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Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling

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Everyday or amateur cultural and media production has long been a site of both optimism and contestation for cultural studies, but there is now more justification than ever to focus on it. On the one hand, the figure of the 'creative consumer' is seen as both a key to the new economy and a major potential disruption to the dominance of commercial media (Lessig, 2004). On the other, the notion of a 'digital divide' based on hard access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) has shifted to concerns around social inclusion and the unevenness of access to 'voice' in the global mediascape (Warschauer, 2003). Indeed, Sonia Livingstone has recently argued that attention to content creation as a key area of literacy is 'crucial to the democratic agenda', positioning new media users 'not merely as consumers but also as citizens' (2004, p. 11). In this article, I argue that recent developments in the uses of new media have ethical and methodological implications for cultural studies, highlighting some of the discipline's persistent and unresolved tensions around popular culture, cultural agency and cultural value. I then use the example of digital storytelling to speculate about the democratic potential of a participatory cultural studies approach to what I call 'vernacular creativity'.

Cultural Studies and Participatory Media

There has been a rapid increase of late in interest around consumer participation in media culture. Driven to a great extent by the growing visibility of weblogs (or 'blogs'), and by the agendas of bloggers themselves, in recent years there has been a clearly discernible thread of hyperbole, or, as Woolgar (2002) would have it, 'cyberbole' around the growing accessibility and power of digital technologies, combined with their availability and potential for use by 'ordinary' people for radical or democratic ends (for an influential example see especially Rheingold, 2003). A sub-genre of this discourse concerns the accessibility of tools for content production and distribution by non-professionals, and the likely impact on the dominance of culture by the mass media. Arguments have appeared that in one way or another suggest that the increased availability and power of digital technologies, combined with the Internet, allow 'everyone' to be a media participant, if not producer, and that this is in fact happening (see for example Bowman & Willis, 2003).¹ Most frequently, the democratisation of technologies discourse concerns the impact of blogging on journalism and knowledge production (see for example Bruns, 2005).

However, the democratisation of technologies discourse from the 'grassroots' converges persistently with emerging neoliberal business and economic models under which consumers (or 'users'), particularly of technology, are considered to possess and exercise more creativity and agency than before, combined with a surge in both the participation in and power of voluntary work and 'productive' leisure. Leadbeater and Miller view the current surge in non-professional creativity as a 'new ethic of amateurism' that 'could be one of the defining features of developed society' (2004, p. 22). In a much more general sense, Richard Florida (2002) argues that more-or-less ubiquitous creativity (ubiquitous, that is, to the 'developed' world) is central to the present and near future of labour and cultural citizenship.

Cultural studies is ideally placed to intervene in the debates around the 'democratisation' of technologies; in fact, as Morris and Frow argue, if nothing else, cultural studies has been 'shaped as a response to the *social uptake* of communications technologies in the second half of the 20th century' (and now, the 21st) and that it is 'deeply concerned with the transformations wrought by this uptake' (2000, p. 321). But faced with the full array of 'user-led' cultural production linked with the use of new technologies, where and how should we direct our critical attention?

It is often repeated that (British) cultural studies was shaped around a concern with both understanding and dignifying 'ordinary' people's lived experiences and cultural practices, and that mass-mediated popular culture was seen as a site of negotiation and political potential. This perspective on the relationship between mass-mediated culture and the agency of its consumers is particularly marked in work that can be placed within the 'active audience' tradition and has been reflected in a particular interest in fans as visible proof of such activity. But fandom has been constructed by cultural studies as a somewhat *extraordinary* mode of engagement with the products of the mass media (see, for example, Grossberg, 1992). In the earlier work of Henry Jenkins (1992), the most distinctive qualities of fandom were not its objects of choice but its psychological intensity and textual productivity, as against the more casual and passive forms of consumption associated with the *ordinary* media audience.

