



Listen. Or scroll.

Storytelling and digital folklore, and why it matters.

By Henk-Jona Klijn

We huddle at the feet of storytellers—oracles delivering versions of life as they see it, and saw it when life was an ancient version of itself. Their words vie for our focus—desperate to stand out from daily noise and the constant stream of stimuli. But the ear is insatiable—it can always hear more, ready to augment our worldview, filtering and judging what constitutes truth. It’s a subjective exchange. It shapes a shorthand of sorts. But the most audacious thing about the storyteller is their brazen determination to fill our minds with a libraries’ worth of tales, expressions, impressions, invitations, commands, slogans, ideas, and memories. Words. In a human library.

When all is done, it is the recollection—the sharing—of stories about collective glory, and pain, that steels us. These folkloric chronicles of identity manifest as bulwarks of resistance, their resonance fostering empathy as it unites the group around shared goals, while providing mental sanctuary and something resembling empowerment. At heart, then, folklore feels as though it should be central to world-making. [Kumbaya](#) moments for broken people. But to underestimate folklore’s potential as a tool of mere reflection, what Brazilian educator, Paul Freire, called “[conscientization](#),” would be to diminish the power of narrative.

Immediately preceding his “weapons of the weak” quote, James Scott comments on the struggle between the have-nots and those that have-lots and still want more. He writes that the struggle between the two groups may “stop well short of collective outright defiance.” Scott

identifies “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth.” Next, he refers to these expressions of class struggle as “Brechtian,” a telling reference.

Bertold [Brecht](#), the leftist German playwright and director, had an outsized impact on protest theater since, at the time, naturalistic theatre with its realistic scenes and relatable characters, reigned supreme, acting as a mirror to society, if you will. Brecht took a sledgehammer to that and, in the process, developed what he terms a *Verfremdungseffekt*, a hard to translate word that suggests both alienation and estrangement. It is a theatrical technique aimed at making the familiar unsettling—I would perhaps call it *jamais vu*—thereby provoking social-critical audience response. To be clear, Brecht wanted his audience to engage with the drama, but in a new and critical way and it was their emotional investment in the characters and story he aimed to manipulate.

Brecht developed his *verfremdungs* thesis under the slogan *Kämpferischer Realismus* (Militant Realism), his motto loosely translating to “fight through writing.” And while theatre is an “elite” culture form, as Lynne McNeil points out, Brecht frequently roots his work in folk or popular culture through appropriation. “[The Caucasian Chalk Circle](#)” is based on a folktale found across cultures while the populist “[The Threepenny Opera](#)” is nothing short of creative nihilism, attacking both morality and petit bourgeois attitudes. But even Brecht, with all his elite concepts and Marxist intentions, had no power against the sweeping tide of Nazism; Brecht fled Nazi Germany in 1933, only to return after the war.

And this admittedly long-winded example, inspired by James Scott, leads me to wonder if folklore (or culture or pop culture) is adequate—consequential enough—as a leftist tool of resistance, activism, or even social change. Is it fundamentally just more *kumbaya* than a storied step to conscientization?

On March 6, 2015, Black Twitter and Tumblr users were snapping, uploading, and circulating selfies, intentionally flooding platforms with Black faces. Before long, there were over

58,000 tweets tagged #BlackOutDay. For Alexander Cho, who, as a user-ethnographer, had been studying Black engagement with online networks for five years, this movement was unusual. He calls it massive, guttural, and affirmative, the latter being a good word since BlackOutDay hinges on the lack of representation on most major platforms, particularly the kind of representation that took on the pervasive European—white—standards of attractiveness and beauty. And it's a lack of representation that hints at being invisible and disposable.

Alexander Cho's "Disruptive Joy" has me think more clearly about toxic positivity as an extension of Insta-perfect lives lived by those who ostensibly fall outside the #BlackOutDay parameters described by Cho. He writes that he'd "wager that many of the participants in #BlackOutDay are very much aware of the precariousness of happiness and the corollary coming-and-going of life, especially in terms of state-sanctioned murder" (195).

