

THE ART OF STORYTELLING IN THE U.S.A

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Reports of record attendance levels at storytelling festivals, strong organizational growth, soaring member levels, and well-paid professional storytellers attest to what some are calling a storytelling renaissance in the United States. One gets the sense in reading the journalistic coverage that people are literally coming out of the woodwork to take part in this renaissance. And yet, beyond the journalistic hype of the past two decades, there has been almost no critical research conducted on it. In an attempt to gain a better understanding of the resurgence of interest in the art of telling stories in the U.S., this paper sets out to analyze the art of telling as well as the art of listening, chronicle the structures that have grown up and around the art, and explore the controversies that emerged over the past quarter century as they affect the storytelling art.¹

The Tellers of Stories²

Writing in the 1930s, philosopher and essayist Walter Benjamin pronounced traditional storytelling dead, a victim of an industrialized society obsessed with information, and the storyteller, a relic of a forgotten way of life. Though many dispute his claim today Benjamin's essay, "The Storyteller", serves not only to incite debate but more importantly, to capture in writing that mysterious and majestic aura surrounding the storyteller. He writes:

The storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel—not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the *incomparable aura* about the storyteller...The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself [emphasis mine].³

Current descriptions circulated by the storytelling community are consistent with Benjamin's vision of the storyteller; the descriptions tend to uphold the idea that there are all kinds of storytellers, some of whom possess that capacity or gift to "reach back a whole lifetime".

Typical of most descriptions is the following excerpt from a news article:

There are the cowboy poets, back-woods yarners, campus readers, nightclub jokesters, camp-fire folklorists, barroom Bsers and an endless variety of those who all, more or less, fit in to the category of storyteller. Some are professionals, some aspire to that position, some are 'folk tellers' and others are merely good at doling out a good line of bull. But they all are storytellers.⁴

This broad, all-inclusive list speaks to the fact that storytellers can, and do, specialize in a multitude of genres and fit into many categories. Perhaps because this list is so amorphous, the process of self identifying as a storyteller often proves to be a difficult one. Based on interviews with storytellers, folklorist Kay Stone posits that "self definition is central to artistic development...[and in] the case of organized storytelling there is often a confused sense of what it means to be called, or to call oneself, a storyteller."⁵

While the reason for this difficulty of self definition has not been explicitly theorized, there are some mechanisms in place that attempt to determine who the professional is and who the professional is not. Therefore, once the storyteller has taken that first step towards

self-identification, he must next decide whether or not he will assume the label of professional. At this stage there is much less confusion but much more contention. I would argue that the reason for the associated contention is two-fold, one is aesthetic and the other is practical.

From the aesthetic standpoint, there is the classic version of the storyteller that Benjamin describes, and which is readily embraced by the storytelling community. The storyteller is the “righteous man”, the individual who manages to be extraordinary in his or her ordinariness. The storyteller who manages to transcend the commonplace, to land somewhere above, is the one that has about him the air of what Benjamin termed an “incomparable aura.”⁶ Folklorist and storyteller Joseph Sobol elaborates on the concept of this aura in his 1999 book, *The Storyteller’s Journey*. He states, “The art of storytelling has about it the halo and the stigma of the ordinary.”⁷ In other words, by identifying oneself as a storyteller, one will automatically assume a halo and a stigma. Once that self-identification has occurred, the storyteller may choose to tell in organized settings thereby distinguishing himself from the “everyday” individual who tells stories. By doing so, the storyteller has begun to transform into the professional storyteller. This means he will be free of the stigma of the ordinary because he is accomplished and practiced, and has honed his stories for audiences and for himself. By separating himself from the stigma of the ordinary teller, however, he is potentially alienating himself from the halo of the ordinary, or in Benjamin’s terms, the aura of the ordinary. Thus, to declare oneself a professional, one may jeopardize that precious balance of the ordinary.

From a practical standpoint, identifying oneself as a professional storyteller tends to involve more basic aspects of reputation and monetary compensation. One journalist noted that “folk tellers” do not consider themselves professionals and will tell stories “for fun, not profit” while a ‘storyteller’ considers himself a professional artist and will therefore “tell for profit”.⁸ The Canadian Storytelling Directory takes the distinction a step further in its directory. Its policy states that a ‘professional storyteller’ is someone who makes a living primarily by telling stories while the ‘amateur storyteller’ is either someone who is only occasionally paid to tell, or who tells stories for pleasure, or who has not yet achieved professional status.⁹ On the surface, it appears that storytellers may be comfortable with these definitions.

Indeed, storytellers will often make distinctions between the professional and the amateur, but tend to make those distinctions on aesthetic grounds. A playful definition of the professional comes from storyteller Jay O’Callahan: “A story is over when it ends. The difference between the windbag and the professional storyteller is the windbag’s story has no end.”¹⁰ While this amuses, it also demonstrates the storyteller’s willingness to make a distinction between a professional and a non-professional. Storyteller Carol Birch also differentiates between the able (or amateur) and the fine (or professional) teller when she states: “In trying to identify what separates the finest tellers from those who are very able, it seems to me that the most effective storytellers do two things: they capitalize on who they are as they tell a story and they tell the story to the people who are in front of them.”¹¹

However, not all storytellers readily embrace the professional distinction. The National Storytelling Network (NSN), the largest member-based organization in the U.S., is attempting to establish a set of credentials for professionals based on a variety of criteria. However, its efforts are being met with resistance by some storytellers, and being exploited by others who “opportunistically describe themselves as professional storytellers [but] may not have much experience in storytelling events at all.”¹² By self-defining as a professional, the storyteller will be viewed as credible in the eyes of the audience and funding sources, and be properly differentiated from the amateur competition. But at the same time, some storytellers resist the title of ‘professional’ in the belief that it will oblige them to adhere to

the confines of that label thereby potentially constricting the art and exposing them to the accusations that they have disparaged the grassroots element of the art.

