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Korina Jocson
Cee Carter
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Kimberly McIntee
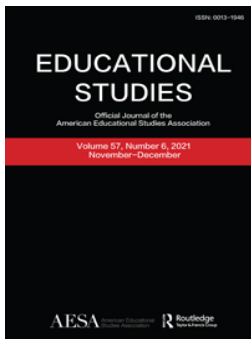Mariam Rashid, et al.

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Plateaus, Puzzles, and PhDs: Un/Making Knowledge Differently through Digital Storytelling

Korina M. Jocson [ID], Cee Carter [ID], Olga Correa [ID], Kimberly McIntee [ID], Mariam Rashid [ID], Benjamin D. Scherrer [ID], and Alisha Smith Jean-Denis [ID]

University of Massachusetts–Amherst

ABSTRACT

Digital storytelling as part of study creates an opening for reworking ideas. It marks an instance of recognition to access alternative ways of knowing, thinking, and doing. Guided by radical black studies and decolonizing methodologies, the authors draw on insights from digital storytelling to extend current understandings of educational research, theory, and practice. The connections across five digital stories are highlighted through a retrospective analysis of educational journeys to and beyond doctoral study. The digital stories are presented in a series of plateaus to (1) challenge the constraints of academic writing and (2) signal methodological openings in collective restorying. To that end, the authors unravel processes of becoming, trouble the pedagogical encounters in their work, and push for otherwise possibilities to make room for the not-yet.

I am embracing the work of challenging existing narratives of marginalized communities.

– Olga

My time teaching … was a lesson in understanding how my struggle is bound up with young people and their struggle for a dignified life and education.

– Cee

As I dug deeper into the memories and still images of my childhood and neighborhood … a digital story provided the layers and texture that a written assignment might not.

– Alisha

Digital storytelling has been a useful tool for expanding pedagogical possibilities with media technology at different levels. It has been valuable to educators and researchers interested in examining the link between cognition and modality. For us, it has been constructive to draw on digital storytelling as part of our study, a kind of intellectual practice that involves revisiting and reworking ideas to create openings in our academic labor. The mode of activity occurred in relation to the university of which we are members but also extended beyond the confines of the university, to refuse the normalized ways it regulates and suppresses study. Digital storytelling from this view marked an instance of recognition to access alternative ways of knowing, thinking, and doing.

It offered a way to join in multimodal resistance against hierarchies and forms of silencing that happen in higher education (Medina, 2018); at the same time, it created an opportunity for cross-cultural collaboration and learning toward the new humanities (Benmayor, 2008). Within literacy and educational studies, the recursive nature of composition, multimodality, and semiotic relationships in digital storytelling has been discussed, particularly among youth producers outside of schools and students working together in classrooms (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Jocson, 2016; Miller & McVee, 2012; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010). Apart from identity and agency in digital storytelling are broader educational and political projects that highlight community approaches on decolonization, mobilization, and activism (Poitras Pratt, 2020; Vivienne, 2016). Such projects have been significant in demonstrating the potential of digital stories as resources for shaping modes of learning in the context of doctoral study. It is to this end that we offer some perspectives based on our time together in a generative space we have created and in being answerable to learning as transformation (Patel, 2016).

Storying practices in education

If storytelling can serve as a method of research, then there is much potential in research as storytelling, as writing and theory making, as intervening (Smith, 1999/2012). This potential in storytelling as research and research as storytelling is key in the process of study. According to Lewis (2011), "It is in the stories of our everyday being, in our trying to live well with the challenges of being that we may engender some insight or percipience" (p. 506). It is the stories, specifically digital stories in the context of our study, wherein lies insight that not only lifts up particular histories but also enables more questions about being, becoming, and otherwise worlds we hope to engender in our intellectual work (King, Navarro, & Smith, 2020). The form of our storytelling in this article borrows from storying practices that point to (micro)political grapplings relevant to pedagogical encounters, troubling *what is* and unmasking *what could be* in a qualitative inquiry course (Nxumalo et al., 2020). The form of our storytelling also resembles the transgressive practices of teaching and learning in a poststructural research course (Kuby et al., 2016). Such practices engender for us a particular entry point for (re)turning to digital stories previously produced in our own respective research course and subsequent independent study. In that sense, the co-writing of this article provides a basis for "ongoing dialogue among continuously co-evolving multiple selves that may frequently contradict" but, as we will point out, also enable space for questions "to grow without obliterating one another" (Nagar, 2014, p. 163). Below, we highlight digital stories by Cee, Olga, Kimberly, Mariam, Benjamin, and Alisha to uncover tensions and potentialities of inquiry propelling us to read more widely, think capaciously, and un/make knowledge differently. First, it is important to provide some context for the production of digital stories and the retrospective lens for analysis, to pick up where we left off, so to speak.

The assignment

Who am I as a researcher? is a question posed for study that Korina typically asks doctoral students to answer in an assignment for a Critical Research in Education course. The added challenge in the assignment is that the answer(s) to the question must be

creatively rendered in a digital story, requiring a degree of vulnerability and technical knowledge. Pedagogically, Korina draws on her vulnerabilities to offer a brief portrait of being Pinay (Filipinx American) at predominantly white institutions. One of those vulnerabilities intimates the personal relevance of "PhD" or Pinay having Delusions as associated with issues of imposter, belongingness, and underrepresentation in higher education (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Flores Niemann, Gonzalez, & Harris, 2012; Maramba & Bonus, 2013). She offers a range of experiences as a researcher with a background in ethnic studies and education, trained in conventional methods, who also utilizes arts-based approaches; as a media composer whose standpoint is contoured by colonization and settler colonial relations; as a multilingual writer influenced by radical women of color writers and poets; as a motherscholar sustained by immigrant diasporic communities. While always partial and incomplete, this portrait becomes an invitation to how one arrives at research with contingent and entangled social relations.

