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**When Plan A Falls Through:
Using a Collective Story Methodology to Construct a Narrative**

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Category: completed research

Abstract

Writing a dissertation is hard work. The work becomes even harder when a group of people you intended to interview does not respond to your invitation. So what is a Ph.D. student to do? The answer lies within finding a creative, innovative methodology. Collective story telling is a qualitative research method that uses interview transcripts, field notes, memos, and other research data, to help create a fictionalized narrative. Implementing a methodology such as collective storytelling helps researchers craft narratives in a creative manner to help tell a story from different perspectives.

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Introduction

Like any good Ph.D. student in their last year of their doctoral experience, I was immersed in my dissertation study. My study focused on a theatrical production that breathed life into the narratives of former slaves, called *Let Them Be Heard (LTBH)*, performed at three plantation sites in the U.S. South.¹ My intention was to interview three stakeholder groups: the director of the performance, the actors of the performance, and the three managers who invited *LTBH* to their plantation sites. However, I was unable to interview the actors of *LTBH* and unfortunately, their voices were missing in the dissertation study.

Given I was unable to interview the actors of *LTBH*, I wanted to find a way to include their voices in the dissertation study. Consequently, I wrote a fictionalized collective story based on the actors' reflections on their experiences with, motivations for, and feelings about the production of *LTBH* documented in a YouTube video. This fictionalized collective story focused on the creation of *LTBH*, the collaboration between Paul Banks (director of *LTBH*) and the actors in the development of the production, and the actors' major contribution to the production as black actors telling enslaved community members' stories.²

Literature Review

Collective stories drawn from interview transcripts, field notes, memos, and other research data, help to create a fictionalized narrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Within the narrative are fictionalized characters based on interview transcripts and field notes. Cook and Dixson (2013) posit that characters in collective stories are often representative of several participants rather than just a single participant with a pseudonym. The collective story presents research data in the form of a performance, or dialogue between characters. Furthermore, this performance could be used in a public forum as a way to engage audience members in critical conversations (Freeman et. al, 2006).

One example of a collective story comes from several researchers within the field of education. In 2006, Freeman, Mathison, and Wilcox explored how assessment-driven accountability altered the way schools delivered their services to children and their relations with parents. The authors conducted ten focus groups with parents to examine how state testing affected their children's educational experience. They analyzed the focus group transcripts by taking note of the logical sequences, natural turns, and thematic connections. The authors did not include all of the themes they discussed or all of the participants involved. Instead, Freeman et al. (2006) state:

It is not possible to include all or even the majority of parental voices involved, we had to

¹ *LTBH* features a collection of dramatic slave readings from formerly enslaved people interviewed by the Works Progress Administration gathered between 1936 and 1938. Paul Banks, founder and director of *LTBH* talks about the stories collected, "In these accounts, previously enslaved individuals talk about working from sunrise to sundown; seeing families sold apart; being sexually exploited, whipped, maimed, and branded; and witnessing murder" (Benjamin, 2015).

² All names of participants and sites were changed in this study to maintain privacy.

make some decisions about who would speak and how their voices would get incorporated into an integrated dialogue when the original conversations occurred in separate spaces and with only a selection of other parents. (p. 472)

The scholars analyzed the focus group transcripts and selected passages that focused on testing and accountability in order to retain the conversational nature of the focus group to create a collective story. Additionally, Freeman et al. (2006) repositioned and integrated parts of conversations with other parents that may or may not have occurred together. Their aim was to maintain as much authenticity of the concerns raised by the groups of parents. Lastly, the authors reduced the amount of speakers and “blended” various voices from different focus groups into one character (p. 472). This provided a way to represent numerous points and concerns in one shared voice. For my dissertation study, I also created a collective story that represented the actors’ voices from a transcribed online video, interview with the director, Paul Banks, field notes, and personal experiences from my observation of the performance, *Let Them Be Heard (LTBH)*.

Methodology

I wrote the collective story as a “performance” where the actors and director of *LTBH* were the characters set in a fictionalized playhouse for their “dress rehearsal”. The data collected included interview transcripts, a YouTube transcript of the actual actors of *LTBH*, my field notes and personal observations from witnessing *LTBH* at one of the plantation sites. I will illustrate how I used the data collected to craft a fictionalized collective story explaining the importance of having the actors’ input and expertise in the development of *LTBH* including the analysis of the collective story titled, “Curtain Call”.

