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## Digital Storytelling as Arts-Inspired Inquiry for Engaging, Understanding, and Supporting Indigenous Youth

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### Abstract

In this paper we examine digital storytelling as a mode of arts-inspired inquiry: in particular we consider digital storytelling as a powerful arts-inspired approach that can help researchers, practitioners, and communities understand and support indigenous and marginalized youth. Our two-fold focus is on: (1) a digital storytelling initiative that engaged hundreds of Alaska Native youth in the production of digital stories; and, (2) on findings from a subsequent pilot study which assessed the value of analyzing the young people's digital stories produced through this initiative, as windows into the worlds, identities, struggles and

concerns of these particular youth. Overall, we aim to use the findings from this pilot study, and impressions from the young people's digital media productions, to demonstrate the potential of digital storytelling as a transformative arts-inspired inquiry which engages young people in processes of *identity making, aesthetics, and voice*.

## Introduction

In this paper we explore digital storytelling as a mode of arts-inspired inquiry. To support this exploration we have decided to focus on both: (1) a successful digital storytelling initiative that engaged hundreds of Alaska Native youth (ages 10-18) across 12 rural villages in Northwest Alaska in the production of digital stories (Lambert, 2010); and, (2) more pointedly, findings from a subsequent pilot study which, among other aims, assessed the value of analyzing the young people's digital stories, *as data*, produced through this initiative, as windows into the worlds, identities, struggles and concerns of these particular youth. We aim to use findings from this pilot study, and, in part, impressions from the young people's digital media productions, to examine several concepts including identities, aesthetic engagement, and voice, which, we argue, reside at the rich intersections where digital storytelling and arts-inspired inquiries cross paths. In particular, we explore the *potential* of digital storytelling as a "tool of identity" (Hannerz, 1983) and of self and world making (Eglinton, 2013). As such, digital stories can be understood as a space to create "aesthetic significance" (Hickman, 2005) and engage in "grounded aesthetics" (Willis, 1990); as "polyvocal" (e.g., Tobin and Davidson, 1990) sites of learning and connection for youth and community; and, as an effective medium for taking youth lives, concerns, and resources (and/or lack of) seriously. We note here, as described later in this paper, the researchers working on this pilot study did not participate in the production of the digital stories with the young people themselves, but sought to look at the potential of using the stories produced as a form of data to understand the lives and experiences of these particular youth.

Borrowing from the scripted process of digital story creation, this article has four interconnected "Frames." In Frame One we briefly explore digital storytelling (DST) and arts-inspired approaches, highlighting several synergies between them. This discussion sets the scene for Frame Two, where we provide a synopsis of the original DST (non-research based) initiative that engaged Alaskan youth in digital story production. We also offer an overview of the methodology from the subsequent pilot study where we examined the young people's digital stories produced through this initiative to better understand their lives. Then, drawing on findings from the pilot study, in Frame Three we consider three overlapping concepts including identity, aesthetics, and voice – concepts characterizing the points where arts-inspired approaches and DST intersect. In Frame Four, the final Frame, we consider the implications of DST as an arts-inspired mode of inquiry with indigenous youth. Here we

focus again on DST as a mode of empowerment and engagement. We also look to the future, and imagine the potential of DST as a component in an art-inspired “ethnographic pedagogy” (Eglinton, 2013) for indigenous and marginalized young people.

By exploring and suggesting DST as an arts-inspired approach to inquiry we not only illustrate how DST can help researchers, practitioners, and communities understand and support indigenous youth, but also, simultaneously, expand the reach and promise of the approach.

### **Frame One: Digital Storytelling and Arts-Inspired Inquiries**

For over two decades, both digital storytelling and arts-based inquiries have been utilized across education, health, and community development projects, initiatives, and studies. For example, Boydell, Gladstone, Volpe, Allemang, and Stasiulis (2012) offer a comprehensive review of arts-based inquiry in healthcare. For arts-based research in education there are multiple examples, for instance, Ewing and Hughes (2008), and Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (2013), and in art education see a special issue of *Studies in Art Education* (2006, Volume 48). There are multiple examples of digital storytelling including Hartley and McWilliam (2009); for DST in education and media studies see Drotner (2008), for digital storytelling in applied and social research see Gubrium (2009a,b), Gubrium & DiFulvio (2011), Gubrium and Harper (2013), Gubrium, Hill and Flicker (Available online); and for community initiatives/health see Weinronk, H., Wexler, L., et. al. (in press), Wexler, Eglinton, Gubrium (2014); Wexler, Gubrium, Griffin, & DiFulvio (2012).

Indeed, there is also a vast literature that considers both approaches, in which narratives and multi-media (photographic stills, sound, and video) production and dissemination is common across arts-inspired inquiries (e.g., Iseke, 2011). However, synergies between DST as an “emergent method” (Gubrium and Turner, 2011) in its own right, and other arts-inspired approaches would benefit from exploration (though see Alexandra 2008).

We liberally use the term “arts inspired” inquiries as an umbrella which stretches across the diverse perspectives constituting what is variously referred to as, for example, arts-based research, arts-informed inquiry (e.g., Cole and Knowles, 2008), critical arts-based research (e.g., Finley, 2011), arts-based educational research (e.g., Barone and Eisner, 1997), and a/r/tography (e.g., Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). Here, we conceive arts-inspired inquiry in the broadest terms possible: *a form of inquiry whereby the production of knowledges (i.e., data collection and analysis) and/or representation and dissemination of knowledges are inspired by the arts (e.g., drawing, painting, writing, spoken word, dance, film, and the like).*

In this definition we imagine the “arts” with a “small ‘a’” (see in Finley, 2003). As Ewing and

Hughes (2008) explain, art with a small “a”, means “that the art need not have the aesthetic quality of a piece that has been created for art’s sake” (p. 516). In this sense, we imagine art forms in the most egalitarian sense to include forms of human expression including certain forms of “visual material culture” (Eglinton, 2013) or human-made forms, artifacts, and performances (including, for example, music, dance, digital media, photography, fashion, and the like) to which people assign meaning.

