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Mainstream representations of trans people typically run the gamut from victim to mentally ill and are almost always articulated by non-trans voices. The era of user-generated digital content and participatory culture has heralded unprecedented opportunities for trans people who wish to speak their own stories in public spaces. Digital Storytelling, as an easy accessible autobiographic audio-visual form, offers scope to play with multi-dimensional and ambiguous representations of identity that contest mainstream assumptions of what it is to be ‘male’ or ‘female’. Also, unlike mainstream media forms, online and viral distribution of Digital Stories offer potential to reach a wide range of audiences, which is appealing to activist oriented storytellers who wish to confront social prejudices. However, with these newfound possibilities come concerns regarding visibility and privacy, especially for storytellers who are all too aware of the risks of being ‘out’ as trans. This paper explores these issues from the perspective of three trans storytellers, with reference to the Digital Stories they have created and shared online and on DVD. These examplars are contextualised with some popular and scholarly perspectives on trans representation, in particular embodied and performed identity. It is contended that trans Digital Stories, while appearing in some ways to be quite conventional, actually challenge common notions of gender identity in ways that are both radical and transformative.

**Keywords:** Digital storytelling, activism, transgender, identity, self-representation

**Trans Digital Storytelling**

While the terms ‘transgender’, ‘transsexual’, ‘cross-dressing’, ‘intersex’ and ‘gender diverse’ are all used in different contexts and by different people to mean slightly different things, I use ‘trans’ as an expression that encapsulates all of these categories; it is also the contraction that was most often used by the storytellers I worked with (which is not to say that all the people that I include under this umbrella would necessarily embrace the term themselves). Transgender theorist Susan Stryker (2006) believes ‘transgender’ is commonly used “as a term that refers to all identities or practices that cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed sex/gender boundaries” (p. 254). Trans Digital Stories are particularly interesting narratives of self because they problematise the categories that attempt to define them.

Digital Storytelling (DST) generally refers to a workshop-based practice in which ordinary people, mostly unskilled in media production, are guided through the process of creating a short (two to three minute) autobiographical video. In this field ‘digital’ frequently refers to the software\(^1\), hardware\(^2\) and digital assets\(^3\) that are utilised in the creation of a story and the online spaces\(^4\) in which stories can be shared. DST initiatives are often hosted by institutions and (from the perspective of both host institution and individual participants) are undertaken for a variety of objectives. These can be divided up into broad categories of purpose including personal empowerment; archiving social history; community development; education and social advocacy (for a global survey of DST programmes with an online presence see McWilliam, 2009). In many regards, Digital Storytelling and YouTube vlogs (video blogs/journals) offer similar opportunities for self-representation. Both allow the ‘average’ user to participate in public spaces as creators of their own self-representative media. There are, however, also many differences between vlogs and DST, and advocates for Digital Storytelling draw attention to the significance of the workshop story circle as a time and space where participants develop affinity with one another and confidence in the telling of their stories. While the stories themselves may eventually circulate in contexts that enhance feelings of social connectedness, it is the Digital Storytelling workshop process that affords a sense of participating collectively and creatively in a cultural space that is greater than the individual.
Importantly, however, while Digital Storytelling has enabled a greater number of formerly excluded individuals to participate in the shaping of culture through their Digital Stories, critics of the claim ‘anyone can do it’ have outlined a number of problems, including uneven access to both information and communication technologies (ICTs) and workshop practice. Problems such as these are further exacerbated in the context of Digital Stories made by trans people whose contestations of simplistic gender binaries is often experienced as a high risk activity. Unlike marginalised groups who are protected by anti-vilification laws, in many countries overt prejudice against gender diverse people is still endorsed by social policy and practices that are discriminatory. As a consequence, trans people have both much to gain and much to lose by using their personal stories to unsettle social values.