The storytellers

Who am I as a researcher? is an open question that serves as a further invitation to interrogate processes of becoming-researcher. Some of these processes are braided[1] through the multimodal layering and analytic framing as presented in the digital stories below. All of the storytellers are either former K-12 educators, school leaders, and community-based practitioners who hail from all over the world. They are at different stages of their doctoral study with varying interests in critical education. They all participated in the same class in the Spring of 2020, with the exception of Alisha who was a member of another class in the Spring of 2017. Alisha's digital story served as an example to help incite ideas for this group. Desiring a deeper engagement of being answerable to learning as transformation, all of the storytellers *chose* to reconvene in a subsequent independent study to further theorize and write in ways that had not yet been exercised in their Education doctoral trajectories, resulting in this retrospective analysis. Portraits of being a scholar along with the joys, struggles, and rigidities of graduate education are illuminated in the digital stories. What follows in the next section are various aspects of their/our processes of becoming, individually and collectively, as guided by radical black[2] studies and decolonizing methodologies.

The production

The task of producing a digital story often demands a thoughtful approach to unearthing a textured life. It is not as simple as one initially imagines. The multimodal requirement of creating a two-minute digital story within a small window of the semester sets the class assignment apart from other graduate level work for several reasons. First, the length of the digital story seems short but proves to be challenging for some students given the semiotic power of multimodality (Hull & Nelson, 2005). Second, while examples of previously-produced digital stories are shared in class, students are responsible for individually seeking resources and technical assistance (i.e., the university's digital media lab, online tutorial, "do-it-yourself" editing YouTube videos, family members and friends, or even neighbors). That is, they are encouraged to tinker with digital

production tools on their own, to experiment, to "mess around" as part of learning with new media (Ito et al., 2013). While some digital stories are workshopped or produced in spaces that allow multiple participants to share ideas in the creation of their stories (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012), this particular assignment was generated individually outside of class, with the exception of Mariam and Benjamin who took a joint approach, offering a uniquely curated digital story. Third, the expectation in digital storytelling invites students to draw on their life experiences similar to centering experiential knowledge in digital testimonio (Medina, 2018). Indeed, there are many different possibilities in telling one's story. The idea in the assignment is to be open to different ways of knowing, thinking, and doing.

Noted elsewhere (Jocson, 2012) are analyses of the different elements and techniques in digital storytelling. The process typically involves the (re)assembling of archived or prefabricated materials as a genre of art creation. Multimodality in composition entails a kind of layering and sequencing of image, sound, and voice that potentially affords different meaning(s), which may be blurred or amplified using technical transitions (Tables 1 and 2). While this creative process can be very exciting, what we have come to realize in (re)turning to the digital stories are the im/possibilities of representational logic and the sedentary categories that flatten the "manifold of forces and intensities that are moving, connecting and diverging" (McLure, 2013, p. 660) all the time. The tendency of the well-intentioned researcher is to make categorical common sense of the world and explain it (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). But as we are reminded, even the many layers in digital stories are limited by representational thought and orient us to the contradictions they hold. Thus, we maintain storytelling as a method in shaping ways of knowing, thinking, and doing, yet also avail ourselves to the impermanence of who and the limits of what can be known and explained.
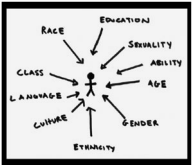
The retrospection

Key to the practice of revisiting and reworking ideas to create openings in the production of the digital stories are the ongoing retrospective analyses. These analyses are not just about looking back to look forward, but are akin to sifting through or contemplating the various nodes in our constitutive constellation while (re)reading possible data to steer from more categorically limited approaches to analysis. In engaging the digital story assignment, the storytellers not only grapple with answering the question, *who am I as a researcher?* but also acknowledge the collapsing of difference within always already entangled selves. The collapsing of difference tends to reduce complex entanglements to particular social identities based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, and ability, among others, that may not account for the fluid, often overlapping, influence of social locations. Digging into (the limits of) positionality becomes the pulse toward formulating a response. In sharing their stories to a class audience, with space for generative discussion between each, the storytellers actively name these collective pulses in their learning. The sharing becomes a pedagogical moment for retrospective analysis and propels renewed thinking about storying connections, dis/continuities methodologies, questions and more, making production choices clearer.

Table 1. Summary of Digital Stories Toward Collective Restorying.

Name and title	Format, editing tool	Total running time	Number of images	Storying mode	Transitions, graphics, effects	Thematic elements
Olga *Choosing the Margins*	iMovie	2:13	29	Narration Song 1: "En Barranquilla Me Quedo" by Joe Arroyo Song 2: "Lucid Dreams" by Juice WRLD	Cross-dissolve, pan and zoom effect Found and personal photos Direct quote, word clouds	Family, education, community, youth work
Cee *I Am and Becoming*	Powerpoint presentation	3:27	20	Live performance and reading with story script Song: "Black Truck" by Mereba	Powerpoint animation (blinds, dissolve in, peek in, fly in) Bluetooth speaker with song playing in low volume Holding script	Family, education, teaching, youth, play of expression
Alisha *Breaking New Ground*	iMovie	2:20	28	Narration Poem: *Hey, Black Child* Song 1: "Road to Zion" by Damian Marley Song 2: "The Questions" by Common	Standing at the front of class Still images of childhood Found and personal photos, pan and zoom effect (i.e., books that shape my thinking with question marks)	Neighborhood, family, schools, youth
Kimberly *Humble Beginnings*	Microsoft Video Editor, Samsung Collage	1:50	25	Narration Background music; melodic music with no words	Intentional graphics (i.e, fire flames, "broken glass" transition)	Family, community, education, representation
Mariam and Benjamin *Colonial Crossroads*	iMovie	5:53	23	Narration in turns Background dub reggae music with no words	Still images fading in and out ("Ken Burns effect") Found and personal photos Intentional graphics	Family, coloniality, interconnected-ness, migration, displacement, Anthropocene, hope and possibility

Table 2. Sample of multimodal layering in digital story – Olga's *Choosing the Margins*.

