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From the Selected Works of Rhea Cote Robbins

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Who gets to tell story.docx

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“Who Gets To Tell Story”

Presentation by

Rhea Côté Robbins

Colby College, Waterville Opera House

October 24, 2018

for the

Citizenship and Community Course that asks students to be fully engaged citizens of many different but connected communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to present here today and I would like to especially thank Mark Tappan and Colby College to have me here and talk with all of you.

I want to point out that today is United Nations Day, celebrating the multiple cultures of the world.

(All cell phones off and away from your person...please/svp/thank you/merci.) Phones: erase story.

Trigger warning: I mention the possibility of death/dying for those of you who are uncomfortable with that concept.

Why would you have me here to present today? My work comes from the research, teaching and writing that I have done over the past 30 years or so. My work is informed by my Franco-American, French heritage, language and culture. French was my first language and something that continues to help me focus on my work that remains to be accomplished.

Not whining because there is no whining allowed, but lately I have been thinking that I have been lucky that my culture/language has been devalued in certain aspects...as well as being a woman all of which has informed me in my work and also my understanding in the reality of ally building.

For some of you, there have been some readings, which sets the stage and explains somewhat my focus and point of view in my work. Not that I am a megalomaniac, but how my writing and my research has informed my work.

As an academic advisor/instructor at the University of Maine, 1st year Undecided students, I have also recently learned from a conference I attended on Career and Workforce Readiness, the keynote was Karen Boston, Asst. Dean for Student Services, U. of Arkansas, who informed us that NACADA, National Academic Advising organization, believes that acquiring a degree is no longer the complete picture of the skills needed, the following skills are also recommended for graduates of colleges and universities:

- Intellectual curiosity,

- Technical skills,
- Management and accountability,
- Business and industry knowledge,
- Analytics and data analytics,
- **Self-Awareness,**
- **Story telling,** and
- Emotional resilience.

By storytelling, the idea is to be able to tell your story...who are you...not like an elevator pitch, but what is your story. I mention that if you want practical application in regard to today's presentation.

OBJECTIVE: For the purpose of this talk, I would like to add that the objective for my talk today is:

Telling or hearing story while conscious of the human ecology—listening to story justly with social consciousness of equality. No one leads a more authentic life than anyone else.

Also, all I am about to say is **speculation**, we may not solve anything today, but the ideas will be on the **whiteboard** for contemplation.

Focus:

Who gets to tell story? By story, I mean life.

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“Jorges Luis Borges said there are only four stories to tell: 1.) a love story between two people, 2.) a love story between three people, 3.)the struggle for power and 4.) the voyage. All of us writers rewrite these same stories ad infinitum.” — Paolo Coelho

CLICK

I would say all stories boil down to the struggle for power. Mill and Hill. Town and Gown.

In my presentation today, I am here as a writer, author and literary criticism scholar. Trained as a resistive reader, taught to read against the text, I analyze literature and its power to control the realities we live.

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In my presentation I want to prove four things:

- 1.) Sentimental story erases truths
- 2.) Hierarchy permeates everything
- 3.) All stories are based in fear
- 4.) Examine the essence of story

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First, I would like to define what qualifies as “story.” I believe essentially that every person, artifact, ritual, etc. is story. Everything we know comes to us via story; we are surrounded by story. Story is the microcosm of the macrocosm.

For the time being, if you could suspend your firmly held beliefs about the written or visual words—including all manner of texts that we are exposed to on a daily basis including commercial as well as non-commercial—spoken, read, heard, etc.

You could also ask what is the urgency in relaying my interpretation of what storying does to the human landscape.

[George Orwell](#)

**"Who controls the past controls the future:
who controls the present controls the past."**

Story ecology would present a conscious process of inclusion, not exclusion. Whether story is written or spoken, not reduced to the simple: B&W race or woman/man equation, because not all diversities are equal, and hierarchy exists everywhere, and while we are at it, do not gentrify the diversity and all the while valuing story is essential to the work.

The issue at hand is not in the story telling, but in the way a story is valued, **or not**. There have been many stories told that point out the social injustices present in our society, but the hearing/listening, which are two different activities, or the ignoring/erasing of the stories **is the crux of the problem**.

