

**Truth or Consequences:
An improvised collective story construction**

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Abstract

What follows is a collectively improvised story that emerged as four authors set out to explore their experiences and thoughts concerning organizational stories. The story is a reflection of our collective, creative, improvisational sensemaking via the construction of a narrative. The authors were selected because of their experience in the fields of organizational storytelling, narrative theory, and improvisation. We began by asking ourselves ‘What would happen if we engaged in improvisation to collectively create a story that makes sense of organizational research?’ After several rounds of reviews, we have added reader voices, along with our own insights gained from our experience in constructing ‘Truth or Consequences.’

Prologue

Dear Readers,

Be forewarned. This is no simple tale you are preparing to read. Reactions from other readers have varied from intrigue and elation to disapproval and disgust.

“In my opinion, this paper is unsuitable for inclusion in an academic journal...the purpose of academic journal articles is to seek an objective theoretical or empirical description of some phenomena – constructed, behavioral, or physical – outside of the scholar’s individual mind.”

To his/her credit, that reader went on to provide a perfectly and completely logical critique supporting his or her position. At the same time, the editor of *Administrative Science Quarterly* responded very differently, saying:

“I was excited, as an editor, to receive such an innovative paper. [...] Your paper offers the reader a truly unique method for advancing understanding. The idea of using improvisational sensemaking to create a narrative at a collective level is an intriguing, not to mention highly promising, approach to stimulating thought as well as active discourse in the academic community. For many reasons, this paper was a joy to read, both as a unique knowledge-building experience and as an opportunity to reflect on the value gained through collective narrative.”

Finally, a *Journal of Management Inquiry* reviewer shared these impressions:

“I picked up this manuscript as a way to counter boredom and get another item ticked off my ‘to do’ list. What an enjoyable and provocative read! Unlike many academic reviews, I did not put the paper down until I was finished reading it nor did I feel the need to wander...”

As for us writers, rest assured our emotions ran this same gamut as our tale emerged (and they still do as we reflect on our experience). As for you, this paper may challenge some of your preconceived notions about what academic work is about, and even what counts as an academic contribution to knowledge. We are not, however, the first to try something like this.

There is now a fairly extensive literature on the phenomena of organizational stories and storytelling; we have a wide array of thick and thin, participant observed, and arm chair deduced, paper dry and tellingly wet accounts of how storytelling occurs in organized settings. Yet, apart from a few exceptions (e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jermier, 1985; Pacanowsky, 1983; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2002; Taylor, 2000; Watson, 2000), most of our stories of stories adopt an “I was a story collector” approach—I was there, heard the stories, wrote them down, and speculated on their patterning (e.g. Kunda, 1992; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, Sitkin, 1983; Van Maanen, 1991). While this has taught us a great deal about organizations and some things about organizing, the watchfulness of our efforts has also kept us at arm’s length from our subject. As Vico first argued several centuries ago, observational methods offer us only partial, superficial understandings; to understand a phenomenon fully, we must try the thing itself.

Phillips (1995) has demonstrated the legitimacy of fiction in making contributions to organizational research and encourages us to take alternative modes of presentation seriously. He claims the division between narrative fiction and more conventional approaches to organizational analysis are insupportably overdrawn, and defends the contribution of narrative fiction in asserting that ‘combining the text of this alternative discourse with the traditional text of organizational theory opens up a new arena of intertextuality allowing the conversation of organization theory to move in new directions...’

As Gertrude Stein says, ours ways of telling are telling. The way we write is important to theory, because writing is a way of knowing, a method of discovery and analysis. In this regard, postmodernism has opened new methods of inquiry related to writing texts (Richardson, 1994). We believe we created what Denzin (1994) calls a vital text, one that grips not only the reader but the writer. Our own heightened engagement in this process (as opposed the passive

involvement with the texts we usually use to represent our work), attests to our belief that our process moves the reader toward direct participation in knowledge building.

We went beyond alternative modes of presentation to engage in alternative modes of construction. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt (at least in organization studies) to use group-based narrative improvisation to explore improvisation (for single authored fictional narratives see Jermier, 1985 and Pacanowsky, 1983 for examples). We believe our contribution lies in both our method of theory building and the insights it produces. We also present insights about reflexivity and marginalized voices that our storytelling produced, and offer some practical guidance for this method of story construction.

Stories are theories, so the construction of stories amounts to theory building. Stories tell us something about the world, thus directly making valuable contributions to knowledge. We might compare two forms of poetic discourse, one where the writer speaks objectively in their own voice (as in typical journal articles), and the other where the writer impersonates and imitates. Aristotle loved mimesis because it created knowledge by getting a thing right and simplifying it (Pappas, 2001). The advantage of mimesis in knowledge building is that it is more accessible and conveys more understanding. Davies (2001) points out that not only is there truth in fiction, there is truth *through* fiction, and he describes fiction's special capacity to furnish us with knowledge about the "actual" world that the "actual" world cannot provide. Within organizational studies, Czarniawska noted that "stories capture organizational life in a way that no compilation of facts ever can; this is because they are carriers of life itself, not just 'reports' on it" (1997: 21).

The type of aesthetic theorizing we developed in writing this paper stands in contrast and complement to intellectual theorizing (see table 1). Baumgarten (1750, reprinted in 1936)

suggested that logic was the study of intellectual knowledge, while aesthetics was the study of sensory knowledge. Jermier (1985) and Pacanowsky (1983) both use story to put intellectual theory into an aesthetic form to provide us with a vicarious experience and to tells us something ‘real’ by creating a fictional world. Not only is our fictional story an aesthetic representation, it is the result of aesthetic theorizing. “Aesthetic theorizing can give us a sense of the whole or gestalt that can be missing from intellectual theorizing but is very much part of our experience in the world” (Taylor, 2000: 308).