Textual productivity is not so extraordinary these days, as Chris Atton shows in his discussion of mundane personal webpages as alternative media, foreshadowing the cultural impact of personal weblogs (2001). John Hartley argues that, just as economic value has, in the new economy, drifted along the 'value chain' from the producer to the consumer, so too has the source of cultural value (that is, the source of judgements about and interpretation of cultural forms) shifted from cultural elites (critics, academics, and producers) to cultural consumers (audiences, readers, and fans). He further argues that received assumptions about how 'production' and 'consumption' work are of little use in understanding this shift (2004). Likewise, Jenkins' more recent work on 'participatory media' exposes fan and game cultures as neither entirely autonomous of the mass media and cultural industries, nor passively dependent on or absorbed into them (2003). Rather, these fields of cultural practice reconfigure the relations between production and consumption, industries and audiences. For one thing, the cultural products and logics of fandom are being fed back into their source media, as is the case with *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and *Harry Potter* (Shefrin, 2004; Murray, 2004). In game environments particularly, terms like 'co-creators' and 'productive players' are increasingly gaining purchase as replacements for 'consumers', 'players', or even 'participants' (Banks, 2002; Humphreys, 2005). In these areas of new media, the 'active audience' is now both a fact and a commercial imperative (see, for example, Herz, 2002). It no longer requires complex theoretical discussions of semiotic openness to be able to consider the 'texts' of new media to be emergent and always in the process of being 'made'. Without reinstating old binary oppositions between active producers and passive consumers, we now must understand cultural *production* to be part of everyday life in a much more literal sense.²

Clearly, something more than the celebration of creativity *as* agency is required. A powerful illustration of the limits of such celebration from first- and second-

generation Internet studies is the camgirls phenomenon. See for example Graeme Turner's (2004) discussion of DIY celebrity, where he argues – partly in response to John Hartley (1999) – that the increased representation of ordinary people as potential or temporary celebrities in the mass media represents, not the 'democratisation', but the 'demoticisation' of the media. Even when ordinary people become celebrities through their own creative efforts as in the case of the Cam Girl phenomenon, there is no necessary transfer of media power, because they remain within the system of celebrity that is native to and controlled by the mass media, if not within the mass media itself. The mere fact of productivity *in itself* is not sufficient grounds for celebration. The question that we ask about 'democratic' media participation can no longer be limited to 'who gets to speak?'. We must also ask 'who is heard, and to what end?'

Cultural studies, somewhat notoriously, has also sought 'bottom-up' agency in the most apparently mundane practices of everyday life – from shopping and cooking to the consumption of popular music and television (see De Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989b). The reinvestment in 'everyday' creativity (or, the creativity of everyday life) as a slanted critique of modernity is expressed most clearly in the following passage from De Certeau's work *Culture in the Plural*, which predates *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

Every culture proliferates along its margins. Irruptions take place that are called 'creations' in relation to stagnancies. Bubbling out of swamps and bogs, a thousand flashes at once scintillate and are extinguished all over the surface of a society. In the official imaginary, they are noted only as exceptions or marginal events. An ideology of property isolates the 'author,' the 'creator,' and the 'work'. In reality, creation is a disseminated proliferation. It swarms and throbs. A polymorphous carnival infiltrates everywhere, a celebration both in the streets and in the homes for those who are unblinded by the aristocratic and museological model of durable production...housing, clothing, housework, cooking, and an infinite number of rural, urban, family, or amical activities...are also the ground on which creation everywhere blossoms. Daily life is scattered with marvels, a froth on the long rhythms of language and history that is as dazzling as that of writers and artists. (1997, pp. 139-142)

But, quite apart from the extant criticisms of this celebratory rhetoric (see, for example, Miller & McHoul, 1998) the separation of everyday life from the systems of cultural production that is a precondition of De Certeau's perspective is not at all straightforward in contemporary contexts, for two reasons. First, the everyday is now ubiquitously part of the production logics of the 'creative industries', as in what Frances Bonner (2003) calls 'ordinary television'. Second, as discussed above, cultural production (that is, the creation and dissemination of cultural artefacts) is now increasingly part of the logics of everyday life, as in blogging or photosharing. In this context, the rather bleak reactive futility of De Certeau's (1984) 'tactics' of 'making do' may be transformed in the cultural studies imagination into something different and more positive. In place of resistance, there is at least the potential, whether realised or not, for cultural participation and self-representation.