	Written/Voice narration	Visual/Image	Audio/Sound	Effects
00:00–00:16	"Answering the question, *who am I as a researcher*? is directly related to the ways in which my intersecting identities have positioned me to view the world, engage my community, and conduct my research."		No background music to focus on my voice and to grab the audience's attention	Puzzle pieces coming together to form one image
00:18–00:24	"With only high school diplomas in hand and limited English, my parents left their families and immigrated here in search of a better life."		Joe Arroyo's "En Barranquilla Me Quedo" (a song about the city in Colombia where both of my parents grew up before immigrating to the U.S)	Transition effects between images; narration aligns with places highlighted in images
...				
01:51–01:59	"Like a bricoleur I will piece together my intersecting identities, my educational and career journeys, and the voices and experiences of youth."		Juice WRLD's "Lucid Dreams" instrumental track (a popular song at the time I worked with youth in local community)	Transition effects between images

In analyzing the responses toward the question, *who am I as a researcher?*, each storyteller also conducted a retrospective analysis in writing entries. The analysis was guided by the following set of prompts: "(1) What is your overall take on this exercise? (2) What were you able to do (or not do) with digital production? Would you have preferred writing a paper? (3) After completing your visual/digital story, did you feel you learned something new about yourself as a scholar or researcher? Explain." These prompts were more than post-assignment reflection questions. They pushed the storytellers to consider the approach taken to digital storytelling, as well as the possibilities and limits of sharing stories through digital media. In addition, the prompts brought back the question that opened the assignment. Revisiting the question provided an opportunity for the storytellers to address impulses that may have been or are still implicitly lingering and informing their intellectual practice, but not always explicitly stated in their work.

During a subsequent independent study, the storytellers also (re)considered how their production choices contributed to their own and collective storying through the compilation of Table 1. Pulling together components of the digital stories in this way further bares the complexities of their constitutive constellations (now the substance of this article). It was timely to expand readings and to put each of the digital stories in conversation with scholarship from radical black studies, black feminist thought, and decolonizing methodologies. The readings we carefully selected for/in our study are embedded in the analyses that follow. Engaging in this retrospection allowed our processes of becoming to unravel. It enabled a method for unearthing some events and

influences in our educational journeys, the connections within and across our lives, and what else we might consider to create openings in our current and future work. This is the premise from which we derive radical and decolonial ways of knowing, thinking, and doing.

Study of/in practice: Experimenting with plateaus

> *Plateau*, extensive area of flat upland usually bounded by an escarpment (i.e., steep slope) on all sides but sometimes enclosed by mountains. The essential criteria for plateaus are low relative relief and some altitude.
> – Encyclopedia Britannica

Part of our collective aim is to invite a conversation about naming stories and the entangled messiness in digital storytelling. McKittrick's (2006) discussion of black women's geographies is integral to "thinking about the production of space as unfinished, a poetics of questioning" (p. xxiii). With this thinking exercise comes many possibilities for critical discussions with space, place, and landscape as a way to open up analysis of our own geographies, the locations we share, where we are always entangled, where we depart, and where we meet again. In charting our movements and holding space for the not-yet, we also borrow from new materialisms in that we explore multiple approaches to intellectual study that run counter to foreclosing thought. We experiment with "plateau" to avoid "any orientation toward culmination" and instead lean on underground stems bringing us together for study (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Harney & Moten, 2013).

Rather than the linearity of a plot or finality in thought, we write with the recognition that our stories and geographies are still unfolding. Noting the similar locations we carry, we have been inspired to enter conversations about schooling inequities where we come together to explore the geographies already contoured by our journeys, what these geographies indicate about K-20 education, and the ways we have contemplated the possibilities and limits of our ongoing work in this seemingly concrete, yet unfinished, educational system. Furthermore, it is this opportunity to consider where we are, or what McKittrick (2006) and Glissant (1997) suggest as our "place," in a relational poetics of questioning. McKittrick's critique of spatial domination and traditional geography invites a discussion of how black women's geographies are both integral and alternative to established notions of space, geography, and cartography. McKittrick reminds us that, for black women, "naming place is also an act of naming the self and self-histories" (p. xxii). It is through this naming, along with Sylvia Wynter's (2001) and many other black feminist thinkers' expansive models of method-making beyond the traditional social scientist frame, that multitudes of black women speak back to hierarchies aiming to fix our/their locations and possibilities for movement. It is through this naming that we, too, assert "that the landscape does not simply function as a decorative background" but instead "space as unfinished" (McKittrick, 2006, p. xxii-xxiii). So, in our study of/in practice, we take the cautionary lesson that space is *unfinished* or *more than a decorative background* to free from restraint and lend ourselves to "the endless play of expression" (Silva, 2015, p. 91). By doing so, we illuminate how digital storytelling helps to understand the connections in our educational journeys and opens up otherwise possibilities for inquiry.

Pursuing a PhD, reworking ideas: A collective restorying

In digital conversation with our set of readings in radical black studies and decolonizing methodologies, we offer perspectives shaping our current work and the constitutive constellation of our many locations placed alongside/through/against one another's storying practice. We consider unfinished space and the poetics of questioning to prompt new connections in educational research, theory, and practice. A focus on our educational journeys shines a light on why and how pursuing a PhD propels different types of inquiry to rework ideas with/through digital storytelling. We invite you—the reader—to move through the stories as you please. The pattern across the five digital stories is repeated, generally, signaling both the influence of representational logic and its limits as we open up more possibilities in our work.