Stories create knowledge and develop the mind in a unique way. Hegel claimed that what a mind is depends on, but is not independent from, what it knows (Inwood, 2001). While the mind cannot know itself without knowing the external world, it still stands in contrast to that world. To know itself, it must know what it is not. Yet, as Aristotle claimed, the mind is not entirely cut off from that external world, knowing itself only by reflection in that world. Creating our story created just such a reflected world, that is, one in which we saw our reflection in the things we said and did. We came to know ourselves, and readers can come to know themselves as we did, by seeing themselves in the story. Not only did we story a world into being, the story then acted as a mirror that developed our collective mind, creating knowledge about us. We created a thing that then created us.

To create our story, we used an improvisational format (see Hatch, 1999, 1998; Moorman & Miner, 1998; and Weick, 1998), taking turns authoring the plot, characters, and action. One of the authors had his 3-year-old niece pull the authors names out of a coffee cup to determine the initial order of the ‘players.’ The first author sat down and began to improvise a story. Instructions were given to just sit down and type as ideas came to mind, to improvise the

composition, such that conception and execution were simultaneous (Miner, Bassoff & Moorman, 2001; Moorman & Miner, 1998). The only rule we followed was this one:

“The start can be a sentence, can be a page, whatever, as long as it's fast and free-form. Email goes to the next person, and they read it and take off from there. We should go freehand, hammering quickly and off the top of our heads. We ‘finish’ when it feels like a finish.” (email between authors)

Each author could ‘play’ as long or as little as they wished. The next author was to read the story, and pick up the improv set, taking the story anywhere they fancied in the moment. They could take the feed and continue along what they thought the path was, they could change directions, or invent a completely new direction. After the initial round of improv writing, authors could jump in when and as they pleased, simply by declaring in an email something to the effect of: “I’ve got it”. Any author inspired could pick up and continue the story, but was not allowed to edit or change anything that went before, only adding what they wanted starting with the last written line. We forced ourselves to become bricoleurs, making do with whatever we had been handed. We agreed that the story would be finished when everyone had read the last contribution and no one staked a claim.

At the outset, we felt we would gain some understanding as to how collectives construct and improvise stories, but none of us had any idea where the story was going as it left our fingertips. What finally emerged ended up being very different than any of our predictions, and deeply meaningful to us as participants. Our impressions are that the story is surprisingly (given the process) coherent, relevant, and authentic. In some ways it reflects who we are in that it grapples with practical and ideological issues many of us have grappled with: access, acceptance, academic career, marginalization, and questions about what constitutes knowledge building.

We hope to begin a conversation with our story. All organizational research is essentially a form of storytelling, and we have chosen a form that is attractive because it allows multiple

voices to be represented in an attempt to model the world and weave a pattern of truth just as do more mainstream theories of organization (Phillips, 1995).

Truth or Consequences

Perhaps it was the scotch embellishing reality and misplacing emotion, but the information did something more than fascinate me. It was late, but I was in the middle of my evening, in my former, much-abused body, when television presented to me some awful and perplexing trivia: The female octopus gives birth once in her life, and promptly dies. For several years, I had no idea what to do with this information about female octopi.

So I have to ask myself what octopi have to do with improvised organizational stories? Improv in organization science is most often presented in a jazz metaphor. People improvising jazz are free to play within an implicitly shared structure. In jazz, creation happens when you change components within the existing structure of the old to create the new. You only end up with a new story by going through the old story.

It shouldn't be so ironic that the telling of the old story is its own demise in creating the new story. Storytelling always leads to a new story. The old story dies giving birth to the new one. And culture, stories and jazz are all like octopi in that sense.

Some of the best jazz is like a good story in that it is both narrative and conversational. But this coherence is continuously challenged by musicians stretching beyond the confines of the existing line, searching for new ways to restate old phrases or introducing new phrases altogether. It acknowledges the line laid down by previous interchanges, but only loosely follows it. All these are choices made in a moment with respect to a fleeting and emergent context.

The octopus, she is dead. She surrendered, her sacrifice made for forever. The child looks back at the corpse, lying so still, so different from its flurry of flexing limbs, the unfolding of new senses. Bewilderment. Confusion. Blink blink.

Firms I study are busy becoming what they are not, and in that there is hope. They story themselves as family, the show, and global liberators, fun places to work. This they do while denying they are still what they were: the lowest pay in town, contractors to sweatshops, addicted to greed. The violence and possibility of making violence nothingness is what Storytelling Organizations do. Who gets to story? Who is just storied?

Two sisters were working in a Korean-owned factory in Mexico called 'Kukdong.' Kukdong subcontracts to Athletic Shoe Company (ASC), making those sporty garments sold on university campuses. The sisters told me face-to-face many stories on my Spring Break to the city of Atlixco in the State of Puebla, not too far from Mexico City. Some players are fired (or worse) for telling their stories. The sisters no longer work at Kukdong because of the

violence; I could record their story and know they would not be fired. It means more powerful players write this history.

After complaining about maggots in their food, being cheated out of pay, physical, and sexual harassment --- 800 young women, ages 16 to 23 years old (a few men too) took over their factory and demanded their human rights. For three days they tried to negotiate with the Korean managers and lawyers, to get an independent union, due process, and more time with their children.

The governor called in the riot police and the state union hired its thugs. On the third day, the sisters were beaten by police and strikebreakers, made to walk with two hundred other women, many with infants in tow, out the one exit, through a gauntlet of police and thugs swinging clubs and shields. They were chased blocks away from the plant. 15 were injured and taken to hospital. The sisters told me two of their women friends lost their babies; that was not in the news, not in the monitoring reports, not part of corporate PR.

It is time for my steam bath; there is a routine, and it is time to enter. I have these notes playing in my head, but time is set up so I rarely follow them, trace them out, find out what is behind it. I am going off to be what I am not. For a moment, I was being who I am.

If this is Jazz, it is the music played by a violent ensemble, one that we glorify in organization theory texts, while the less powerful voice of working women in this orchestration play silenced notes. Maybe every time the Two Sisters or I talk of Kukdong, we change the story. Sweatshop workers, mostly women, have voices that are silenced literally, epistemologically, and ontologically.

Literally, they are fined for speaking to each other at work and fired for telling a story that deviates from official discourse. Epistemologically, corporations, consultants, apologist academics, and monitoring agents articulate (re)story what passes as knowledge of women's factory life experience. Ontologically, the silence of sweatshop women is a scream waiting to be heard. To repeat our refrain: The octopus, she is dead.