There is a third tendency: the articulation, following the lead of Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, of avant-garde aesthetics with progressive politics (see Kellner, 1997). This is the 'radical subversion' position, which McGuigan calls the 'direct obverse of uncritical populism' (2005, p. 438). But, as McGuigan implies, the

conflation of 'progressive' aesthetics with notions of resistance to the alienating and deadening effects of passive consumerism is both elitist and, as polemicists like Thomas Frank (1998) argue, now the stuff of consumerism itself.

Without ever leaving 'traditional' cultural studies territory, it would be all too easy to pick out 'amateur' or everyday uses of technology that are at once mundane and seductively 'cool', and proceed to an analysis of the resistive qualities of these practices without being troubled by their proximity to contemporary advertising and commercial media culture. For example, the 'lomography' movement of the 1990s (whose members celebrate cheap plastic Russian cameras like the Lomo from which the name comes) has developed its own aesthetic, one which appears to resist conformity and artistic authority and allow the free play of creativity for ordinary people. The lomography.com website has built a business out of the movement, offering participation in a community of lomography enthusiasts, with cameras and merchandise for sale. From their website (www.lomography.com) come these '10 Golden Rules of Lomography':

1. take your camera everywhere you go
2. use it any time - day and night
3. lomography is not an interference in your life, but a part of it
4. try the shot from the hip
5. approach the objects of your lomographic desire as close as possible
6. don't think
7. be fast
8. you don't have to know beforehand what you capture on film
9. afterwards either
10. don't worry about the rules

Lomography represents itself as a democratic form of photography, and these 'anti-rules' are clearly intended to offer resistance to the ways in which the rules of 'professional photography' repress 'ordinary' creativity and continually redraw the boundaries between amateur and professional. But these are no 'ordinary' snapshots – there are few kittens, baby photos, or family groups here; what we get instead are cool images of retro bathrooms imbued with greenish light, rows of subway seats, skewed statues, and reflections on rainy windows. The lomography movement combines the signifiers of amateur photography ('the everyday' as preferred subject, the 'snapshot' aesthetic) with the fetishisation of technological obsolescence and a prescription for photographic practice that explicitly marks it as a playful refusal of artistic tradition, therefore neatly conflating amateurism and the avant-garde. The 2004 Sony Cybershot television advertisement featuring the pair of teenagers 'sleepshooting' in a nocturnal urban environment directly references this particular formation of photographic practice, and attempts to leverage something of its (post-authentic) authenticity in building a brand identity for Sony's digital products.

While this aesthetic and the idea of amateur creativity it promotes are both ubiquitous in contemporary urban Western cultures, the kinds of refusal of 'dominant' (photographic) culture that lomography endorses actually rely on very particular cultural competencies as well as creative and technological literacies that we cannot

assume to be shared by the majority of the population – that is, by those whose participation in media culture is relatively peripheral (Warschauer, 2003). If cultural studies work on amateurism in digital culture is not to suffer from the 'favouritism' and 'blind spots' to which Nick Couldry draws our attention (2000, pp. 58-60), and if it is to be more than 'hanging out with what is cool' as Philo and Miller contend (2001, p. 32), I want to argue that this specifically fetishised and aestheticised version of everyday life is not the territory in which we can look for the spaces where 'ordinary' people can exercise meaningful agency, if indeed it ever was.

