DOCUMENTARY AS DISCOURSE: CULTIVATING NARRATIVE AGENCY THROUGH MEDIA ARTS IN MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICE WITH YOUTH

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Abstract
Over the past decade, and especially within the last three years marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, increases in major mental health concerns among youth have been noted by many experts on adolescent health and well-being (Racine et al., 2021). When these trends are considered relative to specific subpopulations of youth (i.e., those with histories of complex trauma and engagement with the child welfare system) an even more concerning story begins to take shape. Young people who entered the pandemic in vulnerable spaces with regard to many aspects of their lives (academic, social, emotional, physical health) have, by in large, become even more vulnerable over its course (Goldberg et al., 2021; Herrenkohl et al., 2021; Murthy, 2022). The current trends around declining adolescent mental health and increasing awareness of the troubling impacts of complex trauma within the context of COVID-19 demand ever more sophisticated and creative approaches to mental health care access and interventions.

Today's adolescents, across demographics, subsist in environments that offer 24-hour access to the news cycle, one another, and the curation of their own metanarratives (as well as both a worldwide audience and the means to construct and share their personal stories) but a finger swipe away. Some argue the immediate and inconsistently mitigated availability of information, media (social and otherwise), and related forms of interpersonal interaction reinforce the aforementioned trends around adolescent mental health, particularly with regard to rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal as well as self-injurious behaviors (Primack et al., 2017; Schor, 2021; Twenge et al., 2019; Twenge 2020). While this perspective holds, a counter narrative exists. Incredible potential rests in harnessing available technologies, means of media production, and digital access, especially as they relate to societal shifts during the pandemic, within a more broadly defined therapeutic space to support youth reimagining stories, redirecting impulse, and resurrecting possibility.

This dissertation explores a theoretical framework and practical application related to one such clinical approach through two interrelated parts. The first consists of a conceptual paper that positions the history and conventions of documentary work (as a specific media arts form) as a potent mechanism to engage narrative constructs (as a particular clinical approach), orienting their intersections toward child welfare-involved youth. This conceptual paper is operationalized by a sample application, in the form of a discrete session that resides in a structured intervention protocol, that further explores and demonstrates the power of documentary arts methods within narrative-based clinical interventions to animate discourse and facilitate post-traumatic growth and healing.

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Dedication

for senai, adae, & eyasu,

who navigated the past three years,
and all they held for us,
by my side—

may you continue to carve
your own stories
through the world
and always know
your power
to choose
what is yours to carry,
and
what you might put down.

i am so proud of each of you.
Love.
Acknowledgment

Potentially, discourse is endless; the infinite semiosis of meaning. But to say anything at all in particular you do have to stop talking. Of course, every full stop is provisional. The next sentence will take nearly all of it back. So what is this “ending?” It’s a kind of stake, a kind of wager. It says, “I need to say something, something…. Just now.” It is not forever, not totally universally true. It is not underpinned by any infinite guarantees. But just now, this is what I mean; this is who I am.

-Stuart Hall, *Minimal Selves*

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Let’s carry on.
Chapter One:
Concepts, Constructs, and Connections

Introduction

“Birth certificates, school records, psych evals, legal reports, case notes, maybe a photograph or two,” Carla¹, a long-time social worker with child welfare-involved adolescents, describes pulling open a file drawer in a room lined with brushed metal cabinets. She narrates what she finds as she thumbs through manila folders filled with papers documenting young people’s lives. She pauses and reflects on the role of child welfare social workers in maintaining these files, “I feel like we become the keepers of all these histories, all these stories.” (C.A., personal communication, July 2021)

Each sliver of paper in every case file marks a certain aspect of a young person’s life, evidencing their time spent in state care. Pressed together, they tell a story of some stretch of a kid’s growing up. Replicated in similar files and kept in comparable cabinets in child welfare agencies across the United States, these stories represent the individual experiences of youth who have faced incredible losses, endured multiple transitions, and born the impacts of trauma across their bodies, minds, and lifetimes. Often the lenses through which these histories are developed and documented focus on behavioral and emotional challenges, highlight schisms in relationships, and trace shifts in location and legal obligation with precision (White & Epston, 1990; Rolock & Pérez, 2018). These are particular perspectives, structured by the systems and dominant relational and cultural paradigms within which these young people have matured. The state sanctioned parameters under which they are constructed suggest some underlying factual basis to the stories they tell. But these files are far from complete and, though rooted in some reality, far from objective in their recounting of how any one child might be known.

There is much that these case files cannot hold, that lies past the edges of their frames of focus, that these stories cannot possibly convey. There is plenty more to any person’s life than

¹ All proper names throughout this dissertation have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
amalgamations of individual records can signify, much about the nuanced days of any story’s protagonist that slip between sheets of paper. Yet, these collections of documents marked with their names follow these young people into new relationships and presuppose their arrivals in fresh spaces even as youth themselves cannot access their contents until they turn 18. Their stories are told through these files and not by the youth themselves.

Young people involved with the child welfare system in the United States navigate narratives of themselves that are deeply impacted by forces outside their influence, and often with parts of their stories beyond their awareness, through significant portions of their lives. From the moments they are born, many American children find themselves positioned within cycles of generational trauma and child welfare involvement rooted in racial oppression and systemic poverty. They become known to child protection agencies because of concerns regarding their safety or well-being relative to family or community dynamics out of their control, processes that are inextricably linked with these same mechanisms of power and oppression. Their stories and experiences are observed and evaluated by strangers vested with incredible authority to make decisions regarding their lives. They endure separation and “removal,” leaving familiar places and people presumably for the better and sometimes without much warning and with only a few belongings. And then, their health, relationships, and daily lives become legal matters requiring careful documentation and record keeping as they sift and shift through the system’s tides.

As child welfare-involved youth age over time within the system, and often before they are ever known to it, stories are told and built about them, reacted to and acted upon, documented without their consistent collaboration, and filed for “safe” keeping in family lore before they enter care and in agency paperwork after. The documentation and frames of focus of formalized
case files of children and youth involved in state systems like child welfare serve specific purposes. They are built to satisfy legal expectations, and they remain relatively fixed in time and space. They do not aim to center young peoples’ perspectives or capture their complexity.

While much is kept outside their purview, for many such youth there remain elements of their stories that are quite intimately known to them long before they enter state care. The details may be confusing or hurtful, hidden or pushed down deep, but their lives are composed of more than fact-based paper trails woven from trauma and foster homes, academic issues, and case workers. Their stories are dynamic and complicated, painful and still alive. The degree to which they reckon with the interplay between their own senses of history and self, in contrast to that which has been constructed or obscured around them, varies depending on many personal, familial, and societal factors.

**The Archive**

Almost universally young people currently in the child welfare system can access details of their stories and reflect on elements of their experiences in real time on the devices they carry and screens through which much of their interactions are mediated. While their lives are being documented and catalogued in file drawers (and often well before) they are building archives of their own design. Many of these youth navigate, curate, and construct story, position, and relationship with stunning dexterity in photographs and video, text, and their own voices many times a day. Indeed, they are growing up in a media climate that supports the near constant narration of their lives, as documents made in square pixelated frames and rectangular videos entered into the public record with a touch on a screen. Multiple platforms exist for them to imagine, record, and assert their own meanings about their lives in the world. The digital
interfaces and virtual archives they develop offer spaces in which they can perform identity and play with expectation, try on new plot lines and review history. All the while these youth-centered storytelling efforts operate in parallel with state sanctioned story making through documentation and reporting protocols.

**Dissertation Aims and Scope**

This dissertation is motivated by the rich territory that exists between these narrative constructs, those stories kept locked in cabinets and password protected files and those breathing through young people making their ways through change and trauma with cell phones and social media. This effort is guided by an orientation toward honoring youth’s innate capacities to negotiate the spaces within and between their own senses of self and story and those stories told about or withheld from them. In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison (1987) wrote, “Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (p. 112). Building on existing clinical endeavors with adolescents within the current media and socio-cultural climate, this dissertation will posit approaches to mental health work that leverage documentary media arts\(^2\) for transformation. In so doing, it hopes to expand clinical support for young people--whose lives have been significantly impacted by trauma and transition--to trust their ways of knowing, claim ownership of their stories, access increased agency, and maybe even freedom.

Perhaps now more than ever, and within the context framed by the social isolation, widespread trauma and loss, and technological reliance experienced by youth, adults, and their communities since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (Magson et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2021) there is a case to be made for digital interfaces and creative media-based therapeutic

\(^2\) Defined by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as “film, cinema, audio, broadcast, new media, creative code, and related formats at the intersection of arts and technology” (NEA, 2022).
interventions occupying a critical place in the field of adolescent mental health. This dissertation operates on the premise that there is imaginative work to be done at the junctures between documentary arts-based methodologies, various platforms for communication, relationship, and storytelling, trauma-focused and healing-centered clinical social work, and adolescent development. This dissertation aims to contribute to this conversation in timely and creative ways through exploring the following overarching question:

*How does the conceptualization of documentary practice within the therapeutic relationship and field facilitate the development of narrative agency with young people involved in the child welfare system?*

This work will approach this larger question through two interrelated parts. The first is a conceptual paper that explores the ways documentary arts can be integrated with narrative-based interventions with adolescents in state care to support agency and ownership of personal story. For the purposes of this dissertation narrative agency (Benhabib, 1986; Cense & Ganzevoort, 2019; Lucas, 2018; Vanaken et al., 2021) is understood as the expressed ability to imagine, claim, and tell one’s story. Through considering the history and conventions of narrative practice as they meet the legacy and power of documentary approaches, I reference and add to the growing body of theoretical and applied work related to media arts as therapeutic interventions, especially with young people carrying complex trauma. These include academic, clinical, artistic, and philosophical work from a range of perspectives as well as my own extensive professional experience with youth, families, and child welfare. By orienting this dialogue between documentary and narrative toward those spending their adolescence in state care (a period of profound physical, relational, and social significance) it considers how contemporary developments in, and access to, digital media intersect recent trends around adolescent mental
wellness with particular attention to trauma and treatment thereof (Gomez et al., 2021; Hammond et al., 2022; Pink et al., 2020). This conceptual work contributes to the current conversation regarding young people’s mental health needs and realities (Goldberg et al., 2021; Herrenkohl et al., 2021; Mojtbai & Olfson, 2020) and speaks directly to the potential, and critical demand, for creative innovations in models and methods of practice from a strongly informed theoretical and historical foundation (Anderson & Cook, 2015; Nissen, 2019, 2020).

This conceptual paper is complemented by a sample application that further explores the potential of such creative therapeutic practices to animate discourse and facilitate post-traumatic growth and healing. Through the introduction to an intervention protocol, this second aspect of the dissertation demonstrates how the integration of documentary arts into narrative practices may look in therapeutic work with adolescents involved with the child welfare system. The development of this documentary arts application was guided by a small, volunteer Advisory Group of former foster-involved young adults. The primary role of the Advisory Group was to consider the developing protocol through the lenses of their own lived experiences and to offer critical feedback about elements of the potential intervention. In this, their perspectives and voices spoke to the proposed intervention and were integrated into the production of the work. They are credited, as desired, as co-creators in this aspect of the dissertation. While the project is focused on one particular population of clients, these practices may hold promise and power with populations and in settings beyond those explicated within the project’s scope. In such, this work serves as a foundation for further exploration of creative and contemporary models for clinical alliances with young people.
Narrative

Some things they carried in common… They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections. They carried chess sets, basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries, insignia of rank…They carried the land itself—Vietnam, the place, the soil—a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity.