Interviews regarding select actors’ from *LTBH* experiences of and motivations for the performance were included in a YouTube video that I found online. The video consisted of five actors interviewed separately where the footage of the actors bounced back and forth from actor to actor. For instance, one actor spoke about their experience with *LTBH* followed by the next scene with another actor talking about why they felt *LTBH* was an important performance. There was not a consistent flow from one actor’s interview to the next actor’s interview. As a result, I transcribed the entire YouTube video, combined the actor’s statements together, and created three fictional characters; David, John, and Alicia. I used Freeman et al.’s (2006) technique of “blending” various voices to create three fictional characters (p. 472). The authors argue, “This provided a way to represent a variety of points of view while retaining a ‘voice’ for their shared concerns and response” (Freeman et al., 2006, p. 472). Since I was unable to interview the actors, I included all of the dialogue from the actors in the video and made sure that all the comments from the actors ended up in the story.

In addition to the YouTube video, I also included my interview with the director of *LTBH*, Paul Banks. For the collective story, I pulled quotes where Paul talked specifically about the logistics of creating *LTBH* including the songs chosen, where the performances took place, and how he directed the actors’ interactions with audience members. The interview with Paul helped me to understand the collaborative effort between him and the actors in creating *LTBH*. Lastly, I referred back to my field notes from when I was an audience member at Elm Grove Plantation this past summer. I used personal experiences, observations, and interactions with the actors and audience members to help frame the story.

I included two additional elements in the collective story based on my experience observing *LTBH*: a song called “No More My Lord” and the slave narrative of Thomas Hall. As

the audience walked to the first slave narrative performance at Elm Grove Plantation, an actress sung the song “No More My Lord.” During our interview, Paul explained to me the reason for choosing that particular song and I included it within the collective story to elucidate the importance of how music contributed towards the emotional performance of *LTBH*. I chose to include Thomas Hall’s narrative in the collective story because it was not only the most powerful performance that I experienced, but also the performance that two of the site managers, two docents, and numerous audience members mentioned being the most impactful piece. For example, during the performance, the actor who played Thomas Hall intentionally interacted with the audience by pointing directly to both White and Black audience members.

Ken Frances, site manger at Hope Plantation where *LTBH* was held, consequently referred to the narrative as the “fuck you” performance. He explained that this performance was the only performance where the actor purposefully got into the faces of the white audience members physically pointing and wagging his finger at them. The actor portraying Thomas Hall stated that some white men were good but overall he was unable to trust a white man. I witnessed this particular performance and noticed how angry and emotional the actor became as he performed Thomas Hall’s narrative. The performance was powerful and left me feeling overly emotional over the anger and resentment Thomas Hall had with the white man. Consequently, I included both the song and narrative as a means of including two elements of *LTBH* that were powerful and moving and contributed towards the overall emotional impact of the performance.

In the following section, I share the part in the collective story where I included the song, “No More My Lord.” Here, the readers can understand how I constructed the *performance* in order to explain the importance of including this song from the actor’s point of view.

Excerpt From “The Dress Rehearsal”

The setting is Benton’s Community Theater (BCT) on Market Avenue in the Triangle Area of North Carolina. BCT is a space dedicated to the community where actors, directors, costume designers, and theater students can access rooms to rehearse and practice. Paul Banks, director of Bare Theater, reserved a room for the theater group’s first dress rehearsal of LTBH on a late Saturday afternoon. A conversation develops between the actors (John, David, and Alicia) and Paul regarding the direction of the production. John Mills, a black male in his 40s, has been an actor for over twenty years and member of Bare Theater for the past ten years. David Williams, a retired UPS driver in his 60s, has 40 years of acting experience and fifteen years as a member of Bare 88 Theater. Alicia Thompson, a 28-year-old woman, is currently perusing her master’s degree in music and theater and has been a member of Bare Theater for the past five years. Paul starts the conversation at 1:00pm in the afternoon:

Paul pauses and takes a sip of water then continues reviewing his notes. “I wanted to close the performance with a song. Alicia, I would love your assistance here since your voice is magical and your thesis includes slave songs. I’m looking for a song that is not traditionally heard with slave performances ... NOT ‘Amazing Grace’ ok? Something that is complex since this production can be uneasy to unpack. What do you think?”

