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On Narrative

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Guest Editors

In 2006, Wayne Bowman asked those gathered for the first Narrative Inquiry in Music Education (NIME) conference, "Why narrative? Why now?" Bowman cautioned, in the opening keynote address, that narrative was not

> the answer to all questions asked and unasked, the position without positioning, the view from everywhere. To take such stances only makes of narrative inquiry another orthodoxy: a status, I think, quite at odds with its most promising features, and one that absolves scholars of the responsibility (response/ability) that we have every right to demand of them. Among our fundamental obligations as scholars is to look closely at the uses people make of narrative, the ends it serves. These are always multiple, often contradictory, sometimes undesirable. (14)

Now, some fifteen years later, this Issue of ACT aims to broaden and deepen the discourse around narrative scholarship and, as Bowman suggested, interrogate further the uses made of narrative inquiry and the ends it serves in music education.

ACT is an apt venue for such a venture—a place where the music education community wrestles with problems and practices through a critical theory lens, and with questions such as those posed for this project: How or in what ways might narrative inquiry make evident the means and meanings of music in the lives of individuals and communities of practice? To what extent or in what ways is narrative lived theory? How do lived experiences represented in narratives become

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theorized by narrators in their telling and/or by their researcher co-conspirators in scholarship? What ethical imperatives and problems underlie narrative inquiry? How does narrative inquiry intersect with other discourses of and in music education and beyond?

The eight authors in this issue engage those questions in various ways. Before reading their articles, however, it is worth thinking through what we are theorizing about. In the 1980s and 90s, Jerome Bruner made an epistemological claim for narrative or, more accurately, for narrating as a way of knowing or coming to know.[1] The distinction is important. Although Bruner and others have theorized about the content and structure of stories, it was the *act* of storying, of telling, of narrating and the reasons for doing so that marked the turn to narrative as inquiry.[2] The human capacity for narrating as a means of sense making and ordering experiences *produces* stories, however, those objects—the narratives or stories themselves—are not necessarily (or not the only) matter or "thing" to be interrogated. Rather, what was and is of interest to narrative inquirers, critical scholars, and theorists are questions about how narratives are made, when they are told and why (or why not), by whom and to whom, for what reasons, and, most importantly, what those tellings have to do with living.

Bowman's challenge to those who choose narrative as a means of interrogating and those who draw upon narrative work was, and is, to think critically about narrating (the act), narratives (the things), and narrators (the story-tellers), and for good reason. Consider: Both narrative and narrating are continuous with the social world, and the social world is replete with collisions and conundrums, power dynamics and political structures, in which the discursive practices that comprise acts of narrating occur. Stories are contingent, complex, situated, temporal, often messy, and (because they are usually connected to conceptions of self and selfhood) rarely innocent. Why, how, and to whom stories are told can reflect positionality, plight, narratological tradition, and moral ambiguity. The narrator has a particular interest in eliciting, co-constructing, re-storying, and presenting narratives of individual and collective experience. That interest and its underlying motivations are worthy of interrogation, as stories potentially shape emerging theory and practice. On one hand, narratives and narrating are lived theorizing, acts of interpretation by the teller. On the other, narrating is performative, a means of making selves, communities, meanings, and knowledge. The terrain is as messy as stories themselves.

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In 2016, Jeananne Nichols and Wesley Brewer mused on Bowman's 2006 query and on the papers published following the fifth NIME conference held earlier that year. Bowman commented that the turn to narrative was

> a turn away from . . . grand scale pontification, a turn toward accounts of everyday happenings, here on the ground, amongst real people. Little narratives recover concreteness, particularity, individuality, and situatedness. They feature people as people, and actions as actions—instead of reducing them to examples of something else: data, or behaviors, viewed from somewhere "out there." (2006, 9)

Nichols and Brewer responded:

> When we are at our best, those small stories speak to big ideas or critical issues and point to something larger hovering over the horizon or lurking beneath the murky surface of our accepted practices. Within and through these small stories, we broach complicated, sometimes uncomfortable, topics. … This is one of the unique strengths of narrative scholarship. We share this story about this person at this time, while knowing that this story is really about all of us, at any given time. (2016/2017, 9)

The authors in this issue disclose small stories. They lay bare uncomfortable topics. They challenge the ethics of doing narrative work. They thread theory and philosophy through narrative in order to ask us to think, again, about how we are in the world and how we might be—as scholars and teachers, colleagues and citizens. Hearing these stories, how will we act?

