acted upon by the wider narratives with which individuals come into contact. It would seem that they arise somewhere at the interface between individual experience and group consciousness. Rappaport notes that both communal and mass narratives affect people on a personal level, influencing the personalised stories which we use as social maps.

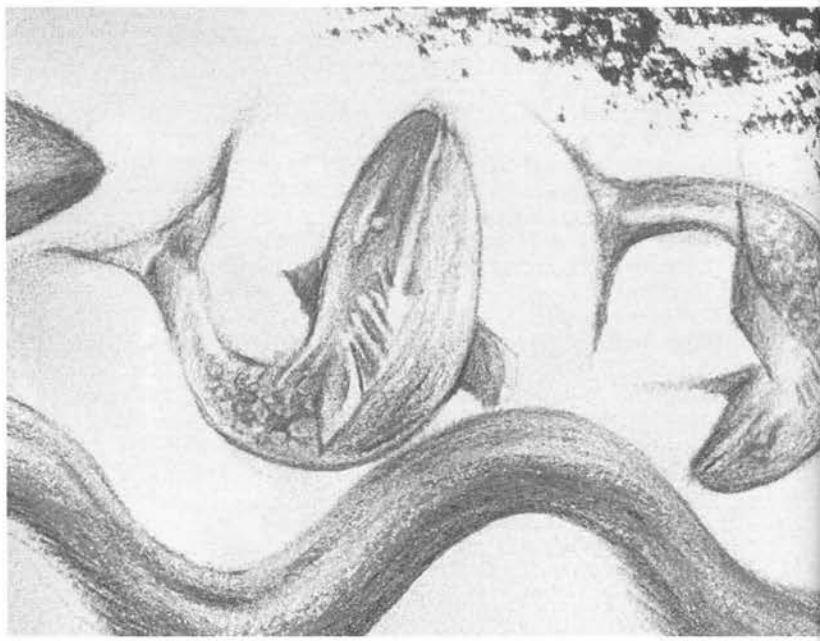
Briefly (so as not to become gloomy), some of the less-positive effects of increasingly uniform, globalised and placeless mass narratives are becoming more widely recognised by those whose concerns gravitate toward the health of people and of communities. As Marcia Nozick (1992) warns, the uniform conformity of mass culture tends toward the destruction of "the authenticity and unique character of our communities along with our feelings of community pride in where we live and our histories." Dominant cultural narratives influence and frequently tend to subvert and disparage localised community narratives, and this erosive relationship should be of no small concern to those working toward communitarian goals. Evident here is a visible need to re-energise locally-based narratives as strong alternatives, or balancing counterpoints, to mass culture. When considered in such a light, the revitalisation of community narratives may be seen as a subtle, yet explicit act of resistance to the colonising discourses of global culture.

But if we are to work toward community-based change, how and why is it important to maintain strong local communal narratives? How do such narratives function in support of community action?

narrative function

In order to indicate their relevance to community action, the functional nature of community narratives must be addressed further. It is important to recognise that initiatives for community action fundamentally incorporate an element of social change - change which occurs on both community and individual levels. Community groups assemble and work towards certain goals which are defined by the values of group members, and the pursuit of such action requires work inspired by a communal perception that some sort of change is necessary and desirable.

To reiterate an earlier point, in many ways, stories function as the glue holding community together, communicating common history, local knowledge, and social guidelines to community members. However, even very traditional communities do not exist in stasis, and stories also have a central role within processes of community change. Indeed, as Rappaport (1995) asserts, community narratives can be a powerful force for generating both personal and social change.



Rappaport relates storytelling specifically to group empowerment, suggesting that the act of listening to stories and helping people to identify, create and relate both their personal stories and their collective narratives is itself an empowering activity. He also casts light upon the relationship between personal stories and community narratives, noting that:

"...people who seek either personal or community change often find that it is very difficult to sustain change without the support of a collectivity that provides a new communal narrative around which they can sustain changes in their own personal story." (1995; p.796)