Despite the implications of the term professional, people continue to identify themselves as storytellers. Stone writes:

In a society such as ours...where formal narrative is less prevalent, where opportunities for telling stories have to be sought out, and where formal training is less developed than for other arts, it is not surprising that many feel unsure of their social identity as tellers. Yet despite the problems and challenges, or maybe even because of them, the number of people who identify themselves as tellers continues to rise steadily.¹³

True to this assertion, statistics indicate that by the late 1990s “as many as 500 storytellers [were] making a living telling tales”¹⁴ (up from 100 in 1981).¹⁵

These storytellers, who represent a wide range of ethnic, cultural and religious traditions, are building upon a U.S. tradition of telling at libraries and schools, and are now telling at festivals, museums, bookstores, bars, on the radio and on the Internet. Hospitals hire storytellers to work with bereavement counselors; ministers attend storytelling workshops to improve oratory skills; and corporations employ storytellers to foster camaraderie and collective values.¹⁶ A number of universities now offer a variety of courses in the art of storytelling; and while there are few advanced degrees in the art, it is being taught at undergraduate and graduate levels appearing under a variety of departments including folklore, theater, communications, education, and library science to name a few. Accordingly, “as the use of story increases, so do the numbers of tellers, festivals, conferences, degrees and awards.”¹⁷

Despite these advances, the task of defining the storyteller and the storytelling art remains an elusive one. Lindsay Brown, a scholar who speaks from a cultural studies perspective, contends that “contemporary storytellers struggle for an understanding of their art, its styles and aesthetics, its functions, its history, its definition . . . storytellers as a group tend to try to define storytelling at the same time as vigorously resisting its definition.”¹⁸ It is clear that storytellers represent a fine and complex art form that demands further quantitative and qualitative analysis, as well as a prominent and permanent position in the larger U.S. arts and cultural community.

The Art of Listening

In his essay, “Between Teller and Listener”, Rafe Martin posits that “the art of storytelling depends on the combined skills of both teller and listener.” He goes on to say: “The teller works with the imaginative, creative powers of the listeners’ minds. And the two sets of skills—of the teller and of the listener—must mesh for a told story to finally ‘work.’”¹⁹ Indeed, the art of the telling depends greatly on the teller’s ability to read an audience while the art of listening requires a special willingness to engage the imagination.

Unlike the art of telling, the art of listening to stories does not possess the same amount of controversy within the storytelling community on an aesthetic level. For the storyteller, there is no question that the audience is a key part of the performance. In the succinct words of storyteller Carol Howe, “You can’t be a storyteller with no audience.”²⁰ Some folklorists share a similar view of audience importance but also explore the active, transformative role the audience will play. Joseph Sobol writes:

Storytelling is a living art which takes place in the present between people. It is not a solo performance. The narrative urges listeners out of self-consciousness into the story. As the imaginative response becomes more and more vivid, the listeners participate in heightened awareness of the event.²¹

And as Kay Stone found in her research with storytellers, "listeners play a role even when they are not at all aware of it."²² Thus, the aesthetic is generally agreed upon – the art of listening requires the listener to succumb to and engage the imagination.

From a practical standpoint, the audience is necessary to generate revenue for the storyteller and/or storytelling organization. Therefore it is important to understand the changing demographics of storytelling audiences. During the 1890s storytelling gained prominence in U.S. libraries as educators told stories to rapt child audiences.²³ Perhaps as a result, librarians, educators and children remain a key audience segments. Recently however, another segment has grown out of this original conglomerate—the parents of those child attendees. Parents, it seems, no longer want to simply drop off their kids at events, they want to listen as well. As storyteller Adora Dupree attests, "Many times I have noticed, in settings other than the classroom, adults bringing their children, as an excuse to come hear the stories themselves."²⁴ And as one journalist notes, "Though many associate storytelling with children, an increasing number of performers and venues are focusing on 'grown-up' stories, drawing crowds to hear tales that are anything but childish."²⁵ Despite the growth of adult audiences, storytelling continues to bear the stigma that it for children only as evidenced in an article focusing on the adult storytelling market for booksellers:

According to August House publicist Anne Holcomb, fans see storytelling audiobooks as good value...So, what is holding up commercial recognition? Public perception is a major problem. "We're still trying hard to overcome the myth that storytelling is just for kids, and that's it's all cornpone and hayseed," said Jimmy Neal Smith, president of the National Storytelling Association [now Storytelling Foundation International]. NSA publicist Nell Tsacrios added, "Bookstores don't know where to slot us."²⁶

Thus, librarians, educators, and children continue to comprise the foundation of the storytelling audience though parents represent a demographic expansion in the current storytelling market.