Like many Digital Storytellers the people represented in this paper don’t regard themselves as ‘special’ but rather ‘ordinary’; similarly they don’t regard themselves as paint-throwing, capital ‘A’ activists, but rather as more ‘everyday’ activists – people who Mansbridge and Flaster (2007) describe as individuals who “may not interact with the formal world of politics, but they take actions in their own lives to redress injustices...” (p. 630). They are the type of people who, when asked by a child at the checkout ‘Are you a boy or a girl?’ may just, if the mood strikes them, give a complex answer. While many trans people are drawn to modes of social advocacy that find them speaking on educative panels and at community forums, the Digital Story form and online distribution affords extended audience reach and longevity which is very appealing for victims of ‘activist fatigue’. Sharing personal stories in online spaces also addresses the social and geographic isolation experienced by so many trans people. One of the trans storytellers included in this paper, Sean, points out that:

“The trans community is about the same size as the Indigenous community in Australia... around three per cent - however it's so hard to find one another. So many of us are invisible or living stealth... the internet is a really useful tool for facilitating connections... reaching one another though storytelling is essential... it's like we've all been separated from our family at birth. We have to find one another somehow and the only thing, apart from very limited social services, is the internet...”

However, trans storytellers who aspire to ‘normal lives’ in which they ‘pass’ in their gender of belief, are torn between the desire to ‘blend in’ and the desire to see the world become a more hospitable and tolerant place. The cost of increased exposure is reduced privacy – and not just for the storytellers themselves, but also for the friends and family members who may be part of their story or linked to them by association. In creating a Digital Story that is singular, brief and static, trans storytellers need to reconcile many different versions of personal history (versions that are frequently at odds with those held by friends and family members). These renditions attempt congruence with past, present and unknown future articulations of identity and there is invariably much distillation of complexity required to arrive at a three minute ‘summary’. Some stories focus on physical transformation, others explore the reconstruction of friends and family networks post transition. Some storytellers utilise before and after snapshots; others use metaphor and illustrations as a means of both performing identity and maintaining anonymity. While identity-construction narratives are not unique to trans Digital Storytellers, traversing the boundaries of gender binaries inevitably focuses attention on changes in appearance and self-definition; shifts that are certainly more socially maligned than, for example, the changes we all undergo in the transformation from child to teenager to adult. Deciding which part of a whole life story to tell (and how) is part of the creative process for every Digital Storyteller, but for many trans storytellers these decisions have to be weighed alongside choices about personal risk over safety and exposure over anonymity.

However, unlike more spontaneous storytelling forms, the highly constructed Digital Story affords control over both the story creation process and the manner in which identity and experience is articulated; in voiceover narration; in choice of soundtrack; and in visual representations, ranging from family photos to artwork and visual effects. In the case studies I refer to sharing personal (and often vulnerable) stories in a workshop context was generally regarded as empowering. This empowerment was later amplified by sharing these stories on cinema screens and online and most
storytellers were affirmed by positive feedback from audiences. At the theatrical launch one storyteller, Sean, was delighted to observe that, not only did his family get to ‘see other identity stuff’ but they ‘got to meet the parents of a very young trans person and (see) how different it is now for parents...’ Sean saw the whole experience as one of give and take in which ‘...hearing other people’s stories and how they develop their identities and what shapes their identities, and then how they interpret different labels and all that sort of thing... it helps you to understand your identity better as well...’.

Trans storytellers offer nuanced personal insights into gender identity construction, thereby expanding both popular and scholarly understanding, yet these contributions are disputed by individuals and institutions that many trans people refer to as ‘the gender police’. As such, and as David Valentine (2007) argues, transgender, “rather than being an index of marginality... is in fact a central cultural site where meanings about gender and sexuality are being worked out” (p. 14). The three stories that I discuss below, then, serve to highlight both the radical potential inherent in trans Digital Stories, but also the regulatory regimes that they render visible. Before examining these stories, however, I first consider some key points in relation to trans representation.

The Contested Landscape of Trans-Identity

While examples of transphobia, violence and discrimination are not hard to find in the mainstream media and are represented with varying degrees of accuracy in films like 'Boys Don't Cry' (Hart, Kolodner, Sharp, Vachon, Peirce & Bienen, 1999), it is difficult to comprehend how profoundly bigotry and ignorance flows across all sectors of society including queer communities and scholarly environs.