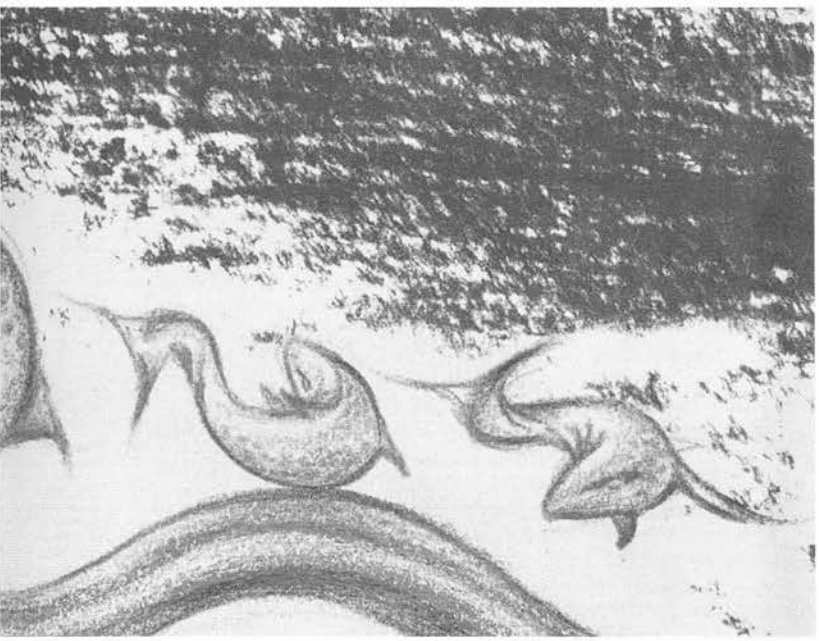
Rappaport contends that "everyone needs a community narrative to support one's personal life story, especially if that life story is being newly created" (1995; p.804). An element of co-dependence between community narratives and personal identity is thus made obvious, indicating that community change is necessarily accompanied by simultaneous changes in the perspectives of individuals, and vice versa. There appear to be firm links here between processes of so-

cial change and what Rappaport (1993) would refer to as "identity transformation," meaning alterations in the identities and perceptions of community members. Where social changes occur, identity transformations at the community and personal level also occur.

If personal and social change are so linked, then the influence of any narrative which affects personal stories is of importance. The above arguments imply that a strong community narrative is necessary for supporting local change; for instance, in the context of community organising. But how does this work? Why are such narratives essential? How do stories underlie and support action, create the possibility for change, and/or motivate people toward resistance?

narratives in action

In addressing these questions, Richard A. Couto (1993) notes that narratives make vital contributions to social movements, and provide a link between local struggles and wider ones. To begin with, stories can help to communicate and maintain a belief in the virtues or values shared by members of oppressed groups, or, to extend the idea to a parallel context, those shared within communities. Couto draws upon the concept of the "community of memory", as developed



by Robert Bellah and associates. This 'community of memory' refers to a collective memory - one perpetuated by storytelling - which nurtures individuals by conveying a moral tradition that reinforces the aspirations of the group. The community of memory creates hope and supports the possibility of future transformative social change. It preserves a sense of dignity and worth, even among heavily marginalized, oppressed and discredited groups.

Second, Couto claims that narratives support social movements by communicating an internal understanding of a group's lifestyle and social condition (based on internal experience), in contrast to perceptions which may prevail within mass culture. Considered in the context of community activism, this suggests that stories help to maintain locally-embedded perceptions of reality as alternatives to those purveyed by mass culture. Community narratives tend to support and validate world-views which value local ways of life, and allow externally derived views to be put into perspective, to be denaturalised. Local stories preserve the uniquely-rooted language, voice and traditions of communities. Butler (1996), in reference to the role of narrative in helping minority Caribbean groups in North America preserve ethnic identity, refers to this general process as "cultural retention." Both Couto and Butler note that the narratives of oppressed groups can operate with incredible tenacity, preserving situated understandings even in the face of extreme limitations upon expression.

In at least these two basic ways, narrative functions to maintain cohesive community identity in resistance to outside influences. Couto, moving further, proposes that narratives actually act to mobilise groups to attempt political change. Social action is not initiated directly, per se; rather, "narratives provide deep and lasting insights into the need and methods of change to individuals who lead social movements or support them despite risks to themselves" (1993; p.61). In a sense, "social movements are possible, in part, because narratives...preserve an understanding of why they are necessary" (p.76). A community's stories also offer members measures of progress and change over time, offering support in matters of hope.