Confirming the notion that storytelling has its roots in education, a survey conducted by American Demographics in 1990 noted that "storytelling enthusiasts tend to be educators." The survey, one of the few demographic studies of its kind, predicted that "storytelling is about to break out of the education market."²⁷ Given more recent findings, it appears the prediction has come to fruition. In 1999 Sobol noted that a wider variety of audience groups have taken an interest in storytellers and are supporting them via funding. He states:

These new professional [storytellers] are supported largely by those earlier institutions—libraries, schools, and recreation centers—but also by a national network of storytelling festivals, modeled on the National Storytelling Festival [NSF] in Jonesborough. In the process, they have developed a web of connections among support personnel in established 'art worlds'—publishers, media producers, arts councils, arts journalists, and public sector folklorists.²⁸

This emerging market of what Sobol terms "support personnel" may be considered the next tier of listeners that sits atop the solid foundation of educators, and will most likely influence the manner in which storytelling begins to be "slotted" by booksellers, funders, and storytelling enthusiasts.

In addition to the educators, children, and art network that support storytelling events in various communities, there is also evidence of an emerging, non-traditional market segment of young adults in urban areas. An example of this urban market is evidenced at events hosted by The Moth, a non-profit storytelling organization that presents theme-based storytelling events, hosted by non-professional storytellers who are professionals in their respective fields. The Moth performs in urban settings from New York City to San Francisco,

from Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) to bars and caters to young urban professionals, the "Young Literati". Commenting on the attendance at a Moth event in San Francisco one reporter notes, "The arty crowd was primarily in its early 30s."²⁹ This urban effect is also occurring in Boston, where a journalist writes, "A testament to the popularity of storytelling is the recent demand for storytelling workshops in the most unlikely places [i.e. in urban settings]."³⁰ Urban and young adult audiences appear to be showing a sincere interest in the art of listening.

What can be learned from the recent demographic expansion is that listeners are an ever-expanding and changing group. Writing on the aesthetics of listening, Rafe Martin posits that "knowledgeable listeners alter the nature, depth, and sophistication of the art."³¹ If his theory holds true, the demographic shifts of the past few decades may significantly alter the art of storytelling in the U.S.

The Art of the Organization

In addition to the storytellers and story listeners that have propelled the art forward, certain non-profit storytelling organizations have been instrumental in advancing the art. The organization most often cited by the storytelling community is the National Storytelling Association (NSA), now split into Storytelling Foundation International (SFI) and National Storytelling Network (NSN).

The history of these organizations goes back to the formation of the National Storytelling Festival (NSF) in Jonesborough, Tennessee in 1973. The festival began as a side event at the first annual Historic Jonesborough Days, but due to its success, it spurred the creation of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) in 1975 which continued to host the Festival. NAPPS was renamed the National Storytelling Association (NSA) in 1994. By 1996, NSF was drawing approximately 10,000 visitors (up from 200 in its first year), and thanks in large part to the success of NSF, NSA's 1996 annual budget amounted to \$1.7 million, a figure that far exceeded the budgets of all other storytelling organizations. In 1998 NSA was restructured and split into two separate organizations - the National Storytelling Network (NSN) member organization, and Storytelling Foundation International (SFI). SFI and NSN jointly own and are funded by revenue from the annual National Storytelling Festival (NSF).

Many mark the founding of the National Storytelling Festival as the start of storytelling renaissance, and NSF is quick to encourage this belief. In its promotional material, NSF writes that it "rekindled American's appreciation for the art, and spurred the creation of hundreds of other storytelling guilds, associations, and organizations across America."³² In 1998, founder Jimmy Neil Smith stated that "most [U.S. storytelling festivals] were stimulated by the 'revival' sparked by the first national fest."³³ To presume that a single organization could affect such change may be a bit ill-conceived.

In 1983 the Director of the National Council on Traditional Arts acknowledged the increased activity but refuted the notion that a 'renaissance' was occurring, claiming that folk festivals have been in existence in the U.S. for years. The following is an excerpt of an interview with the Director:

"For 45 years, the NCTA has sponsored national and regional folk festivals, including this year's National Folklife Festival... There's always stories going on. Storytelling always has been a part of this organization. I don't think it has ever stopped." [He] goes on to say, though, that the term 'stories' has changed to include a wider scope of jokes, anecdotes, poems and other literary and oral forms. Although [the Director] admits that he doesn't really know if there are more storytellers now than in the past, he does agree that "there's a new appreciation for it."³⁴

While I agree with his stance on the questionable applicability of the term 'renaissance', his statement brings up an interesting point. Storytelling, as he said, was always part of folklife festivals and experienced increased activity within those festivals. But what he did not say was that storytelling, as an art form within the folk festivals, was not given room to grow. Thus, although folk festivals may have featured storytelling, administrators did not respond to the growth by expanding programming. The reasons for this may be many, expansion may not have been viable for those folk festivals because of mission conflicts, resources constraints, or political agendas. Regardless, one could argue that niche arts festivals like NSF filled the need that larger folk festivals could not. One could also argue that NSF did not create the resurgence of interest, it merely capitalized on it.³⁵

In reviewing the writings on SFI and NSN, there arose certain issues that have implications for the art: 1) NSA's manner of institutionalizing the art is threatening the art's diversity, 2) NSF's nostalgia-based marketing style is transforming the Festival and the art into a manufactured heritage product, and 3) NSA's recent restructuring into two separate organizations may be taking storytellers and storytelling in different directions.