Below, the digital stories are presented as plateaus of: community (by Olga), poethics and play of expression (by Cee), breaking new ground (by Alisha), puzzles of being (by Kimberly), and colonial crossroads (by Mariam and Benjamin). Each plateau consists of three fragments: an excerpt of the narrated text in the digital story (featured at the outset to distinguish the narrated text from analysis), a quote from each storyteller's reflection paper that highlights a specific technique used in the digital story, and each storyteller's corresponding retrospective analysis of the *unfinished* digital story. Table 1 provides a summary of the digital stories and their various components, including format, length, number of images, storying mode, transitions, and thematic elements. Table 2 illustrates a sample of multimodal layering—written/voice narration, visual/image, audio/sound, and effects—in Olga's digital story to demonstrate more effectively the techniques and choices in digital storytelling methods. The digital stories that follow offer a glimpse of the complexities of production; however, it is outside the scope of this article to account fully for specific storying techniques or practical methods used in their creation. Rather, we offer our collective restorying as a window into processes of becoming in the context of doctoral study. Picking up speed in the restorying, we then move into the last sections with becoming as a perpetual plateau and an unfinished space. Our writing is bracketed in the prelude and postlude with quotes directly from each of the five digital stories. No ending, just more openings.

Cee: Plateau of poethics and play of expression

> Toward the poethical project of thinking and gesturing otherwise, especially in education, I have first inherited the commitment to education and the gift of teaching from the Brooklyn and Baltimore (**CLICK 1**) classrooms my great grandmothers, grandmother and mother taught in. (**CLICK 1, 2**) Second, I have inherited a youthful spirit, undeniably bold and brave, from my students in Arizona who challenged the brutality of the US federal and Arizona state governments adamant about their contestation of Senate Bill 1070, a bill which attempted to racially profile those without documentation for travel, work and life in the US. Additionally, from my classroom, I drew and continue to draw inspiration from students who were down the highway in Tucson, AZ, taking their message to the streets and city offices to hold on to their Ethnic Studies program.

When the digital story was first assigned, I was immediately thrown out of my comfort zone. My mind went to questions: What should I discuss? How is this related to critical

methods? Aren't we supposed to be heavily reading and writing? Simply put, my questioning was evidence of my uneasiness about sharing myself with the class, what would become public, what would I keep private? (Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). I just wanted to do what I did in other classes: show up, read deeply, discuss the readings, write the papers, get the feedback, pass the course and keep going. Now, when thinking back to this two-week period of questioning, I am embarrassed that I could have been so rigid in my thinking with this project. However, it may have been this questioning that also led me to make the choices I made when creating the visual/digital story. This questioning also made possible openings that had been foreclosed (Brown, McKesson, Robinson, & Jackson, 2020).

What became apparent in returning to the digital story was the prominence of academic writing and the possibility of opening up writing beyond academic constraints. The following is an excerpt from my reflection paper:

> Much of what I have been learning in the academy is related to writing cogent essays or following the "rules" of academic writing. I have felt pretty comfortable (maybe even most comfortable) writing behind a screen. So, when we were assigned a digital story activity, it felt out of lock step with my preference for writing papers. As the class may have noticed, I even wrote a paper (script) for my visual story because this is how anchored I am in writing. However, the visual story exercise helped me realize that, at times, writing provides a certain cover or hiding space for me. I am realizing that a reliance on writing can hide the heart and soul that I really feel drives my work in education … or the kind of writing that sustains me beyond and outside the walls of academia.

Given my reluctance to edit a video, I created a 6-slide, 20-image Powerpoint presentation. It contained images of me, my wife, women in my family, former middle school classroom activities with students, scholarly articles, books, garden harvests, my scholarship, and the cover art for *Precious Knowledge*. This 2011 documentary film details the fight to reinstate Tucson High School's Mexican American Studies curriculum after all Ethnic Studies courses were banned by the Arizona state superintendent. The visuals provided an assemblage of me as a queer black woman, gardener, scholar, lover, daughter, niece, sister, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, reader, writer, teacher and traveler. Not only did I overlay some of the images so that they "stack" up on each other throughout the 6 slides, but I also braided music using a Bluetooth speaker and included presentation "clicks" in the script to synchronize with the real-time delivery of my words. The sounds of Mereba's (2019) song titled "Black Truck" accompanied the presentation of my story, "I am *and* becoming," a mash up of visual/digital storytelling and live performance.

I drew on Silva's (2015) concept of "endless play of expression" that keeps me filled with questions. Silva's articulation of play of expression and my conversation with it queered my contemplation of the assignment, allowing me to think about myself beyond strict identities, representations, and fixities to consider how I and the US education system have not arrived, but are also becoming. Reflecting on how I could simultaneously embrace Silva's work, while struggling to express myself through visual/digital storytelling, speaks to my own rigid conceptions of learning. As a teacher and leader, I had been complicit with rigid expectations mandated by measures of standardization and accountability. Additionally, as a learner in graduate school, I also had been complicit with the ease and comfort of rigid approaches to learning. The rote process of read-discuss-write-evaluate. Therefore, my unease about the assignment was not only

about what and how much to share, but also my unease in response to being asked to rethink how to play with the expression of my learning and myself. I arrived at visual/ digital storytelling by holding on to the rigidity of schooling. Through/with/outside/ against this assignment I opened myself to a flow of let go and latch, let go and latch. A naming and (re)naming myself. A becoming and unbecoming. That is, opening once-foreclosed space(s) and allowing these openings to be instructive for how I *arrive at*, *think with*, and *un/do* my work.