To sum up, community narratives tend to underpin the identity and direction of a community and, to some extent, its members. Where change is sought, such narratives are a major catalyst for making community-based action possible. If strong communal narratives do not exist, then the community is unlikely to be stable, coherent, or viable; goals for change are unlikely to be supported by effective communication among community members concerning reasons and strategies for its acheivement. In the case of such absence, plans for community organising may be dependent upon their ability to address this factor.

Of course, in order for a community's stories to narrate its virtues, offer alternative perspectives, and mobilise members toward seeking political change, these stories must be allowed a space to exist.

free space

Couto (1993) emphasises the need for the creation of "free spaces," defined as "environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of co-operation and civic virtue" (1993; p.59). Put another way, free spaces are environments wherein it is safe for community members to create and communicate community narratives, in order to express local values and maintain alternative understandings.

As noted in the previous section, both Couto and Butler (1996) comment upon the tenacity of communal narratives, even in the face of severe oppression, noting their tendency to move underground in times when overt expression is impossible. Such narratives appear to compress or expand to occupy whatever social space they are permitted. In times of severe repression, such spaces could be restricted to the home, or to individual minds, but as oppressive conditions diminish, change and resistance in part entail the claiming of new spaces for dialogue. As Couto points out, the creation of new free space is itself a political act - a form of action - and permits expanding numbers of people to recognise their ties to a community of memory and initiate strategies for change.

It would seem to follow that, if community action initiatives require community narratives to support them, then they also require free spaces for such stories to multiply and spread. The creation of free space and strong communal narratives can thus be seen as mutually requisite for successful community action.

culture, culture, culture

Given all of this, it seems reasonable to suggest more confidently that attempts at community organising would typi-

cally benefit from (indeed, might in many ways require) the support of strong communal narratives, as long-term group action may not be viable in the absence of stories which function to define communities as cohesive and valid, mobilise members, build solidarity, and otherwise establish values, goals and a vision of how they should be attained. Undoubtably this is an underlying, if often unrecognised factor in many successful organising attempts, and many community activists appear to be aware of this narrative role on some level; my point is not to disparage their good efforts, nor to put down their less successful outings. Rather, I am simply reacting to a seeming imbalance which tends to lie manifest within such activism, wherein emphasis is so often loaded upon 'practical' strategies such as 'community economic development,' while so little attention (at least initially and in most cases) is allotted to the robustness of local culture. Perhaps what is at work here, in part, is the tendency within our Western society to exclude narrative knowledge and what is generally categorised as 'culture' from the realms of authoritative discourse, leaving those geographies safely in the keeping of economics, science, and other such 'rational' modes of thinking. This is a subject for another place and time, to be sure, but one that may serve to situate the reluctance of many who work in community (various wonderful popular educators and others excepted) to address the 'intangible' side of community dynamics - a side which, though perhaps ethereal and impossible to quantify, seems to have the potential strength of super-glue when it comes to the bonds of community.

Indeed, projects initiated without this kind of attention and/or support in some form seem unlikely to succeed. Take, for example, the near multitudes of community initiatives which start with promise but ultimately fail, often because the initiating organisation (however well-intentioned) moves on or falters, leaving little behind in the way of a shared narrative (ie: impetus) to sustain activity. On the other hand, if initiatives are accompanied by strong internal narratives (the discovery or generation of which might have to be nurtured before or during the inception of 'practical' activities), and if these stories are incorporated into the 'community of memory,' then strategies for community organisation are bound to attain a significant degree of longevity in the minds and wills of community members. They will no longer simply be action plans; they will be breathing parts of local lives, sustained by dreams and visions instead of mere bureaucracy.

As endless cases involving indigenous groups, gentrified neighbourhoods, and colonised landscapes have made obvious, to undermine a community's culture is to sap its soul; to prepare the ground for its assimilation, marginalisation, or outright obliteration. Culture (read: story, tradition, experience, history, creativity, symbol, material practice, and hope), if able to persist, forms the fulcrum upon which the survival and resistance of communities faced with adverse conditions rests. Were I to advocate one thing within this piece of writing, it would be that the centrality of 'community culture' (of which narratives are a defining part) become more widely recognised and embraced by community activists, bioregionalists, planners, educational organisations, and anyone else interested in locally-based social change. Such a challenge goes out in particular to community-based environmental activists who, while often doing a wonderful job of paying attention to stream contamination, wildlife habitat, permaculture and air pollution, too often seem to ignore entirely the cultural side of environmental issues, forgetting that it is the stories we tell one another which perpetuate the ability and desire to critique our own behaviour and relate it to the influence of others.