-Tim O’Brien, The Things They Carried

The past stays with us, wrapped inside our storied quilts, packed into our cotton bags, and written upon our memories. Past is present is passed on.

-Tiya Miles, All That She Carried

Stories carry. They carry meaning and memory over generations. They carry limitations and loss through relationships. They carry routes and revelations across lifetimes. They carry specific expectation. They are dynamic and evolving and both greater than any one experience and deeply rooted in individual interpretation. And they carry the darkened spaces between their stories’ elements too, that which isn’t passed on or is erased by circumstance or gets consciously suppressed in acts of survival. Tim O’Brien’s (1990) The Things They Carried, a semi-autobiographical meditation on the experiences of one American platoon in the Vietnam War, describes the stories of a single group of soldiers. Their stories are told through the literal and metaphorical “things” the men carry with them into uncharted and dangerous territory far from home. Given strict rules about what and how much to carry and the expectation that all of this would sit on their backs as they navigated war, the men had to choose to fill their packs wisely. The soldiers carried an assortment of things—photos, letters, sadness, rations, dog tags, fear—with a variety of motivations for each piece. And while their bodies bore such weight, there was much that each of them did not shoulder, things that were left behind or forgotten, ignored or unknown, buried in their histories or released along their ways toward war. Across the group, in
O’Brien’s telling, the men lugged some things, did not bear many others, and those things, whether kept close or far out of reach, held them and one another.

Stories live in people and communities and within the spaces between them, from full coherent histories to gap-filled patchworks of memory and feeling. Narrative constructs organize social relationship and shape self-concept as much by what they hold and how they signify as by what and how they don’t (Madigan, 2019). The influence of personal narratives, held in beliefs, carried in belongings, passed on by voices as well as packed away in boxes, silenced by survival, obscured by design, translates across many domains of the human experience. Stories as animators of inquiry and intimate knowing weave across discipline too: from literature, as in O’Brien’s (1990) loosely autobiographical short story referenced above, to the social sciences, as in anthropologist Jason De León’s (2015) attention to narratives lost and found, and close to his own, in his work with undocumented migration along the US/Mexico border, to history, as in Black feminist scholar Tiya Miles’ (2021) recounting of memory and resilience, and her own family’s legacy, stitched through fabric and generations of Black American women’s lives.

With such a trans-disciplinary lens, this effort explores narrative as both a theoretical concept and practical application with powerful implications for the well-being of individuals and their communities. I establish an initial conceptualization of narrative as it relates to clinical practices around mental health and introduces a promising overlap with aspects of documentary work. Ultimately this paper suggests the potential in integrating creative media-based approaches to narrative constructs in therapeutic settings with young people navigating complex trauma and loss, and particularly with young people involved with child welfare.
Narrative as a Clinical Construct

By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others. You start sometimes with an incident that truly happened, like the night in the field, and you carry it forward by inventing incidents that did not in fact occur but that nonetheless help to clarify and explain.

-Tim O’Brien, The Things They Carried

The roots of narrative-based therapeutic approaches lie in Michael White’s (1995, 2000, 2004, 2007) and White and David Epston’s (1990) formalizations of Narrative Therapy, a clinical framework centered on nuanced considerations of personal stories as mechanisms for health and healing. In their theorization, Narrative Therapy’s central premise involves encouraging individuals and groups to conceptualize their lives as amalgamations of stories, or narratives, created, held, carried, and passed onward, much like the platoon members did in O’Brien’s short story and Miles explicated in All That She Carried (2021). These stories might have been generated in people’s own lived experiences or find their roots outside of their discrete selves, in family and community, history and folklore. Thus, the narratives that are heard, repeated, woven into tangible belongings, grooved in people’s neural pathways are the stories that are allowed, or are forced, to define relationships and experiences within individuals, other people, and the world.

Narrative Therapy operates on the basis, informed by French philosopher Michel Foucault’s writings, that these dominant stories of individuals’ lives hold tremendous power while also bearing limited particular truth and little objective validity (Foucault, 1965; White & Epston, 1990). Yet, these narratives chart behavior and relationship, often for the better but also for the worse, over the life course. White and Epston (1990) focused on the ways in which accepted or dominant narratives proscribed people’s lives and might be critically considered in meaningful and liberating ways. They asserted that safely supported inquiry with regard to these
narratives held potential to shift individuals’ dominant stories in manners conducive to healing. In their framework they posited that encouragement within the therapeutic relationship and spatial field between therapist and client, to consider and re-orient to narratives evident in one’s experience and recognize them as tales woven from wholly subjective understandings of experience and observation, could facilitate profound growth (White & Epston, 1990).

In their thinking, these processes are enacted through several core elements of practice that follow a somewhat linear narrative arc. The first essential component of White and Epston’s approach relates to what they termed “externalizing,” or separating the dominant story and its elements from the client’s core sense of themselves through relationship with the therapist and an awareness of being able to situate the story in the therapeutic field between them (Madigan, 2019; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990). As White (2007) famously stated, this process of locating challenging narratives outside of oneself allows clients to recognize “the problem (is) the problem, not the person…” (p. 26) In turn, these distinguishing processes set a stage for clients to engage in another aspect of narrative work, “position mapping,” wherein they draw out components, actors, and specific plot lines in dominant problem-oriented stories using charting techniques (White, 2007). Position mapping within the intersubjective field and with clinical support lays the groundwork for clients to not only disentangle themselves from problematic narratives but also actively deconstruct those narratives and observe them as made of discrete components.

Once a dominant narrative is externalized the process of deconstructing and position mapping allows critical perspective to be found. At this point the client and therapist set to work

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3 Psychoanalytic theorist Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) used the term “intersubjective field” to describe this concept in his framing of Self Psychology. Developmental psychologist Donald Winnicott (1953, 1960) referred to this same concept as the “holding environment” within his formulation of Object Relations Theory.
on the next phase, that of reconstructing a story from the parts mapped, the elements of story set out before them (Madigan, 2019). In narrative approaches, “Clients explore their experiences to find alterations to their story or make a whole new one. The same events can tell a hundred different stories since we all interpret experiences differently and find different senses of meaning” (The Dulwich Centre, n.d.). This practice, known as re-storying, re-authoring, and re-membering, permits the client to make editorial choices about what elements, which people, what plot lines they choose to center (Epston, 1992; White 1995).

Critical to this process is an orientation toward making one’s own meanings and composing narratives that consider “unique outcomes” (Madigan, 2019), understood as felt experiences or latent possibilities that contradict the dominant problem-oriented story. With new perspective and an enhanced sense of narrative control, such exceptions might be more seriously entertained and centrally integrated, thereby shifting the story and its meanings in powerful and insightful ways. The final aspect of their conceptualization of narrative work in clinical applications involves sharing the newly constructed story. White and Epston (1990) argued from the beginning of their partnered effort that the act of expressing a new narrative, of clients’ own, and experiencing it witnessed within relationship with others, allowed clients’ dominant stories to be concretized anew. They termed this aspect “definitional ceremony” and lauded it as critically impactful final step (Madigan, 2019; Speedy, 2011; White, 2000; White, 2007).

Clinical efforts within a narrative arc share common elements with social constructionist theory, grounding mental health in affirming personal perspectives and collective meaning making (Shotter & Gergen, 1989, 1994; Witkin, 2014). At the core of White and Epston’s work is a centering of some nascent power to observe, re-imagine, and assert intimate perspectives through the stories people tell and believe. In this, their clinical approach is primarily about
narrative agency, a process that bears broad implications for one’s capacity to exert influence and mastery over self-concept, relationships, and behavior in the world.

Revisiting the Archive

The field of inquiry regarding narrative concepts as applied in clinical settings presupposes that at least some rudimentary access to an existing narrative, with its components and structures, is present in the client’s consciousness. However, some clients’ personally held archives of data and memory are structurally unavailable or quite heavily redacted in formal records and their own minds, making them challenging if not impossible to draw from or claim. This is the case for many youth whose involvement with child welfare pre-dated any conscious meaning making of their own. For them, the formal records of their life, created in parallel with their development, have been constructed by others—often most essentially by biological family members or case workers—whose biases and motivations permanently impact their contents.

Additionally, research suggests that trauma in and beyond early childhood, like that sustained by young people experiencing significant breaks in primary relationships, relational rupture with subsequent attachment figures, or habitually unstable environments often metabolizes in brain function and body memory as limitations in cognitive and physiological function. These processes can affect access to narrative elements as well as expressive language capacities (Perryman et al., 2019; Schouten et al., 2019; van der Kolk, 2014). Applications of principles of narrative therapy have been demonstrated to support positive outcomes for adolescents struggling with a wide range of emotional challenges (Coholic, 2009; Combs & Freedman, 2012; DeCoster & Dickerson, 2014; Edmondson et al., 2018; Maree & Pienaar, 2009). How can narrative practices apply in situations in which the therapeutic process must
start with identifying initial building blocks of the story to begin with? I explore this question through the case of Sofia, an example from my clinical work:

Case Example: Sofia

*Sofia was 16 and struggling with finishing high school when we first met. As we talked in our first few sessions she shared challenges maintaining friendships and grades, her difficulties with her mother, and persistent feelings of depression and anxiety. Through these conversations a picture emerged, of a young woman fighting to delineate herself within a family history of significant loss and mental illness. Her Mexican-American father had completed suicide after her white mother left him at the behest of her family, taking infant Sofia with her. Subsequently, her mother had remarried a white man and birthed another daughter, becoming estranged from Sofia in the process. Sofia had carved a path through her childhood bearing a strong physical resemblance to her father, a sense of otherness within her white family, and a gnawing fear that whatever fueled his death was chasing her. We spoke a lot about her father in those first sessions. His legacy felt powerful to Sofia and yet the details of her father’s life were murky. She knew he had crossed the border as a young adult and ended up in New England, that he loved soccer, and that she carried his eyes and hair. Her mother and extended family’s distaste for him and the conditions under which he died limited her access and cloaked details of his life and yet there he was, riding with her through it all, in every mirror and every family argument.

How could Sofia make meaning of her own stories of her life, or her father’s, with such limited facts and such weight born through the lenses she was afforded by others? How could she grasp agency or delineate self-concept relative to her father in the midst of these complicated plot lines, traumatic events, and obscured memories? In her TedTalk *The Danger of a Single Story* author Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) states,

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story, and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story (10:13).

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4 Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
Adichie’s suggestion that grasping power relative to personal narrative might start with digging into what hasn’t been passed on, with rejecting the dominant story, within asserting that there is more, and it is different, or at least more complete, could be applied with Sofia.

The story that Sofia told of herself started with her brown eyes and her vision being defined by the narrative that others in her family told about her father as a mentally unstable, brown skinned, “good for nothing immigrant.” But what if she could make a different story through finding new information or imagining fresh possibilities from the little she had and with what was discoverable? We discussed what she could locate of his: a Mexican flag, an old soccer jersey with their last name, a trail of Facebook posts from his former girlfriend. And we started there, inviting these objects and bits of information into the work and space we shared, and tried to develop a new story with these building blocks.