Susan Stryker (2006), in a well known piece on ‘Performing Transgender Rage’ describes, and attempts to understand, hostility from within the gay and lesbian community:

“The attribution of monstrosity remains a palpable characteristic of most lesbian and gay representations of transsexuality, displaying in unnerving detail the anxious, fearful underside of the current cultural fascination with transgenderism. Because transsexuality more than any other transgender practice or identity represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of personal identity depends, people who have invested their aspirations for social justice in identitarian movements say things about us out of sheer panic that, if said of other minorities, would see print only in the most hate-riddled, white supremacist, Christian fascist rags” (p. 245).

Much of the literature in the field of trans scholarship centers on the degree to which transgenderism or transsexuality is deemed to reinforce binary and/or stereotypical understandings of gender. In an effort to avoid accusations of essentialism, many feminist authors focus upon the constructed or performed qualities of gender while critiquing the medicalisation of embodied gender. Some of this work, while intending to complicate readings of gender identity, uses emotive language that is hostile to transpeople.

“Janice Raymond’s ‘The Transsexual Empire’ is perhaps the best-known example of the trans-bashing that has taken place in feminist literature. Raymond’s book, published in 1979, likened male-to-female sex change to rape, claiming that it was yet another appropriation by men of women’s bodies and women’s spaces” (Love, 2004, p. 93).

Of course while not all feminist accounts of gender are critical of trans-identities, it can be argued that the epistemological investigation of gender abstracts lived experience to the extent that many gender diverse people are alienated from the very identity categories that are intended to describe them. In writing an ethnographic account of divergent gender diverse communities in New York,
David Valentine (2007) notes "I was struck by the observation that a large number of the people I met and talked to did not know the term ‘transgender’ or were resistant to its use to describe them (p. 21)."

Butler (2006), while often accused of theoretical and linguistic abstraction (Benhabib, Butler, Cornell & Fraser, 1995; Speer & Potter, 2002; Bordo, 1993), offers an interesting analysis of how essentialist perspectives on gender may be deeply internalised and reconstituted in a performance of trans-identity.

"...it is for the most part the gender essentialist position that must be voiced for transsexual surgery to take place, and... someone who comes in with a sense of gender as changeable will have a more difficult time convincing psychiatrists and doctors to perform the surgery. In San Francisco female-to-male candidates actually practice the narrative of gender essentialism that they are required to perform before they go in to see the doctors..." (p. 191).

She uses the famous case of David Reimer, a male embodied child born with XY chromosomes who, damaged by circumcision at eight months old, was raised as a girl under the supervision of psychologist John Money. As a twin, Joan/John (the pseudonym by which David was known for many years) was an ideal test case for Money’s theories on the development of gender identity through social learning. Despite Money’s accounts of the success of the case, John/Joan experienced ongoing difficulties with gender identity and depression and at 14 he decided to assume a male identity, calling himself David. Using excerpts from interviews with David (John) conducted by Milton Diamond (an endocrinologist who supported Reimer in undertaking his second gender transition), Butler (2006) argues that our story of self is heavily mediated by social context and gender stereotypes.

"What was the problem with Joan, that people were always asking to see her naked, asking her questions about what she was, how she felt, whether this was or was not the same as what was normatively true? Is that self-seeing distinct from the way s/he is seen? John seems to understand clearly that the norms are external to him, but what if the norms have become the means by which he sees, the frame for his own seeing, his way of seeing himself?” (p. 190).

Far from providing evidence for either the ‘nature’ or nurture’ camps, Butler (2006) uses the case to illustrate how surveillance and comparison with gender ‘norms’ may contribute to, but by no means delineate, the complex internal amalgamation of genetics, hormones and social contexts that she believes are synthesized in performing identity. Unfortunately Reimer’s journey, like that of too many trans people ended tragically in 2004 with his suicide.4

While Butler (2006) focuses on gender and identity as a performance, Giddens (1991) holds that:

"The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual ‘supplies’ about herself. A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self” (p. 54).