Disruptive joy then seems antithetical to the kind of disconnected, toxically positive entitlement hell-bent on illustrating how good things are despite much evidence to the contrary. Indeed, disruptive joy exists because, for some, life has attained a toxic quality of its own, and joy—especially the defiant, disruptive kind—acts as therapy while acting as an alternative form of protest in the face of invisibility.

#BlackOutDay generated considerable attention on social media platforms, with numerous individuals and organizations voicing support and participating in the movement. #BlackOutDay's post on Tumblr sums it up: "In a show of community and solidarity, for those 24 hours, we are exclusively posting and reblogging pics, gifs, videos, selfies, etc. of Black people. We want to show that Black History is happening today, right now. That we are all Black History."

The hashtag trended across multiple platforms, indicating a considerable level of engagement and visibility; however, measuring the precise economic impact of the movement can be challenging. While some participants likely refrained from making purchases, the overall financial impact might be difficult to quantify due to the complex nature of consumer behavior.

#BlackOutDay received media coverage, prompted discussions about economic inequality and racial justice, and brought issues of economic disparities faced by the Black community into the public consciousness.

Whether #BlackOutDay was impactful in the long term requires considering whether the movement led to sustained action and change. Did it contribute to broader discussions and lasting positive change, both economically and in terms of its successes as cultural resistance with, perhaps, greater equality and giant strides toward a post-racial, more equal society?

Now, eight years later, the positivity and disruptive joy of #BlackOutDay seem somewhat as though it may have been an ambitious flash in a hostile pan. Since January 2021, 44 states in the USA have introduced new bills or taken action steps that muzzle the teaching of critical race theory. Those bills limit how teachers may refer to racism or sexism, according to an Education Week [analysis](#). Eighteen states have exacted these restrictions through official legislation.

Then, in June 2023, the US Supreme Court [halted](#) race-conscious admissions in the United States, and the decision showed the significant divide between the two ideological camps that make up the current court structure, the conservative six-justice supermajority putting the kibosh on the University of North Carolina and Harvard.

As recently as July 21, 2023, the Florida State Board of Education announced that it will henceforth [teach students](#) that some Black people benefited from slavery because it taught them valuable skills. SS.68.AA.2.3 writes: “Examine the various duties and trades performed by slaves (e.g., agricultural work, painting, carpentry, tailoring, domestic service, blacksmithing, transportation)” and perhaps more alarmingly, “Clarification 1: Instruction includes how slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit” (6). This language has been blasted by state teachers’ union as a “step backward.” The guide on Social Studies, 2023 also clarifies instruction to include “acts of violence perpetrated against **and by African Americans** but is not

limited to 1906 Atlanta Race Riot, 1919 Washington, D.C. Race Riot, 1920 Ocoee Massacre, 1921 Tulsa Massacre and the 1923 Rosewood Massacre” (17, emphasis added).

It seems then that, for some, folklore—folkloresque, fakelore, propaganda, call it what you will—has a significant, lasting effect with profound and consequential after-effects, while others are destined to deal with the fallout, desperate to cling to their sanity. And rights. And they may have to take Michelle Obama’s 2016 example and “go high when they go low,” a motto [highlighted](#) in [countless headlines](#), as it became a much-memed and shared slogan.

Then, in 2020, at the Democratic National Convention, Michelle Obama [amended](#) her slogan, declaring that “going high means unlocking the shackles of lies and mistrust with the only thing that can truly set us free: the cold hard truth,” denouncing Trump by calling him the “wrong president for our country.” Again, she went viral.

But by 2020, there was no space for a soft “go low—go high” comment with the risk of being misunderstood as it flooded the platforms, shared and named. There was no room for folksy narratives, and Obama had turned a corner, exhausted and angered by four years, giving an unfiltered view of how the Obamas felt after the turmoil of the Trump administration. Since then, we have seen more leftist figures, such as Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, Bernie Sanders, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, adopt a new tone on social media with more robust, even galvanizing, opinions. And Twitter blows up every time.