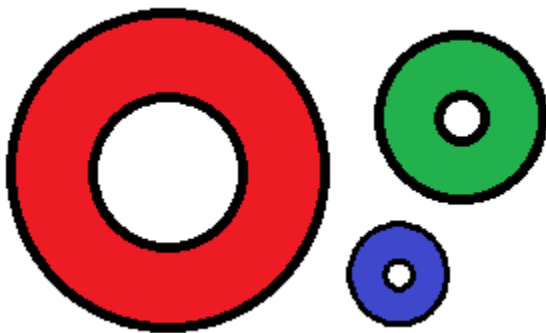
Let us say that stories are circles. Stories are told in circles—around camp fires, with friends in comfortable chairs sitting around a room, as people who are connected by the

circle of knowing each other or not—depending on who is talking, but for the most part story takes place in circles.

Stories also are circular in shape when one thinks about how stories can be retold or remembered—circling back into existence. But what kind of circle?

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All stories have a hole in it—let's call this a knowledge gap.



In social justice community story telling assessment, we need to pay attention to the gap. The hole in the story. What is missing? Who is not talking? Who is being spoken for rather than having a voice of their own? Whose story is being appropriated and told from a perspective that does not tell the whole story due to cultural taboos or hierarchical power structures?

Why is storying important to the work of social justice? What story is not being told and if the oppressed groups are not speaking for themselves, then who is speaking on their behalf?

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History/histoire comes from Old French **estoire** or **estorie**, no “h”

“est” means “is.” Present action. The word **estoire** is related to the Greek “idein,” meaning to see or “eidenai,” to know.

If we can think of story, all story as estoire or estorie, equal in the eyes of seeing and knowing, then we might advance our ability to address some of the issues of how story is told in the community-at-large—as in citizen of the world—and valued.

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1.) Sentimental story erases truths.

What do I mean when I say sentimental story?

Do not confuse sentiment with sentimentality, for starters.

Also, all writing is problem solving. As stated by Dorothy Gallagher in NYTimes series, “Writers on Writing: Recognizing the book that needs to be written.” As some of you have read her piece for today.

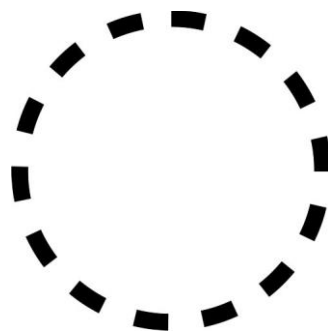
“Writing is problem solving; whether in fiction, biography or memoir, certain basic questions have to be resolved.”

Gallagher further states: “This is an attitude that some have characterized as ruthless: that cold detachment, that remove, that allows writers to make a commodity of the lives of others. But a writer who cannot separate herself from her characters and see them within the full spectrum of their human qualities loses everything in a haze of **nostalgia and sentimentality**. Bathos would do no honor to my subjects nor, most important, bring them to literary life, which is the only way they could live in the world again.”

How does telling a sentimental story cause issue?

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Sentimental stories are stories told as a circle with broken lines. There are pieces missing in the story because there is only so much **permitted** information that is said or told. Sentimental story is based on leaving out certain aspects of the events or people.



Sentimentality story telling is based on covering up lies or truths that do not come to the surface. To participate in sentimental story telling is to collude with the story that does not tell the whole truth of a character—whether that be a person, place or thing.

What is disguised, as friendly story is truly a form of violence committed via innocuousness that overpowers agency. As Adiche points out in her TED talk on “The Dangers of a Single Story,” One story does not tell the entire story of a people, place or thing.

Sentimental story telling is the cover-up of certain facts, from a dominate culture position, of a whole or realistic-based event and allows the dominant story telling to remain in place, unchallenged in its telling. Sentimentality undoes facts about things which are being repressed.

As a result, the story that is not told is often seen as a threat to the dominant narrative and the story teller who dares to tell the whole story becomes persona non grata in the milieu of the community of stories. There is a danger in telling stories that are seen as **taboo**.

How are subjects/topics/etc. deemed taboo? Who dictates what subject is not ok. Where do the taboo subjects go in a society of silencing as a result?

The next question I ask is: **Who is allowed a voice of violence?** Who can talk about the outcomes of the social injustices or who is in charge of the silencing of the social injustices?

How is **the voice of violence** distributed in our society and often couched in terms of non-violence?

Modern examples, among others, would be the #metoo and #timesup movements as well as Black Lives Matter which are also not free of hierarchy. NAs, FAs, children, the voiceless or unvoiced.

CLICK

2.) Hierarchy permeates every aspect of human existence.

Which brings up the next point I would like to examine, hierarchy in relationships/organizations. There is virtually NO relationship or organization that is free from hierarchy.

Everything is predicated on levels or degrees of ordering from high to low. Name me any group of people who come together for any reason and there is hierarchy present in that group. We cannot get away from the hierarchy.