Kimberly: Plateau of puzzles of being

As a lover of both math and music, stats and dance, sports and poetry, it becomes hard to imagine how I ended up where I am today.
Family is not just a group of people who happen to love each other. Family is community.
Friends are an extension of our family. Friends are the people we choose to be a part of our community…-there's still an unspeakable bond, an intangible love.
What pieces of the puzzle am I missing? How will I be defined? How will my research be acknowledged?
From colonized identities, from colonized ideologies, that have disenfranchised me, my people, who I am, who I love, who I care for, who I have raised…

The struggle to adjust to and relinquish power toward the perplexities of existence, of being and becoming, has been an ongoing struggle for me as a researcher and as a graduate student. I have worked in a variety of school settings, both nationally and internationally, yet returning to school to "do the work" has become a jigsaw puzzle where the power dynamics of academia presented themselves with discontinuity. The following is an excerpt from my reflection paper:

> Not only did [the digital story] allow me to do something different than what I usually do for my courses, but it also gave me the opportunity to think about the work that I am doing in graduate school and what I hope will come of my research. I have been told that my visions are bigger than me, which means that I am doing something that is both necessary and has the potential to shape more than I could ever imagine. This digital project served as a reminder of this … and a space to reflect on the points of my journey that have led me to where I am today, namely, my family's strong influence on my life.

I believe that returning to graduate school was the *right* way to gain *enough* credentials to possibly impact change in educational policies, assessment practices, and curriculum designs. I (re)imagine what my former students had become accustomed to in schools as a way to push the fields of educational measurement and psychometrics, yet I have also been met with resistance, bias, and a general lack of engagement in my work. I, in turn, have surrendered to programmatic norms in my graduate studies to survive a "burdened individuality" (Hartman, 1997) and have gifted myself with acts of silence as a means of both survival and resistance through digital storytelling (Medina, 2018). The forces of subjectivity that tend to govern how students, like myself, negotiate feelings of displacement within institutions has been a heavy burden. In addition, the (re)defining of self as shaped often by non-black people creates a distorting view of the body (Wynter, 2001), rendering it as unacceptable or not-yet-acceptable within western logics, including those related to academia.

The complexities of navigating very different geographical, cultural, and educational spaces are central to my trajectory. Engaging in activities like digital storytelling has challenged traditional notions of knowledge in my field of study; it has created a pathway for me and the type of researcher I wish to be(come). I am motivated by the fact that data on students and assessment results hold so much weight in US schools; the often-deficit graphic representation used to display the *performance* of black, indigenous, and systemically-minoritized students brands these students as damaged and lesser human beings. The digital storytelling experience has encouraged a line of inquiry to question longstanding ideas about educational measurement and assessment, to challenge "becoming a statistic" in normative policies and practices (Dixon-Román, 2020). Ultimately, the feeling of being incomplete and missing multiple pieces in the puzzle can no longer be accepted as "truths"; instead, new grounds must be broken.

Alisha: Plateau of breaking new ground

> I'm a storyteller. I find the beauty in the cracks. I relive the stories that are told to me by students in schools, mothers in villages, and other educators…I hope to one day center a new narrative.
> [Heard in the background is three-year-old Pe-Tehn's "Hey, Black Child." In the foreground is a photo of me as a baby to remind myself of why I'm here.]
> *Hey, Black Child,*
> *Do you know who you are? Who you really are?*
> *Do you know you can be? What you want to be?*
> *If you try to be, what you can be.*
> *Hey, Black Child…*

My digital story is a geographic story that emphasizes the importance of landscapes and acts of witnessing everyday lived experiences (McKittrick, 2006; Nxumalo, 2016). A rupturing ensued when I decided to pursue a PhD in education. Through the use of photographic images, I drew multiple connections to the title "Breaking New Ground" to center communities and relationships with people that have informed my research and praxis. The digital story acknowledges the significance of multimodal expression, visual culture, and aesthetics in rethinking age-old practices in communication that suggest theorizing must only come through the written mode especially among youth (Vasudevan & DeJaynes, 2013). The following is an excerpt from my reflection paper:

> The notion of digitally narrativizing "How I came to research?" and selecting the moments that caused me to question all too familiar structures and systems that were deficitizing to me as a child was very scary. I had many questions like: *What would I say? What moments do I include and/or exclude? Where do I begin with this story? And at the most basic level, how do I work iMovie?* While I wrestled with my own limitations of using technology, digital storytelling offered up a new "medium" that expanded traditional ways of sharing my oral histories and also visually illustrated the complexities I faced as an educator within a community I loved and called my homeplace.

My initial reaction to the digital story assignment was a tremendous feeling of anxiety. The idea of digitally rendering a research story was very challenging within my first year of doctoral studies. This was evident in one sequence with a stack of books, including hooks' (1994) *Teaching to Transgress* and Freire's (1971) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in black and white silhouette and question marks over my head. Drawing from my ever-evolving love for hip-hop, these images were accompanied by Common's (2000) song titled "The Questions" to allude to what I was experiencing as an educator, in particular the death of so many young people with whom I worked that eventually led me to pursue graduate school.

Creating a digital story far from one's home is not easy. At one point, I contemplated actually going home to Bridgeport, CT, to shoot on location, but decided that still images, narration, and music can also quilt the narrative I wished to tell in answering the question, *who am I as a researcher?* I drew from the rich traditions of African storytelling by opening with a picture of a collective school building project in Kasungu, Malawi, taken by a community member. In this particular image, I am seen standing on the elevated foundation, putting cement in between the red brick as I hold onto another brick, surrounded by red dirt, a few green trees, and a warm blue sky. I am seen doing this alone but moving towards a sense of storied togetherness. At times, I had an unsettled feeling when putting together the digital story, an overwhelming feeling that being a researcher is lonely. In that pedagogical moment, I decided to begin my narration with these words: "Although the ground I walk on is tricky ground, I'm determined to break new ground." Then I quickly pivoted to an image of my daughter, smelling flowers. This is overlaid with the voice of Pe-Tehn, a three-year-old black girl, reciting Countee Cullen's poem "Hey Black Child" in the background as a reminder of confidence, community, and consciousness.