This story was built piecemeal, with gaps and doubt embedded deep. But, as we spread the pieces out before us, the Mexican flag and her father’s jersey, in photographs on a table in my office, connections she hadn’t noticed before became more concrete and mysteries that maybe did not matter faded into the air. This process of externalizing known elements, bringing them into the therapeutic space, and considering their interplays from some distance and in partnership allowed some semblance of a loosely coherent narrative to begin to develop before us (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Vanaken, et al., 2021). And this was enough to allow Sofia to start to reimagine her relationship to her father and to herself. She had built the beginnings of a framework of a new story, about her father’s life as well as her own, within a relationship with a trusted adult. In this structure, the leaps between what had felt like a loose array of emotionally charged memories and ephemera didn’t seem so far. And she wasn’t alone. The story and its dark spaces and evident structure were witnessed, held, honored in the therapeutic space.
**Generating the Archive**

Many young people experience relatively easy access to the components of their stories; they possess archives held in photographs in frames and computer files, tales told around porches and mealtimes, memories marked by homes or people or experiences. They can rely on threads of consistency stitching the narratives they carry together, processes that allow them to ground themselves as they grow. As they enter their teen years, they begin to grapple with understanding themselves and the relational and cultural dynamics in which they live in both thrilling and challenging ways (Cannon et al., 2012; Jordan, 1991). And drawing on the stories they carry and the narratives that surround them is part of this reckoning during adolescence. Even for young people whose narrative constructs are more stable these processes can be difficult to navigate in this developmental stage (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). For youth whose narratives are structurally inconsistent or unknown or marked by trauma these processes can become that much more fraught.

Sofia and countless other young people from communities marginalized by poverty or war, traumatized by racial oppression or engagement with harsh systems, must contend with aspects of their stories that have been constructed around them, wired within them, or disappeared altogether long before they entered adolescence, foster care, or any new country. Their lived senses of themselves are forged against whatever narratives have been tossed into the spaces they embody and enter, as adolescents, as young people of color, as foster youth, as immigrants, as kids struggling with mental health issues, and growing up poor. Their stories of themselves have often started with what Adichie, and Barghouti before, referred to as “secondly” in her aforementioned TedTalk (2009). They must consider these outlines in their approaching spaces and their shadows too, navigate how they fit into them, or not, and how others perceive
them relative to these incomplete stories that they signify but perhaps have never felt like, or
truly been, theirs to carry. The emotional and social impacts of these experiences related to story
and self cannot be asserted in any absolutes. However, this conceptualization of how narratives,
and narrative-based clinical work, function in the lives of adolescents who carry complex trauma
offers insight into mechanisms that contribute to mental health challenges with this population as
well as the possibility in expanding narrative methods in targeted ways and with specific goals in mind (Anderson & Cook, 2015; Ginwright, 2009, 2015, 2018; Ikonomopoulos et al., 2015).

**Current Issues and Applications of Narrative Constructs with Adolescents**

In such divided times, we believe that the role of story is to remind us there is no ‘us’ and
‘them.’ There’s just ‘us.’ This *[holding up award]* is for everyone who feels like they
don’t belong. Anyone who feels like they’re stuck in no man’s land. You’re not alone.
We’ll meet you there. That’s where the future is.

- Rizwan Ahmed, *Academy Award Acceptance Speech*

Over the past decade, and especially within the last three years marked by the COVID-19
pandemic, marked increases in major mental health concerns among youth have been noted by
many experts on adolescent health and well-being (Mojtbai & Olfson, 2020; Twenge, 2019).
When these trends are considered relative to specific subpopulations of youth (i.e., those with
histories of complex trauma and engagement with the child welfare system) an even more
concerning story begins to take shape. Young people who entered the pandemic in vulnerable
spaces with regard to many aspects of their lives (academic, social, emotional, physical health)
have, by in large, become even more vulnerable over its course (Racine et al., 2021). The current
trends around declining adolescent mental health and increasing awareness of the troubling
impacts of complex trauma within the context of COVID-19 (Goldberg et al., 2021; Herrenkohl
et al., 2021; Murthy, 2022) demand ever more sophisticated and creative approaches to access
and interventions. The onus is on practitioners and researchers with the interest and capacity to develop engaging and culturally relevant strategies to meet the needs of young people whose real lives are reflected in these trends.

The current media climate, as it intersects with youth culture and decreased stigma around mental illness and treatment, presents a uniquely rich context in which to pioneer creative interventions with young people around many issues of great relevance and considerable concern. Many assert the efficacy of creative methodologies that center story when treating young people, particularly identifying expressive arts therapies and narrative work as supportive of adolescent mental health outcomes (Coholic, 2009; DeCoster & Dickerson, 2014; Edmondson et al., 2018; Faranda, 2014; Manuel, 2010; Noland, 2006; Warner, 2013). An existing body of work has endeavored to leverage new media to support mental health with various populations, including youth in state care (Denby, 2016; Despenser, 2006; Rice, 2013, 2014; Rose et al., 2016; Schwan et al., 2018). The proposed clinical intervention builds on these efforts by harnessing elements of the media landscape within this adolescent mental health crisis (Murthy, 2022) to meet young people on their terms, trade in their particular vernaculars, and invite them into collaborative narrative work, processes that might support vulnerable young people in especially timely and transformative ways.
Documentary as Landscape of Story and Power

Many years ago, in the flatlands of deep East Oakland, young people carried paper frames around a room, holding them arms-length away, peering through, taking mental notes of what they observed, and making stories from what they saw. They crouched under tables, climbed on chairs, lay upside down, and stood in doorways just outside the room itself. What did they see? What didn’t they? What did they choose to leave beyond the frame, or include within it? What meaning did they imagine from these details and choices? When they shared their visions and the stories they signified, the tales they told were varied and complex. Carlos’s ‘saw’ some things specific and unique in his frame and from his point of view and crafted his own story of it. So did Angelica, and Natalie, and Kevin. And that made all the difference.

That day Carlos and his peers were making stories about their communities, families, and selves within a documentary photography workshop. The project focused on youth developing skills to critically observe their immediate worlds with cameras and film, document those observations in visual and written forms, craft these documents into stories of their own imagining, and share those unique perspectives with audiences. The effort was predicated on a belief in documentary work as a personally and socially transformative form of storytelling. As Adichie’s (2009) quote above suggests, the loudest and most dominant stories in our minds and worlds are often narrated by the parts of ourselves and our communities that are strongest or overpowering at points of inflection, emerged ahead or victorious from conflict, or were born with power and privilege at the top. For these adolescents from East Oakland formidable narratives existed about them, their cultures, their schools, their families, and their futures as kids of color from low-income neighborhoods on the edges of a large American city. Teachers, city council members, and the lighter, whiter, and wealthier folks in the East Bay hills all had more say in the stories that were told about their city and their spaces than they did. Yet, these young people knew their voices and had their own stories to share. This workshop was one

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5 Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
small opportunity, in the days before smartphones and social media, for them to hold some means of media production and tell tales of their own making with the tools in their hands.

Since those days in Oakland the landscape of media arts has shifted in incredible ways. A process that started with hours in darkrooms now transpires in moments on devices pulled from pockets. Across the world people of all ages express and discern meaning in all manner of text (visual, aural, etc.) with amazing speed and dexterity. Communities of digital natives trade in relationships and experiences documented as “stories” in live time and broadcast thousands of miles a second. Access has become more equalized, allowing the storytelling possibilities of documentary media and arts to be more broadly experienced. The following pages explore documentary as a form of relational practice and a forum for narrative expression with specific characteristics and applications that are rooted in its historical legacy, were present twenty years ago, and are particularly compelling for youth and their communities in the present day.

*Defining Documentary*

Poets, prophets, and reformers are all picture-makers, and this ability is the secret of their power and achievements: they see what ought to be by the reflection of what is, and endeavor to remove the contradiction.

-Frederick Douglass, *Pictures and Progress*

In 1861, one hundred and fifty years before any Oakland adolescent practiced picturing their world in a paper frame, abolitionist Frederick Douglass stood in Boston’s Tremont Temple speaking about the power of images in a speech entitled *Pictures and Progress*. He alluded, in the early days of daguerreotype, to the emerging medium’s potential to express individual experiences, assert specific points of view, and, perhaps most critically, facilitate transformative processes through the discourse it might inspire. While aspects of picture making as process and product appeared in his writing and speaking engagements, Douglass was also a frequent and
willing focus of the camera, sitting for portraits on many occasions, some argue more than anyone else of his time (Gates, 2015). Douglass’ presence in photos and at podiums leveraged his life story, considerable range of skills, and physical attributes in the interest of a broader movement that advocated justice for those who, like him, were formerly enslaved. The socio-political context that framed Douglass’ orientation toward images and justice is of critical importance to the consideration of his efforts. In the many decades since Douglass’ prescient words, the capacity of photographs—captured in single still frames and strung together in moving pictures—to express perspective, frame story, and convey meaning has only become more influential.

Douglass did not articulate his orientation toward images in terms of “documentary” practices. He did, however, argue that pictures (and mid-19th century photography as a medium) allowed people, across a range of personal and social factors, unprecedented access to “seeing” their lives and “interior selves as distinct personalities as though looking in glass,” a process that made “ourselves objective to ourselves” and in turn opened avenues for self and social critique that could ultimately animate social change (Wallace & Smith, pp. 6-7). His assertions about the transformative power of what might now be considered applied visual media and culture provide a foundation upon which this argument for the considerable potential of documentary as integrated into therapeutic contexts is built.

In this paper, I define documentary work in line with the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, as an engagement with creative processes (making photographs, shooting film/video, recording audio, composing narrative prose, and exploring experimental media) to construct a tangible record of some experience, thereby “documenting” said experience in the products these methods generate (photographs, films, audio files, written pieces, and
experimental forms) (Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, n.d.). This dissertation does not attempt to offer an exhaustive exposition of documentary as concept or effort across artistic medium, academic discipline, or cultural or political history. Instead, I respectfully acknowledge the depth of existing scholarship and creative production related to documentary as well as the breadth of potential inquiry. And I seek to establish documentary as a dynamic narrative construct, a conduit for discourse, and an essentially dialectical enterprise, both rooted in settler-colonialist paradigms of power and control (Cole, 2019; Hull & Rivas, 2022) and attuned to the personally liberating and socially just audio-visual tradition represented by Douglass’ endeavors so many years ago (Stauffer et al., 2015).

While debate exists about the origins and definitions of “documentary,” many scholars credit Scottish filmmaker John Grierson with an early delineation of the term (Austin & De Jong, 2008; Franklin, 2016). In a 1926 review of Robert J. Flaherty’s film Moana, Grierson described the filmmaker’s cinematic meditation on one Polynesian family as: “a visual account of events of daily life” having “documentary value” (Winston, 1995, p. 11). Grierson qualified this choice of language by calling the film a “creative treatment of actuality,” further asserting that “intimacy with the fact of the matter is therefore the distinguishing mark of documentary…” (Franklin, 2016, pp. 5-7). In subsequent work, Grierson (1932) presented documentary as a field of creative and social practice composed of three animating concepts: the “intentions” motivating the work (or purpose), the “qualities” of the effort (interpreted here as process), and the “powers and ambitions” at the “organizing stage” (or message-infused documents or products generated through the process). In writing published toward the end of the 1930’s Grierson would more explicitly expand on the processes animating documentary work, stating, “The basic force behind [documentary] was social and not aesthetic. It was a desire to make a drama out of the ordinary,
to set against the prevailing drama of the extraordinary: a desire to bring the citizen’s eye in from the ends of the earth to the story, his own story, of what was happening under his nose.”