Our definition is based on the assumption that all people and not just artists/researchers/scholars, including young people, are capable of artistic and creative expression, and that human expression is everywhere: not just confined to the gallery, the stage, or the studio. Appropriating Sullivan’s (2006) words, we argue, “productive artistic activity takes place in just about every setting imaginable, from the classroom to the community, the industrial park to the Internet, and the subway to the highway” (p.30).

Further, our understanding of arts-inspired inquiry includes those critical arts-based and participatory research perspectives (e.g., Finley, 2011) which position participants – including youth participants – as researcher-artists / artist-researchers. Arts-inspired inquiries can potentially forefront those voices generally pushed to the margins. In other words, arts-inspired research has the power to ultimately highlight narratives, knowledges, and meanings rooted in the life experiences and vernaculars of the producers themselves – narratives often unheard or quieted. Arts-inspired inquiries, as we envision them, open up a space of dialogue amongst constituencies including, for example, the expression makers / artists, analysts, and viewers (see also in Bresler, 2006, for dialogical relationships in “aesthetically based research”).

Focusing now briefly on DST, while much of our discussion is centered around the popular Western model of DST presented by the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkley California, the idea of telling/representing/constructing stories through an integration of image, sound, and text is neither new nor exclusive to the practices of the CDS (e.g., see Frohlich’s (2004) work in audio-photography). (For overviews of DST see, for example, Gubrium and Turner, 2011; Lambert, 2006; Lundby, 2008; Hartley and McWilliam, 2009; for arts-based, informed, and inspired inquiry see, for instance, Sullivan, 2005, 2006; Barone and Eisner, 2011; Finley, 2003; Leavy, 2009; Cole and Knowles, 2008; Theron, Mitchell, Smith & Stuart, 2011; also <http://iirc.mcgill.ca/>),

Digital stories as described by the CDS are short (2-5 minute) multimedia narratives, which include sound, image, text, voice over, and/or music. The stories are often personal. In DST workshops people are trained in story crafting and digital editing techniques. The workshop emphasis is on the story form itself and the means of constructing the narrative (using both

traditional and new media – from writing a story while looking at old printed photographs to gathering and assembling digitized images on the internet). Overall, DST workshops entail a “learning by doing” approach in which participants produce their own digital story over the course of a twenty-four hour period. By the end of the workshop, all participants have constructed a digital story. The participants are positioned as expression makers, producing their own digital story, and the content of a story ultimately derives from participant experiences. The workshop process is based on a Freirean model (Freire, 1970) of using images to generate dialogue and foregrounding participants’ personal experiences as “funds of knowledge” to serve as narrative resources in digital story construction (Moll, 1992). As with other Freirean approaches and narrative research methods, one central goal of the workshop is to listen to the themes or collective issues of participants.

The workshops are commonly organized into phases, including: (1) The first phase which focuses on the story writing process; the goal of this phase is for participants to craft a script of their digital story that they can ultimately use to record a voiceover of their story. An activity integral to the crafting process is the story circle. The purpose of a story circle is to create a safe and comfortable space for participants to present an initial idea or draft for their stories and to encourage group cohesion in discussing and mutually mentoring each other in story construction. Story circles can be used to present and discuss difficult experiences and may provide the first outlet for participants to acknowledge and create something positive from these circumstances. This provides a collaborative format for both story construction and supportive commentary (Gubrium, 2009a). (2) The second phase of the workshop takes a more technological turn as participants learn how to work with a digital image editing software to piece together their stories. There is a tutorial focused on incorporating components of the digital story (visual and oral) into a non-linear video. Participants also learn how to incorporate soundtracks, titles and credits, and other special effects such as panning and zooming, into their stories. By the end of the workshop, each participant has a digital story that may be presented to the workshop group. As part of a collaborative effort, workshop closure is important in the digital storytelling process. Screening each digital story at the end of the workshop is a way of celebrating the groups’ collective accomplishments (Lambert, 2006). We come back to some of the ideas from the workshop process in Frame Four of this paper.

DST is considered both a narrative form and practice. Hartley and McWilliam (2009) write:

As a form it combines the direct, emotional charge of confessional disclosure, the authenticity of the documentary, and the simple elegance of the format – it is a digital sonnet, or haiku. As a practice, digital storytelling combines tuition of the individual with new narrative devices for multiplatform digital publishing across hybrid sites (p.

5).

Digital stories are constructed from workshop participants' own subject positions and told as personal narratives. The workshop process, products (i.e., digital stories) and audience responses to the stories can be used by researchers to investigate socio-cultural understandings of experience, while also providing storytellers a chance to provide input on matters important to them. Namely, researchers can take ethnographic field notes during the workshop process as they and other facilitators work with workshop participants to craft their digital stories. The researcher might also interview participants about the workshop process, the digital story produced and how the story relates to participants' lived experiences. Viewing and listening audiences might also be interviewed or surveyed for feedback on the stories (Gubrium & Turner, 2011).

The digital storytelling process and product offer an array of visual, oral, and textual empirical material for participatory ethnography. The method is participatory in that digital stories are based on the telling of storytellers' own cultural worlds, with the story largely directed by the participant. Essentially, digital storytelling can serve as a participatory approach for investigating participant subjectivities. In this way, the workshop process is just as important a site for data collection and analysis as the digital story artifact produced (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). As a facilitator of the process, the researcher can observe and take field notes of workshop activities and participant interactions. While the researcher may not obtain conventional data from participants during the digital storytelling process, s/he may arrive at a more complex understanding of their lives and the ways they chose to represent themselves and their experiences.