"Breaking new ground" is connected to the ways in which the aeshethics of a speculative world can be used to shift the discourse on black woundedness and suffering (Musser, 2018). At one point in the digital story, a still image of a Latinx student appears and whose murder sparked outrage and a citywide curfew because he was only 15 years old. This image is followed by another exposing a brick wall with "RIP" inscribed in red color, flowers on the sidewalk, and bodies in black hoodies and knit caps. In cadence with the intensity of the images is Damian Marley's (2005) song "Road to Zion" echoing lyrics that further emphasize the reckoning of structural violence and police brutality. Such an illustration reverberates what Sharpe (2016) theorizes as living in the wake to propose that "wakes are processes, through them we think about the dead and about our relation to them … wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual" (p. 21). This moment in my digital story is pivotal as it points to both the constant unsettling of colonial histories and the materialities within the everyday. What happens when young people return to school after witnessing and mourning the death of their friends? What responsibility do educators have to allow space to mourn? I pose the questions in the next image of me in a school office with four boys in various postures, sitting on a couch with eyes closed, smiling, and engaging in conversation. In my reflection paper, I described this image of the boys remembering and celebrating the life of their close friend as a "defining moment as an educator." There are many other possible responses or actions to address social death in schools and this was an awakening during that period in my life.

To shake up the "tricky ground" of research (Smith, 2005) by journeying the audience in and through stories implies a practice of community care. My digital story reveals the personal and political challenges that kept me grounded and committed to deepening my work with young people. Additionally, there were creative moments of joy in the journey to go along with the technicalities of video editing. I learned how to play around with narration and sound (Ito et al., 2013) and even add recorded clips via iPhone with assistance from my teenage daughter who was also featured in the digital story.

Olga: Plateau of community

[My parents] instilled in me the values of hard work and a commitment to gain the education I needed to be successful and be a source of support for my family.
Though I was constantly selected to participate in academically advanced programs, as early as the eighth grade, I witnessed how educational inequities influence individuals' lifelong trajectories…my school district pinned students against each other and provided only some with the best resources to graduate high school…In my role as a residential director for a summer pre-college program aimed to better prepare students from low income families, my research interests in college access, retention and graduation rates among black and Latino youth came into focus…I knew, and they knew, it wasn't enough.

The digital storytelling assignment was not my first time putting together images, videos, and music to tell a story. The difference this time around is that the story focused on parts of my life I had not fully interrogated - the academic, personal, and professional experiences that shaped my aspirations of becoming a community-engaged educational researcher. Vivienne and Burgess (2012) assert the importance of reflecting on the differences between past and present understandings of our identities because the final digital story will only "capture the journey so far" (p. 368). Processing those differences came up in my narration brainstorm because who I was and what I knew when I first applied to the PhD program shifted dramatically to who I was becoming and what I had learned when taking the course. Telling my own story was also a meaningful practice in using digital testimonio to center my experiential knowledge throughout my processing of the question, *who am I as a researcher?* (Medina, 2018). I appreciated the ability to "break from and speak against" dominant narratives that often normalize systems of oppression and use deficit-based language, while also sharing my message in a mode more accessible to my intended audience (Medina, 2018). While this was a class assignment, I also planned on sharing the digital story with members of my local community and the youth leaders that I worked with over the years.

Organizing the content of the digital story was an eye-opening experience because even though I was aware of historical and socioeconomic factors that have shaped access to quality education, I had not critiqued my own participation in certain K-12 opportunities. My narration is an honest reflection of the ways my intersecting identities (depicted with a clip of puzzle pieces coming together as illustrated in Table 2), my upbringing in an immigrant household (depicted with pictures of the countries my parents immigrated from), and my work in local communities (depicted with pictures

of local organizations and youth leaders) have positioned me in my journey of becoming an educational researcher. The following is an excerpt from my reflection paper:

> I really enjoyed completing this exercise because of the ways it challenged me to be creative in telling my story. I did a lot of cutting down in order to "pin-point" the moment I chose to become a researcher. Even though I know there are different parts of my story that led to the decision to pursue a PhD, it was definitely my work with youth in my hometown that sparked my interest in education research. Most courses do not allow for this type of creativity, so I appreciated the opportunity to tell my story with words, visuals, and music … Though the 2-minute limit placed a constraint on how much I could share, it also challenged me (in a good way) to focus on key aspects of my story. I was able to center my parents' immigration to this country and my educational and career experiences.

Apart from my parents' journey, it was important to accentuate my research interest in college access and retention while earning a master's degree and also my work with youth at a School-Based Youth Services program in my hometown. During my years working with 7th-12th graders in a Title I-funded district, a bright light shined on macro-level educational inequities. Course readings buttressed foundational claims featured in the digital story. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith (1999/2012) argues that "schooling is directly implicated in colonialism through the curriculum and its underlying theory of knowledge." Black and other marginalized students are measured against a Eurocentric and white-washed schooling, and are expected to thrive in such contexts. Similarly, juxtaposed against deficit perspectives, Tuck (2009) underscores the danger in damage-centered research or "a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (p. 413). In short, students are battling a school system designed without their best interest in mind. I allude to this claim in my digital story through the use of an image of two bookshelves; one is filled with noticeably more books than the other to symbolize the inequities that exist among public schools. My goals as a researcher align with Yosso's (2005) model of Community Cultural Wealth in "revealing accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color" (p. 77). The model encompasses the value of being connected to where you live and working with peers, families, and community leaders to bring about change.