Joyce McCall uses critical storytelling and Dubois's double-consciousness theory as a reflective framework to explore the continuing challenges for Black American students studying in music schools located in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). After describing the ethos, resources, and aspirations of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), McCall points to the persistent systemic inequities that require graduates of HBCUs to "make the inevitable leap of transitioning into and negotiating a predominantly White graduate music program in which racism is often an entrenched feature." She presents "images" of four Black men negotiating that transition and the ways in which DuBois's experiences of over 130 years ago continue to be reflected and reproduced. McCall urges PWIs to "take up a mantle of honesty, active listening, inclusion and commitment" to address the "systemic, racist culture they perpetuate and shelter."

In their book on rigor and complexity in educational research, Joe Kincheloe and Kathleen Barry note that interpretation is always at work in narrative and in scholarship of all kinds; "the 'facts' never speak for themselves." (2004, 28)

Jeananne Nichols explores the difficult terrain of truth and fact, disclosure and silence, omission and re-interpretation, in her reflections on her long-term engagement with a group of military bandswomen who endured a federal government investigation during the McCarthy era. She asks readers to "consider the researcher's ethical responsibility when a participant hides the facts or refuses to voice their truths." Narrative scholarship is relational work, and Nichols demonstrates the ways in which long-term engagement, listening closely, re-visiting, and holding ambiguity in balance can provide deeper insights into meanings held by those who choose to share their stories, or not.

Both McCall and Nichols can be read as counternarratives to master narratives that assert political and often hegemonic control in a society. *Karin Hendricks* demonstrates the ways in which counternarratives "serve to challenge majoritarian biases by normalizing the experiences of minoritized persons and, in turn, invite other stories to rupture the dominant narrative." Hendricks draws on her own early experience of an historical narrative told by white colonizing settlers and her shock at discovering its majoritarian view of the world. Majoritarian histories are mainstays of school curricula, promoting a unifying vision of a country's seeming teleological progression to economic, social, and cultural harmony and success. Hendricks provides an overview of the emerging scholarship in counternarratives and, in that process, opens spaces to debate some of the taken-for-granted assumptions concerning music and music education. She suggests a move from a pedagogy of perfectionism to notions of radical hospitality.

Similar to Nichols, *Juliet Hess* raises questions about ethics when narrative inquiry becomes entwined with experiences and stories of trauma. Hess elaborates on Britzman's notion of "difficult knowledge" and in the process, demonstrates how recalling or revisiting in the process of narrative re-storying may revive experiences of trauma for the teller and the reader/listener. Whether in research or in pedagogy, encounters with stories of trauma are unsettling, precarious, and full of risk. Through considering the usefulness of narratives of trauma, Hess raises the possibility of a "politics of refusal" as one means of grappling with difficult knowledge. Focusing on music in particular, she explores the potentiality of music to attune us to silences, to attend to listening differently, and to address the crisis of representation that narrative's reliance on the word poses. Hess's challenge to think critically about the uses and purposes of empathy when encountering stories of trauma and sufferings of others foregrounds the unethical dimensions of

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attempting to make understandable the unutterably un-understandable, of co-opting the pain of others for our own purposes.

Trauma is at the center of *Katherine Norman Dearden's* "When Violence and Death Touches a Children's Choir." Norman Dearden uses the poetic device of six-word reflections that encapsulate thought and feeling between episodes of sparse and forthright prose to juxtapose personal and communal stories of devastation against a master narrative of armament. She lays bare the almost unbearable, the impossibility of closure. In narrative, the art of writing matters; the power of narrative is, sometimes, simply, in the telling.

Lauren Kapalka Richerme's exploration of affect theory provides another possibility for narrative telling. Richerme challenges the oft-made claim that narratives are emancipatory. She argues instead that "the potential for emancipation, although not necessarily its realization, lies in the affective moment itself." Like other contributors to this special issue, Richerme notes that narratives are not necessarily trustworthy or truthful. What reveals also conceals, what potentially liberates might also enchain, what might appear to be benign might well be malign. Narrators, writers, all of us, move between (are caught betwixt?) the seeming polar oppositions of fact and meaning, observation and interpretation. And, as Richerme notes, narratives are often revised by their tellers or in need of revision in light of contemporary developments and dilemmas. She argues for attention to the present moment and for affect-theory-inspired research and writing, for as Richerme suggests, "Affective moments serve a crucial purpose in our current precarious and emotionally-charged world."