Now bringing together our specific understanding of arts-inspired inquiries and DST, points of convergence exist. On a philosophical level, both modes are underpinned by epistemological and ontological assumptions based on forms of construction-ism/vism (see Hickman & Eglinton, 2009 for a review of constructionism-constructivism within arts education research). That is, both are in some way underpinned by the idea that knowledge and identities (that is, our understandings and ourselves) are continuously produced, shaped by, and constructed through available cultural resources including, for example, values and beliefs, and language (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996); and that knowledge and identities are produced through mediated action: as we use language, or narrative form, or even a camera – as we perform, as we dance, as we sing, as we convey an emotion we are creating and representing ourselves and our worlds (Cole, 1996; in art education research see Eglinton 2013). And, further, as Eglinton (2013) argues this production of knowledge and identities is a potentially creative – even playful – process. Since both modes are embodied—accessing the emotive, the ephemeral, the mind *and* the

body, thought *and* feeling—scholars variously write of DST or arts-inspired inquiry as both a process and a product which can get at or elicit different ways of knowing (e.g., Barone and Eisner, 1997; Cole and Knowles, 2001; Gubrium and Turner, 2011). In DST there is a conflation of producer and consumer of media, and in arts-inspired inquiry there is a dynamic between the knower and what can be known. In arts-inspired inquiry and DST, the “artist”, “researcher”, “story maker” or, broadly, “cultural producer”, is not conceived in the modernist sense as decontextualized (untouched by social and cultural influences), but rather as part and parcel of the sociocultural and physical worlds in which they live with/in and through. As such, both modes not only have the power to disrupt the notion of artist and/or researcher as all powerful, decontextualized, or “lone genius”, but rest on the idea that we are all change makers as we engage in acts of human expression. Giving voice to our ideas and disseminating them, we are not only shaping ourselves, we are shaping our worlds.

Bringing these ideas together, both modes can be imagined as “non-dualistic”: as overcoming various dichotomies across the social sciences and, more pointedly, in art education theory and practice which separate, for example affect and cognition, reason and emotion, as well as individual and society (including person and geographical space), local and global, researcher and researched (see in Bresler, 2006; Bell and Desai, 2011; Gamradt and Staples, 1994; Eglinton, 2013).

While we can continue to theoretically explore these points of convergence, we argue that woven throughout is a focus on: identities and self-making; aesthetic engagement; and voice. All of these points came to the fore in the pilot study described in the next Frame. That is, the substantive and methodological findings from the pilot described later in this paper point to the notion of DST as a powerful arts-inspired mode of inquiry – and an area worthy of further investigation.

### **Frame Two: Digital Storytelling Initiative and Pilot Study in Northwest Alaska**

In the following two Frames we offer the background for the DST project and methodology for the subsequent pilot study. We then use the findings from the pilot study to look more closely at the concepts of identity, aesthetics, and voice in the context of DST as arts-inspired inquiry.

With the partnering tribal health organization the initial digital storytelling project called Project Life took place in a sparsely populated, rural area of Alaska, encompassing almost 36,000 square miles with less than 10,000 residents. The study region’s population is 90% Alaska Native. The arctic region experienced rapid social change over the last seventy years. Over that time period, the migratory subsistence hunting/gathering lifestyle changed to a sedentary settlement lifestyle, reliant on wage economy and store-bought goods. Additionally,

the language used in everyday exchanges changed from Inupiaq to English. Now, the Elders of the region speak fluent Inupiaq with English as a second language, whereas most youth speak only English. Another consequence of the imposed changes is that young people's learning is now managed extensively by schooling systems that function outside of the purview of many Inupiaq family members (Chance, 1990; Wexler, 2005). In this context, many older Inupiat people are uncertain about how to support youth in becoming successful and responsible men and women in a modern context (Wexler, 2006).

This situation has fostered a sense of generational "gaps" that are associated with many of the youth health disparities in the region (Wexler & Goodwin, 2006; Wexler, 2009a; Wexler, 2009c; Wexler, 2006). Alaska Native youth in this region have a suicide rate that is 18 times that of other Americans (Wexler, Silveira, & Bertone-Johnson, 2012; Wexler, Hill, Bertone-Johnson, & Fenaughty, 2008; Wexler, 2009a; Wexler, 2005). Substance abuse rates for indigenous youth also represent a glaring health disparity (Rhoades, 2003; Swaim, Oetfing, Thurman, Beauvais, & Edwards, 1993). Alaska Native youth suicide and substance abuse are associated with cultural discontinuities and accompanying feelings of historical trauma, rootlessness and cultural identity conflicts (Durie, Milroy, & Hunter, 2009; Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009; Jarvis, Spicer, Manson, & The Superpfp Team, 2003; Spicer, Novins, Mitchell, & Beals, 2003). The problems of substance abuse and suicide among AI/AN youth have been difficult to affect through standard programs (Goldston et al., 2008; Noe, Fleming, & Manson, 2003; Wexler, 2011, Wexler & Gone, 2012). This outcome is, perhaps, because the roots of these health inequalities are complex, and are associated with larger cultural and community issues such as historical trauma, colonialism, culture loss, and disempowerment.

It follows that there is mounting evidence linking cultural resources and empowerment to reduced AI/AN youth substance use and suicidality. Thus, the AI/AN Strategic Behavioral Health Plan 2011-2015, states that there is a clear need "to realize cultural renewal and wellness through an emphasis on sobriety, community, elders and positive youth development." With this theoretically-based and community-endorsed approach, the partnering tribal health organization began a primary prevention initiative that aimed to engage young people in reflective and empowering activities to highlight personal, family and community strengths. Healthy youth development is more likely when young people have accessible and meaningful opportunities to develop positive and culturally-salient identity constructions on their pathways into adulthood (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). To aid young people in these kinds of developmental processes, digital storytelling was utilized as a platform for young people to re(present) themselves—their culture and identity—to highlight positive aspects of their lives and strengthen connections with important people in their lives.