Still in transition, NSN has just recently formulated its mission statement: "To bring together, nurture, develop, and celebrate individuals and institutions who use the positive power of storytelling in all its forms."³⁶ Its list of organizational objectives is still in process but will most likely focus on member driven activities such as its Storynet Web site, special interest groups (e.g. the healing power of storytelling group), the member magazine, state liaisons, the national directory, and the national conference. As a membership organization, NSN receives funding support from dues, conference revenue, sponsorships and gifts, as well as proceeds from NSF.

As the name suggests, the Foundation, which has recently become a Smithsonian affiliate, will extend its mission into the international community. SFI will focus on creative applications of storytelling in the areas of health and healing, conflict prevention and resolution, leadership and management, and children, youth and families. SFI is now in the process of building the National Storytelling Center, a multi-million-dollar complex in Jonesborough. The center will feature, in its words, "A resource center and 200-seat performance facility where the power of story can be demonstrated for the benefit of educators, therapists, attorneys, political leaders, and corporate leaders."³⁷ As SFI has no members, it receives its funding by providing educational and training services, receiving grants and donations, and moneys from NSF.

Given their new missions, SFI and NSN appear to be in step with field-wide trends, for storytelling "promises to become even more influential as professional tellers and others in corporate management, business, health and social services, education and the media explore its transformative power."³⁸ Over the span of some 30 years SFI and NSN, under any name, have proven themselves to be adaptable entities and distinct leaders in the storytelling community.

Lindsay Brown writes on the development of the NSA and states: "The [NSA] has influenced other groups and shares many of their aims, but it has a unique power, influence and political structure."³⁹ The popularity and visibility of the organization is further evidenced by the amount of journalistic coverage devoted to it (78% of storytelling articles reviewed for this paper mention the organization and/or its related festival). However, Brown goes on to say that many find the NSA to be a threat to the art's diversity. She writes: "Many who participate in the storytelling revival are deeply wary of the NSA. In terms of the commodification, homogenization and institutionalization of the art of storytelling, for many the NSA represents a worst case scenario."⁴⁰ In the process of promoting itself, it seems the NSA is homogenizing the art. The format purported by the National (now International) Association suits the decidedly quaint, Jonesborough aesthetic, but the NSA should not deign

to represent a national storytelling aesthetic, nor a national storytelling agenda. Nevertheless, due to NSA's monopolistic power in terms of funding, visibility, and advocacy, its organizational vision is fast becoming the national vision (it is important to note that in no other arts discipline does a single organization holding such a influential position).

In Brown's exploration of authenticity as it pertains to contemporary storytelling, she asserts that the Association and Festival aim to recreate a nostalgic experience for their visitors based on built history and as a result, are forcibly positioning storytelling as a manufactured heritage artifact not an art. She compares the NSA to politicians who, with their promotional "rhetoric of tradition, the past, and the betterment of society", are attempting to "build populist, consensual nationalism".⁴¹ Arguing that by placing real heritage (like oral histories) in the context of false heritage (like the NSF) threatens the authenticity of the storyteller's art and the storytelling event. The process is akin to placing actual film footage of a trip to the moon within the context of FutureLand at Disneyland. Brown provides the example of storyteller James Rucker:

In his own community Rucker is a permanent fixture, telling stories over and over in a long-standing commitment to a particular place and time. . . Rucker's community work may be part of the new interest in storytelling, but it is perhaps inaccurate to call it 'revival storytelling' except when it appears at festivals [at which point it is danger of becoming a heritage product].⁴²

Thus, the Festival, with its 'rhetoric of tradition' may indeed be manufacturing heritage which is understandable, given the fact that NSF grew out of a heritage tourist attraction. This is not to say that all festivals are attempting to capitalize on feelings of nostalgia and that all artists are willing to perform at such events. Nevertheless, the reality is that this process of framing storytelling in the context of built heritage is being presented as the norm by an extremely visible and influential festival. Brown does suggest, however, that although connections between nostalgia and storytelling have not yet been explicitly theorized, storytelling may be both a purveyor of nostalgia but may also have the potential to be its remedy.

Given the recent organizational name change and restructuring of the NSA, NSN and SFI are in a unique position to remodel themselves and the Festival. Though both NSN and SFI are based in Jonesborough and receive proceeds from the Festival, they are two separate organizations with different missions. Without looking too far into the future there are already noticeable differences regarding the presentation of the SFI and NSN. With their respective Web sites as example, it quickly becomes apparent that disparities exist.

Storynet.org, NSN's Web site and the original site of the NSA, has the look and feel of a grassroots Web site. It is weak on design and strong on friendly appeal and information. There appears to be no Web design team on board creating continuity within the site (though this may be in the works, there was no indication given). However, it is strong on content and as a member organization it is currently promoting the extensive member services, soliciting ideas for NSN's new vision statement, and linking to its affiliate organization--SFI's Web site. Going to StorytellingFoundation.net (SFI's Web site) is like stepping into a different world, a world with a Web development company. SFI's Web site is brand new, with no visual ties to the NSA past, and possesses a look and feel of polished professionalism. SFI has no links back to Storynet.org nor does SFI mention NSN in its text. Unlike Storynet.org, which simply has a link to the NSF site, SFI prominently features the NSF thereby visually linking themselves better to the Festival than NSN. SFI though weak on content, perhaps because of its newness, is the superior Web site in terms of design and presentation. If the Web sites are any indication of the future of these organizations, then NSN will remain a grassroots member organization representing the face of the storyteller, while SFI will emerge as the glossy spokesperson for storytelling.