Vernacular Creativity and New Media

In thinking about how a politics of 'ordinary' cultural participation might articulate with the 'democratization' of technologies, Atton's (2001) article on the representation of the mundane in personal homepages is significant. This is because it disarticulates the spectacular and the radical from the concept of alternative media, redrawing the field to include everyday cultural production and therefore 'ordinary' cultural *producers* in the field of alternative media studies:

What happens when 'ordinary' people produce their own media? I want to explore some aspects of 'popular' media production and its intersection with everyday life. To do so will be to [...] take to the notion of 'everyday production' and its place in identity-formation to a different place: to that of the originating producer within everyday life. Popular media production might then be considered a primary form of everyday cultural production. (n.p.)

The central placement of the politics of ordinary participation through everyday cultural production shapes our concerns toward access, self-representation, and literacy, rather than resistance or aesthetic innovation. This approach also preserves the distinction between *the* everyday (as signifier of a particular form of mundaneness, viewed from above by the privileged cultural critic or artist) and the specific dignity of everyday *lives*, expressed using vernacular communicative means.

I use 'vernacular creativity' as both an ideal and an heuristic device, to describe and illuminate creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions. The most familiar meaning of the term 'vernacular' is that of vernacular speech, thought or expression, usually applied to the 'native' speech of a populace as against the official language (for example, English in the Middle Ages)³ but now used to distinguish 'everyday' language from institutional or official modes of expression.⁴ Thomas McLaughlin (1996) has repurposed it in challenging cultural studies to recognize and engage with the specificity and heterogeneity of the philosophical frameworks and knowledges of non-elite Western (sub)cultures, and demonstrating how this might be done across several case studies.⁵ Indeed, McLaughlin's approach to studying vernacular theory is the bedrock of my approach to studying vernacular creativity. This ethical positioning of researcher and researched represents a continuity with some segments of the British cultural studies' tradition - in particular, a commitment to empathy⁶ and respect for the 'ordinary' or 'popular' cultural formations under study and a dogged refusal to see research participants as only subjects, either of the research process, or of a monolithic capitalist popular culture.

I use 'creativity' in a specific sense as well. My use of it is aligned with the position at which Negus and Pickering finally come to rest in their (2004) attempt to rescue the term from the exclusivity of high culture on the one hand, and the flat ubiquity of neoliberal discourse on the other. That is, creativity is the process by which available cultural resources (including both 'material' resources – content, and immaterial resources – genre conventions, shared knowledges) are recombined in novel ways, so that they are both recognisable because of their familiar elements, and create affective impact through the innovative process of this recombination.

'Vernacular creativity', then, does not imply the reinvigoration of some notion of a preexisting 'pure' or authentic folk culture placed in opposition to the mass media; rather, it includes as *part* of the contemporary vernacular the experience of commercial popular culture. Vernacular creativity is a productive articulation of consumer practices and knowledges (of, say, television genre codes) with older popular traditions and communicative practices (storytelling, family photography, scrapbooking, collecting). Above all, the term signifies what Chris Atton calls 'the capacity to reduce cultural distance' between the conditions of cultural production and the everyday experiences from which they are derived and to which they return (2001). Accordingly, one of the most useful questions cultural studies can ask about new media is, 'which technologies, practices and forms most effectively communicate vernacular creativity'?

Digital Storytelling as Vernacular Creativity

Although the term 'digital storytelling' has been used generically to describe the uses or affordances of new media for new or innovative narrative forms, as exemplified by 'hypertext fiction' and game narratives, here I use it to refer to the specific modes of production, technological apparatus and textual characteristics of the community media movement that is known explicitly as 'Digital Storytelling'.⁷ Digital storytelling is a workshop-based process by which 'ordinary people' create their own short autobiographical films that can be streamed on the web or broadcast on television. This form of Digital Storytelling can be understood not only as a media form, but as a field of cultural practice: a dynamic site of relations between textual arrangements and symbolic conventions, technologies for production and conventions for their use; and collaborative social interaction (ie the workshops) that takes place in local and specific contexts. Digital Storytelling as a 'movement' is explicitly designed to amplify the ordinary voice. It aims not only to remediate vernacular creativity, but to *legitimate* it as a relatively *autonomous* and worthwhile contribution to public culture. This marks it as an important departure from even the most empathetic 'social documentary' traditions.