I have tried to lay down a brief explanation of why communal narratives may play a vital role in community action, local activism, and cultural retention. What I have NOT attempted to tackle herein is the somewhat daunting question of HOW this might be approached in a practical sense. Such a task is beyond the scope of this piece, and perhaps beyond my own experience as well. Thus, I will limit myself to a few words of ...

encouragement

In the First Nations community of Wasauksing at Parry Sound, three hours north of Toronto, FES Masters student Brian McInnes is engaged in an ethnolinguistic project. Concerned that the traditional place-based stories and language of his community are disappearing, and with them the keystones of local Ojibwe culture, Brian has been collecting and documenting narratives from local elders. This has been done with the intent of compiling them in a Cultural Atlas of maps and stories which may be used as an educational resource, in the hope of renewing interest among young community members while there still remain elders to pass such knowledge on.

Sylvia Bowerbank (1997) has recently written of efforts in the area of Hamilton Harbour to adopt community place-based oral histories as a valid form of knowledge with respect to local environmental decision making. Free space for the articulation of community narratives is being reclaimed in the form of publications from local artists which explore connections between local identity and ecology, as well as outdoor storytelling events wherein local community members tell tales about their personal experiences in the Harbour.

In many places across North America, community and bioregional mapping projects (maps being themselves a narrative form) are engaged in the process of seeking validation for local perspectives through geographical representation, weaving together ecological information, human history, and local story in a form that may be used to communicate both within communities and without. To offer a home-grown example, Zion Heights Junior High School, as part of a larger project initiated by the North York Board of Education, is using multi-media community mapping as a tool for connecting curriculum to local ecology and history, employing maps (an arguably narrative medium) for the purposes of ecological monitoring, restoration, and illustrating histories of environmental change. The maps are also being used to share stories about local experience and senses of place.

Finally, there are perhaps inklings of a wider narrative project in the works. Storytelling in the form of literature, whether fiction, journalism, ethnography or essays of place, is increasingly being incorporated as a venue for exploring issues of community. This may be essential, for individual communities are not the only places where free space for dialogue needs to be claimed - space in which mass cultural narratives may be critiqued on the basis of the experiences of community members. What is also required is the introduction of challenging counter-narratives with alternative values - such as those novelistic renditions which Sandra Zagarell (1988) refers to as "Narratives of Community" - into the mass cultural narrative stream itself. In other words, free spaces must be claimed not just within communities, but in the realm of mass culture which inevitably influences them.

Overall, incorporating greater concern for narrative into community movements would involve the revitalisation, and preservation of local community stories, and perhaps more importantly, spaces for telling. As community activist Marcia Nozick (1992) suggests, maintaining community culture necessarily entails the reclaiming of our regional social and natural histories - inching back across the spectrum from uniformity toward diversity and polyculturalism, and reconnect-

ing with all types of local heritage. This will require the validation, reinforcement and reinvention of an alternative context for living, and that is a struggle for storytellers.

epilogue

Late afternoon. An old woman and man sit on the porch of their small, rural north Ontario home. The man quietly talks while his wife flips through a series of large, dilapidated photo albums, every once in a while punctuating his rambling banter with a correction or appraisal. They have lived in this spot ever since being married on a warm August afternoon in 1946, and their families have lived here longer. The photos and clippings in the album span several generations, offering breaths of history from last year's fall picnic to her great grandfather's exploits as a fishing guide. Stands of white pine are stripped from rolling hillsides, locks and roads are variously erected, wild rice is planted and churches burn down, and the life of a waterway is sewn out of tattered fragments of remembering. They have come from many sources, these crackling snapshots, from travellers and newspapers, developer's records and relatives passed on; carefully compiled by successive pairs of hands, each belonging to an historian of some skill and affection. Perhaps the local township will find a little money to compile and publish the highlights in a small book next year. That boy from the west branch of the lake came by the other day, saying he already has the thing half-written. It will be no more and no less than a collection of everything certain prominent locals want to remember, everything they want visitors to know, about this little patch of forest green. The old woman's watery eyes hold my own as she closes up the last album. "After all," she whispers, "a lot of things are changing these days." Her husband nods agreement, looking off to the side at some unspecified distant point. "Sure, we seen a lot of changes, allright. An' these days, lots more things are changing. Why, I 'member another time..."

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