Clearly narratives of self are not only shaped for personal consumption but for those people surrounding us; audiences composed of both intimate and unknown publics. What ramifications do these various theories of identity have for trans individuals with biographies that, while not fictive, may nevertheless alter dramatically over the course of several years? In an environment where everyone from celebrities to politicians to facebook users are frequently maligned for presenting
inconsistent opinions, beliefs or articulations of self, how do trans individuals fare? Perhaps trans identity highlights the instability and inconsistency of all identity? Roz Kaveney (1999) puts it like this:

"...we are prone to vary across time. Often, to describe oneself is simply to describe a particular moment, to say who we were in a particular year. It is a matter of prudence not to burn bridges that we may, as individuals, find ourselves in need of sooner or later“ (p. 149).

Does this cautionary prudence, in acknowledging different incarnations of self across time, influence what a trans storyteller may include or exclude from their story? Green (2006) develops this issue of fluid unfolding identity, highlighting the fact that actually owning or declaring a trans-identity (especially in a public space as an activist) is at odds with the normative goals of medical and psychological treatment for transsexual people:

"We are supposed to pretend we never spent 15, 20, 30, 40 or more years in female bodies, pretend that the vestigial female parts some of us never lose were never there. In short, in order to be a good - or successful - transsexual person, one is not supposed to be a transsexual person at all. This puts a massive burden of secrecy on the transsexual individual: the most intimate and human aspects of our lives are constantly at risk of disclosure“ (p. 501).

Green (2006) argues that, in order to confront bigotry and social ignorance around gender diversity, it is desirable for trans individuals to be visible and to publicly declare their history, despite the significant personal risks this entails. While both Green (2006) and Kaveney (1999) accept that these risks are likely to cause some trans people to choose 'stealth' (living exclusively in one's gender of belief, negating trans identity), they both emphasise the positive consequences of 'being out':

"...the campaign for personal invisibility has always struck me as entirely perverse and self-hating... It is less important to pass than to be accepted. If being transgendered is valued as a human variation, then many problems disappear. And it is more likely to be valued if we value it ourselves - being out and proud and prepared to defend ourselves is probably less risky than being in the closet, ashamed of our pasts and relying on a piece of paper“ (Green, 2006, p. 149).

So far these discussions of fluid, evolving identity have focussed upon what Kaveney (1999) calls 'conversion narratives', where transition occurs from one clearly defined gender category to the other and, having arrived at the destination, stays fixed: "I once was lost, who now am found/Was bound, who now am free (Kaveney, 1999, p. 149). Here Kaveney (1999) utilises a lyric from the hymn 'Amazing Grace', which of course emphasises not just transition from one state to another but cathartic and conclusive religious redemption achieved in the process. What prospects are there for those whose 'biographies of self' continue to evolve? Are they forever prone to accusations of inconsistency or disparaging comments along the lines of 'I guess it was just a phase you were going through?’ In an essay published online, FTM Max Wolf Valerio (2003) writes:

"I celebrate the human capacity and right to change, rediscover, reinvent and continuously experience revelation; to re-evaluate and to renounce any aspect of myself that is no longer authentic; to live beyond my own fears and preconceived notions as well as those of the people around me. Without a doubt, anything can be revealed at any moment. Without a doubt, anything usually is . . . I claim the right to change my mind.”

Valerio (2003) suggests, like Giddens (1991), that one's biography should be under constant review, but is unconcerned that radical alterations that repeatedly traverse gender categories may leave him prone to personal criticism. In fact he accepts that his identity journey may be difficult to understand,
but nevertheless proclaims a moral obligation to live authentically in the moment. In her review of recent writing on trans-identities, Love (2004) speculates:

"...in part it is because of the visibility and the supposed immutability of gender that such changes encounter such widespread resistance. Valerio claims the right to change – to change oneself materially and with finality – and then to change again beyond that very finality. While such subjective flux tends to be stigmatized in transsexuals as either mental illness or lack of political commitment, Valerio presents it as a crucial aspect of human subjectivity" (p. 99).