(Grierson & Hardy, 1946, p. 9)

Grierson’s understandings highlight critical tensions that are embedded within the construct of documentary, writ large, and each of these three spheres of operation. For example, Grierson’s vernacular suggests a purposeful orientation or intention toward social reform and advocacy even as it tacitly centers and reinforces the privileged point of view of the documentarian, financially supported “observation” of “original” content and people, and preferred global position of the Euro-American theater or “west.” While significant portions of documentary work might be legitimately understood as media-based storytelling for social justice the field of documentary practice has also developed from and within dynamics of institutional power and narrative control, imperialist ambitions, and inequitable access to the mechanisms of production (Cole, 2019). These forces present in parallel formulations within state-sanctioned and operated systems, like child welfare and juvenile justice, in the modern United States as they “keep” and tell stories of and for generations of young people.

These tensions, between forces of control and drives for liberation, are evident across the conceptualization of documentary efforts as an amalgamation of purpose, process, and product throughout the historical record (Sontag, 1977; Campt, 2017). If the nature of doing and making documentary work is critically fraught, it is also in this charged dialectic that incredible potential lies for it as applied in certain contexts and in this moment. Visual theorist Ariella Azoulay (2008) writes, “The widespread use of cameras by people around the world has created more than a mass of images; it has created a new form of encounter… thus opening new possibilities of political action and forming new conditions for its visibility” (p. 24). The recent leveling of
access to the means of visual, written, and aural production, as well as audiences for said
expressions, has generated new fields of inquiry, modes of relationship, and forms of
storytelling. Digging into the dialectic in documentary allows new applications for its methods to
materialize. The remainder of this paper expands on these three elements, develops possibilities
found in the inherent complexities of the work, and presents ways in which the form might be
critically considered, oriented around narrative-based efforts in clinical settings, and applied with
particular populations.

**Documentary as Purpose, Process, & Product**

**Purpose**

The good photograph is not the object, the consequences of the photograph are the objects.
-Dorothea Lange

The idea of purpose, or intention, in documentary work is fundamental to its
conceptualization and sets the form apart from adjacent audio and visual endeavors that exist as
more purely artistic, or what Grierson (1946) called “aesthetic,” enterprises. Here, “purpose”
encompasses the documentarian’s personal ambition and relationship to the work as it intersects
with any public-oriented motivation or intention they represent. Establishing clarity of purpose is
difficult, given that the layers in any motivation are many and rooted in the historical, social, and
personal contexts underscoring the effort. These may be known or unknown to the
documentarian themselves. For example, documentary work might be undertaken in the interest
of historical posterity, tacit social control, academic study, legal record keeping, personal
curiosity, civic action, journalistic storytelling, political propaganda, or social advocacy.

Photographer Stuart Franklin (2016), describes documentary’s orientation toward
purpose as an “impulse,” defined as “the passion to record the moments we experience and wish
to preserve, the things we witness and might want to reform, or simply the people, place or things we find remarkable” (p. 5). Franklin’s definition brings up important questions about the role of agency and location in purposeful efforts to document or record experience. Whose “passion” is centered? Whose “wishes” are fulfilled? Whose sense of what is “remarkable” in an experience is privileged? Contending that underlying purpose and related potential outcome in any documentary enterprise is both a defining characteristic and inherently complex allows the concept to be accepted as almost always about a reconciliation, whether conscious or not, between private and public aspects of the work. Naming ways in which intention in documentary endeavors is rooted in identity, positionality, and associated privileges opens avenues to consider how the goals of the work can be repurposed, and intention reoriented, toward certain aims that effectively de-center typical power dynamics and traditional outcomes in the medium. The contested ways in which those orientations, influences, and outcomes are pursued and constructed in the world are considered next, in terms of the process of doing this work and the concretized results, or products, of these efforts.

Process

A second convention, documentary as process, is evident in the relational dynamics by which experience is observed and story is constructed within the work. Four principle contributing forces participate in the relational space within documentary: (1) the documentarian as observer and editor, (2) the people, places, and things (subjects) whose content (image, experience, story) are observed and catalogued, (3) the transmuting devices or tools (cameras, audio recorders, notebooks) that operate within the fields of practice between them, and (4) the audience for the resulting products. The dynamics between these actors and elements are
complex and deeply impactful to the endeavor. Yet, in many, especially early, iterations of
documentary practice, many of these relational aspects of process remain largely opaque,
unrecognized, and divorced from the story in any consistently or openly articulated form. Two
important relationships will be explored in the interest of illuminating some tensions and current
opportunities within documentary work as process: (1) the relationship between the
documentarian as observer and documented subject as the observed and (2) the triangulated
relationship between the intermediating devices mentioned above and the actors and audiences
positioned behind and in front of their literal and figurative lenses.

First, the relational processes of documentary center perceived proximity (and presumed
“intimacy” as well as, perhaps, trust) between the primary actors (subject as observed and
documentarian as observer) in the field of contact. Perceptions of such closeness when paired
with the visual and aural realism of the mediums of photography, film, and audio, create illusions
of the observer having seen or heard and then documented something as it “is,” and blur the lines
between truth and fiction. In Grierson’s review of Moana he noted the filmmaker’s witnessing of
the seemingly mundane “events of daily life” and making a “visual account” thereof. He
suggested a connection between this observational approach and the sense that the resulting film
conveyed some thing “actual” in these “fact(s) of the matter” (e.g., true or real) (Franklin, 2016,
pp. 5-7).

A central relational supposition is evident here: that the documentarian has related closely
enough with the subject to be afforded some intimate window into their “real” experience, a
perspective that subsequently has been concretized in film or photographs or audio recordings
that appear to present the subject’s experience in “facts” as they “actually” were. The
presumption that documentary work depicts some essentially objective reality born of intimate
relationship is often, if not always, a misconception, one that rests on a belief that the observer has the capacity to participate and relate in this way, that the observed has shared some part of what is most essentially theirs, and that some fixed reality exists in both of their domains. The perception that something “real” has been documented stands in contrast with an awareness of the documentarian’s tacit biases and limitations, the subject’s agency in the presentation or performance of their experience, and the idea that interpretations of reality are dynamic.

A second critical relational aspect of documentary process is that which exists between the documenting device, documentarian, and subject in the field, a triangulated association that gets replicated in the relationships between the documentary products, audience, and documentarian as editor at a later stage. In the field, the documentarian carries a camera or a notebook or some other tool (today, often a cell phone) as a method by which they record, i.e., document, the places, people, and stories they observe. Franklin (2016) designates this intermediating mechanism a “machine,” asserting it transmutes that which is shared or witnessed in mere moments into a new form, a process that essentially blurs the distinctions between the real and interpreted experience and heavily favors the perspective of the documentarian. This blurring is fueled at least in part by the capacity of audio-visual media to often translate to the viewer as “real” in that it can mimic the human visual and aural experience with deceptive precision in ways that other creative mediums, like painting or drawing and even writing, cannot.

By design, the control and manipulation of the tool or machine is in the literal hands of the documentarian and in such is held in the space between the observer and the observed. It operates as both a literal and figurative screen in the spatial and relational field between the parties through which all action and interaction is mediated. For example, with a SLR camera, the documentary photographer is positioned “behind” the tool and can manage frame, exposure,
type of film, angle, point of view, lighting, location and quite often the subject themselves who is positioned on the other side of the device. Not only is the machine a powerful intermediating force, but the documentarian themselves operates as an extension of the tool, a prism through which the “objective” is projected. The field of observation in front of the device is also impacted by its presence, as it subtly and not so subtly impacts behavior and affect with its arrival.

The consequences of the relationships between the observer, observed, and documentary “machine” become even more complex when the scope is broadened to include editing and post-production and interactions between the work and an audience. Beyond the initial field of observation, documentarians work in dark rooms and in front of bright screens for hours observing what record they have assembled from another place and other time, making executive decisions about the story they want to tell. They share their work with colleagues and editors and perhaps with those who are the subjects of the work, soliciting feedback and suggestions for further directions. There are secondary intermediating mechanisms now: the enlarger, editing software, literary editor, or constituent advisor, all working to cut and crop, re-order and reframe once again.

The methods by which the work is concretized and shared with an audience present a third level within the relational process of documentary. In this space the relationship between the observer and observed is mediated once again as it is shared through some mechanism with an audience. Is it printed on paper in magazines or hung on school walls, screened on a theater stage, or projected on a sheet in vacant lot? How does this aspect of the process reinforce certain aspects of meaning and purpose? Who gets to see the stories? Who decides how, where, when they are presented? As was established earlier with regard to the centrality of purpose, the ways
in which the documentary process is resolved, through revealing the constructed story back into the world, matter.

If the process of documentary is initially animated by relationship between documentarian and subject, it is operationalized by relationships between those parties, various intermediating mechanisms in the field, editing, and sharing stages, and ultimately the audience. Throughout this process there are countless decisions made and negotiated about narrative and aesthetic. In traditional constructs of documentary, by the time the “actual” experience finds its way to a screen or a show or a book it has been sifted through so many filters, it may seem like a foreign story to the people, experience, and places populating its narrative.

This construction of documentary process as linear and leading away from the amplification of any “objective” reality is problematic. Manipulation of these mechanisms, therefore, illuminates incredible potential in collapsing the roles and intermediating mechanisms and in making the processes more transparent, recursive, and critically reflective. The advent of digital media has made applications of documentary work in this vein that much more accessible. It has allowed people to engage in these secondary, and tertiary, mediating processes in the field, effectively folding the process back into itself in time and space. Now, editing can happen in camera or phone in live time and work can be shared with an audience of one’s choosing, for better or worse, almost instantaneously. The immediate availability of this relational and creative terrain within protected systems, like the therapeutic space between client and therapist and within autobiographical uses of documentary methods, suggests ways this process can become essentially reflexive and in so doing critically empower and elevate personal stories, generated by the documentarian themselves as subject and through their manipulation of the machines at their disposal.
Product

...Bring only what you must carry—tome of memory
ts its random blank pages. On the dock
where you board the boat for Ship Island,
someone will take your picture:
the photograph—who you were—
will be waiting when you return

-Natasha Trethewey, *Theories of Time and Space*

Finally, documentary work across medium focuses on the production of some things concrete, some externalized forms existing as proxies for the experiences of the participant and documentarian themselves. These could be photos, films, essays, interviews, podcasts that carry the work’s purpose in the world and evidence a process undertaken and a story observed, like the photograph waiting for its subject to return in Trethewey’s poem. As was suggested with regard to purpose and process, as digital technology has expanded and access to the mechanisms of production has become more equitable, new conceptualizations for the roles as well as the archiving of documentary products present. The products made through the documentary process can be constructed in the spaces between the documentarian and the subject as participant, co-created and collaboratively held while singular in their structure. The products do not belong to only the documentarian, though they represent aspects of their vision, perspective, spirit, creative focus, and story. They are not solely the participant’s either, though they represent aspects of their experience, spirit, and story too. Ideally these products are built from raw material, processes, and essential purposes that signify meaning co-created between the parties involved.

In the current media climate these products evidence a particular effort, connection, or moment, but live in the ether and on screens, capable of being shared or accessed miles away and transforming into concrete objects in mere seconds many years on. The temporal dynamism and spatial complexity of the digital archive is astounding, affording incredible opportunities to cull
information and curate story as well as re-situate and re-interpret documentary products again and again. In a construct of auto-documentary work these products represent a process pursued wherein the observer and observed are one and the same. In their existence they signal some meta-analysis undertaken, some new perspective asserted, and some narrative agency grasped.