Issues: Copyright, Overuse, Commercialization

The resurgence of interest in the storytelling art has brought with it a number of issues. The more poignant and pervasive issues involve the complexities of copyright, the perceived threat of overuse, and the commercialization or homogenization process as it pertains to the story, the story event and the storyteller.

Copyright

Perhaps the most intriguing issue of late is copyright. As it stands today, there exists an unwritten ethical code that storytellers have a responsibility for the stories they tell. However, this unwritten code may need to be more clearly outlined as the storytelling art continues to grow. As Lindsay Brown writes:

Such explosive growth has brought to light the issues surrounding storytelling rights and permissions. Many tellers do not realize they infringe on copyright if they tell a published story that is not in the public domain without obtaining permission from the copyright holder. Tellers also infringe on copyright if they perform someone else's unpublished story if it exists in a tangible form. If no tangible form (such as a written or recorded copy) exists, the issue becomes an ethical one, for which the original teller has no legal recourse.⁴³

It can be said that storytellers and organizations are careful when it comes to questions of copyright infringement. However, without written laws, the storytelling community is reliant upon the mores of individuals. This approach may function well on a grassroots level but as the art becomes more institutionalized those in the storytelling community may find themselves needing the protective structures of copyright law.⁴⁴

Overuse

Related to the issue of copyright, is the notion of overuse. This involves the belief that a story told again and again by a single storyteller reveals the layers of a story, but that same story, if told by multiple storytellers, albeit in a different styles, can become exhausted. With the plethora of stories to choose from, one would presume the likelihood of overlap occurring, and therefore overuse, to be minimal; however, this is not the case. As an anecdote reveals, overlap can even happen at the same event. At the 2000 National Storytelling Festival's ghost stories series, two storytellers had unknowingly planned to tell the same story on the same evening. A last minute reshuffling prevented the repetition of the story but it demonstrates that stories do circulate. In this case, a simple act of planning on the part of the organization would have avoided the situation.

What may lie at the heart of this issue is the sense of ownership. Interviews with North American storytellers concerning the creative process of storytelling reveal their personal connection to the stories they select and tell. As storyteller Waddie Mitchell attests: "Storytelling is personal . . . And though I've heard a lot of stories, I only tell the ones that are important to me, those that touch me personally. And when I tell a story...I want my listeners to know how special that story is to me."⁴⁵ And as veteran storyteller Laura Simms states: "I rarely go in search of a story...It's almost like we meet each other—like you find a friend."⁴⁶ Perhaps, then, storytellers become so connected to their stories that they begin to feel like they own them, and in order to protect what they own, they justify the argument of overuse. However, the very idea that a story can become exhausted runs counter to Benjamin's argument that a story, unlike information, can expend itself. To reiterate Benjamin's theory, "A story preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time,"⁴⁷ and after many retellings. Interestingly, Lindsay Brown discovered that the idea of overuse is held primarily by tellers in the United States (as opposed to Canadian and British tellers). However, whether the issue of overuse is unique to the U.S. has not been explicitly theorized. Therefore, although a story in the public domain cannot be owned by any one

person, certain provisions in U.S. copyright statutes related to unfair competition may protect the distinctive style of a storyteller's telling.

Commodification and Commercialization

The Commodified Story

The reductive process of commodifying story occurs when a story is 'discovered' by corporate entities who remove its natural but possibly subversive cultural connotations and diversity in order to create homogenized, salable products. As folklorist Jack Zipes matter-of-factly remarks, "Stories are marketable commodities. Ad agencies use cleverly written stories to 'move product.'"⁴⁸ A classic example is the handiwork of Disney:

[Stories are exploited by] Disney just as they were once bent to bourgeois purposes by Hans Christian Andersen, but with the distinction that Disney's corporate reach is global, its access to the means of communication infinitely greater, its silencing of other stories or other versions of stories all the more complete.⁴⁹

Commodification, then, is not a new issue; however, its extended reach has new implications for the art. With its new found reach, the act of commodifying a story not only tepefies it, but fragments communal structures and makes the storytelling art appear "primitive". Joseph Sobol argues:

As technologies multiply, each seems to perform a more culturally subdivided role. They are all touched by a ray of the archaic storyteller's light in that they provide a momentarily coherent narrative of the world, yet their narratives break down immediately outside the enclosed space of performance into a multitude of mutually incomprehensible stories: not whole culture but artificially inflated mass culture or reactionary subcultures. With this ever-increasing technological extension and corresponding cultural fragmentation, storytelling has come to appear childish to many. The technology it embodies is primitive.⁵⁰

As more storytellers exhibit a tendency towards subversion, then the art will begin to serve a more recognizable social and political conscious and as a consequence, subvert the notion that storytelling is the stuff of childish fancy. "Storytellers [are able to] enter the culture industry to subvert it, or at the very least to question and challenge its machinations."⁵¹

The Commercialized Storytelling Event

Just as a story can become commodified, storytelling events can become commercialized. Commercialization, in this context, is equated with the lack of intimacy of the event's environment as well as the exclusionary or offending practices of pricing and sponsorship.