Revisiting the digital story allowed me to broaden my thinking about the historical events and contextual factors that influence the conditions of the communities with which I work. Specifically, Césaire's (2000) *Discourse on Colonialism* taught me the importance of disrupting the fairytale-like story of colonization that is embedded in K-12 education, since it proved to be a process that produced racial hierarchy among humans. I believe these ideals are perpetuated in the U.S public school system as a way to maintain racial hierarchy via practices that disenfranchise black youth, including teaching white-washed curricula (Love, 2018), maintaining an unequal funding system at schools attended by predominantly black youth (Baker, 2018), and enacting racially biased disciplinary practices (Morris, 2016). Indeed, educational policies uphold contemporary racial segregation in public schools and perpetuate hegemonic norms that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

Mariam and Benjamin: Plateau of colonial crossroads[3]

> Mariam: How can I not recognize my level of privilege? I am a college educated woman, and I am pursuing a Ph.D. Isn't that a rarity for a black immigrant whose people are still on records as stateless and African non-native?
>
> Benjamin: My parents have the privilege of university degrees. White skin and legacies. I am from my Grandparents origins in exoticized British-colonial outposts, religious and military folk … I am from my Grandma, a British Fijian islander, home and land of black indigenous people …
>
> Mariam: I am a first-generation college student, a position that I do not take lightly, because my parents have no college degrees. In fact, my mother, the most intelligent woman I know, never went beyond 5th grade … My great grandparents and their ancestors were uprooted from the Nuba region and recruited to join the King's Africa Rifle and fought for the British in WWI and WWII.
>
> …
>
> Benjamin: For my students, I pause, I listen to their stories, try to learn who they are, before reproducing what I think they need to know. Must I not forget, it is also, and more so, white bodies who carry the burden of dismantling the systems steeped in coloniality, systems they are/I am within.

At first examination, Mariam and Benjamin's pasts couldn't have appeared more divergent; one raised in the Western part of Kenya and the other in the Northwest United States. However, in telling one another's stories, it became evident that the exercise of digital storytelling was an opportunity to find historical crossroads where colonial convergence and rupture seemed inevitable. Together, they created one digital story in tandem with a coordinated voiceover. Mariam wrote the following in her reflection paper:

> I keep working on it with my younger brother—digging family documents and asking distant relatives about our ancestors. So, when I started drafting an outline for this project, it hit me hard that I am working with refugees. I am interested in their stories, their integration and resettlement in third countries of asylum and yet I find it difficult talking about my own story.

Likewise, Benjamin offered the following in his reflection paper:

> I wonder how our families would critique the (joint digital story) narrative and maybe generate new stories and frameworks for understanding our collective knowledge, and how this knowledge could contribute to the depth of our work.

Mariam and Benjamin's conversational digital story was influenced by Anzaldúa's (1999) concept of living beyond borders, the act of "being a crossroads." The selections presented here highlight diverging and converging colonial legacies—their bodies as products of collective British colonial pasts. While Mariam's ancestors were uprooted from Equatoria, a province of Sudan in North Africa to fight for the King's Africa Rifle and (dis)placed in Kenya, Benjamin's predecessors are linked to the British Colonial Fiji Islands as colonizers. In different ways, the two of them share experiences of living in between, being insiders, outsiders, and not always fitting within the spaces they occupy, within what Diversi and Moreira (2018) describe as moving to and from "us versus them, to us *and* them," the healing space in between. The digital story served as a bridge to what previously seemed as isolated facts toward a future of connected truths, critical insights, and possible modes of being (Wynter, 2001).

For Mariam and Benjamin, the act of restorying as a collective project was an exercise in academic and personal vulnerability. Forms of autoethnographic narrative like

digital storytelling can bring the past into conversation with the present and possibilities for the future, providing openings for engaging with the complexities of historical and cultural knowledge-making through frameworks of storying. Poitras Pratt (2020) asserts that digital storying is a relational process with students making "connections to their own family stories" (p. 13) and inspiring others to share their stories too. Over the course of the project, Mariam and Benjamin began to see differently and through each other's stories. At the time of finalizing this article, Mariam and Benjamin were doctoral students in International Education Policy. Benjamin had previously worked in Kenya as (what is named within the international development regime) an "expat" or "expert" in education. On the other hand, while Mariam had also worked within the same place and had a similar teaching background, she had a different title within the international organization. Her positionality situated her knowledge as "less than" that of her white Eurocentric coworkers. By thinking with Mariam, Benjamin found openings by decentering Western white male scholarship and engaging ways in which scholars (like himself) can unsettle their veils of bias and privilege (Jules & Scherrer, 2021).

How does the human untangle itself from colonial ways of being? Stories serve as a bridge and can offer ways of integrating knowledge (Sundin, Andersson, & Watt, 2018). For Mariam and Benjamin, this is a political process of unsettling the colonial imaginary. Digital storytelling has been an opportunity to problematize the personal as situated within historical genealogies, reproducing fragments and bits of epochs in their lives (Denzin, 2003). The processes of generating stories made Mariam question how her body fits in the spaces that she shared within her own research with refugee women participants. She began to reconfigure what might be driving her as a researcher and why she was interested in the work of forced migration and displacement. For Benjamin, the exercise provided a new opening to interrogate personal histories and research positionalities. The two of them used dueling and intersecting stories to trouble, unsettle, resist, and challenge the colonial project (Diversi & Moreira, 2018). The production of a digital story felt like a naturally collaborative process in contrast to more conventional projects, not only for content generation but for visual and technological skills as shared praxis. As Haraway, Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler (1992) describe, one's own identity can be unreliable, although the question of "who are we?" offers more openings, "always ready for contingent, friction generating articulations" (p. 324). Creating a joint digital story was an instance for new and extended dialogue.