Brecht would approve. It may not be a play, but even in their tweets, our elected leaders are willing to “fight through writing.” As for the rest of us, it may just not be our thing.

Stories are situated, localized, dumbed-down, made politically digestible, pimped up, or stripped down. They show their age when they use bad words and insensitive descriptions; some vanish; others become subject of endless reinterpretation and mental excursions; some are formalized in print, becoming collectible, and often reissued. Stories decorate shelves, liven up

coffee tables, provide reading matter during quiet moments in the smallest room in the house, and sometimes prop up a rickety piece of furniture. And they make great last-minute gifts.

Words and stories provide proof, confirming what we suspect and, when more than one story tells the same sequence of events, they form a body of evidence. At the root of every “he says—she says” argument and litigation, stories are sometimes indiscriminate in their incriminations while also able to justify actions and deeds—some say manipulated. For the story and the word may well be proof or accurate in episodic retelling—a verbal surveillance mechanism—but it easily skews, outlining a situation or place so augmented by personal vantage points that we can never be sure that something was or wasn’t as portrayed by the story. And so the word can be a victim to the whims and abilities of the teller; under-baked and stodgy in the hands of the casual amateur or overblown and insincere in the hands of an aggrandized wordsmith, but a story—every story—inherently possesses a liminal space. A sense of suspension—a holding of breath before the denouement—is present in every story, whether telling of noble causes, documentations “as it happened,” or a voyeuristic souvenir of a life well-lived.

A good story—or a good persona or character in UX—is deliberately focused with intentionally blurred peripheries and the ongoing interplay between the alluded-to and the inferred and how it intersects with the given. And while any story has a complicated relationship with lived experience and degrees of truth, many authors inhabit a complicated space as an authority blended with equal parts opinion and enticement; the work frequently veers into murkier territories of culture, predisposition, and scruples. Any seasoned writer will know the strangely hypnotic rote one enters when reading, re-reading, editing, reading again, and tweaking just a little for the last time as they strive for a version of the tagline, headline, clause, or paragraph that they can live with. A version that squares up with their notions or with the received research of the user/reader and reflects carefully positioned opinions on stance, direction, attitude, and demographics. In weighing the tone, establishing the words’ value and context, the writer shapes a narrative and girds the

subject. And even when narratives are quick and informally licentious, they don't always thwart tedium or possible pomposity. This docility and acquiescence to intent or instruction give the craft its latent threat—its virulence.

Texts that exalt are no less virulent than those that destruct and deceive. Virulence is baked-in. Tweets and memes—viral. Anything online—viral. We aim for virulence, we get rewarded for causing it, and we feel done-in when an otherwise-exemplary piece makes little viral inroads. We do this in a world that increasingly thinks (and reads) in charged, digestible chunks—a landscape that is one massively liked set of words. From the beginning, the printed word was a mechanism for democracy, a pivot from a society where a select, ordained few had knowledge and training—and access—to vaults of information. As we progressed—rapidly—to a mostly digital world, our words and stories have been sharpened for social use, and while the results are acts of creativity, they are frequently free from artistic ambition or pretense. Something else is at play there—a post-advertising conflation of user recognition, symbology, language, and tonal signaling. And so words and stories have become authentic mass communion cultural and artistic expressions, and like every commercialized or mass art form, the narrations are not made as a primarily artistic venture. They signify collective ritual, a vaccine against angst, and convenient shorthand manipulation by formidable power structures.

“...the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often, there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.” Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’ [1936], in *Illuminations* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1968)

There is a tone of pain detectable in the words of Walter Benjamin. More than that, there is a frustration with the cultural shift and social change that belies his view that we are, now, less able to share human experiences meaningfully. And Benjamin blames modernity.

In a “get off my lawn” moment, he writes that “a generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of the force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body” (Benjamin, 144). Against the context of folk tradition and participatory media, Benjamin does, however, make us pause and reflect on what—or who—the storyteller is, and he gives, as one of the reasons for the death of storytelling, the rise of “information.”