To foster an intimate relationship between storyteller and listener, stir the imagination, and create a storytelling event requires the proper environment. Founder of NSF, Jimmy Neil Smith, captures the sentiment when he writes:

Stories can be told anywhere—at home, school, community library, club meeting, community festival, or wherever people are gathered. But whether it's a public performance before a large audience or a quiet evening at home with friends, successful storytelling depends significantly upon the quality of the performance space—that strategic but subtle blend of acoustics, lighting, staging, audience arrangement, and other elements that contribute to the mood surrounding a performance.⁵²

Indeed, Smith's Jonesborough-based Festival has proven to be an ideal environment for storytelling and some might argue that it is on its way to becoming the Broadway of storytelling. In homage to Jonesborough and in a bout of nostalgia, Joseph Sobol argues that

the resurgence of interest in storytelling had to begin in a small spot, a "pinprick" of a place. He writes of Jonesborough:

The festival adventure must begin with a journey, not to New York, Paris, London, or any comparable center of modernist faith but to a small-town simulation of an ideal past, far from the main roads, where local Davids face the Goliath of progress armed only with cobblestones and antique bricks in a sling of homespun yarns.⁵³

However, now 25 years later, the festival adventure is not at its beginning, the authenticity of nostalgia-induced storytelling events has been called into question, and although Jonesborough is still a "pinprick" of a place it no longer hosts a 'pinprick' of a festival. Like other large scale festivals, NSF is grappling with the issue of intimacy as audience levels continue to increase.

In order accommodate more listeners but bound by its two or three-day time frame, the festival can either increase the size of the event or turn people (and revenue) away. NSF opted to expand its event by increasing the number and size of the performance tents. As a result, it lost some storytellers and listeners who were unable to cope with the resultant microphones and stadium feeling.⁵⁴ In her interviews with storytellers, Kay Stone's research reinforces the notion that such events, typical of the larger festivals, can produce alienating effects:

Some storytellers worry that the art is becoming too popular for its own good. "It's changed with all the microphones and lights," [storyteller] Kathryn Windham told [Stone]. "Storytelling should be the most personal of all arts."⁵⁵

To circumvent this, some festivals have chosen to limit their attendance levels. As early as 1988 Gay Ducey of the Bay Area Storytelling Festival began limiting audience size:

"We're a little fussy about our attendance... We try to limit it to about 500, with only six or seven storytellers, but we're pressed to do so. We want everyone to be able to see and hear a real human up there telling a story, not some dot on a distant stage, because this one-to-one communion between the teller and the audience is vital to the art form."⁵⁶

It is clear that "intimacy between audience and teller, particularly in the less-than-intimate settings of theaters, tents, and auditoriums, can be an elusive, though essential trait."⁵⁷ It is also clear that increasing audience levels strain the balance between aesthetics and profit. To rectify this imbalance, the storytelling festival as it exists today will need to make changes to its current format.

Storytelling organizations like most non-profit arts organizations require a diversity of revenues sources to ensure sustainability. These sources tend to include grants, donations, sponsorships, and earned income. However, there is general fear in the community that what happened to folk music in the 1950s will happen to storytelling, that it will be eaten up by commercialism.⁵⁸ Commercialism in this case being corporate sponsors. In response, some in the storytelling community express a desire to keep the art 'pure' in the face of ostentatious sponsorship at festivals. Reporting on storytelling festivals, one journalist notes:

[Storytelling's success is] beginning to trouble some people, including a few storytellers, who wonder if the craft is selling its soul. Corporate logos and advertisements are starting to appear at storytelling festivals amidst haystacks, wagons, and bonfires. This year [1991], for the first time, [NSF] will allow a sponsor, Mott's U.S.A. to advertise at its annual festival in Jonesborough, Tenn. Mott's is also carting a 125-seat mobile theater shaped like an apple to malls across America where storytellers spin 30-minute yarns...the Hoosier Storytelling Festival last month featured banners touting Coca-Cola, American Airlines, Target Stores and others.⁵⁹

While sponsorship is standard with more established art organizations, for the new breed of storytelling organizations and associated festivals it is still being infused into the community.

In addition to issue of sponsorship, some festivals have suffered from a backlash associated with increased ticket prices. The NSF is one such festival. As the NSF became more popular, the market was able to bear higher ticket prices. However, the repercussions came from the storytellers and the audience. One storyteller lamented:

“And if John Q. Public can't come [to the festival] because they [sic] can't afford to pay...then I figured that what [the NSF] had basically done is...cut themselves off from the man in the street, the man for whom this single art form is probably the most accessible art form. And they'd just sort of elevated it to something that was more and more for the white-collar establishment.”⁶⁰

Accessibility is an issue for any arts organization, but because storytelling is conceived as the people's art form, storytelling organizations, perhaps more than other arts organizations that do not share that history, are required to walk a fine line with sponsorship and pricing so that they do not alienate audiences and tellers.