Digital Storytelling in this form balances the ethics of democratic 'access' with an aesthetic that aims to maximize relevance and impact. Economy is a core principle of this aesthetic – stories are around two minutes in length, using scripts of around 250 words which are then recorded as voiceovers, and a dozen images, usually brought from home. These elements are then combined in a video editing application such as Adobe Premiere or Apple's iMovie to produce a digital video that is of sufficient technical quality for web streaming, broadcast, or DVD distribution. The philosophy behind this economy is that formal constraints create the ideal conditions for the production of elegant, high-impact stories by people with little or no experience, with

minimal direct intervention by the workshop facilitator. The personal narrative, told in the storyteller's unique voice, is central to the process of creating a story and is given priority in the arrangement of symbolic elements. Narrative accessibility, warmth, and presence are prioritised over formal experimentation or innovative 'new' uses for technologies.

Since mid-2004, I have been one of a team of QUT researchers engaged in 'research-based practice' to adapt the BBC model of digital storytelling practice (Meadows, 2004) for community media projects. I have worked as a researcher and trainer in some of the Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) workshops around Queensland,⁸ as well as leading a pilot workshop for the Kelvin Grove Urban Village Sharing Stories project that involved several elderly participants.⁹

The Digital Stories produced by 'peripheral' young people participating in the YIRN Digital Storytelling workshops reproduce recurrent themes that relate to feelings of boredom, lack of opportunities and isolation, alongside 'aspirational' ambitions for the future as well as a strong sense of place-based cultural identity (Notley & Tacchi, 2005). In one story, the author tells us that her mother is Waima from Papua New Guinea and her father is from rural Queensland – her story is both exploration and explanation of 'the blood of two cultures' that, she says, runs through her veins. One story grapples with the storyteller's ambivalence about her outer Brisbane suburb, discussing the problem of '[paint] sniffers' and the benefits of being forced to confront both good and bad 'choices' at an early age.¹⁰ Other stories are passionate in their evocation of enthusiasms – for photography, for computer games, for their communities.

One of the most 'ordinary' and affecting of the YIRN stories was produced by a young woman called Jenny,¹¹ now in her mid-twenties, a volunteer at the local youth centre, and an undergraduate student at a local university. In her story, entitled 'Gift', Jenny tells us about becoming pregnant at a young age and her eventual realization that becoming a mother has created opportunities rather than closing them off. With the added responsibility of parenthood, she says, came the decision to go to university and participate more in community life. In the final sequence, while images of Jenny sitting on the steps with her four-year-old daughter slowly appear and dissolve on screen, she tells us, "I can still hear people saying 'your life is over when you have children', but when I stop and look at where my life is today, I know they were wrong."

Taking a familiar textual analysis approach to Jenny's story, there are a lot of things we could say about it straight away, without even seeing it. It is not unreasonable to imagine – even if I am being slightly tongue-in-cheek – that such an analysis would say that this young woman is constructing her identity primarily according to her reproductive function; that there is a strong narrative of self-actualisation at work; that it relies on clichés representative of dominant discourses of femininity, family, and individual agency, all of which mask social structures and power relations. But this type of critique is not only disrespectful to the originator of the text; it is also a misrecognition of the nature of the text itself. What we are looking at when we look at a digital story is something that sits uncomfortably with both our celebrations and ideological critiques of 'popular culture', and hence with the available critical toolkit for textual analysis. This is most of all because digital stories are a very different kind

of popular culture: first, digital stories, despite some inroads into their mass distribution (especially by the BBC) are not 'commercial' culture, although they may draw on it; nor are they straightforward examples of the discourses of dominant 'institutions'. Their authors are 'ordinary' people but they are neither 'consumers' nor the victims of the surveillance of everyday life typical of both 'documentary' and reality television (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 130). Instead, they must be considered to be relatively autonomous citizen-producers.