***Digital storytelling process***

Project Life, a suicide prevention initiative funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration and run by the tribal non-profit serving Northwest Alaska, worked with over three hundred young people living in twelve regional villages to engage them in digital storytelling. As described in Frame One, an important aspect of the digital story telling process is that it is participant driven. As such, this initiative provided youth, community members, and later, researchers with an unprecedented opportunity to learn about the lives of young people through the eyes, voices and perspectives of the youth, themselves. The project offered young people, ages 10-24, the opportunity to participate in a week-long digital storytelling workshop after their school day. Young people were given the equipment and support to create digital stories in all of the region's villages, but were not directed as to the content of these. The outcomes were highly personal digital stories that were produced with the intention of sharing among friends and family and posted on the internet (if the producer wanted to do so). The evening of the last day of the workshop included a community screening of youth-produced digital stories, again if participants wanted to share in this way. Virtually all participants chose to publically screen their stories, and most invited peers and family members to view their finished product.

The digital storytelling workshops gained in popularity over the course of the funding period (2006-2009). The beginning workshops had 3-6 participants finish their digital stories, while some of the last workshops had close to 40 participants engage with and complete their digital stories. This process indicator shows that young people enjoyed the services offered by the project and were likely to tell their friends about the opportunity. It also illustrates the increased skills of the facilitators, since such large numbers of participants are not usually doable. By the end of this four-year, federally-funded project, 566 digital stories had been produced.

***Pilot study and methodology***

To explore the potential of these stories as a medium to understand the lives and identities of youth living in the region, two years into the initiative the third author (Wexler) was contacted by the director of the project to explore the kinds of information that could be gained by systematically researching the digital stories. The director believed that the digital stories themselves could teach us about the everyday lives of young people, and could help the tribal organization develop effective and attractive programming for young people in the region. Capitalizing on this existing resource, rich with youth perspectives, the dataset consisted of over 250 digital stories generated through this Project Life initiative. To clarify, while the intention of the original digital storytelling initiative was to engage youth in an activity where they could think about and depict their lives for the wider community, the subsequent pilot

study aimed to explore the usefulness of analyzing the young people's digital stories as a means of identifying Inupiat children's and adolescents' sense of selfhood, their primary concerns, struggles, and resources. A further aim of the pilot was to explore the potential of using "exemplary" digital stories as a platform to illustrate and discuss preliminary findings from this analysis, to spark intergenerational dialogue, and make suggestions for youth programming. In the following few paragraphs we offer a detailed overview of the pilot procedures and how we arrived at our findings.

Four of us were involved in the analytic work for the study including the two Co-Primary Investigators on the project (Gubrium and Wexler), and two additional researchers (including, Eglinton). Aligned with common assumptions underpinning various arts-based inquiries and digital storytelling as method (see Gubrium, 2009a,b) our analytic work was guided by a moderate social constructionist framework – a framework which holds that knowledge is not discovered but constructed and produced through mediated action using cultural tools and artifacts (including scripts, values, visual material culture) from the world around us (e.g., Bruner, 2002; Bruner, 1990; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Turner & Bruner, 1986). This form of constructionism resonated with our own views as it pushed into relief the importance of young people's knowledge construction, the assumption that young people are active agents working to recreate their worlds with the cultural tools available to them, as well as the idea that there is much productive power infusing knowledge, values, and meanings – power that, in part, shapes all of our lives (Foucault, 1980). What is more, this framework continuously reminded us that in all research endeavours, our findings will always be colored by the researchers' own positionings, identities, values and the like (in relation to digital storytelling see Gubrium & DiFulvio, 2011; Gubrium & Scott, 2010). As such, we were continuously conscious of the need to be reflexive, to explicate our position, and, importantly, to consult community partners throughout the process with regard to the direction of the study and findings.

In the spirit of reflexivity, and as a means of explicating our positioning for the reader, we note that all four of the researchers identify as white and middle-class, and, at the time of the study, were all involved in academia and a university system as faculty and/or researchers. At the time of analysis, all of us were located [removed for blind review]. As a team our interests and areas of expertise were diverse, spanning public health, anthropology, education and community development, and environmental studies, as well as participatory visual methodologies, including digital storytelling. The three authors on this paper have been involved in youth work and scholarship for most of their careers, and have deep interest in the promise of qualitative, visual, and multimedia methods and data. In particular, methods and data which prioritize the voices of young people and variously marginalized (e.g., economically, socio-culturally, politically, and/or geographically) populations. Out of the four of us, one of the authors (Wexler) has been working closely and collaborating with tribes in

the NW Alaska region for over a decade; these collaborations have produced a number of research and youth development projects (Ulturgasheva et al., 2011; Wexler, 2009a; Wexler & Burke, 2011; Wexler, DiFulvio, & Burke, 2009; Wexler, Eglinton, & Gubrium, (2014); Wexler, L., Gubrium, A., Griffin, M., & DiFulvio, G. (2012); Wexler & Graves, 2008; Wexler, 2009b; Wexler, 2011; Hagan, Hill, & Wexler, 2007; Hill, Perkins, & Wexler, 2007; Ulturgasheva et al., 2011; Wexler & Gone, 2012; Wexler et al., 2014a; Wexler, et. al, 2014b; Wexler et. al, 2016a; Wexler, et. al, 2016b; Wexler & Goodwin, 2006; Wexler & Graves, 2008; Wexler et al., 2008; Wexler, 2009b; Wexler & Burke, 2011; Wexler, 2006).

While a detailed overview of the analysis can be found in (Wexler, Eglinton, Gubrium, 2014), in an effort to highlight the power of digital storytelling, and explicate its promise as both process and product in research and pedagogy, an overview of our method is provided. This will arguably also help in the trustworthiness (including the credibility, dependability, and confirmability) of the study (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The data – the initial 200+ stories from Project Life – arrived on hard drive, with each story between three and ten minutes long (with the average story between four and five minutes in length). A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program, NVivo8, was used to support data organization, storage, retrieval, and coding, as well as to encourage productive memo writing (i.e. taking theoretical and analytical notes, and questioning the data, developing patterns and themes) (Charmaz, 2000). Analysis, which involved a continuous and iterative cycle of individual and group story watching, memo writing, negotiation, and discussion, loosely followed three overlapping phases.