Story ascendancy, one story worth more than another, is a concept we live with everyday and we accept without being aware of our participation in the process.

Technology being better than analog would be an example—phones constantly in our daily presences when they used to hang on the wall. Can you imagine your life without your phone being with you 24/7? That used to be a reality. We do not even consider putting the phone back on the wall and leaving it there—becoming non-intrusive.

Hierarchy in certain groups is pointed out more readily than in other groups. Take patriarchy, for instance. Patriarchy is deemed dominant in the culture and it certainly is, but what is not said is that there is hierarchy in the matriarchy as well. There exists dominance in the matriarchy that is not talked about, but is certainly felt in many circles as such. Class, another way of talking about hierarchy, permeates our existence. We all subscribe to hierarchy, dominance, and class, consciously or not, and as a result, we are participants in the hierarchy of story. One example would be my presence here today. People from my old neighborhood do not get to talk at Colby to students. My relatives were workers at Colby, not having their stories told or read, until recently perhaps.

CLICK

3.) All stories are based in fear.

Because of the hierarchy present in society, all stories told are based in fear or aka insecurities by which we are all plagued. This goes back all the way to the Cain and Abel tale in the bible, the preferred sacrifice over the not so preferred—vegan over meat. **The Can't and Able story, I call it.** Interestingly, today, the vegetable sacrifice would be more valued over the meat offering.

We are always kept at our “not sure of ourselves” no matter who we are or what we do. The entire focus of advertising is geared towards our insecurities and whatever their products will fulfill and deliver you, or I, from. The latest everything of the moment on the pulse of the moment. Handbag as signifier, I read recently.

What other proof of fear is there as the basis of stories told? Best sellers? False attitude of storying as a marketing ploy.

The real truth is: We all tell story; we are story. Our lives are lived by story and only story. The telling of our story is a guarantee against our story ending or being forgotten. Or, as I would tell my writing students as they left the creative nonfiction classroom: **“I dare you to leave here and do not tell a story.”**

CLICK

Fear is the driving force underneath our beliefs and actions.

Here is a list of some of the human fears—from #10 to #1:

Top 10 Strong Human Fears

[Caty Medrano](#), LISTVERSE

10 Losing your freedom
9 The Unknown

- 8 Pain
- 7 Disappointment
- 6 Misery
- 5 Loneliness
- 4 Ridicule
- 3 Rejection
- 2 Death
- 1 Failure

Definition of fear can be obvious or hidden, but at the bottom of each story there will lay a germ of truth—some fear to be faced.

If we think in terms of where story permeates our lives daily: What we eat, what we wear, did our team win, which music you listen to, where do you live, what do you drive, what time is it, how do we describe who we are to others—visually, etc. at the back of our minds, underneath it all—we feel the fear of being judged.

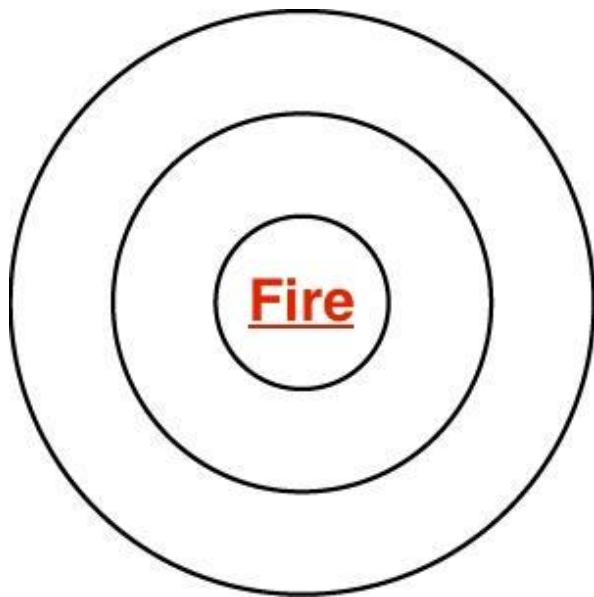
The idea of comparison/contrasts explains the need to achieve the hierarchy of our story against someone else's story. We fear fear itself.

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4.) Examining the essence of story

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This is the shape of telling story...gathering around a fire—real or imagined.



What is the true element or essence of story? While, avoiding essentialisms.

Story is told in circles— a circle of friends sitting around a campfire is the iconographic image of telling story.

Round table, fire pit, talking circles, threads, etc.