**Documentary: Transformative and Timely**

This brief explication is but a suggestion of the long and complex history of documentary work bearing meaning and carving significance through interactions with experience and story. As has been intimated, it is not documentary’s history, role in artistic expression or political movements, or even its principal methods with which this dissertation is most concerned; it is its application to the social and emotional fabric of the media saturated, digital dependent, post-COVID world of the present day. There is unique potential in channeling and adapting certain documentary conventions for this moment in time and current media climate. Today, people carry cameras and connection in their pockets. Images are everywhere and many people, especially the generations of youth known as digital natives, have screens interceding in their experiences a significant amount of the time. The capacity to observe what Frederick Douglass termed “what is” and consider what “ought to be” is at their fingertips. With the unprecedented access to media and its machines, to telling stories and being seen, the purposes, processes, and products of documentary are instantly accessible and capable of being leveraged to remove that “contradiction,” in both far reaching public forums as well as intimate ways, especially relative to the media-saturated lives of digital natives.

Evidence can be found of documentary processes being brought to bear on societal and local as well as individual levels. In the Murai Hiro-directed music video for his 2018 song “This
is America,” Childish Gambino raps, “Watch me move, This a celly, That’s a tool, On my Kodak (woo, Black)” over a steady beat, lyrics accompanied by images of a group of young, black men holding cell phones trained on an interaction between a police officer and one of their own (Hiro, 2018). In this scenario more current implications of the purposeful employment of documentary methods are clear. The youth hold cellphones as “tools” and, in such, create a permanent and perhaps even public record of their intimate perspectives on a set of circumstances, defiantly staking claim to a point of view traditionally buried by mechanisms of systemic oppression in the US. Indeed, though Douglass asserted the power of images to shift narratives around race on personal and political levels over 150 years ago, the legacy of access to the mechanisms by which these narratives, especially those of black youth in America, has been stained, and continues to be murderously marked in encounters with law enforcement and civilians and Hollywood studios, by the manipulation of image and story. Esteemed mid-century African-American photographer Gordon Parks famously called his camera his “choice of weapons” in his fight for social and racial justice (Parks, 1986). The image of black male youth holding cell phone cameras as tools documenting racist police misconduct mirrors Parks’ assertion and brings his words into the present tense.

Current applications of documentary methods aren’t relegated to the broader social context. One must only turn to Tik Tok or Instagram to observe countless personal visions, feelings, and moments documented in concretized records through photographs and films, words and sound. The widespread access to both these platforms and the tools to create what can be interpreted as documentary work allows a diverse array of people to observe their lives as if distanced from themselves, make their own meanings of them from these critical vantage points, and share those meanings with audiences with incredible fluidity and reach. In these
processes, individuals make creative and editorial decisions that frame the feelings and construct the ideas they choose to embody in those moments in time. And they delineate their perspectives of record and reinforce the stories they want to tell about themselves and their experiences. These stories can be shared or kept in personal archives, on handheld devices and in faraway clouds, accessible from anywhere and able to be seen again, articulated, and edited anew, any time. These processes harness documentary conventions in the interest of narrative control and agency in important ways, especially for young people who are navigating growing up within this time.

This consideration of documentary methods, media arts, and adolescent mental health is both critical and timely: critical because of the current crisis in adolescent mental health, a reality presented in recent research highlighting the need for and relative lack of substantial services for this population (Murthy, 2022); timely because of the ever increasing reliance on virtual modes of communication and meaning making over the past decade, a trend potentiated by the COVID-19 pandemic related to social isolation and separation, racial upheaval, policing of women’s bodies, and the proliferation of gun violence (Murthy, 2022). The rationale for the further development of practices using documentary methods and media arts forms in mental health settings with young people is predicated on these aspects’ intersections and shared elements as well as this modern moment. Increased digital access, the rise of virtual communities of belonging, and the intensification of adolescent orientations toward their phones and social media allows one to imagine the thoughtful integration of documentary methods and media arts into clinical social work with young people. In the interest of further developing these ideas about the power of documentary conventions the next aspect of this dissertation explores the rich
intersections between documentary and narrative and lays the groundwork for the proposal intervention protocol that follows.

**Mapping Documentary Arts as Narrative Practice in Mental Health**

It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people—the transitional space—that intimate relationships and creativity occur.

-Donald Winnicott, *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena*

The call to documentary is an aspect of the call of stories.

-Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*

Narrative Therapy and documentary practices share several critical aspects. At their cores both center the impact of intentional story making and telling. They are animated by relationships, composed of processes that involve perspective and agency, and facilitated through spatial fields, or “transitional spaces” as Winnicott stated, of great significance to their function. The following explication plots elements of each as they correspond to one another, using the central principles of narrative therapy as a guiding structure.

**What’s Going on: Grounding Relational Processes, Externalization, and Interactional Fields**

Relational constructs undergird both documentary and narrative in critical ways. Narrative work is predicated on several relationships: that between provider and client; that between client and story (with provider as a secondary relationship); and that between client, story, and external actors in the story itself (again with provider in secondary role). These primary and secondary relationships operate within a field of practice that includes physical, social, and emotional aspects and provides the larger context for the clinical work. The establishment of such a field creates the space to critically observe the stories individuals had accepted as elemental to themselves in the process known as externalizing (Combs & Freedman,
Seeing narratives as outside of themselves allows clients to consider the ways they might have agency relative to these stories, and permits them to separate their stories into distinct parts and map them in positions relative to one another as well as notice gaps and seek additional building blocks of their stories, a critical aspect of narrative transformation.

Similarly, documentary work hinges on relationships: between documentarian and the subject of their work; between documentarian, subject, and the products of the work; and between these animating actors and the audiences for the work. And these relationships operate within spatial fields. Not unlike separating oneself from a problematic narrative by moving it into the intersubjective field between client and therapist, the documentarian separates themselves from the subject by looking through a lens of some sort and transposes observations into a document, or the “record:” a set of photographs, or a reel of film, or a recorded conversation. This product exists as a concrete representation of that which they saw, felt, or heard, becoming a “story” that rests outside of their own body and felt experience as well as that of the subject of the work. This process of using media as an intervening mechanism allows the documentarian to observe and interact with experience from a distance and in some frame of their own making. Much like the practices of deconstructing story and position mapping, once the initial documentary product is made (similar to the dominant narrative being articulated in the externalized space) the documentarian can observe its components and deconstruct or break the “story” into individual images, scenes, sounds, words, phrases. In this process, they consider how these parts function relative to one another in advance of the next aspect of documentary production.
As it does in narrative, the intersubjective field between and around participants in documentary work operates as a space through which and in which relational processes facilitate the awareness and composition of story. In the history of documentary these fields of practice often included documentarians, as Flaherty did in making Moana, traveling into territory unknown, or out “in the field” to story the lives and experiences of some “other.” The fields in which documentary work is made today may not always operate under such pretenses and dynamics, but the experience of being in a physical space with another or oneself and composing a record of that experience is much the same. Documentary work is a product of the environments in which its people and mechanisms observe, reflect upon, and create story while its mediating devices, the camera or recording technology, operate as structured fields of interchange and production as well. The screen, the image, the voiceover, the virtual or visual interface become both superconductors through which, and spaces in which, the narrative work takes place.

What’s the story I want to tell: Re-storying, Creative Control, and Narrative Agency

Following the processes of externalizing and deconstructing narratives, clients engage in re-constructing [or “re-authoring” and “re-storying” as White and Epston (1990) referred to these processes] these very same narratives. Within documentary work a similar opportunity to edit and organize the aspects of the story affords space for the documentarian to construct a specific narrative of their own. In this stage, they curate what remains “within” and what gets relegated to “outside” the frame of the story they want to tell. They decide what they want to say and to whom, consider who populates this narrative and how their story matters to the central one, and what of the raw material gets left out entirely or needs to be found and added. The emerging
narrative, as a composed media product, represents specific meanings made by the documentarian about what they observed and experienced as a story in the field. In many formulations it exists as a proxy for their own unique identity and point of view.

Who needs to see or hear this story: Audience and Definitional Ceremony

The final stage of these processes involves the sharing of these curated narratives and the ways in which they take on new significance as they are witnessed. In the narrative space, this involves sharing newfound narratives as more complete stories of self in “definitional ceremonies.” The most critical audience for these stories is the client themselves. In some cases, the client will share with key people in their lives beyond the discrete therapeutic relationship, bringing the story into a collective space, reinforcing the client’s perspective and modifications, a process that White (2007) suggested allowed clients to ultimately “re-grade” their lives. In documentary work, sharing products with audiences often includes a ceremonial aspect: a show, an opening, a screening, an article wherein the documentarian’s meanings are asserted in the world, expressing meanings of their own, perhaps as advocacy, or art, or even propaganda, in the public domain. The import of being witnessed in both constructs is essential to the concretizing of the new narrative or story, a component of the therapeutic process with potential impacts on self-concept, and senses of agency, an aspect of documentary work with possible consequences for social dynamics and public opinion.

Making Sense of Mapping Documentary as Narrative

Both narrative and documentary practices operationalize observing events and relationships as stories from distances through mediating tools and strategies, making choices
about the salient narratives to be conveyed, and enacting the products of these efforts as new stories asserted into the world. Possibilities emerge from considering the ways in which these constructs map onto each other as well as diverge, especially relative to this time and with particular populations. In narrative constructs the process and therapeutic partnerships therein are the primary focus of the effort, with the products appearing as evolving personal monologues and deeply reflective and intimate stories. The process is the work. In documentary the locus of control rests more deliberately and often visibly in organizing intention and final products that exist in the public domain, as fixed images and films, paragraphs and podcasts. The process is less evident.

Considering shifting the inflection point in documentary away from the bookends of intention and product and into the relational and process aspects of the work allows for a new and different sense of documentary work as it might be applied to emerge. In this modification, the observed subject in the initial formulation becomes co-creator, participant, and/or documentarian themselves. And the story as observed, recorded, curated, constructed, and shared becomes partially or entirely theirs. What potential exists in collapsing the roles of documentarian and subject into one another in this way, turning the lens back upon the media creator, making the entire documentary process essentially reflective? Documentary work might then operate as an intervening process that can be situated within other constructs, like narrative therapy, in powerfully relevant ways. In this conceptualization the observation of stories as documents, the externalizing and position mapping of their components, the curating and reconstructing of these elements, the sharing of new narratives as proxy for grasping and enacting narrative agency can all be facilitated in real time or virtual space with documentary methods and media. With whom might these approaches be most effective, even most timely?
Applying Documentary Arts in Narrative Practices with Youth and Trauma

Migration is a one-way trip. There is no ‘home’ to go back to. There never was... Who I am—the ‘real’ me—was formed in relation to a whole set of other narratives. I was aware of the fact that identity is an invention from the very beginning, long before I understood any of this theoretically.

- Stuart Hall, *Minimal Selves*

By definition, adolescence is a migration, a liminal period that bridges childhood and adulthood, a space between places and groups of belonging, a balance of influences of peers and family, a negotiation between the ways young and changing bodies present in space and are perceived as such. Perpetual self-reference and a specific ego centrism are endemic to this developmental moment. The adolescent focus on self and its relation to the external, subjective world is practically all-consuming. The interpretation of oneself through the lenses offered by others’ points of view is deeply influential. And the ways in which one negotiates these experiences and integrates them in the transition into adulthood can be quite impactful on personal and professional outcomes as one ages (Crone, 2017; Ferrer-Wreder & Kroger, 2020).