And these are the thoughts I carry as I am leaving the bathhouse. I look around and realize that besides the mildewed, faded, tile bathhouse, I must live in the most run-down building in my part of Mexico City, the fancy Zona Rosa. I have a single room, with dusty and scarred hard wood floors, and no water. I sleep on a camping mattress I bought from home. The only other furniture in the room is a small desk and chair, which I moved closer to the only electric outlet to plug in my laptop computer. My bags, junk, and clothes piles take up most of the other floor space. It's much less than I am accustomed to, but quiet, and I can work. Maybe it's even good for me.

And what is a bathhouse doing in the center of the trendy Zona Rosa in Mexico City you ask? The bathhouse went up in the 1950s, and used to be full of Russians. It stands in not much more than a crack between two buildings, one of which is the Russian Embassy. And though forgotten, the bathhouse is still there, and I am probably the only gringo that actually uses it to bathe, which I do every other day, if not every day. I go to the bathhouse an hour or so before it opens, and the attendant, a kind old bent but unbroken woman, who still speaks a few Russian phrases!, gives me run of the

place (it's a men-only joint other than my pre-opening ritual). I sit in the sauna until my skin feels like it will dissolve, and then shower, all while the attendant is doing her best to clean and tidy the various chambers in old place. As I am leaving, I tip the woman what she always motions is too many pesos, which I always think is too few since I don't have running water, and would probably pay anything for a shower.

She pushes the coins towards me. "Are you sad? You are sad today? You buy something nice . . . make you happy."

"Having you make a decent wage would make me happy. I don't need to buy more. I've got enough. You don't."

"Yes she does," mutters another voice. "You oughta take the money." I look around, my heart pounding hard. In the cracked doorframe stands an athletic looking young woman, short blond hair, freckled nose. She looks fresh, deodorized, all American. And she has an ASC briefcase in tow.

"Christ, what now?" I wonder.

"I'm Amandela—remember? We met a couple of years ago at that conference?"

"Oh yeah—sorry, didn't recognize you. So . . . what's up?" I'm tongue-tied. What do you say at times like this?

"I was in the area . . . a friend told me you were around, doing some interviews at the plant. We've been instituting a couple of new programs you know—maybe you've heard of them? A housing makeover project and the workplace improvement program we started last year. Going really well. You're still doing that story thing, aren't you? Well, we're collecting all these great success stories here, part of a world-wide effort. You'd love them. Best one I've heard so far is about using some sawn-off shoes to make mousetraps! Can you believe it?"

"Aw come on Amandela. Who're you kidding? Sawed-off shotguns maybe. I'd believe that."

"No, really, they made some kind of web out of shoelaces that ends up gagging the little beasties once they've gone in the shoes. Kinda gross, but it works. You wouldn't believe the monster they caught the other day. Hey, how's your work going? We haven't seen you much in the press these days."

Ah, so they do keep track.

"Yeah, well, you know how it is. More than mice being gagged these days. But the work's still going. Getting my share of stories too."

"Hey, you need a ride?" she says, thumbing towards her Beamer. "Maybe we could swap stories."

"Thanks, but no. I've got a ride coming a little later."

"Sure? You could use my cell phone to call."

“No, no, I seriously doubt they have cell phones. They hardly have shirts. I gotta go.”

“Okay. Look, here’s my card if you feel like talking about our programs sometime. The number is one of those global-roaming ones—it’s so cool. You can reach me anywhere in the world. Well, ciao.”

“Yeah, right.” I watch as she pulls out her keys. The car alarm sounds off as it disarms, its metallic chirps echo down the alley.

And as I pace and wait for my always late ride, it does not escape me that for the grant money funding my research, someone will say that I am going to have to come up with more than a story about those stories. “That is an impossible task. Nothing isn’t a story!” is what I’d like to say. But I understand the need for contribution, and my story can do that by adding another voice or voices to the sense we make of organizations. And I hope they don’t think I am deconstructing anything. Deconstruction has gotten a bad rap. It’s simply another construction, as is any discourse. And my setting is in disparate need of another construction.

And since today is Sunday, my ride (and interpreter, who is a PhD student down from Monterey Tech) and I will work for just a few hours. We will flag down and talk to workers as they walk home from their shift’s end. The PhD student is a former mid-level manager at the plant. And I see him coming now, someone the factory approved of to drive me back and forth during the hours I was able to be on site, after they begrudgingly gave me access to interview workers, off the clock, under very strict conditions in the plant cafeteria. But I have never been inside the plant or cafeteria, preferring to speak with employees outside of their work, when I can convince them. “The plant approves,” I tell them the truth, “we are just not in the cafeteria.” They are much more open outside of work.

The car is still a half block away when I see two people are there, no, three including the driver. It doesn’t get any closer and I already know who one visitor is – the woman I ran into this morning. And as I reach for the back door handle, it occurs to me that I didn’t run into her this morning at all, she must have been waiting for me – another American female, and hours before opening time at the near defunct Russian bathhouse in Mexico was too much of a coincidence. What was I thinking?

My driver nods kindly but with chagrin as the woman speaks. “Hello again!” I nodded at my driver, who remained more expressionless than usual, like he was suddenly a taxi, and pushed the canvas computer bag with the ASC symbol on it across the back seat so I could sit down. On the other side of the seat was another well scrubbed woman, decked out in ASC regalia. “This is my work buddy Tzara,” Amandela said, craning her neck to take us both in.

“You must be Emma,” and it was not lost on me that this was a statement and not a question at all.

“I’m trying to be. And how are you?” My intonation was definitely ‘Who are you?’

From there I was done talking until we reached the plant. Tzara, “Starts with a T-Z, and sounds like Sara, but with long-A”, from a university in the

Pacific Northwest, was on a ASC funded grant to show how working condition improvements in the plant, and social programs in the community, helped local workers and their families. "I'm an ethnographer too," was how she put it. '...too.' That told me she already knew all about my research.