Stylistically, digital stories tend to be deeply felt, poignant and gently humorous rather than archly self-aware, witty, or formalist – qualities, I would argue, that are the luxury of those who can assume that they have ample, ongoing space to 'play' with self-representation. Rather than employing ellipsis, a refusal of closure, wit and irony, digital stories are in general marked by their sincerity, warmth, and humanity. As cultural studies researchers, to work with these stories and their tellers is to be literally confounded: it is not immediately obvious what one 'should' say about them. This is because for too long, we have been interrupting the ordinary voice, speaking instead of listening - repurposing 'found' everyday culture (by applying liberal doses of theory) in ways that complement our own subcultural taste patterns. When we heroically make the mundane *cool*, we continue to be guilty as charged: as Meaghan Morris asserted well over a decade ago, too often 'the people' are reduced to 'the textually delegated, allegorical emblem of the critic's own activity' (1990, p.23).

Digital Storytelling in its current institutionally-supported form is of course not a complete and magical solution to unequal access to media power by any means. This is particularly obvious in comparison to the decentralised, accretive and networked, but equally 'ordinary' kinds of storytelling made possible by personal weblogs. For one thing, distribution channels for digital stories remain limited and frequently are under the control of the institutions that provided the workshops.¹² Secondly, as digital storytelling projects proliferate in a range of institutional contexts and the resulting weight of evidence begins to accumulate, it is becoming clear that these constraints and the sociality of the workshop process combine to shape the practice of digital storytelling so that as a cultural form it is marked by a fairly predictable, if not uniform, range of ways to represent the self. Because I worked as both trainer and researcher in several of these Digital Storytelling projects, my own position could be perceived as one that is, not only empathetic to the 'ordinariness' of the stories, but also complicit with the agendas and limiting effects of the institutions who provided the means to hold the workshops in the first place. However, the fact remains that the participants in workshops of this kind are often on the wrong side of the 'digital divide', and are not necessarily likely to be participants in the apparently autonomous new media cultures (blogging, computer games, fandom) that are so loudly and frequently celebrated – without some additional motivation and support, many of the participants in digital storytelling may never use a computer at all. Given the alternatives – distant, omniscient critique of the politics of digital storytelling on the one hand, or the uncritical celebration of the most spectacular participatory media on the other – these relatively new problems of complicity and engagement are worth negotiating.

Digital Storytelling gathers some of its democratic potential from the fact that it draws on vernacular literacies – skills and competencies that cannot simply be reduced to cultural capital or an 'artistic' education but that instead exploit

competencies built up through everyday experience, especially experience as a mass media consumer. The literacies required for digital storytelling therefore cross the divide between formal and informal learning. They include not only 'learned' skills like the ability to conceive and execute an effective narrative and use a computer, but also the more intuitive modes of collecting and arranging textual elements (as for scrapbooking), the oral performance of personal stories (learned through everyday social interaction), and the combination of sonic and visual elements to create televisual flow (learned through the consumption of television, film and animation). In this light, it is interesting to observe the very different style of expression adopted as an initial default by the older participants in workshops at QUT. Their stories were marked by an emphasis on facts and detail, linear temporality, an almost entirely referential use of images, and a journalistic tone. In contrast, the younger participants 'instinctively' used images metaphorically, providing a harmonic counterpoint to the spoken narrative. They also tended toward colloquial, everyday speech styles, and were more at ease with the use of personal and emotive themes.