The argument for the application of documentary methods in clinical efforts with adolescents builds on a belief that these approaches can vitally support youth in ways that meet them in their developmental transitions and spaces of belonging, and honor their vernaculars and acumen with patience, curiosity, and great care. These convictions rest in the significance to be found in young people controlling the means of producing uniquely personal visions and stories of themselves and their worlds at such a critical developmental stage. They leverage the power in positing a reality of one’s own, carving a space, making a statement in the public in a formalized way, choosing frame and perspective, bracketed by glass or a screen and admired on an easel or an app. They seize the experience of being willfully objectified by oneself and by virtue of this process grasping a heightened sense of one’s space and place and possibility. These practices
afford youth opportunities to see their selves while being witnessed, held in esteem by peers and
family and teachers and strangers, and the agency reinforced by these experiences. They allow
young people space to claim meaning in the stories they choose to make, all as a function of their
own gaze. Particularly for youth carrying complex trauma and navigating difficult transitions in
their bodies and spaces of belonging, this conceptualization of documentary work, which adds
therapeutic support, within clinical settings appears particularly compelling.

Case Study: Kyle

“This man, a.k.a. father, who ruined my life.”

*The caption is scrawled in red sharpie on a white card and glued alongside a 5x7 photograph of a smaller worn photo. In the faded image within the larger frame, an American soldier stares resolutely at the camera, helmet and face fixed. He looks intent, possibly even proud. He’s wearing a uniform and sits atop a military vehicle in the desert. “That’s my dad. I want to know why he abused me. I want to see him again and ask him why, once I have a successful career and family.”*

This photo was the final image in 17-year-old Kyle’s book of photos, ephemera, and personal writings, a collection assembled as part of a documentary arts workshop I conducted with young people in foster care. Kyle’s book, like those of his peers, was comprised of text and images focused on examining what he carried from different parts of his journey; how he carried them, why he did, and whether he wanted or needed to still do so. Kyle’s images ranged from his diabetes tools to journal entries, from boxing gloves to self-portraits, all with detailed explanations of feelings and thoughts written at their sides. His book’s emerging narrative was largely temporally linear, with his second to last image a self-portrait made while sitting on the edge of a sandy hill in recent days, back against the sky “*ready for what life brings me next.*”

But Kyle’s story of what he carried ended with the photograph of his father, an image captured far away in someone else’s camera, likely printed when Kyle himself was but ten; and a photo

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6 Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
that held unresolved memories and unanswered questions. He chose to place this layered image last.

Through his creative process, and that of the group, Kyle had actively worked on reconciling his past experiences with his current reality and a future of unknown possibilities. Kyle’s resulting expressions of himself in photos, writing and voice, while both expansive and insightful, reflected some essential tensions within adolescence, likely magnified by growing up in the child welfare system. His narrative threaded concretized beliefs with visions more fantastic and ideas evidently abstract.

Especially for youth living in and through layers of trauma, significant transitions, and relational instability, like those involved with the child welfare system or juvenile justice, documentary practices might offer a particularly incisive conduit through which to grasp, shape, and assert their own stories, whereby developing senses of narrative agency transferrable to other areas of their lives. These processes have potential to impact mental health measures, generational transmission of trauma, and ultimately the process of aging out of adolescence, these systems, and into adulthood. More specifically, documentary arts in combination with narrative approaches might be especially powerful when introduced within the child welfare system and with youth who are challenged to negotiate senses of themselves, their relationships, and their stories within this particular timeframe of acute trauma and adjustment in their personal lives and community experiences.
I believe in memory not as a place of arrival, but as point of departure—a catapult throwing you into present times, allowing you to imagine the future instead of accepting it.

-Eduardo Galeano, *Century of the Wind, Memory of Fire V. 3*

Every year thousands of young people are “removed” from their families, transition into the American child welfare system and subsequently find themselves “placed” in foster homes. In 2020 an estimated 217,000 children and youth entered the foster care system in the United States (Children’s Bureau, 2021). Of these young people, a certain percentage went on to be reunified with immediate family within months, while others remained in various settings as foster children past a year. In total, over 630,000 young people were “served by the foster care system” during FY 2020 (Children’s Bureau, 2021). Regardless of time spent residing within state care, these young people had, by definition of circumstance, experienced significant trauma and loss prior to entering the child welfare system. And they certainly endured compounding losses and ever more complex trauma as a result of their shifts into and through placement itself (Fawley-King, 2012; Gillies, 2016; Greeson et al., 2011; Kerker & Dore, 2006; Spinnazolla et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2021). The system developed to ensure American children’s safety and welfare may be rooted in a generally accepted societal responsibility to protect minors from harm; but it remains a complicated, and culturally contested, calculus that promises any young person’s improved well-being at the hands of a group of strangers and the state.

Indeed, there is much at stake for all involved in child welfare cases, most especially for the young people themselves. The intersections in which the welfare system’s children sit are complex by design and the impacts of their policies and nuances profound. The incidence of mental health issues with young people involved with the system nationwide is high compared to that within the general population; several studies detail this phenomenon, evidencing the prevalence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, substance use, depression, suicidal ideation, and
non-suicidal self-injury among child welfare-involved youth (Bartlett et al., 2016; Bronsard et al., 2016; Pecora et al., 2009; Kerker & Dore, 2006). Complex trauma associated with abuse, neglect, and various forms of loss are suggested as the primary driver of high rates of mental health needs among young people in foster care (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2014). Some sources assert the existence of especially elevated mental health needs among the adolescent age-group (ages 12-17) involved with child welfare, needs that many argue intensify as young people progress toward “aging out” of the system at 18 (Gabrielli, 2015; Greeson et al., 2011; Havlicek et al., 2013; Lawrence, 2006; Steenbakkers et al., 2018; Szilagyi et al., 2015).

The familial and social constructs operationalized by the child welfare system and particularly in foster care placements—spaces profoundly impacted by trauma, loss, and especially significant challenges to one’s sense of esteem and emotional well-being—make child welfare-involved adolescents’ passages through the developmental stage arguably that much more fraught. The lenses afforded them to hone self-concept are inconsistent, the frames of reference emotionally immature, the grounding environments themselves unstable.

Documentary Media Now!

Several tested treatment models exist for therapeutic interventions around mental health with adolescents in such contexts. These include trauma-informed Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Multisystemic Therapy (MST), and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR) as well as interventions that involve home-based and wrap around services. These rely on methods designed for youth or adult clients in uniquely separate developmental and/or socio-cultural circumstances. This is far
from adequate. Today’s adolescents are emerging from two years of watching their worlds
became scarier and more isolating by the day, as if protagonists in their very own and very real
post-apocalyptic tales. Many of them, and especially child welfare-involved youth, weathered
these experiences within their own transitions into and migrations through adolescence and
without trusted or consistent adults shepherding them. The data present a picture of adolescent
mental health needs that demands more current and culturally relevant interventions, now
(Murthy, 2022).

Therapeutic approaches that leverage media, trade in visual culture and storytelling, and
prioritize creative partnerships present a unique and valuable addition to the array of available
clinical options. Mapping documentary work into narrative practice is particularly compelling
with adolescents, for several reasons. The work centers dynamic and innovative conceptions of
the therapeutic field in virtual as well as “in real life” (or IRL) settings, efforts that parallel
adolescents’ developmental positions and the ways in which adolescence itself is about
navigating liminal spaces and transitional fields. It weights young people’s archives of memory
and meaning, acknowledging their increasing abilities to think in abstract terms. It
honors the nuanced and evolving realities of youths’ lives and narratives as expressed in their
dexterity with technology and storytelling. And it joins with them with patience and curiosity in
exploring the roles of agency and self-concept, power and control with regard to narratives,
recognizing their natural inclinations to wrestle with such issues in relationship to others and
themselves. Especially with young people who live with layered trauma, and particularly in this
socio-cultural moment, the experience of engaging with visual media, self, and story in
particularly intentional and supported ways can be therapeutic, even revolutionary.
This work might look like a small group standing side by side arranging photographs on an empty table in a conference room or two people volleying short videos from two states away, both scenarios engaging young people in delineating realities of their own, seeing their selves while being witnessed by others, and discovering newfound senses of power and agency in the process. These contentions are predicated on my own observances of, and beliefs about, young people’s enhanced capacities to consider and develop, hold and keep their own narratives as a function of their engagement with reflective, artistic, and empowering storytelling opportunities like those Kyle, Sofia, and their peers experienced. With such a conceptual and experiential foundation, this dissertation pivots to present an example of one compelling practice application in mental health settings with adolescents and trauma in its second half.
Chapter Two

In the Real: Applications and Interventions with Youth

Introduction

Look and listen for it. Transformative work has been happening: amid photographs pinned to school walls in East Oakland; illuminated blue by cell phones on the westside of Providence; evolving in the ride down Detroit’s Gratiot Avenue, video rolling, young voices narrating the outside through to the other side of a screen. Media arts are being integrated into the fabric of community development, the landscape of education, the nature of mental health practice nationwide. This innovation isn’t necessarily new. Various forms of media arts and creative storytelling practices have been long employed to supportive, even liberating, ends with adults and youth alike.

The landscape of media arts in community-based settings, both historically and within the current moment, includes groups and individuals engaging various methods and forms of media across many practice settings. These efforts focus on literacy and psychoeducation, ethnographic research, and public health promotion. They bolster important initiatives that improve academic skills and increase self-esteem, expand access and advocate justice. They include photographer Jim Hubbard’s work with Shooting Back in Washington DC in the late 1980’s, community-based efforts generated by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke starting in the early 1990’s, and Dr. Caroline Wang’s image-animated public health research that codified Photovoice in the late 1990’s (Wang & Burris, 1997). More recent examples of media-based storytelling endeavors include those facilitated by the Bronx Documentary Center in New York City, Las Fotos Project in Los Angeles, and Chicago’s Street Level Youth Media.
There are many ways that creative professionals in various disciplines have been integrating media arts and practices into their work. Many of these initiatives focus on community engagement and vitality, social justice and advocacy, and youth education and empowerment. Yet relatively few youth-focused media arts endeavors explicitly employ documentary approaches (as outlined in Part One) as a methodology to address clinical issues related to mental health, and even fewer target the most challenging situations, like those navigated by dual system youth (those engaged with both child welfare and juvenile justice), and the most serious mental health conditions, like complex trauma, habitual self-injury, and suicide.

A substantive body of research demonstrates that expressive arts interventions, narrative-based therapies, and various applications of media arts (especially photography) support positive therapeutic outcomes for young people struggling with a wide range of emotional concerns (Anderson & Cook, 2015; DeCoster & Dickerson, 2014; Edmondson et al., 2018; Maree & Pienaar, 2009). However, as has also been demonstrated, the demand for interventions that meet the generation of digital natives in this particular moment in time, and in manners that center their nuanced experiences and array of cultural influences related to their mental health and well-being, steadily outpaces the supply of modalities and practitioners fit to the task.