"Mail came for you yesterday." My driver passes me a FedEx envelope addressed 'care of' the plant. It came from Oregon. I open it, and am mad at myself for being surprised. It is a letterhead inviting me to wrap up my engagement, as the corporate host's commitment is nearing an end. Three days should be plenty, and they ask that I conduct my remaining interviews in the cafeteria, in the company of my new-found friends, and I'll be damned if it doesn't actually say, "since the research is so similar, perhaps you can take advantage of synergy by working together." To top it off there is "with our compliments" a first class plane ticket enclosed for me to get home, and at the bottom of the one page letter is a little knife that reads 'cc: Professor Kurt Salinger' (the dean of my business school).

As we drive right through the front gate to the plant, and into the lot between the administrative offices and cafeteria, Amandela and Tzara wait patiently for me to read the letter, and anxiously for my reaction. No doubt they have already seen copies.

"I see the clinic is coming along nicely." Tzara motions towards a newly poured concrete slab, she faces Amandela, but everyone knows she is talking to me.

"Good news?" Amandela points at my letter. She just can't wait. I want to scream 'Bitch!', but I don't.

"Thank God for bureaucracy."

"How's that?" She knows by the look on my face, and the admission now on her's, that the contents of my package is news only to me.

"I can't believe it took them seven weeks."

"Ah yes," Amandela is smart and savvy, "if we had known we were working on similar research, we would have come sooner."

Tzara nods, like she's just seen a terrific chess move. "Why don't you join us in the cafeteria today? We have a focus group lined up, a quality circle if you will. You can listen in on our portion, and then ask them a few questions of your own. It will be helpful for your research." We are across the parking lot and into the cafeteria while she continues to expound on synergy.

While Tzara checks the script in her head, Amandela is next. "Ohh. The air conditioning feels nice. We have some time before our first group comes in, why don't we discuss our research?"

"Our research... is not very similar." I take a seat. I could be in any high school cafeteria in the United States. "I am giving the workers here an ethnographic instrument and their tune will be heard, in their own words. I am looking to help them tell their story, a new story, by exposing the gap between the corporate story and the workers collective storytelling machine."

I let this all out in one breath, and find myself puffing. Damn I am an easy mark! Conferences have conditioned me to explain my entire research agenda in about half an elevator trip (the other half of the elevator trip for the other hostage to give their spiel).

“Amandela told me you might bring your soap box.” We all smiled, to break the tension. I was the only one with red ears.

“Well then, perhaps I can ask, what is the goal of your research, and where does it fit into your business school’s mission?”

Here I go, not being what I am again. Do I want to fit into a business college or do I want to fit into the human race? That Amandela is sharp, and she thinks me cornered now, but I am only thinking because I want to give a decent answer . . .

“The goal of my research”, I decide to explain to Amandela, but really to Tzara, “is to document the narratives that construct the Athletic Shoe Corporation. I recognize that although ASC top managers may think they have special rights in the conversation about who or what the company is, in point of fact the company is created and sustained by all the parties to the conversation – including even you, Tzara and me. I am interested in recording as many stories about ASC as I can because I believe that these stories – all of them together – make ASC what it is, and I would like to develop my understanding of that. Now, you can help me, but maybe not in the way you thought you could. I would like to interview both you and Tzara about your relationship to ASC and your views on the company. I want to hear your stories. Then I would like to hear what you think my “soap box” is and discuss with you the position you would like to see me take and why. Tzara, what do female octopi have in common with the female factory workers who work for ASC and Reebok, here in Atlixco?”

“I do not understand the question. Why are you asking me about octopi?”

“You may not be aware that the female octopus gives birth once in her life, and promptly dies. By way of context, it may help you to know that a group of narrative researchers are studying what octopi have to do with improvised organizational stories.”

“You think that talking about octopi and you and your jazz players improvising will help anyone understand the life of factory workers in Mexico? It seems a bit far-fetched to me, but I am willing to play along. Amandela, what do you think of Emma’s question?”

“OK, here goes. Jazz has a melody and a rhythm, but it is not worked out in advance. The players tune into each others’ performance, and something new coheres as they play off of each other’s improvisations. It is as if Jazz is some kind of conversation, but one in which the parties listen to one another. Let’s see, the octopus surrenders her life to bring her children into this world. I wonder if the women we will interview in the focus group think they are bringing something new into this world by way of their sacrifice?”

Amandela stares at me, then at Tzara, and starts to take a deep breath. “I see where you are going. But, it is more complicated than that. Emma, you

keep harping on how ASC is so insensitive to women workers. You even said we offer them slave wages. I want this off the record. I have something to tell you and it relates to Jazz and octopi, I think. First, Emma, ASC is not a monolith! Do you know what I mean?"

"Do you mean that some people, like you, actually care about the 730,000 workers, mostly women, who will never afford a pair of ASC shoes or enjoy the cafeteria in Oregon?"

"Emma, you just don't listen do you! I am talking about how the women I work with at ASC corporate, risk everything to bring about change in a very conservative business culture. There are people at ASC who do care about the workers. I care about women and I do not think it is fair of you to label the employment and education opportunities we offer the Third World women as sweat labor."

I blink blink in bewilderment, seeming to awaken from years of pain and confusion in a primordial soup. "I want to know if you care about these women in the factories or is all this some kind of career move. Strike that. I believe you do care and you seem too sincerely seduced by ASC's storytelling. But, the women I interview, the ones that will not be invited to this focus group, tell stories about the gaps in the official tale of how happy women are to work 60 and 70 hour weeks, for dimes and pennies an hour, while being yelled at, and you know they have been slapped around by their Korean supervisors. I am sorry, but the photos of the women with black eyes and bruises and their dead fetuses keep playing in my head. Don't you get it! There is violence being perpetrated on the women who work for your subcontractors."