The Commercialized Storyteller

Within the field of storytelling there exists an inverse relationship between fee structures and artistic integrity. That is, the higher the storyteller's fee, it is believed, the more commercialized the telling. Both storytellers and those outside the profession appear willing to perpetuate this falsity. In his portrait of the contemporary storyteller, folklorist Jack Zipes believes:

The new breed of professional storytellers...charge high fees for their services in schools and community centers, and perform in a highly stylized manner that has more in common with Hollywood than the talking circles of the Amazon rainforest. Though many of them are gifted, their primary mission is not to shape wisdom but to amuse, distract, entertain.⁶¹

Zipes may be justifiably distressed by storytellers who opt to simply entertain audiences, but equating “high fees” with “stylized” tellings is a disservice to the artists. In addition, to assume that every contemporary storyteller is going to emulate the “authentic” style of the “talking circles of the Amazon”, or carry out “their primary mission” to “share wisdom” is confining the evolution of the art. There is room for those tellers who simply wish to entertain as well as those who wish to evoke something of greater depth from their listeners. This range can be found in any art form, and leads to the tricky notion of ‘good art’, or in this case ‘good telling’.

Storytellers themselves subscribe to this theory, and this is having an impact on the tellers' concept of self. As storyteller Kathryn Windham tells researcher Kay Stone: “It distresses me when I see storytellers becoming performers.” At Jonesborough, many tellers have tapes, books and videos for sale.⁶² Stone observed in her conversations with storytellers that the growth of storytelling as a “money-making profession” has caused full-time tellers to reexamine their social identities. Mary-Eileen McClear another storyteller states, “Am I fooling myself, cheating the people who came to hear 'a real storyteller?'”⁶³ Stone interviewed other storytellers who, she believes, were fearful of losing their, “initial exuberance for storytelling in order to become self-supporting professional performers.”⁶⁴ Some storytellers react to this sense of commercialism by refusing to be listed in the National Storytelling Network's directory because they do not wish to “translate their art into economic terms.”⁶⁵ Perhaps as storytelling fee structures become more standardized and as storytellers gain

respect as professional artists, this belief will no longer be such a divisive issue for the storytelling community.

Conclusion

Given the resurgence of interest in storytelling as an art form and growing number of storytellers, the expansion of the art in traditional and non-traditional settings, and the pressing issues of copyright and overuse, a comprehensive, quantifiable study of the professional storyteller in contemporary society is recommended. Thus, as storytelling becomes a more recognizable art form, as the old stereotypes fall away, as the backwoods festival outgrows its own nostalgia, as new technologies allow for improved communication in the storytelling community, as the new generation of tellers enters the field, and as organizations and storytellers bend to the forces of commercialism the highly adaptable people's art, changes. For better or worse, the contemporary storytelling art is on its way to becoming institutionalized in America. And yet, storytelling will always possess an ordinary place in our communities because it is everyone's to possess.

¹ Due in part to the lack of research I will be leaning heavily upon: 1) the journalistic coverage of the art as it has played a significant role in connecting the public to storytelling events and organizations, 2) the voices of storytellers as they define themselves and the art of contemporary storytelling, and 3) the writings of essayists, folklorists, and scholars as they conceptualize a storyteller's and storytelling's larger role in society. These three voices are representative and enable an interpretation of the dynamics of contemporary storytelling and will, for the purposes of this paper, be referred to as the storytelling community. Some accounts are speculative at best but reflect the many issues surrounding the art of telling stories in the U.S.

² The storytelling community currently employs various concepts to understand the art of telling stories. The concepts are not necessarily embraced by all, nor are they necessarily in frequent usage, yet they provide structure for analysis. In her cultural studies research on storytelling, Lindsay Brown identifies four major concepts of storytelling. For the purposes of this paper I wish to distinguish between two types. *Traditional storytelling* is "a foundational [concept] that conditions our understanding of the term storytelling itself, with all its connotations of ancient forms and the past." It is the form most likely to evoke feelings of nostalgia and romanticism, and refers to both "storytelling performed in the oral traditions of the past, and storytelling still practiced today in the 'pockets' of other oral traditions that survive today...these traditions are viewed as somehow isolated from 'mainstream' or 'modern' culture, either by time, geography, language, or other factors." (Lindsay M. Brown, "Storytelling: A Cultural Studies Approach." (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1997), 29). *Revival or "revivalist" storytelling* is "a new set of practices and discourses of which individuals and groups deliberately attempt to revive, promote, preserve, and understand storytelling and oral traditions. Its ideas and practices are often determined by perceptions of traditional storytelling; it is either traditional stories, or traditional storytelling practices, or both, that 'revival' storytelling aims to resuscitate. While 'revival' storytelling is not a well known term, it refers to a set of practices and ideas that are quickly becoming more visible in western countries in the form of public storytelling performances and events." (Ibid, 24.). For the purposes of this paper, 'storytelling' is synonymous with the tenets of 'revival storytelling' unless otherwise noted.

³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt. trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968; Schocken Books, 1969), 108-109.

⁴ Wayne Lee, "American Folklore Lives on in Growing Storyteller Art," *The Washington Times Magazine*, 19 August 1983, 3D.

⁵ Kay Stone, "Social Identity in Organized Storytelling," *Western Folklore* 56 (Summer 1997):234.

⁶ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 109.

⁷ Joseph Daniel Sobol, *The Storytellers' Journey: An American Revival*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1.

⁸ Lee, "American Folklore Lives," 3D.