The current media climate, as it has been animated by COVID-19 and intersects with youth culture and decreased stigma around mental health and treatment, presents a uniquely rich context in which to further develop and refine dynamic and creative interventions with young people around many issues of great relevance and considerable concern, including those mentioned above. Today’s adolescents, across subgroups, subsist in environments that offer 24-hour access to the news cycle, one another, and the curation of their own metanarratives (as well as both a worldwide audience and the means to construct and share their personal stories) but a
finger swipe away. Some argue the immediate and inconsistently mitigated availability of information, media (social and otherwise), and related forms of interpersonal interaction reinforce concerning trends around adolescent mental health, particularly with regard to rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal as well as self-injurious behaviors (Primack et al., 2017; Twenge, 2019, 2020; Twenge et al., 2019). While this perspective holds, a counter narrative exists. Incredible potential rests in leveraging existing technologies and access, especially as they relate to societal shifts during the COVID-19 pandemic, within a more broadly defined therapeutic space to reimagine story, redirect impulse, and resurrect possibility.

The remainder of this dissertation demonstrates the range of clinical efforts that might engage documentary processes and media arts to enhance personal agency and self-concept through story with youth. The example application and adjacent suggestions for further inquiry were formulated using the preceding conceptual framework, my extensive professional experience prior to this writing, and collaboration with a small group of former child welfare-involved young adults who had aged out of the system. It is, and was, my firm conviction that no clinical application (and for that matter, perhaps any intervention of any kind) should be generated or posited “for us” but “without us.” Thus, young adults were recruited as volunteers through local professional networks and invited to meet with me over several sessions as advisors to and co-creators of the project.

During these meetings we discussed the concepts underlying the proposed interventions, engaged in sample activities regarding their archives and stories, and reflected on their perspectives on these ideas and activities within the contest of their lived experiences in child welfare. As key informants these young adults were encouraged to share from the constituent experience while a fundamental orientation toward trauma-informed practices was maintained.
They contributed uniquely rich insights into how certain themes or questions or even access points might work better or worse than others. Their critical feedback, and their partnership in co-creation of these applications more generally, was essential to the process of moving from conceptual framework to models for tangible intervention.

The exploration of clinical applications that follows suggests this work can look quite different across practice settings, populations, and modalities while adhering to critical components, including: the creation and deconstruction of documentary work within and between sessions, the concretizing of the therapeutic field and intentional use of space therein, and the consistent orientation toward client’s agency as they explore story with media arts. It presents a set of core features of the approach, followed by an explication of one sample application in more depth. The example intervention demonstrates how the work can be adjusted to fit the needs of one population and in a single format. The specific form of media, treatment modality, or theme holding the effort together over multiple sessions are much less critical than is the spirit of the endeavor: the process of using some documentary arts mechanism (e.g., photography, film, audio, etc.) to intentionally structure and relate to narrative in ways that resonate with and honor clients’ personal, cultural, and social experiences and milieux.

**Elements of Documentary Arts in Narrative Practice**

The proposed form of clinical work hinges on the use of current mechanisms of media production and dissemination in combination with responsive practices that reflect the moments and experiences in which they are located. Certainly, there is some new interface or another device waiting around the next corner, ready to shift discourse in fresh directions. The following set of elements of documentary arts in narrative practice are derived from lessons learned
through my own work in the field in concert with this conceptual effort. They are meant as suggestions for current applications as well as gestures toward future iterations of documentary media-centered clinical practice.

**Element One: Documentary is Discourse**

The first element of documentary arts in narrative practice relates to core assumptions about the nature of the work and defining orientations toward its components. The first assumption is that documentary processes (making the raw “work,” curating it into some product, presenting it as such) are always relational, making documentary practice a forum for communication and expression for meanings with important others. The second is that documentary products (photos, films, etc.) are always concretized narratives. Thirdly, documentary work and story work in clinical settings always holds potential to enhance narrative agency. These presumptions are foundational for subsequent elements related to the who, where, and how of the work.

**Element Two: Rooted in Dynamic Relationships**

The second element locates the work within important relationships: between client as vision and voice and the adjacent clinician and audience. The effort privileges the client’s acumen and vernacular (especially relevant with youth clients), locates the primary gaze and narrative expertise within the client, and, thus, resists colonialist paradigms in clinical practice. Indeed, the ways in which privilege and bias (related to race, age, citizenship, and socioeconomic status) are performed and signified in therapeutic constructs can reinforce dynamics of oppression, albeit often unconsciously. This relational core is especially relevant when power
over/under dynamics are represented within the specific identities between the client and clinician (e.g., a white clinician and BIPOC client). The work aims to vest the client with narrative control and construction while centering their access to (and choice relative to) means of production, dissemination of story, and being seen.

Meanwhile, the work casts the clinician as collaborator and witness. In such, the model de-centers the clinician’s gaze and narrative control. The clinician’s role becomes one in which they hold space as co-creator as well as facilitator and guide. A third aspect of the relational work rests in the audience for the effort and products generated. The effort is essentially reflexive with the client being the primary audience. However, the telling and sharing of new stories and work can contribute to the healing process, and thus, others may be invited to participate as audience or witnesses. Client and clinician discuss the potential (for an) audience and possibilities for sharing throughout the process. Any expression of newly constructed narratives is dynamic and animated by the client, and their full documented consent.

**Element Three: The Work in Space & Time**

The third element locates story making and construction in the traditional “session” with respect to its physicality and dynamism. Concrete and sensory aspects of the work are accentuated and operationalized through printing photos and arranging them on tables, bringing objects and situating them on rugs, viewing films or social media through screens, and curating stories within the 50-minute hour. Incorporating tactile experiences of holding and moving pieces in physical space allows for novel perspectives on available aspects of story and as well as gaps to develop in real time. Clinician and client can pursue a line of creative inquiry together, digging into websites or posts, culling people and memories and history while sitting together.
Relating with deconstructed elements as they are printed in session or excavated from digital archives (e.g., social media or text or pictures on phones) within clinical spaces opens up how dynamic this work can be. These ways of interacting with story afford flexibility in both in person (IRL, or in real life) and virtual settings. Making work on site and in person (e.g., accessing and printing photos in the room or finding and making videos in session) allows the client and therapist to collaborate in re-storying efforts concurrently and in physical proximity. In virtual settings these same methods can be applied, with the proximal interface existing on a screen through Zoom or Facetime, wherein parties can observe and discuss in real time without being in the same “room.”

In the context of these processes of co-creation, the client, clinician, and narrative work are triangulated, with client and clinician often positioned in parallel, observing aspects and construction of story. In this set up, the direction of the dominant gaze, and non-reliance on eye contact and body positioning toward one another, modifies dynamics of power and narrative control. These shifts invite clients (especially those with experience with oppressive systems, trauma, and marginalization) to bring themselves into the space in ways that might have been absent within other therapeutic modalities, and even with other forms of narrative practice. The therapeutic “work” of relating to story is done within and through the spaces between and around the client and clinician as they are positioned in these ways. The intersubjective fields are made tangible in the documents created and shared as well as through the intentional manipulation of space within which these artifacts are arranged and organized.
Element Four: Intervention as Process

The fourth element of documentary arts in narrative practice is composed of two parts and involves how the work is done, in terms of process and content. The process of this work is relatively consistent, but malleable. Modalities in which these practices might be applied are flexible, meaning this approach has potential to be used individually or with groups, in real life as well as virtually with some adjustments. The client population’s needs and acumen are always centered. In group iterations especially, a narrative arc guides the process and acts as a binding agent between sessions. This is less critical in individual applications. A spirit of supported curiosity and a commitment to the co-construction of new narratives animate the process, whether individually or in group iterations. And finally, the client’s ownership of their archive and narrative products is prioritized. This might translate as group members taking their concretized documentary “work” when the group ends or clients departing their sessions with discrete senses of agency relative to the narratives they’ve worked to develop.

Meanwhile the content that populates the structure of the process is reflexive and responsive. The aforementioned narrative arc in group applications is held by a theme or metaphor that is appropriate for the population of participants. For example, in the application that follows the metaphor of constellations is used. Other metaphors considered include: ‘the things you carry,’ mapmaking and cartography, and song arrangement. Similarly, the media arts tools used (camera, voice recorder, phone) and documentary narrative products created (photos, films, social media content) are flexible and must adjust to meet the interests and capacities of the client. Finally, the interfaces and forums through which narratives are shared range from photo books and art shows to websites, social media posts, and beyond. The methods by which narratives are asserted and held by clients moving forward in their lives again depends on their
interests, abilities, and clinical needs. The same can be said for the people and spaces with which these narratives are shared.

The following sample application, co-created with young adult advisors, demonstrates these elements in practice. The general aims and six session arc are presented, followed by a sample session with text box notations of various elements in action.
Chapter Three

Story Constellations: An Example Application

Introduction

This sample application builds from the core features above and demonstrates one of many ways in which documentary arts approaches might be harnessed within clinical settings to facilitate collaborative storytelling and cultivate narrative agency. The application focuses on child welfare-involved youth, employs photography and narrative writing as documentary tools, and explores storytelling through the metaphor of constellations within a group setting. A multi-session arc is mapped out with one session presented in more depth. This demonstration centers populations of digital natives who have experiences with complex trauma and/or limited buy in with more traditional therapeutic constructs.
**PURPOSE OF INTERVENTION**

**Protocol Overview**

**Goal:**
Youth and therapeutic support join to scaffold dynamic and accessible spaces to place and hold elements of their stories

- Move away from youth’s stories being perceived as static, distant, and kept by adults (in file cabinets or public opinion)
- Move toward their stories being perceived as evolving, complex, constructed from particular perspectives, and accessible by themselves over time and space

**Format:**
Six-week therapeutic group for adolescents in foster care placements, ages 14-18. Through the use of documentary arts methods and narrative therapy constructs, the group explores the ways participants relate with stories about their lives through the metaphor of stars as the elements of their stories and constellations as stories themselves. Through this process facilitators and participants collaborate in deepening awareness of and developing emotional/social/cognitive skills with regard to narrative agency and self-concept.

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**Six-Session Arc**

**SESSION FLOW**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>one</th>
<th>two</th>
<th>three</th>
<th>four</th>
<th>five</th>
<th>six</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductions &amp; Stories surround us</td>
<td>Where do your stories live? &amp; What are your stories made of?</td>
<td>Charting your sky &amp; Observing one constellation</td>
<td>Charting a new constellation</td>
<td>Locating your new constellation &amp; Your evolving universe</td>
<td>Viewing, Celebration &amp; Closing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**
Narrative arc consistent with principles of narrative therapy; conceptual movement in scope from general/impersonal to specific/personal to general/personal; use of spatial metaphor; use of experiential bookends and transparency about process and commitment from start
One session, in depth

SESSION ONE: STORIES SURROUND US

SESSION GOALS/OBJECTIVES:

- Introduction to group and participants
- Present structure of group
- Begin exploring stories: parts, perspectives, and organizing principles
- Introduce star/constellation metaphor as proxy for stories

SESSION ONE AGENDA & MATERIALS LIST

Agenda

1. Introductions
2. Purpose and plan of group
3. Stories Surround Us Activity
4. Stories as Constellations
5. Closing

Note:
Ways in which the session incorporates visual examples and cues and opportunities to participate non-verbally (e.g. write in journal instead of sharing aloud)

Note:
Presence of various “tools” to make story documents in session: consider having Instax instant cameras, laptop computer, and portable WIFI-accessible photo printer in session as well

Note:
All youth will not have access to their own device, or want to use it
SESSION ONE, IN DETAIL

1. INTRODUCTION (15')

WELCOME (facilitator)
• Introduce facilitator, brief purpose of the group, commonalities between participants, and the use of different forms of media
• Acknowledge that the group might bring up some things that are hard for people, note that we will make space for this, and that being supportive is important

GROUP SHARE (facilitator/members)
• Name
• Something you are carrying with you today
• How are you feeling about being here today today scale of 1-10? (facilitator: get a read on youth’s entry point and possible hesitations; pay attention to how youth engage with each other and with the process. Important to know who elected to come and who was encouraged to come by their case worker or other adult)

2. GROUP FOCUS & GROUND RULES (10')

GROUP FOCUS (facilitator)
• This group is about stories. The stories we tell ourselves, and have been told, as well as those that are told about us. It’s also about the stories we hold, and others hold for and with us, and how we might choose what we carry from this point onward. It’s about how these stories are represented in our lives, and how we might be able to choose how they show up more than we think we can.