Amandela is about to nihilate and give her rejoinder, but seems to decide to just dive in between the lines. "OK, I want this strictly off the record. Some of us at ASC, are not addicted to greed. We want to end the violence in the factories, and we think we are doing a good job of policing 720 factories in 35 countries, with 730,000 workers. And we listen to our critics. I am listening to you. I have slept in the dorms in China and I have walked and talked to the women in this factory. Yes, they can not tell their story for fear of being fired. You cannot tell this story, or Dean Kurt Salinger will fire you. If I tell you stories, I'll get fired. It's called loyalty, Emma. The reason you have never been past an ASC cafeteria, much less a factory floor, is because, we do not trust you with our stories. You will run to the press and tell all. You would risk being fired by your Business College. For what? Will that make any difference to these women? The story will be news for 15 minutes, and Blink blink, in the blink of your eye, it will be forgotten."

Tzara, actually raises her hand, and being ignored, interrupts. "Ok, you two need a time out. I want to answer the question. What has all this to do with Octopi and Jazz? Jazz is beautiful music that storytellers make together. This is just noise. Neither of you listen to the other. You are from two different species. Let's assume for a moment that we are female octopi. We are about to die as we give birth to some new story, or is it new music, or perhaps a new way of doing narrative research? What if we fantasize? Emma, you tell the story that would be your death, or at least get you fired from the Business College. Amandela you tell one that would get you fired from ASC. And I will tell one that will get me fired from my

university. We put it on the line right here, right now. But, we agree never to publish any of it. We just lock ourselves in this room, and do a little truthing. Thinking about it. I am just going to start.

“I am a Sports Marketing Professor from Western Pacific University in Oregon, increasingly referred to as ‘We Pacify U.’ The story that will get me fired, is to tell you, the President of my university called me at my home, 11 P.M., and asked me to please find something good to publish about ASC. I know they have education programs and their subcontractor is building a new cafeteria, and offering meal choices that no longer include maggots. Actually the food here is no different than the student’s eat in our cafeteria at Western Pacific. Now what do I do? If I come back to Oregon with the kind of trashy stories that Emma keeps publishing, then I will not get tenure. I can see that writing on my wall. Now it’s your turn Emma, what is the story that will get you fired from New Mexico State?”

“I am not sure I like this game, but I will play. I have tenure, so I would have to either commit moral turpitude, that is, rape a male student or teach naked, or disparage the beef industry in any way. What will get me fired? What choice of story is important to tell you know, but will produce a narrative that will cohere into something that will get me fired? To be fired, I would have to do what I intend to do when I get back. It is a United Students Against Sweatshops chapter, and I will be advising them how to convert our university from membership in the ASC-sponsored Fair Labor Association, and instead join the Workers Rights Consortium.”

Tzara interrupts, “That would get me fired. If I started to advocate for the WRC, my university president would fire me on the spot. The loss of \$30 million when we switched from FLA to WRC put a hurt on our merit raises. You bet I would be fired. But Emma, would your Aggie campus fire you for that? I don’t think so.”

Amandela nods in agreement. “Emma, you know that story is just not good enough. You have to do better than that.”

“Ok, Ok” as I blink and blink, and fidget in my seat, “I have not told you the part of my story, the one that will actually get me fired. I intend to call the student club, the ‘Naked Feet.’”

“So! So what is the big deal about that,” both Amandela and Tzara chime in, in unison.

“I’ll tell you if you put a lid on it. I intend to stop wearing shoes and socks whenever I teach until I am absolutely convinced that the violence is over, women are getting paid a living wage, and they have the right to organize their own unions.”

Amandela inquires, “How is it that not wearing shoes or socks will get you fired?”

“For one thing we have a strict dress code in our college. That will be the real reason my tenure will be revoked and I will be fired. But, the story told will be this, ‘Emma did a strip tease in her MBA class, and on her back was the words WRITING MACHINE, signed by Kafka, and across her naked chest, the words BETTER NAKED THAN ASC.’ That is a performance that will get me

fired. I think I will do it, unless you and Amandela can convince me that I have nothing to be concerned about.”

“Hey, don’t make me responsible for your stupidity. If you want to throw away your career, it is not my business. And I am not going to toss my career to the dead octopi. They will die when they give birth. I plan to live. I will tell you the story that will get me fired at the ASC Corporation. But you must swear a blood oath here and now that we never reveal our stories. I take this knife from the letter of Dean Salinger and cut my middle finger. Now you each do the same.” They join bloody fingers in an act of solidarity, three sisters forming an age old pact.

“OK, that hurt, but not as much as what I will do to you if you tell my secret. I work in the ASC ‘War Room.’...”

I feel a burst of anger and cut off her story, “I am sorry to interrupt but did I cut my finger to hear that? I already know you work in the War Room, and you keep files on me and every other activist and professor who writes disparaging things about ASC. Maybe you are going to tell me that Dean Salinger informed on me, and told you I was coming to Atlixco, and that Tzara is your deep cover agent? But, that would not be news, and would not get you fired. You would get some kind of ASC medal of honor.”

“Emma,” Tzara shouts, “Get off the soap box and stop with the Narrativis Interruptus. You are being rude!”

“Sorry, I did not want to interrupt the flow and coherence of this narrative. Are there still maggots in the food? This cafeteria smells like boiled octopus.”

Amandela takes her cue, “If I may be allowed to continue. The story that will get me fired is quite simple. As I said, I work in the War Room. And I know that you know this. And yes, your ‘Wanted Embarrassed or Alive’ is on the wall. And I have a full time assistant that tracks all the web pages you have on ASC. And by the way we are grateful for one thing. Thanks for starting to track the goings on other sports apparel makers. They are the real hypocrites. Where was I? Right, in the War Room, we do dirty tricks like the Nixon Watergate staff did. We produce disinformation and spy on our critics. We fight to win, Emma. Stop looking at me like that. I will tell you what will get me fired. There are people working in ASC who are attempting to leak the original copies of the PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) audits of this factory to the press. I know who they are, and I am not doing anything about it. That is the story, that if you tell, I will deny, and just the rumor of it could get me fired. Emma, are you really going to teach naked and Tzara, are you really going to tell your story about your university president asking you to write appreciative inquiry stories about ASC?”