Paul looks to Alicia and notices that she is blushing. She takes a moment to think of a song. “‘No More My Lord’,” Alicia says out loud. “It was a slave work song. Not sure if

ya'll know this, but during the 1930s, Alan Lomax, collected folk music and went to Parchman Farm Prison. This prison was an infamous prison plantation and convicts were forced to work, and the labor conditions inside the prison were largely indistinguishable from slavery. In order to keep pace, the inmates would sing. And their songs were good ... really emotional. So Lomax recorded them and placed these songs into his collection of American Folk Songs of the South. The song that stood out for me in his collection of folk music was 'No More My Lord.'" Alicia takes a long breath and starts to sing the lyrics of the chorus:

No more, my Lord,
No more, my Lord, Lord,
I'll never turn back no more.
I found in Him a resting place, And He have made me glad.
Jesus, the Man I am looking for, Can you tell me where He's gone?
Go down, go down, among flower yard,
And perhaps you may find Him there.³

David looks to Alicia and nods his head with approval of her choice. She continues "This song was sung by prisoners ... but also sung by slaves. They too ... they too were prisoners. Seventy years later prisoners were still singing these songs in prison ... but with some different words here and there. The song ties the periods of the 1930s back with the period of slavery. 'No More My Lord' at the end is just a great way to end *LTBH* by saying yea ... yes slaves were singing it then hoping that it would all end and seventy years later ... they were still singing it hoping that it would end."

Alicia's knowledge of "No More My Lord" exemplifies to Paul why it is so important and crucial to have her contributing to the direction of *LTBH*. Without Alicia's input, Paul would have never known to include this particular song and he is grateful for her expertise.

Paul writes in his director's notebook that the performance will end with "No More My Lord." He looks up from his notebook and discusses his reasoning behind the edits he made with the narratives. "As for the edits made to the narratives ... I don't want to change the meaning behind any of these narratives. So if they said that slavery and freedom were two snakes full of poison ... that meaning is going to stay there. Also, there is the N word in some of these narratives. I don't feel like I have the right as a White man to make this edit ... we do caution the audience before about sensitive language with *LTBH* ... But I want to leave this decision up to you, Alicia, John, and David ... "

Paul looks towards the actors for their input. "Please stop me if this doesn't have the ring of truth to it. I don't want you to say something and feel like you have to force it out."

David speaks first. "Yes! This is what is in there and we should say it. We are OK with that." David looks to John then to Alicia and together they nod their heads in agreement. John looks Paul straight in the face and says, "It is real life being depicted and it is a

³ "No More My Lord". (1947). On Alan Lomax Collection. Retrieved , March 31, 2015, from http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/folk-song-lyrics/No_More_My_Lord.htm.

beautiful thing to be apart of that.”

Paul fidgets a bit with his watch and looks back at his notes. “I’m happy you all are in agreement, because I, too, feel like it is more impactful with the raw language left in the narratives. I feel like White audiences do not hear it a lot and maybe by your performances, using former enslaved peoples’ exact language, will take them back to a time where it was a common thing to say ... and perhaps question why now, if they hear it, why it is such a charged word ... and ... ” David observes Paul’s nervousness with his constant fidgeting of his watch. He places his hand on Paul’s shoulder and says, “Listen...I hope audience members will take away some insights and learn a few things about what it was like to be a slave. And what it was like to live under those conditions but yet survive those conditions. And look forward to something better. Hopefully, people will leave with more questions then they came with. I think that is a really compelling part of telling a real story.” Together they are working on telling a real story ... Together they will help create *LTBH*.

Conclusion and Discussion

Curtain Call: Analyzing the Collective Story

Using collective memory as a framework, I wanted to depict a story that illustrated why the actors chose to be part of *LTBH*. It was the actors’ contribution, their performances, their voices that helped audience members identify with the memories and experiences of former enslaved community members. Over (2001) argues, “literature does not transform society single-handedly ... the artistic form makes its spectator perceive ... the invisible people of their world-at least a beginning of social justice” (p.12). The actor’s embodiment of enslaved narratives performed through *LTBH* was an attempt made by the management in order to adopt a more inclusive representational strategy of the slave past at plantation museums.

Through a collective story methodology, I was able to write a fictionalized story based on the actors’ voices expressing their willingness and passion in telling their collective memory of enslavement. The YouTube interview of the actors, field notes, interview transcripts, and my personal observations, helped to transform my dissertation study to include the voices of the actors allowing for a truly inclusive narrative. Hopefully, researchers and academics can use this methodology to create an innovative and creative way to share their research data and help to generate a discussion.

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