Narrative inquiry and the claims for narrative have roots in psychology. Jerome Bruner connected narrative to cultural psychology, and Donald Polkinghorne's *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* was thoroughly grounded in his long career in counseling psychology.[3] In this issue, *Nicole Canham* draws on the emerging field of narrative therapy to consider how independent musicians, including those who eschew tertiary music studies—negotiate their careers and career development in a complex and uncertain world. Canham suggests that a convergence of narrative inquiry and narrative therapy approaches provide a means to explore the "background music" of musicians' career trajectories, a challenge to institutional master narratives, and an alternative for understanding career development and musician career continuity.

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In the final article, *Isaac Bickmore* returns to where this issue began, but in a completely different way. Through the experiences of a composite character named Joni, Bickmore considers the lack of diversity in music education degree programs, the failure to retain students of color in these programs, and the factors that contribute to music education's "whiteness problem." He begins by asking "Who are music education degree programs designed to attract, recruit, retain," then explores that question through a science fiction narrative that seeks to trouble the presumption, the certainty, that music education degrees "work" for everyone. In doing so, Bickmore demonstrates the potential of fiction to query the hierarchical structures of music education programs and schools of music, their prevailing Eurocentric practices, and their disconnect with contemporary social, cultural, and political discourses. He asks, plainly, "why should Joni stay? . . . why would she *want* to stay?"

The authors in this issue of *ACT* demonstrate the multiple ways in which narrative inquiry may be used to engage and interrogate some of the most challenging questions and problems of our time. Their articles are engaging, provocative, and point to ways of thinking and acting without prescribing a singular answers, methods, or models. This is what narrative does; narrative grapples with stories that wouldn't otherwise be told and opens spaces for thinking about the remembered past, the troubling present, and possible futures.

The articles might be read in an order different than the one we have selected. To read McCall and then Bickmore is to think in two very different ways about institutionalized racism in schools of music. To read Hendricks, then McCall, Nichols, and Canham is to think about the multiplicity and meanings of counternarratives. To read Nichols and then Hess is to think about what silence and withholding means or might mean in narrative work. To read Richerme and then Norman Dearden is to consider the power of the affective moment. To read Nichols, Hess, and Richerme is to wrestle with profoundly ethical questions of doing narrative work. To read Canham and Bickmore is to question why we need schools of music at all. These orderings in themselves create a larger narrative frame through which we may further interrogate the challenges that face music education, not least the ethical dimensions of our profession, its practices, and its future. For surely, we are in need of change—change that might be provoked by narrative; as Thomas King (2003) suggests, "Want a different ethic? Tell a different story" (60).

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About the Guest Editors

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Margaret Barrett is Professor and Head of the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music and Performance at Monash University, and Founding Director of the Pedagogies of Creativity, Collaboration, Expertise and Enterprise (PoCCEE) research group. Her research investigates the pedagogies of creativity, collaboration and expertise across the lifespan and innovative participatory research methods. Her research has been funded by the Australian Research Council, Australia Council for the Arts, Australian Youth Orchestra, Musica Viva, and Australian Children's Music Foundation. Publications include the Oxford Handbook of Early Learning and Development in Music (2022 with Graham Welch) and two volumes of narrative inquiry (2009, 2012 with Sandra Stauffer). She has served as President, International Society for Music Education (2012–2014), Chair, World Alliance for Arts Education (2013–2015), Chair, Asia-Pacific Symposium for Music Education Research (2009–2011), and Editor, Research Studies in Music Education (2004-2012). She was awarded Fellowship of the Australian Society for Music Education (2011).

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Bruner's 1986 *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds,* in which he explains narrative knowing, as well as his 1990 *Acts Meaning,* and his 2002 work, *Making Stories*.

[2] See, for example, Bruner, 1990, for his references to literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke and then the problems of holding a western-centric view of how stories are constructed. Donald Polkinghorne (1988) expands on Bruner's 1986 epistemological claim about narrative and outlines structures of stories. Other examples of theorizing about narrative post Bruner and Polkinghorne's early work include Mark Freeman's work on the *Hindsight* nature of storying and Dan MacAdams and Kate McLean's musing on narrative and identity construction. Patricia Leavy outlines narrative construction in her text on *Fiction as Research Practice,* and, consistent with their view of inquiry as bricolage, Joe

Kincheloe and Kathleen Berry weave insights about narrative throughout their *Rigour and Complexity in Educational Research*.

[3] Bruner made the claim for the cultural psychology lens in both *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* and *Acts of Meaning,* published in 1986 and 1990 respectively. Polkinghorne's 1988 *Narrative Knowing* falls between Bruner's two works, and his paper *Narrative Knowing and the Practicing Psychologist* in 1985 predates Bruner by a year. The two authors reference each other. One wonders what was in the air at annual meetings of the American Psychological Association during that time.

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