“I tell you what,” says Tzara, “if Emma strips nude in front of her MBA students, and actually gets fired, I will walk into my President’s office and tell him to his face, I am going to the press about his interference in academic freedom. But, Amandela, will you do as you say, and allow the PWC audits on this factory, done before the story of maggots and beatings became news --- will you let the audits be public record?”

Amandela licks her throbbing finger, "Blood sisters, I will if you will."

As my flight lands in Albuquerque I'm so tired I wonder if I'll survive the drive down to Las Cruces. And as I am driving towards my town, I reflect on my research project, my university, the world of academia, and my life, and how irony almost never escapes me. Las Cruces is short for 'El Pueblo del Jardin de Las Cruces' (The City of the Garden of Crosses). There are several stories and theories about the town's name. Two of the stories are related to crosses erected at the sites of massacres. Another story says the name is simply derived from the Spanish translation for 'crossroads.' And though language is pretty important in meaning, either bent will work for me. I've just come from an ongoing massacre, and I find myself at a crossroads. How will the workers stories ever get out if my own story doesn't get out? And will I be able tell mine, or will my story, and I, be pushed out and even off of the margins and into oblivion? And what of my pact with Amandela and Tzara? Will Amandela really be able to share the story told by the PWC audit? Will Tzara still fight against infringement on academic freedom when she gets back to her campus? I left Mexico hopeful, but even now, as I head South so do my emotions, and I feel a restrictive tightness in my chest that I thought was reserved for men having heart attacks.

I am only about half-way to Las Cruces when I have to pull over, even though it is early in the evening and I am anxious to get home because I want to erect another cross as a symbol of another massacre. Maybe the town is even waiting for another cross to reconstruct itself. But my tired body won't go on. I pull into Truth Or Consequences, which is about dead in the center of New Mexico, and into a cheap motel. Another interesting town name, changed from Hot Springs to Truth Or Consequences in honor of a damn game show. But they couldn't move the hot springs, and my hotel has a 112 °F mineral bath. I check in, but don't even go to my room, heading straight to the adobe structure that houses the simple spa. The first few snorts of sulfur open my lungs and my throat and my chest relaxes. Since I am the only one there I leave my clothes where they drop and slide into the mineral bath. It engulfs me and my nerves dissolve into the heat. My shoulders drop and my jaw loosens. I had my jaw clinched so tightly that my teeth hurt when my face muscles finally relax.

There is a story, of course, about the history of the hot mineral springs painted on the wall of the little adobe bathhouse. The hot mineral springs were considered "neutral grounds" by the Southwestern Native American Indians long before whites settled the area. The hot baths were believed to have healing powers, and the tribe members considered the area sacred. Members from many different tribes gathered without conflict for peaceful inter-tribal exchange.

I take as deep a breath as I can and sink again into the warmth and wish members of the Academy could be as smart as the Native Americans in the story of the healing mineral baths, we could really use a place like that. And I find I don't want to come up. I don't want to leave this place. I don't want to submit my research to someplace it will be rejected because of how it represents the truth. I don't want the stories of the factory workers to be silenced. I don't want my contribution to be lost. I don't want my story to die. And I can finally empathize with mother octopus. My story is dead. It was dying as I told it. Dying now. My hope, like the octopus, is in knowing I have given birth to new stories, and that those stories will be told and

retold. And so what if I never come up. What if my research never gets accepted? And what of my job, and my career choices in how I choose to contribute and how I seek to build the truth, and the aftermath those choices cause for me? So what if I die here? No matter. I never have been able to make it past Truth Or Consequences.

Epilogue

Calas and Smircich (1999: 664) ask: “Should we not all explicitly recognize the textuality of knowledge making and become more reflective narrators in/of our theoretical stories?” Answering with a resounding “Yes!” we attempted to do this in our story. That is, we assumed that we could make knowledge by writing a text, and now we will be reflective by describing our own and other’s reactions to it and to us as narrators. As a product of our reflexivity, we will provide some possible explanations that emerged from our story writing, along with some suggestions for others wanting to use this methodology. Besides the areas we chose to focus on, we are sure of collectively improvised story construction has implications for a broad array of organizational studies. For instance, Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) link the process of storytelling to entrepreneurship in outlining the critical role stories play in new venture emergence. The process we engaged in here might provide insights into the ways entrepreneurs construct stories of legitimacy to garner venture and institutional capital. Similar contributions might be made to organizational identity (cf. Corley, Harquail, Pratt, Glynn, Fiol, & Hatch, 2006; Whetten, 2006; Weick & Putnam, 2006). Perhaps understanding identity construction as a collective storytelling process that defines a single social actor (‘the’ organization) can resolve some problems the field is grappling with concerning ‘who’ in (and how) a collective determines a distinctive organizational identity and what constitutes ‘shared’ notions of identity.

Let us begin by telling you that we collaborated in writing this epilogue, just as we did in writing the story. We shared our reactions and impressions of the process via email, and have

taken various turns at writing and editing the paper that you are now reading. As with other academic collaborations in which we have each been involved, as time wears on, it becomes difficult to say where one author stops and another begins. However, in this case, the breadth of ideas we embraced is greater than with a traditional manuscript written for academic publication. We felt an urge to be all inclusive as opposed to judgmental and in dealing with ideas or interpretations that diverged from our own made a special effort to take a both/and as opposed to an either/or approach. Our process of discussing and concluding has thereby come to reflect the attitudes and practices we developed as we co-authored the story. Collective narrating led us to produce a more pluralistic framing and concluding process. What you read below is a collection of thoughts about what we learned about our story and our writing method.

Story Construction Process. We found that writing our story in a collective manner locked us into a pattern of forward movement that closed as many avenues as it opened. The many opportunities to take the story in a given direction appeared and disappeared quickly. If you did not jump in to declare your turn, someone else would and then the story was out of your hands until it was put in play again, and literally anything could have happened since the last time you saw it. This made it impossible to second guess your co-authors and created a level of anticipation of the next move that held excitement, possibility or dread. Regardless of the emotions it evoked, each new version inspired a sense of curiosity unmatched by our experiences of other academic writing.