It is also worth noting that embracing a right to rediscover and reinvent articulations of self may also include embracing identities that defy categorisation. In this regard, ‘genderqueer’ is a term gaining in popularity as a catch-all descriptor of gender identities that fall outside the binary categories of male or female, and is often claimed by individuals who are androgynous in appearance and diverse in their sexual identity. Driver (2007) reflects upon her research into an online "birl" community (boyish girls or girls who identify as boys).

"...the community provides a collective place to dialogue publicly about identity, to share with others alternative ways of inhabiting in-between genders. A youth introduces himself in the following ways: “I am a boyish girl (and a girlish boy) because I fluctuate between feminine and masculine... I love to wear skirts, but I also love to bind, pack and wear ties. I am comfortable being called she most of the time, but other times I prefer he.” Gender ambiguity becomes a source of pleasure and bonding between these youth... At times, the very concept of gender is up for grabs, boldly theorized by youth beyond heterogendered frameworks” (p. 188).

Given their capacity to describe themselves on their own terms in a text based space, one can only speculate what impact these "birls" might have if they were to share their unapologetic stories and self-representations in multi-media Digital Story form with a wider community.

**Overview of the Rainbow Family Tree Project**

During 2009, a series of Digital Storytelling workshops were auspiced by SHine SA (an SA based government funded sexual health education and information network). As principal facilitator I acknowledged my multiple roles as Queer Digital Storyteller, filmmaker and researcher. Some of the workshops took place face to face and others were facilitated almost entirely online. The initiative was known as ‘the Rainbow Family Tree’ project and had several stated objectives, being GLBTQIS’ community engagement and production of an educational resource. Participants were recruited via info posters placed in social service agencies and distributed via e:lists and in some cases through word of mouth. They were aware that their finished Digital Stories would be launched at a theatrical screening, appear online and be a part of a DVD compilation (to be packaged with a facilitators guide as an ‘anti-homophobia’ resource, distributed by SHine SA). Issues of privacy and publicity were discussed with all participants and, in fact, many were keen to engage in the initiative out of a desire to ‘get our stories out there’. There was a general perception and underpinning assumption that sharing personal insights and anecdotes is an effective means of raising awareness of diverse sexual and gender identities and confronting social prejudices. Sarah and Karen were involved in the face to face workshop (but had met prior) and Sean followed in the online workshop. I give a thumbnail description (approved by each storyteller) as a means of briefly outlining their motivations, aspirations and challenges in creating and sharing their Digital Stories.

Sean is a 29 year old female to male (F2M) individual who has been living full time in his gender of belief for several years. He has an Honours Degree in Social Work and his thesis canvassed a wide
range of perspectives on gender transition. He currently works as a Community Rehabilitation worker in the mental health field and has taken a lead advocacy role in educating both his fellow workers and employers about trans issues. He generally refers to himself as a trans-man with pansexual preferences and notes that he modifies these self-descriptors according to who he is speaking to. He believes many of his clients assume he is a gay man. His Digital Story is a short journey through his happy childhood and tumultuous teenage years followed by learning about transgenderism and deciding to ‘become male’ (Sean’s words). His focus is positive and self-accepting and acknowledges the significance of the two families (“my trans brothers and sisters” and “my family who raised me”) who love and support him.

Sarah is an older transsexual woman (male to female or M2F) who is currently undertaking a higher research degree. She had an unhappy childhood in England, much of it spent in abusive foster homes or state institutions, and left the UK when she was 21. She has adult children, one of whom she is reconciled with after initially having lost contact at the time of transitioning. She is a leader and vocal advocate for the South Australian Transsexual Support Group (SATS) and, while she often speaks at community events, she regards herself as an intensely private ‘almost reclusive’ person. Her story is illustrated with her own drawings of a caterpillar’s transformation into a butterfly and her narration is poetic and allusive, accompanied by reflective cello music.