GROUND RULES (co-created by members/facilitator)
• Some guiding concepts
  - Confidentiality
  - Choice
  - Collaboration
  - Safety
  - Empowerment

Note: Attention to simple ground rules and trauma-informed work

3. STORIES SURROUND US ACTIVITY (30')

STORIES SURROUND US. THEY ARE EVERYWHERE, IF WE LOOK FOR THEM.

• Brainstorm: What are some stories you know? Have heard or seen?
  - Find an image or video or meme or song on your phone that represents a story, share with group
  - As members share ask follow-up questions: Where did you hear or see stories? Where did they come from? Children’s stories/fairytale, friends, movies, books, the news, music, videos, songs, poetry, family, cultural narratives, religious stories, school

• Ask for a volunteer from the group to explore their example in depth: as the group shares write each point or comment on an index card and put on the table OR write on whiteboard (invite any group member to do this with you)
  - What are the main parts of this story? Characters, plot, setting, etc.
  - Who tells this or told this story? How did they? Books, movies, people, church, etc.
  - Who are they telling it to? Why?
  - Whose stories aren’t told here? How can this story be told differently?

• The stories that surround us
  - The board or table is now full of different parts of stories (people, places, things, audiences, motivations, etc.)

Point out that stories:
• Are made of elements (people, places, events, etc.)
• Are seen and told in certain ways by certain people
• Are given certain meanings
• These meanings impact people
• Ask one member to arrange the story elements to tell a different story discuss how the shifting of the elements in a different arrangement makes the story different

Note: Attention to points of view in story; whose perspectives and voices are privileged, and whose aren’t

Note: Exposure to idea of archives and their excavation
Practice with deconstructing, externalizing, and concretizing story
Introduction to story construction in the intersubjective field
4. STORIES & CONSTELLATIONS* (15’)

CONSTELLATIONS DEFINED
- Hand out or show an image of a night sky with stars
- Ask for group to share what they know about constellations
  - What are they? Can you see stars where you are staying? If not, what do you imagine they to be?
  - Any examples? Your favorite one?
  - Why do you think people made them a thing? Indigenous wayfaring, colonial conquest...
- Show image of constellations drawn in the sky

CONSTELLATIONS ARE LIKE STORIES
- Someone looked at stars, made lines between them and imagined they looked like something they could recognize
  - Then they drew it out, told other people, and so on
- But have you ever looked at a constellation like:
  - “That’s a bear, right?” Yeah. Someone else said it was bear... so I’m trying to see the bear.
  - But, what if I see something else? Or don’t see it at all? Can’t see it? Don’t want to?

STORIES ARE LIKE CONSTELLATIONS
The stories we’re surrounded by are like constellations,
  Many of which we didn’t actually make!

5. CLOSING (15’)

STORY ARE LIKE CONSTELLATIONS, EXAMPLE
- Put three-five things on the table (facilitator)
- Each of these things is like a star
- Ask each group member to arrange them in some order to tell a story
- Share any stories

Let’s go back to that thing you shared at the beginning; what you are carrying with you. Ok, now can you think of or find 2 more things you are carrying?
- Write them down, put them on the table, imagine them in your head in some order
  - What’s a story there? About your day? About right now?
- Share as desired
- One volunteer- can we arrange their “story constellation” differently? TRY IT AS A GROUP

NEXT TIME
We’ll be focusing on some of the stories of our own, remember what you share and how you share are entirely up to you.
In between now and then - take a look at the sky some night and see if you can find an image or a story there, it could be something you know to look for or something of your own

FINAL CHECK-OUT
Weather Report on mood/feeling right now
Thank you for coming!

Note:
Encouragement of multiple ways to relate to metaphor; accessibility even without prior knowledge/experience; bringing concept into spatial field and concretizing it

Note:
Use of metaphor to bind sessions, with awareness about the degree to which it resonates or doesn’t with population

Note:
Making concepts accessible with example that doesn’t challenge anyone’s personal comfort with sharing; demonstrates facilitator’s buy-in

Note:
Importance of engaging in collateral work, especially with minors in state care; letting youth know about the limits and necessities of these connections

Note:
Circling back to start; marking experience; inviting group to come back
Chapter Four

Discussion and Future Directions

Introduction

We are living through a critical moment in media and youth culture as well as mental health awareness. Young people carry computers in their pockets and their emergent senses of self on their persons all the time. Mental health concerns appear decreasingly stigmatized and increasingly problematic for populations of youth and their communities of belonging. Countless young people need mental health support and interventions that center their ways of making, expressing, and receiving meaning, meet them in their spaces of knowing and confidence, and listen to hear their voices and perspectives. While many caring professionals and concerned allies raise warnings of the dire circumstances with regard to young people’s mental wellness, especially in the wake of COVID-19, the supply of models and practitioners is not nearly as diverse, creative, or accessible as the demand necessitates.

This dissertation explored one approach to manifesting such work as it considered the intersections and spaces between documentary methods, trauma-focused clinical social work, and adolescent development. I suggested a conceptual integration of constructs of narrative therapy (and the use of story as an organizing principle) and documentary media arts production. And I posited an application, created in collaboration with young people with experiences of trauma, loss, and child welfare involvement, that demonstrated possibilities for such work with similarly vulnerable populations of youth. The work proposed within this dissertation emerged from a certain belief in the radical potential of cultivated creative spaces in which young people (themselves in transitional developmental moments) might critically consider their stories, curate them with care, and reconstruct them into some further becoming.
But suggesting potential in this moment is not enough. We must push the possibilities into real life opportunities and real time interventions. Young people struggling with their mental health deserve creative and culturally relevant options for clinical support, right now.

**Strengths and Limitations**

This conceptualization of documentary arts in narrative practice is rooted in my own work as a social worker with young people involved with child welfare. I pulled from two decades of clinical relationships and learnings with youth and critical insights from young adults with prior experience in child welfare during the dissertation process. The voices and visions, experience and expertise of these young adults complemented my own and played essential parts in the development of this work. From a methodological perspective, the engagement of these young adults was a necessity, given my convictions around collaborating with constituents in creating interventions that are vested most deeply in their own perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of capacities and needs.

While the young adults’ participation and contribution was a strength of this effort, their insights were located in reflections on their pasts and thus were limited in their current applicability. As many of them noted, both youth culture and media access shift so rapidly that the cultural landscape during their times in care looked quite different than it does for young people presently involved with child welfare. Nonetheless, I prioritized minimizing the significant risks of re-traumatization by collaborating with young adults who were no longer involved with the state. Future research might invite young people currently in care as advisors so as to engage constituent participation in ways this project did not. However, potential risks
related to trauma exposure must be seriously considered to ensure ethical, trauma-informed, and healing-centered forms of inquiry.

As much as this effort found inspiration and resonance in specific experiences with child welfare-involved youth, it rests within my larger professional and personal arc, narrative even. The proposed model of social work practice with youth, story, and media arts tracks through a two-decade career that has remained oriented toward collaborative efforts and transdisciplinary approaches. A reminder of this larger arc allows the particular work posited within these pages to speak to adjacent efforts and gesture toward other applications. Indeed, the themes around which the argument has been made for documentary arts in narrative practices with youth, and particularly child welfare-involved youth, can be applied with populations with similar experiences of complex trauma, housing instability, displacement and/or migration, particularly in combination with inaccessibility to elements of story and memory. Such populations include adolescents involved with juvenile justice or refugee resettlement. And they include people across the life course with certain features of psychological distress or lived experiences that interrupt their capacities to grasp and embody narrative agency.

**Future Directions**

My journey into this work started many years ago in a darkroom on the coast of Maine during my own adolescence. And it sits today within these pages as a collection of memories and thoughts, lived experiences and shifting relationships developed in collaboration with many young people, communities, and colleagues over decades. Through the space between then and now, my efforts to integrate media arts practices with work that supports young people’s health and wellness have grown more informed and nuanced. My orientation toward the need for this
kind of creative and transdisciplinary work in the field has become more intimately known and deeply affirmed. The proposed intervention in these final pages was profoundly considered, yet it remains incomplete. It was conceived as a foundational piece that could inspire and sustain continued effort. There are several directions to pursue from this spot, collaborators to be identified, adjacent endeavors to be considered, approaches to be more thoroughly developed and integrated into practice.

It is my firm belief that the current moment demands the expansion of effective and accessible media-centered clinical applications with many populations, and most especially with digital natives who carry complex trauma. No longer can clinicians, and the therapeutic modalities and institutions through which they are trained, rely so heavily on long standing conventions of “talk therapy” as the preeminent approach in therapeutic practice. The limitations of these methods, rooted in the amplification of certain voices and the privileging of narrowly considered modes of making and communicating meaning at the expense of other approaches, may be negatively impacting people for whom these methods do not resonate emotionally or culturally, as both clients and clinicians (Akinyela, 2014; Chin et al., 2022; McKenzie-Mavinga, 2016).

There are many ways to tell any story, from parts obscured and found, through bits pulled apart and reconfigured, in moments seared in memory and burned into glossy paper or pixelated frames. There must be as many ways to access revolutionary healing. The framework and clinical application described earlier are founded upon this premise and warrant continued development, testing, and analysis. Only upon being built out more fully, can the ideas and practices be scaffolded into protocols that can be replicated with providers in the field who have never used a camera in the 50-minute hour or barely considered meeting a teenager through a
screen. The investment in this kind of work, work that reconfigures the therapeutic relationship and field quite significantly and trades in new vernaculars and power dynamics, requires a paradigm shift with regard to how therapy is done.

This is already happening, forced in part by the COVID-19 pandemic. Clinically oriented apps and online therapy options have proliferated. Social media sites function as a real time purveyors of crowd-sourced mental health-related content and insight. Efforts to actively decolonize social work and therapeutic constructs, and create spaces and services that more thoughtfully support systematically marginalized populations, are more evident than ever (Choate, 2019; Hughes & Afuape, 2016; Myrie et al., 2020). Yet the extent to which conventional mechanisms of therapeutic intervention are evolving to meet the current potential is uncertain. What is certain is that new platforms offer new possibility, like those suggested in this dissertation. Now is the moment to resist sliding back into armchairs and expecting young people to heal from across rooms. Let those of us with the capacity and conviction to meet this time and its challenges, as well as its opportunities, do just that. We must join with youth in their spaces of belonging and honor their ways of expression and knowing. In co-constructing new therapeutic landscapes together, we make room for all of us to conjure new and transformative narratives from the archives and the ether. As Riz Ahmed stated so beautifully, “This is where the future is.”
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