The aim of the first phase was to grasp ideas, youth issues, and perspectives. To do so we organized and then uploaded the stories into NVivo8, and viewed all of the videos whilst jotting down thoughts on storylines, recurring themes or topics, and early impressions. In addition, Eglinton assigned basic descriptive “attributes” to each video including: age (“older”: age fourteen and over, and “younger”: under age fourteen), gender (male and female), location (one of twelve villages), and date of production (month/day/year). The attributes helped us to compare and contrast the content of the various stories, but also supported us in providing recommendations and insights to the community with respect to particular groups of youth (e.g., younger boys, versus older boys from a particular village). Throughout the process, stories that stood out for various reasons, including those that illustrated a reoccurring theme or had powerful “expressive content” (Rose, 2001:46) (expressive content includes the work’s mood, atmosphere and the like, this is something as a team we all felt when it was powerfully present in the story), were tagged as “noteworthy” stories that we would revisit. After this preliminary data exploration, we met as a team to discuss our impressions and to map a “lay of the land” for the dataset. Tribal partners were consulted and asked to comment on the usefulness of the different initial attributes and

categorizations. After, with the interests of the collaborating community members in mind, the research team met again to identify which additional descriptors or attributes should be attached to the stories. To continue exploring the data Eglinton watched the stories a second time and assigned additional attributes noted by the communities that ultimately included: music (seven categories including, for example, rap and hip-hop; rock and heavy metal; pop and R&B), key themes (six in total, including friends and family, events, hobbies and interests, issues (and activism), camp(ing), and other); use of Inupiaq or Indigenous name; and whether or not there had been a suicide in the village within six months of digital story production. Throughout the rest of phase one as we assigned attributes and selected those stories which we considered to be particularly evocative of key identified themes we consciously made analytic choices, with Eglinton tracing these choices through detailed analytic memoing. We also continued to mark as noteworthy those stories that highlighted an issue, or, in some cases, were “outliers” (i.e. markedly different from the rest of the data). By the end of the first phase, we marked approximately 60 of the 200+ videos as “noteworthy.”

After attributes were assigned, we moved into a second phase of analysis where the aim was, in part, to select a small number of “exemplary” videos from the 60 noteworthy stories, which were then subjected to an initial round of coding (i.e., categorizing chunks of data, bringing together reoccurring words, practices, etc. under a particular label). To select these stories, the 60 videos were watched again by individual researchers. Then, coming together as a group, we discussed and (re)viewed many of the videos, with 31 stories selected for formal coding. The exemplary videos were intended to demonstrate particular themes, issues, and perspectives, and take into account the perspectives from girls and boys, in both age groups, and from all of the villages. The 31 stories included videos from 13 older girls, 6 younger girls, 5 older males and 5 younger males, one story was made by older boys and girls. The coding scheme itself was developed throughout the first two phases of the project: through continuous viewing, memoing, and discussion we finally settled on several general codes, which formed a basis for analysis of the 31 stories. The codes used were descriptive (e.g. “context away from Alaska”) and/or theoretical, for example, “performances” of masculinity or femininity (e.g., Butler, 1999), and all codes remained open and flexible throughout the coding process (see Wexler, Eglinton, Gubrium (2014). Coding was done in conjunction with memo writing, and after coding the 31 videos, several conceptual models illustrating connections between the codes and helped spark further discussion. At this stage of analysis, key categories and analytical themes became clear, and the community partners were included to help make important analytic decisions and a further theme was added.

The third phase of analysis included viewing segments of the coded video and running a series of “queries” using NVivo8. Queries generally retrieve data that are coded in specific ways at the intersection of particular codes and attributes (e.g. gender and age). In this case, queries

supported us in questioning the data, in looking for patterns, and in further augmenting analytic categories. As the objective was, in part, to begin expanding emerging categories, queries were accompanied by extensive and, in this phase, more focused and structured memoing. Memos were guided by several questions that helped us develop a narrative language and rationale for interpreting the queries. These questions included: how are themes represented, performed, and/or made sense of? Pragmatically speaking, what are the implications of these themes for program development? In other words, how can we apply this data analysis to programmatic concerns that will affect change for Inupiaq communities? Memoing from the queries was followed by intensive discussion and negotiation amongst the researchers: patterns were considered and the stage was set for crystallizing several key findings and the dissemination of insights in a report for the involved communities.

While more of the findings from this study can be found in Wexler, Eglinton, Gubrium (2014), here we draw on select substantive and methodological findings and insights to think more specifically about identity, aesthetics and voice.

### **Frame Three: Identity, Aesthetic Engagement, and Voice**

As discussed, it was through this pilot that the idea of DST as arts-inspired inquiry was pushed into relief. In particular the methodological and substantive findings pointed to three points of convergence including identity, aesthetic engagement, and voice that highlighted DST as a powerful arts-inspired approach. We focus on these three points in this Frame, beginning with identity.

As practice and form both arts-inspired inquiry and DST have identity and, connectedly, culture at their core. Culture here is understood as both a process and a product; it is the medium of human engagement with the world, and the product of that engagement (Cole and Engstrom, 1993). We understand identities and culture through a sociocultural lens: as people use culture or cultural artefacts (e.g., cameras, songs, images), giving them meaning in and through human (inter)action, these forms/meanings constitute mind – they are “internalised” (Vygotsky, 1978) – at once (re)constructing various identities and (re)producing aspects of self and worlds (Castells, 2004). Through this lens we know that identities and culture can only be understood and produced in relation to geographical, social, institutional, and historical contexts (Cole, 1996). And further that contexts or places are not simply physical sites, rather they are dynamic, comprised of intersecting social flows, practices, discourses, identities, and meanings which young people draw on in their everyday lives (Jess and Massey, 1995).