Karen is a transgender woman (M2F) who made her story in the early days of her transition. She has worked for many years as an administrative officer in a Women’s Health Service. Her story starts with her childhood in a ‘typically conservative and idyllic’ family in England and travels through her realisation that she wanted to be like her sister: ‘a little girl’. Years later, having decided to acknowledge her inner truth, Karen describes the acceptance she unexpectedly received from her sister. She focusses on this positive relationship and the hope that it inspires, while grieving the loss of relationships with her partner, children and parents.

While the storytellers in this paper have much in common, the ways in which they have manipulated the multimedia tropes of Digital Storytelling are divergent and complicated. While all three were familiar and relatively comfortable with sharing their personal stories as a mode of social advocacy they all considered that their engagement with the Rainbow Family Tree project would probably take them out of their comfort zones. None of them regarded themselves as especially tech savvy and they all had trepidations about their capacity to master the editing software as well as engage in the online community. The desire to ‘conquer the technology’ actually proved to be a useful focus by diverting anxiety away from more creative storytelling concerns. There was also an accompanying emotional roller coaster as they each braved many levels of anxieties; first, sharing their stories in a small group workshop (both face to face and the online equivalent); frequently confronting well buried memories; then consulting with friends and family members as to whether they were happy to be included in their stories.

Analysis of Trans Digital Stories

In ‘Back to Happiness’, the narrator – Sean – describes a ‘happy, adventurous and confident childhood’; racing matchbox cars, dressing as a superhero, climbing trees and riding a BMX bike. The accompanying photos show what appears to be a cheeky blonde boy. The next part of the story reveals the impact of social and media messages about ‘how to be a girl... not a boy’ and the onset of female hormones, accompanied by images of a shy/sullen teenage girl. The narrator states: “I rarely wore dresses because they made me feel like I was in drag”, and “I lived with anxiety and depression for nearly two decades”. A change in background music and visual style heralds the next phase in the narrator’s existence, including online research and meeting “my first transgendered person”. He states: “I realised I was the cliché of being male trapped inside a female body... but at last I found how I could finally become happy again. I decided to transition to become male”. The rest of the story summarises the experience of ‘becoming male’ in a few short sentences and skips over the accompanying tumultuous social changes with the gloriously understated, “after a period of adjustment my family and friends were very supportive too”. The narrator speaks positively about having two families who can now see the “confident and happy person I am once more”. He includes
photographs of a birthday celebrated with a little niece and nephew alongside photos of friends in the trans community resplendent in black ties and frocks.

The positive self-acceptance that emanates from Sean’s digital story is reflected in an interview in which he describes the process of making it. His father did not wish to be identifiable in the story and Sean debated whether or not to blur his image in a family snapshot he wished to use.

“That seemed to imply shame and I didn't think Dad was ashamed, more that he was simply paranoid about the internet... and at the end of the day he has the right to have control over how and where he is represented just as I do...”

Sean's empowered choice in representing his families as he sees them (loving and diverse) while simultaneously respecting their right of self-representation demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of both identity and community. It seems unlikely that an outsider 'looking in' could create this kind of nuanced and ethical story and for this reason alone it is a radical example of trans storytelling.

'I am Sarah' is told almost entirely with hand drawn images of a slightly cartoonish pair of caterpillars, one brown and plain, the other attractive and with long eyelashes. The narration starts with, “I was different; not how other people wanted me to be... my body alien to my inner self”, and becomes increasingly poetic and slightly abstract. As the caterpillars become chrysalises we hear “fear cannot deny truth any longer, nor hold sway... all that was wrong has finally become right”. Finally we see first one beautiful butterfly, then a flock, accompanied by, “Into such a diverse world I am not unique... different perhaps, depending upon your perspective... but I know who I am”.

Much of Sarah’s story comments implicitly on gender norms as measured by physical representations of beauty. However by using symbolic images of caterpillars and butterflies she both maintains her privacy (through not using before and after shots or images that might identify place, family or friends) and avoids affirming the very gender stereotypes she wishes to deconstruct. Sarah describes herself as a private person and in a perfect world she would choose to 'blend in'. She also recognises this impulse in other M2F friends.