Digital Storytelling therefore works to remediate vernacular creativity in new media contexts: it is based on everyday communicative practices – telling personal stories, collecting, and sharing personal images – but remixed with the textual idioms of television and film; and transformed into publicly accessible culture through the use of digital tools for production and distribution. Through this process of remediation, it transforms everyday *experience* into shared public culture. Digital storytelling above all is an example of creativity in the service of effective social communication, where communication is not to be understood narrowly as the exchange of information or 'ideas', but as the affective practice of the social.

These individual stories balance the personal with the universal and the universally accessible, through a combination of familiar tropes and the strong affective resonances created by the warmth and visceral presence of the narrator's voiceover. Further, because of the way it is presented in the sound field (mixed front-and-centre and dry, with sound effects and music very much subordinated to it) the digital storytelling voiceover represents what Michel Chion calls the "I-voice":

In a film, when the voice is heard in sound closeup without reverb, it is likely to be at once the voice the spectator internalises as his or her own and the voice that takes total possession of the diegetic space. It is both completely internal and invading the entire universe...Of course the voice owes this special status to the fact that it is the original, definitive sound that both fills us and comes from us. (1990, pp. 79-80)

The primacy of the recorded voice, then, places digital storytelling at some distance from the textual and visual emphasis of most 'new media', especially web-based, culture. This can be understood as a kind of reverse engineering of new media aesthetics, recapturing the warmth of human intimacy from the imperative of innovation.

John Durham Peters suggests that this desire for presence and intimacy underpins all modern communication:

If success in communication was once the art of reaching across the intervening bodies to touch another's spirit, in the age of electronic media it has become the art of reaching across the intervening spirits to touch another

body. Not the ghost in the machine, but the body in the medium is the central dilemma of modern communications. (1999, pp. 224-225)

As Peters implies, the test of meaningful communication in this sense is to do with presence. For the storyteller, the digital story is a means of 'becoming real' to others, on the basis of shared experience and affective resonances. Many of the stories are, quite literally, *touching*.

Under these criteria, even cliché is not necessarily a negative quality, but takes on a positive dimension as *shared language* (i.e. a feature of readership, not authorship). Stock themes and clichés become shared lexical elements through which individual creativity can work in the service of peer-to-peer communication, enabling access at either end of the creative process. Somewhat paradoxically from a critical perspective, it is the very qualities that mark digital stories as uncool, conservative, and ideologically suspect – 'stock' tropes, nostalgia, even sentimentality – that give them the power of social connectivity, while the sense of authentic self-expression¹³ that they convey lowers the barriers to empathy. Secondly, Jenny's story, among others, claims agency for ordinary people in making sense of their own lives within the constraints of social circumstances, and in working out what it means to live a good life. Through the specific textual arrangements Jenny has chosen, she presents an alternative viewpoint to the idea that motherhood defines her. For Jenny, becoming a mother has actually provoked a larger reassessment of her life goals and possibilities.

If nothing else, initiatives like Digital Storytelling can instill a degree of confidence in one's life-story as unique, and as worth telling (Nielsen, 2005). Witness the case of Minna Brennan, one of the most senior participants in the KGUV Sharing Stories project. Minna came along to the workshop with several exercise books filled with neatly hand-written histories of the Kelvin Grove Infant's School from her point of view as a teacher during the second world war – histories that only close family members and fellow residents of the nursing home had seen before. At the conclusion of the workshop, where she completed a digital story that interwove these wartime 'institutional' memories with the story of her then-nascent romance with her husband, I asked Minna what she thought of the workshop process and her story. She said, with a mixture of great pride and self-deprecating humour, 'I never thought I'd be a *storyteller*.' Her story is now available online along with the others created in that workshop on the KGUV Sharing Stories website,¹⁴ where the digital stories attract significantly higher traffic than the other photographs, stories, and artworks housed there.