Another observation we can make is that our method forced us to listen, and as we did so, we gained confidence in the process, in spite of the fact that we had no idea where the plot might lead. We had to contend with our high degree of uncertainty. Knowing that the writing method could lead anywhere at all we turned to the joy of the process or simple curiosity to sustain us

during the construction. More than one of us developed an acute sense of responsibility that shifted over time from self to collective, and from the act of writing one's own bit to the story as a whole:

‘At the outset, writing narrative with others caused me first to focus mainly on my own additions to the story, but as we went forward, I began to feel a responsibility for the story itself. When the main story line emerged, I saw that the story needed tension and even resistance. As a result, the story went in a somewhat new direction, with more complexity and more challenge to the reader.’

In addition to learning to trust the process, and shifting our focus from our own contribution to the group product, we also collectively worked our way into our story. We had to come to terms with the process in order to tell a story, but then we had to deal with the story and our relationship to it and its plot and characters. For some reason about which we are still not entirely clear, as soon as we found a setting for our story, this part of the process took hold and lifted our collective storytelling ability and ambition. Was it the concreteness of Mexico that gave us this gift?

Mexico was where our project finally took shape. It acquired scene (context), more characters, a plot, and dialogue, and thus became recognizable as a story. It was also the place where we left our comfortable, yet distancing roles as formal theorists behind. If you compared the post-Mexico portion of our story with the more abstract pre-Mexico one, you might have sensed that you did not have a ‘place’ in the story. Instead, you were forced to sort through categorizations and expositions that were mostly variations on what we have written elsewhere. In this sense, the pre-Mexico writing was merely badly rendered theory.

So how did we manage to shift from a logico-deductive orientation to our project to a narrative one? Part of the answer is that we started to imagine the characters in a lifelike way, that is, we let verisimilitude take over as a means to make sense of what we had written and to

function as joint writers. As our characters began grappling with what they were up to, we had to think more about what they might do and then decide how to render those actions.

Our method also encouraged a shift in meaning making surrounding the text. Barthes (1974) distinguishes 'readerly' interpretations from 'writerly' interpretations, where the reader is no longer a consumer but a producer of the text. Given our construction process, authorial intent became less influential and opens space for the reader to make more writerly interpretations such as musing about where you wished the story would go, or what you would have said or done. Our method dissolved the separation between writer and reader in meaning making, creating a reader inclusiveness that was previously missing – a 'near author' experience.

Another thing we observed was that, like jazz musicians, we began addressing one another through the story, as in the case where Emma says, "I am not sure I like this game..." and "you are being rude." Our basic rules for writing the story precluded discussion of plot, or how the scenes should unfold. If we thought the story should go one way, we wrote it that way. To move the story in any direction, or to signal each other, demanded having our characters speak and act. This set up tensions within the plot and between the characters that created motivation for further plot twists and character development. It also set up tensions between the authors that could only be confronted by the characters. This mixing of authorship and characterization caused us to experience our characters as speaking for themselves and our plot as generating its own twists and turns. This mysterious enlivening of plot and character is often remarked upon by novelists, though it is seldom considered part of good theory. As the result of our collective storytelling project, we now believe there is no reason to exclude the possibility, after all good theories often generate hypotheses.

Emergent Theorizing. As the characters came alive, our mode of theorizing changed; in fact, as one reader remarked, our theories became so wrapped in motive and plot that from a conventional theory-building perspective, they disappeared. We found ourselves unintentionally drifting from normally disembodied theorizing to an embodied form of theory-in-practice in which the bodies in question were those of our characters. Various propositions arose from our increasing identification with these characters, a process which itself became increasingly complex—as individual authors, we may have been developing Emma’s perspective on a given turn, only to find the next person imbuing her with attributes we hadn’t thought of or even disagreed with. Whenever someone introduced a twist of events that completely upended what we thought was happening, we were compelled to reconsider our prior assumptions. In a strange kind of way, we started combining theory building with theory testing, even though the testing was limited to seeing whether a given point had enough attractiveness to inspire the next author to pick up on and extend it.

As our form of theorizing changed, so too did our embedded propositions. Initially, it seems we were saying something like, “Ethnographers need to be wary and suspicious because respondents, especially ones who have something to lose by the study, and *especially* well groomed, corporate ones, will use seemingly friendly but insincere means of engagement—they will spin the truth.” Yet as we fleshed out our story using both ethnographic and corporate points of view, we developed a sympathy for our spin-doctoring antagonist Amandela and her naïve compatriot Tzara, and we were able to make Emma more sympathetic than strident. It seems we were now saying, “Corporate representatives, no matter how well groomed to champion the corporate cause, are nevertheless human, replete with their own doubts, fears, and desires... when we as ethnographers can shift from a distant objective perspective to both an

empathic and self-revealing one, the possibility for greater authenticity and transparency appears.”

We discovered what most fiction writers already know: taking the voice of the Other moves you beyond your initially limited and limiting perspective. Constructing a character is different than simply interviewing and listening to a respondent you don’t like. To turn Emma, Amandela and Tzara into more than straw people who could be conveniently deconstructed, we found ourselves having to justify Amendela’s and Tzara’s actions rather than merely criticizing them, and giving Emma a full heart rather than a bleeding one.

Through our developing the three characters, we rediscovered some old wisdom: in staying to one side of the action while describing it, ethnographers can easily become marginalizers whose stories about others’ experiences replace those others. While this insight is not new—many ethnographers have acknowledged as much—our method of reaching it suggests one way to avoid the marginalizing dynamics of traditional ethnography. Perhaps all students of ethnography should be required to write collective stories to confront their preunderstandings.

We seemed to conclude that it is narratives of disclosure that can make a difference—and not any disclosures, but ones that combine elements of desire and fear. Here, our characters shared their desires to go public with some emancipatory truths, but feared the consequences (hence the title of our article and our story). When one person discusses a personal dilemma concerning the choice between telling the truth or avoiding its consequences (write what you want or keep your job, speak out against your company or perpetuate a machine that’s oppressing women), a certain dynamic emerges, where others may themselves admit to such dilemmas, thereby bringing up bigger truths as they join into the collective enterprise of rendering a single story.