In this conceptualisation, through mediated action, youth identities are always in the process of “becoming”, are dependent on time and place (i.e., are contextual), are multiple, and are

enacted and produced in and through human (inter)action in everyday life (Castells, 2004; Holland et al., 1998; Meinhof & Galasinski, 2005; Rattansi & Phoenix, 1997). Because identities, such as racial identities, are contextual and formed through mediated action, they are relational (i.e., dependent on place, space, and historic time, as well as produced in relation to other forms of identity such as gender or class), and, in part, they are performative (where, in a sense, action is constitutive of or produces the state of affairs) (e.g., Butler, 1999; Paechter, 2001).

The production of, and reflection on, digital stories opened up opportunities for these youth to represent, perform, and thus construct their identities using the cultural artefacts available to them. Indeed, young people overwhelmingly chose to produce aspects of their identities, particularly their Inupiaq and gendered identities. In many of the stories the cultural artefacts mediating their representations of self included Inupiaq values (e.g. sharing, love for family, responsibility to tribe; see McNabb, 1991 for full list and descriptions). These values were used as tools to represent self and to develop a collective identity that was tied directly to blood-ties, to family, to being a “True Native.” Boys depicted images of sharing, respect for nature, responsibility to tribe, and humor to in their digital stories. Using both the production of digital stories and the Inupiaq values as tools to create and represent themselves and their worlds, girls’ stories included love for children, respect for Elders, knowledge of family tree, as well as humor as means of self-representation.

These representations were closely linked to the gendered identities youth produced and performed. In fact, heteronormative gender identities (i.e. masculinity and femininity) were evident throughout the stories: girls shaped feminine identities using images of themselves dressing up, raising children, and being in romantic relationships. Boys shaped a masculine identity through images of themselves outdoors, playing sports, fishing, building fires, and, for example, making “tough poses” (e.g., flexing muscles) with friends. In particular, boys represented themselves engaging in activities considered masculine, whereas girls tended to include activities primarily considered feminine, such as taking part in domestic life.

Representing these activities through the DST process, the youth reinforced their gendered identities as Inupiaq young women and men in a particular time and place.

It is important to point out that youth could not create any identity they wished: the deep interconnection between place, people, and culture will always constrain and enable particular identities (Grossberg, 1989). Particular artefacts have to be available, and the meanings invested in them are wholly dependent on young people’s lives, histories, and collective experiences, as well as on aspects of local place. Through DST youths did not simply reproduce identities, culture, and places, but rather through the deployment of aspects including, for example, history and individual and collective experiences in and through a

local-global nexus there was a (re)construction of selves and of the world they lived in and through (Eglinton, 2013). For example, a major theme was the (re)presentation of “sites of achievement” which reflected social expectations, opportunities and even economic disparities. In this case, the kinds of successes and identities depicted by boys in their stories were more limited in scope and availability than those for girls. Boys had few “natural” and/or “necessary” culturally salient gender roles for them to play in the community. Cultural artifacts, such as gender roles, mediate boys’ understanding of what it means to be a successful male; as such their stories tended to embrace artifacts from marginalized groups (i.e. hip hop, gangster poses), but deployed them in ways that reflected Inupiat cultural values. For instance, many of the boy’s digital stories had images of groups of same sex peers in baggy “New York style” pants, posing with their hands making “gang signs” in front of a particularly good fish catch. Very few boys highlighted academic or professional success. Instead—as the example above illustrates—boys’ sites of achievement depicted hunting, fishing, the ability to drive fast and skillfully (by snow machine, boat, four-wheeler and automobile) and sports (from Wexler, Eglinton, Gubrium, 2014)

It could be further argued that digital stories were a “tool of identity” (Hannerz, 1983): a tool people use to represent and understand self. Hall (1996) argues identities are produced only through and in representational practices (see also in Leeuw and Rydin, 2007). Through the production of digital stories – through (re)presentation of self –as young people used media to create and relate an experience through image and/or narrative form, they constructed their sense of self. In this sense, the produced digital stories might be thought of as “identikits.” Hannerz (1983) writes of representations of self as “identikits, an inventory of elements that one might use in putting together an identity of one’s own” (p. 355). “Such externalities,” he writes, “seem to be tools of both identity and imagination. They serve an expansive sense of what an individual may be or can become.” Through the production of digital stories, youth used expressive media and engaged their imaginations – at once constructing, expressing, and reflecting on their stories of self, their lives, desires, and their pleasures.

Tied to this, through the digital storytelling initiative the young people involved in this project engaged in the production of multimedia forms that we would argue went beyond merely documenting life. In fact, thinking about DST and arts-based inquiry as active modes that include the production of all forms of human expression, and are based on the assumption that all people (including young people) are not only capable of – but continuously – creating expression, we suggest that DST offered a space for aesthetic engagement. As Hickman (2005) might argue, through DST young people were, “creating aesthetic significance”: where to *create* connects to “inventiveness”, *aesthetic* refers to the senses, and “*significance*” is associated with meaning and ‘signs’ that are highly expressive and invite attention” (p. 103). Aesthetic significance resides at the intersection of visual and multimedia education, youth

cultural production, arts-based inquiry and digital storytelling.

Hickman describes how all beings have the innate drive and power for “art” making [here we are referring to “art” with a small “a” (in Finley, 2003)]. In his own research Hickman (2005) found that people’s cultural production “exhibit all of the tendencies which artists often display: a passionate desire to create something which looks good and feels right – something which has particular significance, whether it be a birthday cake, a garden, or a hairstyle” (pp.102-103).

Yet, as youth produced their digital stories – as they undoubtedly created aesthetic significance – they were not producing aesthetic forms in the modernist or decontextualized sense, but rather their productions were wholly connected to their sociocultural and physical worlds. In their representations, girls, for instance, drew on both traditional and contemporary artifacts or resources, reworking them at the nexus of local and global influences. For example, they represented traditional values such as love for children and simultaneously used contemporary social media and technology to express themselves as young women “in the world” (Gubrium & DiFulvio, 2011) and communicate with friends and family. That is, they produced representations of self as situated young people living in an increasingly interconnected world.