If we are working within a politics of participation, we need to learn to listen to these autobiographical narratives without condemning the people who made them as dupes of ideology, or patronizingly disregarding them because they fail to subvert the aesthetics and structures of new media. Neither anti-populist 'critique' nor the unreflexive celebration of the fan-producer or player-producer of computer games do anything to make the voices of the less culturally and technologically privileged citizen more audible. When we do listen, we begin to realize that if 'ordinary' people have the opportunity to create content for public consumption for the first time, they choose to use this opportunity to talk about what the serious business of the human experience – life, loss, belonging, hope for the future, friendship and love – mean to them. The themes of digital stories may be 'universal', but by definition the

specificities of individual lives never are. The task for cultural studies is not to speak heroically on *behalf* of ordinary voices, but to find ways to understand and practically engage with the full diversity of existing and emerging media contexts in which they are, or are not, being heard.

¹ Note that the *purposes* to which such capabilities are put are assumed to be positive and liberatory (such as to use flashmobbing tactics to organise peaceful leftist protests); the recent beach riots in the Sydney beach suburb of Cronulla, reportedly coordinated largely via sms messaging, are testament that this is not always the case.

² Among the many neologisms emerging as a result is Axel Bruns' idea of the "produser" (2005b).

³ Where, to be precise, 'vernacular' didn't merely mean 'English'; it meant *not-Latin*, and so not-learned. 'Vernacular', then, was the language of folk, magical or superstitious knowledges, rather than the language of literacy.

⁴ In the United States, the term 'vernacular' is used equally to refer to (white) 'folk' culture on the one hand, and the forms of cultural expression associated with African-American or 'native' people on the other (see, for example, Baker, 1984).

⁵ In the late 1990s, Henry Jenkins built on this framework to reformulate grassroots, alternative, and fan-based media as sites of vernacular media theory (1998a, 1998b).

⁶ Melissa Gregg (2003) has discussed the politics of empathy in cultural studies scholarship with particular reference to the career of Richard Hoggart.

⁷ This model of Digital Storytelling is that adapted from the initiatives of the Center for Digital Storytelling based in Berkeley, California by Daniel Meadows, and subsequently used in the BBC's 'Capture Wales' program. See www.bbc.co.uk/capturewales for further information or to watch the stories.

⁸ The Youth Internet Radio Network (YIRN) is an Australian Research Council funded research project led by John Hartley and Greg Hearn that aims to engage young people in an investigation of how information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be used for interaction, creativity, and innovation. The project has created partnerships with urban, regional, and indigenous communities at 10 different sites and has undertaken digital storytelling workshops at each. The fifty-one Digital Stories produced at these workshops will be included with other content young people produce on a streaming website (www.sticky.net.au) to be launched early in 2006.

⁹ The Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV) is a joint venture of the Queensland Department of Housing and QUT. The KGUV is an area at the edge of the CBD that includes the QUT Kelvin Grove Campus, Kelvin Grove High School, the site of a former military barracks and a retirement home, as well as new residential and commercial developments. The government has funded at a cost of half a million dollars a three year Sharing Stories project led by Philip Nielsen and Helen Klaebe, as part of a strategy to build a sense of community identity and inclusiveness in the development. The project will produce two books representing the history of the area from first settlement, and has launched a web site which includes community oral history, visual artworks and digital stories.

¹⁰ As an indication of the impact digital stories can have, this particular film led to discussions at the local Community Centre and a meeting to discuss with young people how paint sniffing is affecting them and what they thought needed to happen to improve the situation.

¹¹ Ethical considerations at the time of writing require that the author remain anonymous in this article; however, when the YIRN online network (www.sticky.net.au) is launched in early 2006, the story will be available for public viewing or download, as all content is searchable by title.

¹² However, this is changing, with the emergence of open storage and distribution channels such as OurMedia – see www.ourmedia.org

¹³ I am nonetheless aware of the theoretical problem raised by the idea of the authentic self – see Will Tregoning, this issue.

¹⁴ To view the digital stories, see <http://www.kgurbanvillage.com.au/sharing/>

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