Becoming as a perpetual plateau

Engaging in digital storytelling proved useful in our effort to "produce different knowledge and knowledge differently" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 176). With the question, *who am I as a researcher?,* and its potential answers through a multimodal format, we have been able to engage further with people, lessons, complicities, challenges, and roads to doctoral study and education research. As Smith (1999/2012) reminds us, "the point of stories is that they simply do not tell a story or tell a story simply … stories contribute to a collective story." Stories, in fact, are avenues to connect our past and our future. Smith distills the idea that stories are "memories of injustice," and digital storytelling has provided an avenue for tapping into those memories during our time together. The use of

images and sounds, for example, has afforded us ways of talking about difficult stuff and experimenting with learning. Pedagogically, playing around with digital tools generated possibilities for everyday activism in the context of doctoral study, making digital storytelling a worthwhile learning project in higher education (Benmayor, 2008; Jamissen, Hardy, Nordkvelle, & Pleasants, 2017; Medina, 2018; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). We are learning (how) to be(come) vulnerable, to embrace and acknowledge those memories of injustice, to (re)write our stories beyond damage, and to charter new paths or new connections. As Smith, Tuck, and Yang (2018) assert, it is important to "understand your intentions and capacity to work in a good way" (p. 13).

By drawing on the contingent and entangled social relations that shape how we pursue our work, we ask questions that compel us to proceed with greater care and consider the textures in the many stories we encounter in our research. Therefore, in attending to processes of becoming, we contend with the im/possibilities of representational logic for continuing to examine the tricky ground of research and the many questions we have yet to ask about youth of color, educators, women refugees, and black girls, among others. For Mariam and Benjamin, the praxis within digital storytelling generated greater understanding for one another within communities where their research is taking place. The work of building with visual, sonic, written, and aural elements provided the seemingly rare opportunity to pause, reflect, and reframe the self within research; that is, not only attending to the limits of positionality but more importantly where research interests come from in relation to coloniality. Through digital storytelling we remind ourselves that representation can be an opening and not a means to an end. The openings orient us to other plateaus and the unfolding stories of those with whom we work. Otherwise engagements are made possible by refusing to tell stories centered on damage and pain narratives (Tuck, 2009), by choosing to complicate the genre of human (Wynter, 2001), by exploring our connections and contradictions through collective restorying (Nagar, 2014), and by challenging habitual learning through the undercurrents of a generative space (Harney & Moten, 2013; Zembylas, 2017). In doing so, we are clearer in our understanding of educational research, theory, and practice to also reckon through writing that which is yet to become (Honan & Bright, 2016). Representational thought in digital storytelling has provided an opportunity from which to further consider its limits. That is, each storyteller's retrospective analysis has been fruitful to see what we hadn't seen before, to allow the unthinkable to become thinkable, and to make room for the not-yet.

Unfinished space

We now engage inquiry differently. In processes of becoming, we have gained insight into digital storytelling to access alternative ways of knowing, thinking, and doing. The storying and restorying framed within radical black studies and decolonizing methodologies help us to attend to past-present injustice (Nxumalo & Vintimilla, 2020). Put simply, we are able to better articulate the past-present injustices in our lives (though we have far to go) and processes of becoming that have required treating study as an intellectual practice; writing as play of expression that sometimes gets lost

in academic writing or buried in traditional modes of learning; thinking otherwise in the puzzling together of geographies, landscapes, and the everyday; and, troubling *what is* as pedagogical encounters of *what could be(come)*. We are also able to ask the "unreliable narrator" (Bhattacharya, 2020) in each of us to (re)imagine the world through a speculative lens (Silva, 2015). Perhaps to intervene, to listen to stories (whatever the mode), and to practice kinship differently (Haraway, 2016). We are hopeful.

Central in our analysis are the connections in our educational journeys to and beyond doctoral study. Included are the shifting roads to the PhD, the turns along the way, and to what extent that PhD will shape educational futures. The connections we have shared here are less about the who and the what but more about the where, why, and how we have become. As Lewis (2011) notes about the place of storytelling in research, "an uncertainty is necessary for small discoveries to be realized … change is engendered at moments when we do not know what to do yet we choose" (p. 509). Digital storytelling has given us a chance to unsettle what is un/known. The many openings urge us to enter the next plateau with different sensibilities in an unfinished space.

> How can I expect the population that I work with to be vulnerable, and share their life experiences after undergoing forced displacement, yet I cannot talk about my own experiences?
>
> *– Mariam*

> My struggle: deconstructing my positions in order to permit myself to "do" research, producing justly and revealing how to live within and beyond yesterday, today, and tomorrow.
>
> *– Benjamin*

> I am (re)imagining the ways that we communicate ideas about black and indigenous youth … [against] traditional fields in education.
>
> *– Kimberly*

Notes

1. In this article, we build on the concept of braiding within the collective African tradition and indigenous forms of knowledge-making as demonstrated in a related storying elsewhere (see Rashid & Jocson, 2021).
2. We choose to write with a lowercase *b* rather than a capitalized *B* in an attempt to free blackness from biocentric categories. We take invitations from Katherine McKittrick (2021) who observes "how black knowledge is continually cast as biological knowledge" (p. 45). We also draw on La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2021) who notes: "Grammatically, the proper noun corresponds to a formal name or title assigned to an individual, closed, fixed entity. I use a lowercase *b* because I want to emphasize an *improper* blackness: a blackness that is a "critique of the proper"; a blackness that is collectivist rather than individualistic; a black-ness that is "never closed and always under contestation"; a blackness that is ever-unfurling rather than rigidly fixed" (p. 6). This collective writing maintains the use of black in lowercase with the exceptions of published works or established terms for continuity.
3. In their segment, Mariam and Benjamin write in the third person instead of using the pronoun "we" for clarification purposes. The use of "we" throughout the article refers to all of the authors.

Acknowledgments

ORCID

Korina M. Jocson 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1863-9876
Cee Carter 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1067-7774
Olga Correa 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7821-8243
Kimberly McIntee 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2822-2580
Mariam Rashid 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0354-5992
Benjamin D. Scherrer 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3001-4609
Alisha Smith Jean-Denis 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6596-4121

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