Rethinking Marginalization. From a process perspective, we have begun to re-examine our notions of voicing, deconstruction, hegemony, and marginalization. Postmodernist thinking places an extra burden on authors to reflect on their own biases, but in re-reading our story we found that no one could remember ‘who wrote what’ as individuals. All four of us arrived at this independently, and some of us even argued over who had written various passages. There were also those of us who vehemently denied writing the sections we did. Two of us argued recently, both adamant we had given the main character her name and gender (the main character was unnamed and genderless until well into the story). Another of us sums up our feelings:

‘I have no idea which of the other authors produced which of the other paragraphs you see in this text. I remember at first thinking that I knew who had written what, but then finding that I had been wrong in many cases. Even more surprising this time around is the extent to which I do not recognize my own voice in the assembled text.’

One way to surface hegemony in organizational narratives is by asking who is shaping and influencing the story (Boje, Luhman & Baack, 1999), showing that some are more powerful than others (Boje, 1995, 2001). For instance, critical researchers might demonstrate that management’s voice is silencing the union’s voice in an organizational narrative. The conclusion is that some groups ‘get storied’ rather than being allowed to participate in storying. Our method, which ultimately rendered our authorship anonymous (even to us!), could prove to be a powerful device for changing people’s minds about one another. Imagine a management-union negotiation that included collective storywriting in which the voices were anonymous.

Yet had we not ‘seen’ our voices go in, knowing our rule that the story could only be extended and never edited, each of us could claim that our voice had been marginalized or silenced: “Where’s my stuff?” But given our process, this claim is impossible. This brings us to the uncomfortable realization that if we cannot distinguish our own voices in our own story, how

can we with confidence single out powerful organizational factions that silence other factions in organizational narratives? Are people who believe themselves to be marginalized not really losing their voice after all? Are all the voices there all along, but when they become indistinguishable within the collective tale, the less powerful feel silenced? Do they ask “where’s my stuff” and seem all the more sure of hegemony when management assures them their voices are in the story? Surely this goes too far, but perhaps our experience helps to explain what so many claims of hegemony baffle the powerful. Could collective narrating be a means to equalize voices and expose efforts at manipulation so effectively that participants in collective storytelling projects develop trust for one another?

Far from trying to derail critical postmodernism, we are asking if our experience might offer an alternative explanation for the sense of marginalization that seems paradoxically so central to critical postmodern concerns. By now, deconstructionists might be feeling threatened, while the ‘voiceless’ could be encouraged. We are not claiming that there is anything positive about marginalization, but there may be something revealing about our not being able to distinguish individual voices in collective constructions. One of us could not deny a sense of relief that their voice did not seem to dominate the story, as they suspected was the case during its construction. It was comforting to see that their voice was absorbed into (as opposed to marginalized by) the collectively woven tale (Czarniawska, 1997). Knowing our voices are all strongly present, but are largely indistinguishable, provides assurance that no single voice had undue power in the construction. Knowledge of the context of construction seems warranted, and perhaps we need criteria beyond not being able to find your voice in a narrative to claim hegemony. But note, accepting the rules of engagement is crucial – if a hegemon refuses to play, our method won’t work.

There are other insights related to ‘losing our voices *to* the story.’ If our processes hadn’t been disclosed, then it would be possible to believe that one person wrote the story, especially from the point where we seemed to find a single voice (though not a single perspective). Though this is not a requirement for collective narratives, it does point to a new narrative configuration—stories that can be polysemous but univocal, having one voice but many meanings. Polyvocality has become conflated with polysemy: for many, the presence of multiple voices means numerous meanings are represented. Hansen (2002) notes the implicit goal of polyvocality as a way to attain polysemy (multiple meanings).

‘With reflexivity comes the promise of polyvocality. In effect, we can speak with many voices (Gergen, 1999: 162) as we construct stories, with possibilities of liberation from domination (Habermas, 1984). We must allow for more voices in the stories told, or we risk having the powerless live by someone else’s narrative (Heidegger, 1962) and in someone else’s reality.’

Based on our experience, it seems we need to separate these terms more. Perhaps instead of organizations learning to speak many discourses (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996), they sometimes need to learn to speak in one voice that includes multiple perspectives. Since narrative is a way of knowing that tolerates the existence of paradoxes in the text (Czarniawska, 1997), might our method permit organizations be polysemous but univocal? Our experience suggests it is possible.

Practice Considerations. Reviewer responses and our reflections offer some important observations for doing and presenting fictional and/or improvisational approaches to organizational studies. One is that this kind of work simply takes time and practice, undoubtedly much more than we had here. We played meekly at the beginning, but then eventually let go of our inhibitions as we improvised. Though stories can be enduring, our process was very

delicate. It was in the space of letting go and giving in to the story, not control, that we finally ‘found our riff.’ Improvisation is a messy process, and the warm up period can sound as awful as an orchestra tuning their instruments, but thank goodness they do it. There was a constant tension between coherence and representing the story just as it emerged. Without the ugly warm-ups, we would not have written the more beautiful parts. Although concealing the ugly is tempting, it would also silence some truth about narrative construction. Rewriting would conceal the improvisational aspect of our process, destroying the focus of our inquiry. In this light, even the incoherence offers valuable insight.

In closing, we invite your deconstructions and alternate constructions of our story. We have tried to provide you with the information about our construction processes needed to produce your own collective story. Or maybe you will continue our story, taking up where we have left off. And in telling your stories about organizational life, and creating the stories of your own research lives, we hope you pay no heed to Truth or Consequences.

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Table 1: Intellectual and Aesthetic Theorizing

Intellectual Theorizing

Analytically reduces experience

Invites refutation

Explicit knowledge

Goal is consensus on a particular conclusion

Focus on outcomes

Seeks some closure (“Shuts the case”)

Employs logic

Privileged

Aesthetic Theorizing

Artfully enhances experience

Invites engagement

Tacit knowledge

Aim is to allow many meanings to coexist

Focus on process

Creates openings (“Opens the case”)

Engages senses and feelings

Accessible