But stories are still stories, irrespective of media. Some are told as symbols; many are layered visuals; others are participatory and episodic. One could also argue that memetic or viral folklore relies more heavily on elevated levels of high-context meaning and messaging compared with traditional storytelling. As such, we are closer to non-verbal or inferred meaning than ever before, and while we may not quite be attaining Japanese levels of *Kuuki wo yomu*, or “reading the air,” we are nevertheless deploying highly textured and complex messages. But sometimes, a meme is just a dog in a hat, and “a cigar, just a cigar,” as Freud is famously [misquoted](#) as saying. So maybe Benjamin has a point.

One could argue that silly memes on FaceBook also contain “openly or covertly, something useful,” as [Benjamin](#) thinks it befits a good story (2). And sometimes TikTok or X indeed peddle “some practical advice” or “a proverb or maxim” (2). Benjamin, from this perspective, may seem a little elitist, but his comment goes beyond storytelling per se, as he seems fundamentally concerned with *how* stories are transmitted. Lynne McNeil in *Folklore Rules* (2013) comparing folklore with other artistic expressions, clarifies that what “distinguishes folklore from these other forms of cultural expression is the way it’s transmitted.” Benjamin quotes a German saying that “when

someone makes a journey, he has a story to tell.” We still do exactly that. It’s *how* we do it that’s been so transformational to our society.

Stories help us navigate the world. They warn us about lurking dangers, and they suggest a range of outcomes tied to sets of behavior. The best ones start by framing an event in narration at a temporal distance—*once upon a time*—lending an aura of expectation; a disassociation rendering a character such as Goldilocks greedy, opportunistic, and entitled instead of—heavens forbid—the greedy, opportunistic, and entitled recipient of the story, who is learning a set of ethics and life codes simply by listening. And so, for example, the notion of occupying another’s space, indiscriminately tasting everyone’s porridge, and breaking their beds before jumping out of the window in a fast escape, is not really the thing to do. It is significant to note just how the perpetrator in this particular story has been treated by the storytelling tradition going from an old crow in the early versions of Goldilocks—then called “The Story of the Three Bears” by Robert Southey in which the old woman is never seen again, perhaps ending up in a correctional facility after repeated breaking and entering misdemeanors—to the flaxen-haired pretty white girl, who wantonly wants what she does, and complains about everything she gets. Sounds familiar?

To say that Goldilocks’ story represents a form of morality tale is to understate the patently obvious. Claiming that the morality tale is relevant across the ages and draws links to contemporary life, is to get to the core of what the word—the story—can do. Seen against in a post-millennial light, the little girl is utterly, relentlessly, disappointingly, searingly charmless. Her saving grace is her hair—her coded entitlement. She sullenly invades space belonging to others, staking claims, and then criticizes the just-claimed territory—too hard or too soft, insisting that everything is just right. Her right. The only right that matters. No regard for group ethics. No display of personal ethics. Just greed. She insults her hosts and leaves as quickly as she came. Given half a chance, she’d have them collared and leashed, training them to dance on hotplates and sold to a traveling circus for a tidy

profit. And therein lies the power of story—boundless meaning, contained in few words. Many iterations, repetitions to get a point across, for the premise and mechanism of the good story is to see yourself reflected: to learn from it.

Hearing a story is an opportunity to situate yourself in it—imagining the thing being described, appropriating the world you hear about. What kind of chair would *I* like? The softest one for sure. Now, regarding the bed. Foot-end? No. I'm 6' 4"—no small bed for *this* Goldilocks. And we need to have a word about the porridge. I mean, as if. Hello—carbs. And, of course, a word about the one-ton bear in the room—literally. Come-on—three bears, living together in a house? It's not 1837 when Southey first wrote his story. No wonder the blond is bossy and, put mildly, consistently dissatisfied; Goldilocks has no role in ursine polyamory. But this view is not shaped by words or story—instead, it is a biased reading, habituated in an organic world. The story allows a mental excursion into an inorganic space where unencumbered, an interpretation can be conjured up—an elaborate visual feast—that acts not so much as a statement on the world as described by the storyteller, but rather the world as we, the user, perceive it.