“The majority of girls that I see, while they may not be as reclusive... as socially isolated as me, by choice, um... they tend to want to be invisible. Now, as I am, I can't be invisible, unfortunately. Not without, um [makes noise], a road closure, or a scaffold, and a building team, reconstruction papers, and certificates, whatever. I joke about it.”

Towards the end of the story Sarah breaks with the visual style she has established by showing herself in a head and shoulders photograph, dressed and beautifully made up, half smiling against a neutral background. The narration states: “I am Sarah, not part of a clique”. Sarah reflects upon the inclusion of this photograph:

"I changed my mind on that about 10 times I think... 'cause I'm not photogenic. I never have been. The camera does not like me. I always look about 500 years older...

The idea was to get people to see that I'm not comfortable with being upfront and in your face, and exploring my entire life history in open, you know? But what putting that photo at the end does, is it shows that people can get past that. And I hope that with people who want to transition, or people who are in transition and struggling, I'm hoping that that final frame takes them by surprise, and they go, 'Oh, that's what you look like!' That final image just validates the message, and says, 'Look, here I am. Um, I'd rather not be here. But here I am. So if I can do it, why can't you?”
Sarah’s decision to maintain a sense of privacy through poetic abstraction while taking a stand in support of other trans people treads a fine line typical of the everyday activist. She has a similarly courageous attitude when it comes to sharing her story with audiences.

“I’d rather walk into a room full of hostiles than walk into a room where everybody’s on side. To me, that’s no value, you know? What’s the point of talking to people that have some understanding, when you should be talking to people that have got no bloody understanding, could be totally intolerant? ... yet you can walk out of there knowing that you’ve got a couple of them thinking.”

‘Sisterhood: a path less travelled (a tribute)’ follows one of the shared generic tropes of both Digital Storytelling and many trans narratives by ‘starting at the beginning’ with photographs and a description of childhood. The storyteller – Karen – describes an early realisation, at age seven, that she was jealous of her sister because, “I wanted to be a little girl... just like my sister...” Grainy black and white photographs chart the sister’s development into a beautiful young woman and the narrator’s parallel journey into masculinity, marriage and fatherhood, described as “to play a role and hide my truth, both for my safety and their ease, seemed easier... This strategy clearly didn’t work... constantly flowing beneath the surface was a stream of unhappiness, confusion, silent yearning, pain, suffering and unfulfillment ...” In a later passage, precisely composed and narrated with great calm and control: “When my uninvited dilemma became too powerful and I felt like I was dying inside... I had to speak out loud... Those nearest and dearest to me couldn’t cope... I lost them all... all, that is, except my sister”. The image of a family gathered together on the lounge for a family portrait (several faces obscured by blurring) becomes high contrast black and white then shatters into many tiny squares.

Karen struggled with finding a creative way to represent her current relationship with her sister. She had very few photographs of them together, and we talked about trying to reenact and photograph some ritual that they shared. Something ‘female’? Something ‘sisterly’? She decided on a series of photographs (taken in a bathroom by an invisible third party) of she and her sister putting on make-up together; a ritual of ‘feminisation’ that Karen had watched and envied many times as she grew up. In this way Karen constructed and performed a present embodied self and placed clear parameters around the aspects of the relationship that she wished to represent. ‘Sisterhood’ is essentially a story of acceptance set against the concomitant and understated theme of rejection. While it was made with the desire to communicate to a wide audience it addresses one person specifically - her sister.

There is a postscript to ‘Sisterhood’ that illuminates the problematic issue of fluid, evolving identity and the difficulty of foreshadowing further change in a permanent digital document. In an interview with Karen over a year after the making of ‘Sisterhood’, she revealed that “Karen’s days are numbered”. For a number of complex reasons, Karen has decided to ‘revert’ to her male identity. While much of the language used in describing this journey was oriented around ‘success’ and ‘failure’, Karen was also keen to state that this new incarnation of identity would reflect aspects of all previous selves.