Drawing on Willis (1990), we suggest that the DST project involved youth in a process of “grounded aesthetics” or symbolic engagement where they augmented, appropriated, or, for example, personalized the cultural artifacts mediating their lives (including popular culture, language, traditional beliefs and values). Based on the findings from the pilot study we found that culture for these youth “lived”, it was taught and learned, passed down, remade, and negotiated – often at the crossroads of traditional and local values and contemporary global youth cultures. In their digital stories, youth engaged in a grounded aesthetics, where through “symbolic creativity” (Willis, 1990), they at once drew on and continuously reworked cultural artifacts in meaningful and specific ways (for examples see in Wexler, Eglinton, Gubrium (2014)). For youth, culture was a resource that was unbounded, a noun and a verb (Dimitriadis, 2001:10); both “rooted” and “routed” (see Clifford, 1992; Hastrup and Olwig, 1996). By engaging in grounded aesthetics – using cultural artefacts as resources – youths were (however minutely) adding to, changing, and having a voice in their sociocultural worlds.

Voice is understood here as the extent to which young people can be heard and impact their own lives (see Watkins and Tacchi, 2008 for voice). Voice is linked closely to discourses of democracy, social change and transformation (see, also in Thumim, 2008). As such, the methodological findings from this pilot point to voice as central feature of DST, while also



advancing our understanding of DST as arts-inspired inquiry [resonating in particular with those critical arts inspired approaches which have a focus on social justice (e.g., Finley, 2011)]. Watkins and Tacchi (2008) describe “voice poverty” as “the inability of citizens to influence the decisions that affect their lives.” They define voice “as inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes” (p. 14). Voice is joined to localities whereby whose voices are heard, whose count, and whose are excluded depends on the values and structures making up those geographies. Thought of this way, voice was interwoven into this DST initiative because showing the digital stories to the wider community brought the narratives and voices of these youths into the local discussions, programming, and into community discourses more broadly.

In a sense, the young people’s digital stories, served as “polyvocal” spaces or platforms which served to elicit the multiple voices, perspectives, and solutions to issues close to the young people’s hearts (see in Tobin and Davidson, 1990). A democratic space that connected youth and their communities, ignited community dialogue, and a space where youth voices and concerns could be taken seriously in those conversations impacting their lives.

Turning more pointedly to the idea of democracy, we have suggested that through a kind of “symbolic creativity” (Willis, 1990) or symbolic work, the young people were actively shaping both themselves, and the cultural world they lived. As such, we would argue that the process of digital storytelling – taking cultural objects and reworking them to fashion selves through representational means -- is in fact a form democratic action. More specifically it is a form of “radical democracy” (Dolby, 2003). Referring to young people’s engagement with popular culture, Dolby argues that as youth use cultural forms to learn about, construct, and negotiate selves and worlds – through “their creative production” or, as Willis (1990) might write, though “symbolic creativity”,

[youth] contribute to the multiple sites in society: their homes, families, schools, and communities. In this way, young people are not just refashioning private spheres and private identities, but are contributing to the transformation of public spheres, citizenship, and democracy (Dolby, 2003).

Digital storytelling as arts-inspired inquiry pushes youth voice to the fore, helps us to reposition youth as active agents, supports reflecting with youth on the ways in which they construct and make their worlds, and empowers youth to be part of their changing worlds. We focus more closely on the implications of this in the final Frame next.

#### **Frame Four: Implications and Directions**

In the previous Frame we used findings from a pilot study, to consider three points of convergence including identity, aesthetic engagement, and voice, pointing to DST as an arts-inspired inquiry. Here we look more closely at these ideas within the context of indigenous

and marginalized (for instance, socio-economically, culturally, geographically marginalized) young people. We keep a particular focus on implications and directions, with an emphasis on empowerment, participation and engagement, and on DST as a basis for youth program development. We also explore DST as a component of a transformative pedagogy, more specifically used within an arts-inspired “ethnographic pedagogy” (Eglinton, 2013). As noted in Frame Three, the production and distribution of young people’s digital stories offered youth the opportunity to contribute to and distribute amongst local (and wider) communication networks their thoughts, ideas, opinions, stories. Here, we argue that this has particular implications for indigenous and marginalized youth as it intersects with empowerment, participation and engagement. Specifically, as already touched upon, DST itself is underpinned by notions of inclusion, of potentially giving silenced groups a voice to social justice and to activism (Freire, 1970). This Freirean approach potentially breaks down traditional hierarchies including for example, those that exist between youth and their communities, and works to support youth and their communities in recognizing and articulating the issues they want to change, potentially empowering them to make those changes (Berrigan, 1979). Through Freire’s process of “conscientization” youth can explore issues, identities, and oppression through discussion and reflection on images, narratives, and ultimately through the production of a digital story. And, through reflecting on those issues, and finding solutions for change – through critical reflection -- become conscious of and transform their worlds (Gubrium & Scott, 2010).

If youth and community development could be defined as “a process of self-determination”: “a process of change, the direction of which can and should be determined by the people affected by it” (Berrigan, 1979, pp. 11-12), it holds that DST is a potentially empowering tool as it fosters youth participation in the decisions impacting their lives. DST might be thought of as a participatory developmental tool, used, to ameliorate power relations and open up a space for marginalized voices and the possibility of transformation through the production process (e.g., Tacchi, Slater, & Lewis, 2003). These ideas are obviously important for indigenous and marginalized youth whose voices are often left out of important decisions and discussion impacting their lives. On a practical level, DST holds great appeal to young people who are often already engaging in producing and distributing multimedia content, for instance, with friends through social and other new media – often with performance and storytelling at its core (Eglinton, 2013). Further, DST provides a space for youth to explore and reflect on issues in their lives with their communities. Using DST, program development begins with the lives of youth, with what they need rather than what adults think they might need.