Some stories are shrines to the people who preceded us, shaping us and reminding us that they too were giants in their day. Stories can be forgiving, softening the edges of a troubled relationship over time and recasting a new version of the kind of history some of us wished we had. Stories were made for families. By families. Episodes about children—mostly when they are/were small are infused with parental bias. By telling these stories, each member of the group or family positions themselves in a bigger story, their vantage point providing an evidential chronicle of events, highlighting the delicate stitching that defines most complex situations. The subject-matter is hardly noteworthy in some cases, emphasizing a single response or comment—a look or an action—that comes to define the character in the genealogy. When the anemic nuclear family took root, extended clan stories with observances on the now-dispersed tried to ameliorate threatened

connectedness and, at least verbally, lay claim to people who form the larger aggregate. Family stories are unsurprisingly often about lost family—the stories being all that had been left behind.

If the story imagines the past and memorializes the missing, it can also enter the world of the conceived space. The story is synonymous with travel—it provides proof of experience and a taste for exploration. It tells the neighbors that things got done—fun had. Stuff. Lots of it. Stories augment the happy snaps captured on a smartphone, documenting them, making them real by giving them context and depth. They form part of a canon—a travelogue—of experience and culture. For some, travel is the mechanism to add to the canon. The process around the experience and the dizzying pace of it all adding to the frisson when retelling travel tales. Unsure of how to process what happens and how to deal with crappy things, “at least it’ll make a good story,” we tell ourselves or the guy standing next to us when a stupid thing happened. And especially those with an ax to grind collect the stories and moments of experience as proof that they are more than a workaholic and that they too can chill out—have fun. Looking for the next story becomes a form of work for the work-defined. They quickly settle into a quasi-work schedule: enthusiastically hunting experiences that act as work surrogates—proof of play.

The disenfranchised put even greater value on stories. Victims of displacement, who deal with trauma and obfuscated memory fight against the constant threat of vanishing heritage, collect and collate fables of a place that once was home. At the same time, the pressure to assimilate and become part of a Borg-like collective is immense—and seductive. It’s so much more convenient to be part of a new story—a new history—than to constantly buzz-kill your way through tales of desperation, suffering, and invalidation.

Storytelling, especially complex iterations such as television shows or films, has emerged as a vital mechanism for vicarity—creating the illusion of integration and engagement. And where the written story ignites imagination, sparking pensive moments and flights of fancy, the resigned engagement encouraged by the visual storytelling layers messages and sound and allows for

marketing and advertising, so much so that the process becomes passive—voyeuristic. Does it matter? Does it lessen the value of the experience or diminish the power of the story? It does not, instead, becoming an event of its own design—stories that are worth telling and therefore worth seeing and worth sharing enthusiastically with friends, the maven stamping with the seal of approval. Tales of hope, youth, the lives of others, history, love, otherness—all served up for the chronic spectator, often consuming stories via second screens. Apps want to add our photographs to our “stories.” And these stories that are collected and collated snapshot contextualize events, give meaning—they prove that we were there.

The story is, in essence, an encounter—a meeting between teller and user, as much an event as the ones narrated, creating a bond that reaches over centuries. They interfere with the status quo, oblivious to the reader’s framework or objections—ignorant of everything that constitutes the user’s world. I use the term user to indicate the person reading, watching, listening, clicking, or just randomly engaging. Once the story has been delivered, when it has interrupted, asserting itself, it has managed to take a further step to immortality, caught in the collective subconscious, ready to go dormant again until the next serendipitous discovery by a user. While kinetic losses and loves are incurred in the world outside the door, the storyteller makes a bid to keep his audience connected to a different kind of world—a curation that will outlast each of us.