- ⁹ Brown, "Storytelling," 39.
- ¹⁰ Elizabeth Karagianis, "The Story Behind the Storytellers," *The Boston Globe*, 14 August 1984, 6E.
- ¹¹ *Who Says? Essays on Pivotal Issues in Contemporary Storytelling*, eds. and with introduction by Carol L. Birch and Melissa A. Heckler (Little Rock: August House Publishers, Inc., 1996), 111.
- ¹² Kay Stone, "Social Identity," 237.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 238.
- ¹⁴ Bruce Watson, "'The Storyteller is the Soybean...the Audience is the Sun,'" *Smithsonian*, March 1997, Vol 27, Number 12, 60.
- ¹⁵ Ted Stone, "The Yarn Spinners: At the National Storytelling Festival, the Object is to Grab You by the Tale." *Republic Scene*, September 1981, 50.
- ¹⁶ Jack Zipes, "Worth Telling: Searching for Stories that Challenge our Poisonous Myths," *Utne Reader*, September/October 1997, 40.
- ¹⁷ Evy Herr Anderson, "The Spell of the Storyteller," *Publisher's Weekly*, 15 Feb 1993, 30.
- ¹⁸ Brown, "Storytelling," 39.
- ¹⁹ Rafe Martin, "Between Teller and Listener," ed. Birch and Heckler *Who Says?*, 143.
- ²⁰ Stone, "Social Identity," 236.
- ²¹ Laura Simms, "The Lamplighter: The Storyteller in the Modern World," *National Storytelling Journal*, (no. 1 1984): 9, quoted in Sobol, 37.
- ²² Kay Stone, "Social Identity," 236.
- ²³ For further study of the storytelling renaissance in turn of the century libraries refer to Barbara Lehfelddt Baker, "Storytelling: Past and Present," (M.A. thesis, Texas Woman's University, 1979). Interesting to note, Texas Woman's University is the host of Storytell, a prominent listserv for storytelling.
- ²⁴ Adora L. Dupree, "We Gotta Talk! The Rise of the Modern Storyteller," *High Performance*, Fall 1993, excerpted by *Utne Reader*, March/April 1994, 118.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Matt Kopka, "Adult Storytelling Seeks Bookseller Support," *Publishers Weekly*, 6 November 1995, 52.
- ²⁷ *American Demographics*, Oct 1990, quoted in Jeremiah Creedon, "The Storytelling Renaissance," *Utne Reader*, March/April 1991, 46.
- ²⁸ Sobol, *Storyteller's Journey*, 14.
- ²⁹ Sylvia Rubin, "Storytellers Drawn to the Light," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 July 1999, sec. B1.
- ³⁰ Karyn Miller-Medzon, "Once Upon a Time," *The Boston Herald*, 3 Oct 1999, Arts & Life, 55.
- ³¹ Martin, "Between Teller and Listener," ed. Birch and Heckler *Who Says?*, 149.
- ³² See Storytelling Foundation International promotional material "Our History" on the Web at www.nsa.org.

³³ Linnet Myers, "A Very Old Tradition Left for Dead," *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 29 November 1998, Sec 10.

³⁴ Lee, "American Folklore Lives," 6D.

³⁵ In reviewing the journalistic coverage for the thesis on which this paper is based, it seemed that everyone in the storytelling community had a theory as to why storytelling saw a resurgence of interest. In the course of research, certain themes began to emerge, four themes in particular, namely: the reaction against an information-driven, TV-based society (cited in 37% of articles), the institutionalization of storytelling as art by organizations and prominent storytellers (25%), the larger folk revival (22%), and the return to community after a post-modern, isolationist lifestyle (16%).

³⁶ Excerpted from www.storynet.org Web site.

³⁷ Excerpted from storytellingfoundation.net Web site.

³⁸ Anderson, "The Spell," 28.

³⁹ Brown, "Storytelling," 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 121. For a complete investigation of the homogenization process see: Brown, "Storytelling" 120-150.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴³ Anderson, "The Spell," 30.

⁴⁴ Though no definitive work on the subject of copyright yet exists, Vicky Dworkin, Ph. D. candidate in American Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa is currently working on her dissertation that deals with issues of copyright and ethics in contemporary storytelling.

⁴⁵ *Homespun: Tales from America's Favorite Storytellers*, ed. Jimmy Neil Smith, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1988), 337.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 90.

⁴⁸ Zipes, "Worth Telling," 39.

⁴⁹ Brown, "Storytelling," 166.

⁵⁰ Sobol, *Storyteller's Journey*, 2.

⁵¹ Zipes, "Worth Telling," 42.

⁵² Smith, *Homespun*, 333.

⁵³ Sobol, *Storyteller's Journey*, 85.

⁵⁴ Kay Stone, "Social Identity," 238.

⁵⁵ Bruce Watson, "The Storyteller is the Soybean, the Audience is the Sun," *Smithsonian*, March 1997, Vol 27, Number 12, 68.

⁵⁶ Bernie Ward, "Tell Us A Story," *SKY Magazine*, September 1988, 123.

⁵⁷ Birch and Heckler, *Who Says?*, 129.

⁵⁸ Melvin Maddocks, "In Maine: Storytellers Cast Their Ancient Spell," *Time*, 3 August 1981, 11.

⁵⁹ *Wall Street Journal*, "Tale Tellers Go Big Time and Live Happily Ever After," 29 August 1991, 1.

⁶⁰ Sobol, *Storyteller's Journey*, 152.

⁶¹ Zipes, "Worth Telling," 39-40.

⁶² Watson, "The Storyteller," 68.

⁶³ Kay Stone, "Social Identity," 237.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁶⁵ Sobol, *Storyteller's Journey*, 3.