Broadly, DST as an arts-inspired approach might be thought of as a “tool rather than a goal” (see, Heeks, 2009, p. 26 in ICTs) in arts education and research. For example, in arts education research, DST techniques which focus on local meanings, identities, and values can

involve youth and researchers in getting at the local power hierarchies and highlight the exclusions and inequalities in the social landscape. Further, as we found in this pilot, culture for youth is constituted of dynamic and changeable practices. Consequently, DST can focus on the ways in which young people are reworking both traditional cultural artifacts (in this case, for example, Inupiaq values) and those global forms (e.g., hip-hop forms) which continuously touch down in local places, and are picked up and used as cultural resources in identity making. In fact, DST as arts inspired inquiry can begin to push into relief “the marginal and the local” (Hall, 1997) for youth, communities, researchers, and educators. This perspective includes the space where the “margins come into representation” (Hall, 1997, p. 183), in this case, the voices of those often silenced young people.

Thinking about DST as a tool rather than a product is significant, as it begins to expand the potential of arts-inspired inquiries and digital storytelling approaches and points to a future direction which, arguably, resonates not only with other arts inspired approaches, but with participatory visual-based research modes across social and applied research disciplines. Specifically, we imagine DST as a form of transformative pedagogy, in this case, a component in Eglinton (2013) notion of arts-inspired “ethnographic pedagogy.”

An arts-inspired ethnographic pedagogy starts with young people as researchers – as participatory visual ethnographers – it focuses on their needs, and on their media making, and is meant to offer youth and educators (as well as community members, facilitators, and other youth practitioners) insights into the issues, struggles, identities, and worlds of the youth themselves. An ethnographic pedagogy is contextual, as it emphasizes identities, both global and local cultural artifacts, and the local cultural experiences of youth. While we refer readers to Eglinton (2013, pp. 174-181) for a deeper explanation of an ethnographic art education, here we highlight DST as arts-inspired inquiry which could be a significant part of this kind of transformative pedagogy.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we began to conceptualize DST as arts-inspired inquiry and, as such, examined its potential to engage young people in processes of identity making, aesthetics, and voice. Using examples from a pilot project working with Alaska Native youth, we showed how DST digital stories could be understood as “tools of identity” (Hannerz, 1983), offering young people opportunities for “symbolic creativity” (Willis, 1990), and have voice, or the capability be heard and to influence their own lives (Watkins and Tacchi, 2008:14). Through examples, we illustrated some ways in which culture, values and gendered ideas of selfhood were deployed through DST in our pilot project. These forms of engagement and empowerment can be linked to notions of active democracy, social change and transformation (Thumim, 2008). In these ways, we imagine the potential of DST as a component in an arts-inspired

“ethnographic pedagogy” (Eglinton, 2013) for indigenous and other marginalized young people. This transformative pedagogical stance is critical, supporting youth in understanding the ways in which structures bear down and impact their self making, and exploring cultural production and its links to the production of self and the betterment of communities. Together, DST complements the idea of radical democracy: recognizing that youth are active innovative people continuously changing themselves and their communities. Finally, using DST as a component of an ethnographic pedagogy would support youth in reflecting on their meanings and identities, in understanding the local, and in exploring for themselves the affective, the lived, the hybrid, and the space where their lives and identities are produced.

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### **About the Authors**

Kristen Ali Eglinton, PhD, is a co-Founder and the Executive Director of Footage Foundation, a not for profit organization dedicated to creating and implementing social change programs, using local technology and media arts, to bring the underrepresented voices of young people into the conversations on the world's most challenging issues including violence against women, forcible displacement, and gender inequalities. She also serves as Director of Footage's award-winning Girl-talk-Girl initiative supporting dialogue between American and Russian young women at-risk to gender violence by creating awareness about their daily challenges through mobile digital stories. Kristen trained as a multi-media artist before receiving a PhD from the University of Cambridge. When not leading the team at Footage, Kristen uses her experience as an applied social scientist and multi-media ethnographer working with vulnerable youth around the globe, and consults in the areas of child and public health, education, financial inclusion, and technology for development. Her clients range from international foundations and non-profits, to Fortune 500 companies, to start-up social enterprises. She is the author of two books including: *Youth Identities, Localities, and Visual Material Culture* (Springer, 2013) a rich participatory ethnography of youth lives across sub-Arctic Canada and New York City.

Aline Gubrium, PhD, Associate Professor of Health Promotion and Policy, University of Massachusetts Amherst, has extensive experience using innovative and collaborative research methodologies, including narrative, visual, and sensory approaches. She is a trained and experienced facilitator of digital storytelling workshops and uses the process in public health research, intervention, and advocacy contexts. As a medical anthropologist, Gubrium has worked in diverse communities, nationally and internationally, including conducting discursive narrative and ethnographic research on gender socialization and substance use among southern, rural African American women; collaborating with community-based partners on an NIH-funded Photovoice project with Latino/a youth focused on parent-child communication about sexuality; heading up a Ford Foundation-funded sensory ethnography project focused on sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice with young parenting Latinas; and leading an NICHD-funded project on using a culture-centered narrative approach for health promotion with nulliparous, pregnant, and/or parenting young Latinas. Currently, Gubrium serves as Co-I on a U01 funded by the NIMHD, which uses a CBPR approach to evaluate the effectiveness of a narratively enhanced intervention in lowering stress and risk of chronic diseases among men of color. Her 2013 and 2015 books explain participatory visual and digital methodologies for social research, health promotion and practice, and advocacy.

Lisa M. Wexler, M.S.W., Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Community Health Education in Health Promotion and Policy within the School of Public Health and Health Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She graduated with her doctorate from the University of Minnesota Twin Cities in 2005 after working as a counselor, community organizer and

researcher in Northwest Alaska. Her collaborative and community-based research utilizes a variety of participatory methods to engage community members—young and old—in inquiry and advocacy to develop programs and services that prevent suicide and foster conditions that support resilience and wellness. This work draws from intergenerational narratives, utilizes social network, ethnographic and digital approaches such as Photovoice and digital storytelling, and highlights Indigenous wisdom in ways that offer individuals, families and tribal communities practical and encouraging possibilities for action.

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