All stories are circles, never-ending concentric, overlapping, echoing, reverberating, repeating, renewing itself like a pebble thrown into the water reaching other shores and circling back to the one who threw out the story. We tell story to survive. We tell story to be alive. To be present to the future.

Because of the fears inherent in story, in the end, the real essence of story is forgiveness— for give ness—the act/art of forgiving self and others.

And knowing one's true self in the process of telling story.

I've been all over this terrain...there are many roads into story...and only one road out— forgiveness.

(Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life by Gerard, Philip)

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Resolutions? Solutions?

Why does this insight into story effect the social justice aspect of community telling story?

How can change be brought about?

How is story equity determined? Which story gets told and which story is silenced?

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We can think in terms of the four freedoms:

FDR, Roosevelt insisted that people in all nations of the world shared Americans' entitlement to

four freedoms: the **freedom** of **speech** and expression,

the **freedom** to worship God/Creator/or not in their own way,

freedom from want and

freedom from fear.

How can freedom from fear be achieved? And is that even possible?

In a more just or equal story plane, the insistence of telling a more, rounded truthful story takes conscious effort in **both** listening and valuing story.

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One model used in assessing the Feminist Identity Composite, counseling, psychology materials, which I believe can be used for other works such as telling and valuing story as well is as follows:

- **Tool 1:** Ask, “Who benefits from this situation?”
- **Tool 2:** Ask, “How are privilege and power shaping what we see?”
- **Tool 3:** Question who is and is not represented in the “literature,” [story] among researchers, participants, cultures and communities.
- **Tool 4:** Question the methods.
- **Tool 5:** Question the research [interview] questions.
- **Tool 6:** Question the interpretations.
- **Tool 7:** Question the motivations and possible uses of this work, intended or unintended outcomes.
- **Tool 8:** Question the ways in which a focus on the individual may obscure contexts and dynamics of power.

—by Carolyn Zerbe Enns (Editor), Elizabeth Nutt Williams (Editor)
The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Multicultural Counseling Psychology (Oxford Library of Psychology) 1st Edition

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Another possible resolution/solution has to do with grieving.

I attended a workshop led by Victor Lewis and I went to the session with a question in my mind because of the courses I was teaching at the time in regard to contact literature and women’s/gender studies.

My question had to do with what to do with the **Great White Guilt**. Lewis stated that the guilt/defensiveness is a stance against grieving about what occurred. Greif allows work to go on and does not become a cloying activity. Guilt lays a trip on those who are already oppressed. (5 stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, but not necessarily in that order.)

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Lewis said, I am paraphrasing: We should build allies with other oppressed groups from a stance of principle and not based on identity. Not ignoring one's identity, hyphenated, or not, but as a matter of human principle should we interrupt oppression. Moral outrage is to be based on principle, not identity. Identity as a choice, part of one's definition, but to see beyond the riff and create recognition of the differences as ally building.

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Doing cultural work involves: (and I want to add that writing, from a platform of the cultural point of view is doing cultural work.)

Service
Sacrifice
Struggle
Solidarity
CLICK

- **Service:** Donate time/talent/money to any organization of your choice that is undoing oppressions.
- **Sacrifice:** Sacrifice low self-esteem, timidity, self-righteousness, and do the work that needs to be done.
- **Struggle:** Name any civil rights work that has been done and struggle has ALWAYS been involved.
- **Solidarity:** Based on the idea of principles, and not identity. Meaning that different cultures DO come together and build solidarity. AS themselves.

And finally,
CLICK

I am a fan of fonts/typography and I have found one of the most elegant portrayals of community, aka story telling in my interpretation, that comes from the work of Marian Bantjes who is a designer, typographer, writer and illustrator working internationally from her base on a small island off the west coast of Canada, near Vancouver.

Of this work, I will read her brief explanation of the piece. She states: "Given the opportunity to write / draw over 3 spreads on the subject of Community for [Fontshop's](#) Font 004 magazine, I took the chance to explore some "graphic communication."

She goes on to say, I initially wrote a fairly lengthy piece on the inclusiveness/exclusiveness of community and the varying levels of exclusivity, as well as the various potential communities to which we all belong.

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And after writing, I started to draw. And as I drew, I eliminated the text as it became absorbed into the graphics.

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The whole became a kind of organic narrative diagram, and has survived the test of time as one of my favourite pieces, she concludes.

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Title of the work: **Us vs. Them**

(Last slide of Marian Bantjes, the whole piece)

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(My info slide.)

Thank you.

This concludes my presentation so I am interested to know if there are any reactions, observations, remarks, and/or questions at this time. Any discussion points that have occurred to you?