Telling a story is a non-invasive process, to some physical extent, at least. Reports from the frontlines allow us to observe, get outraged, or remain unaffected, for reporting is mostly non-interventionist. Should they choose to intervene, it becomes a different genre of story. But even the aloof reporter, choosing to stay on the perimeters, observing, has a heightened relationship with their surroundings, and through telling the story, they partake—contributing to the event’s reach and exposure. To tell the story of the event’s unfolding is to be curious and inform others that things are not always as they expect them to be. It bears reminding some that it’s not Friday 8 PM at the Piggly

Wiggly for everyone, everywhere. Stories make us realize that others have lives and joy and misfortune.

Our stories have the power to arouse—to flex and prod the impulse—while remaining mostly abstract, with ethics and issues of morality far removed from specifics and concrete personas. And while the arousal impulse is strong and prevalent, the arousal of the conscience is equally viable. However, as stimulating as the call to action may be, to act in good conscience and “do the right thing,” the mechanism is less than powerful to dent apathy and disengagement. The images and testimony that emerge after brutal killings like those of George Floyd, Eric Garner, or Breonna Taylor don’t guarantee that people will flock to the voting booth or make good on holding police accountable. Many of us are asymmetrically outraged over semantics—people are angrier overuse of the words “defund the police” than over the deaths that caused the slogan to begin with. However, few who see the footage and hear the reports can be unaffected by what they contain. Stories, visual or verbal, cannot by themselves forge group ethics; still, they can buttress them, keeping them buoyant in our subconscious—made inchoate, germinating deeper resolve to a better understanding of what the group ethics are.

We are caught in a reflective period of civilization. Our stories are rooted in nostalgia—they are made for fireplaces and moments where we must keep hope alive. They are bathed in pathos. A tricky subject may be shocking and upsetting, but the craft of the storyteller can shift our perception—elevating our take on the story, creating underdogs that prevail, allowing us to feel better about ourselves, creating the delusion that are better people, able to do more, should that ever come up. Most of know we won’t. But maybe, who knows? Stories are about schadenfreude, after all. To tell a story is to participate in the misery of another—to observe their world, judge their actions, pontificate over their demise. It allows us to hold up the narration, inspect the minutiae, and keep it static—suspended—bearing witness to carefully selected scenes from the blur of a lived life.

Our stories have created multiple copies of the various worlds we have inhabited over time; our mythologies present countless iterations, each pushing limits of what is/was/could be. They represent a quasi-presence while at the same time, act as bookmarks referencing things gone by. We have started to accept that the delivery of information such as that contained in the story is contained in a narrow frame of space and time. Through the telling of the things that we wish to convey, the world we inhabit becomes episodic—often unrelated and individual—a blurring of past and future, delivered anecdotally and as evidence of diversity. The story renders our world manageable—convenient to reconcile with, presenting us with choices of interpretation and varying relevance, inviting the user to view the story as a veneer hiding what is below—leaving us with the assumption that the hidden is no worse than the declared; and the suspicion that what lies below may be more fantastical than hinted at. Stories need us to imagine. By themselves, they are impotent.

Storytelling is fundamentally different from visual metaphor in that while it also seduces the senses by unlocking the imagination, it can also aim to convey ethics and socio-political thought. It does not have to fall victim to sentimentality—it does not have to be cynical or weary. And while it can never claim to present us with the complete picture, it approximates what we may need as rememory or take-away. The need to augment reality and heighten the experience is now ubiquitous. Advertising and our relentless consumerism have made us all addicted to fast affirmation and validation—we have become story-stoners. Our need for an escape to places of beauty, renditions of redemption, and wordy probes of others' lives are affirmed when we read/hear/imagine even the simplest of tales. It has become a fixation; turning lived-experience, or imagined lives, into personas that help define the user, outline the character, assisting in meaning-making—a way of seeing. In the end, having the lived-experience becomes analogous to telling the story, and more frequently than not, life is starting to approximate art. “People wouldn’t believe this stuff if I made it up,” we hear more frequently than ever before. Mallarmé nailed it when he mused that, fundamentally, everything exists to end up in a book. He did not know the half of it.