“I believe that it’s a little bit like a history record... history comes from the perspective of the writer... you ask different people about that history and they’ll see that history differently but it was true to the writer of that history... Also, you know that story didn’t finish at that point, in fact that was the beginning of a journey in many ways... the journey has taken another direction that was perhaps unexpected? But I guess the potential, the awareness... you could say had always been there because that’s what the journey is about... it's about discovery...”

Karen’s Digital Story was unique and compelling in its original context; however the postscript, far from undermining the original, brings new insight into the transient nature of identity and the unexpected paths that all our lives take. Karen also highlights the arbitrary nature of choosing any one point as the beginning, middle or end of a Digital Story. While at the time of interview she felt
that she “couldn’t see the wood for the trees”, she thought it possible that at some point in the future she might undertake an update to her story, perhaps in the form of a new Digital Story or as an online post/blog entry. This capacity to update or modify the context of a Digital Story goes some way towards addressing the problem of its immutable form. However it is the underpinning acknowledgment of fluid and amorphous identity that is celebrated by these storytellers and trans activists like Green (2006), Kaveney (1999) and Valerio (2003), that is perhaps most challenging for mainstream audiences.

**Digital Stories: Embodied, Constructed, Distributed**

Trans storytellers articulate their journeys in many different ways. Theories on gender identity are similarly divergent, ranging from social constructionist perspectives that focus on performances of gender through to genetic/biological origins, essentialist debates and arguments about embodiment. While Digital Stories are authentic first person accounts, they are nevertheless highly constructed and mediated by social context (including the circumstances of the workshop in which they are created). The choice of images, music and particular words reflect a conscious construction of identity just as the intonation of narration reflects a performance of self. However, unlike the written word, photographs represent identity *incarnate*, hence in some ways these stories are both embodied and performed. As contrived digital documents they provide opportunity to reflect upon and control self-representation in a way that is difficult when just ‘being myself in the moment’ (a process that further distinguishes them from the typical verbatim YouTube vlog). Influencing distribution by limiting screenings to a handful of friends or by strategically targeting audiences, both intimate and unknown, affords storytellers additional control over how they share their identities. It is my contention that Digital Storytelling, as an accessible audio/visual multimedia form that easily populates online spaces, offers profound and far-reaching potential for trans storytellers as everyday activists.

**Conclusion**

The city in which these stories were created, Adelaide, feels like a small country town for many trans people. There are limited medical and psychological services dealing with gender identity issues. Trans support and social groups are few and often combine people from very different backgrounds and with very different ideas about what it means to be ‘trans’. Each of the trans storytellers in the Rainbow Family Tree case study has made a series of tough decisions, first in deciding to transition and second in making a Digital Story as an ‘out’ trans person. Sean argues that developing a thick skin is crucial.

“...from the very beginning of my transition I’d decided that I was no longer going to care what people think about me... If I continued to care about what people thought of me, including my family, I would have just gone crazy because there’s so many different perspectives about gender transition... I just dealt with my parents’ reaction as though, you know, they’d get it eventually, and I didn't take anything they said to heart... and that was the key really.”

Perhaps ‘not caring what people think’ affords trans storytellers the tenacity to live and speak as exemplars of everyday activism? Rendering a slice of life in permanent Digital Story form, then distributing it widely, while no doubt upping the stakes, nevertheless evokes the same conflict between privacy and publicity that is wrangled on a daily basis.

While Digital Storytelling affords greater autonomy in constructing and distributing stories of self, than comparable well-meaning documentaries created about self, they are nevertheless representations of identity that are mediated by social circumstances. This does not negate their authenticity; neither does an acknowledgment that our current performed and embodied selves are influenced by parenting and a myriad of social institutions (schools, hospitals, courts) alongside genetic factors. Trans Digital Stories are radical offerings in part because they report the existence of
these multitudinous influences and, despite this, claim a space to describe personal and heartfelt truths. Additionally, far from voicing the marginalised concerns of ‘other’, they offer everyone, regardless of their gender identity, an opportunity to better understand the nuances of human existence and the inspirational potential of living beyond gender stereotypes.

**Author Note**

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**References**


