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INTERVENTIONS IN ADOLESCENT LIVES IN AFRICA THROUGH STORY

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Adichie, Chimamanda
adolescent health in Africa
Biko, Steve
Black Consciousness Movement
geographies of story infrastructure
storytelling
Wainaina, Binyavanga
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This essay sets out to show how stories can help shape and change people's understanding of their environment and how it impacts upon them. We report on how these ideas of storytelling informed a March 2020 UKRI GCRF funded Accelerate Hub workshop in Cape Town, South Africa, on narrative and adolescence in Africa, and point to related examples of storytelling interventions from elsewhere on the continent. We then explore questions that the workshop raised about the kinds of storytelling available to young people on the continent today and how understanding people's stories is important for social policy design. The essay draws on the work of the Black Consciousness thinker and activist Steve Biko (1946–77), and of Kenyan writer and activist Binyavanga Wainaina (1971– 2019), to outline the significance of storytelling to projects of individual and collective emancipation. We build the case that there is an uneven geography of stories: that different people have different access to narrative making and therefore to self-envisioning. The essay closes by exploring how better access to infrastructures of storytelling might provide grounds for transformation in young people's lives in Africa, and so might condition our approaches to policy intervention in African contexts. We suggest that linking storytelling, agency and social context to the field of social development and intervention can have important practical benefits for young people across Africa.

Introduction: speaking from where we stand – the importance of story

Wherever in the world we live, stories hold us. The ways in which we perceive, understand and narrate the contexts we inhabit can be the first step to re-evaluating our relations to those contexts and, potentially, to changing them. (Neukrug 2016)

Across cultures, the imaginative stimulus and creative-critical powers of storytelling are widely recognized. Stories give structure to our sense of self, and shape how we understand the past and face the future. As we will discuss, experiential psychology and the medical humanities show that stories can help us rebuild and heal. They demonstrate that “how we see the world” can be as important as “how the world is” in areas of life as fundamental as childhood development and physical health (Greenhalgh 1999). Throughout this essay, story is flexibly defined as a structured way of recounting an experience (in the form of beginning-middle-end, or before-after, for example). At once descriptive and qualitative, these narrative accounts are value-laden, capturing particular ways of looking at the world.

The essay constitutes a hybrid attempt to capture and theorize ongoing work on narrative and pedagogy, as well as draw conclusions for the practical field of social policy interventions. It is in part a thought experiment, using the idea of the “infrastructures of storytelling” to explore the uneven ways that people access platforms to speak and resources to imagine with. We understand the infrastructures of storytelling as the social, technical and material conditions of possibility for narrative and imaginative freedom. At the same time, however, the essay is also a research report, drawing on ongoing projects, largely based in southern Africa, with examples drawn from elsewhere on the continent and in the diaspora, all of which attempt to deploy narrative approaches within social policy and pedagogic interventions.

As co-authors, we contribute from a variety of situations and disciplines. Elleke Boehmer is a professor of world literature and a writer of novels and short stories, with a career trajectory of reflecting critically *and* creatively on the power of story and storytelling, both as a teacher and a practitioner. Archie Davies is a cultural and historical geographer, who has worked on the histories of infrastructural networks, and their colonial dynamics and legacies. Zimpane Kawanu is an early career scholar of world literature in English, with specialism in African and South African literature and particular interests in representation and narrative ethics. As co-authors, we were brought together through our work as humanities scholars contributing to a multi-institutional, social science-led Global Challenges Research Funded project, the Accelerate Hub, looking at social policy interventions among adolescents in Africa (as we enlarge below). This essay emerges from our attempt to think about story and storytelling in the context of positivist

social science and policy oriented research. We are intellectually connected then through two main areas: first, through our interest in the multidisciplinary field of infrastructural studies; second, through the field of literary studies in Africa, and its interests in issues of selfhood and representation (who is telling whose story?).

In the essay, we bring these different fields to bear upon one another and consider the ways in which infrastructure – as a set of social and material technologies, *and* as an analytical field – allows us to think about the power of storytelling, and about unequal access to it. Our conjoined interests in representation and the (in)accessibility of technologies and infrastructures are salient for the questions we explore, about how our environment and other social elements help to make certain forms of stories and certain kinds of intervention possible (or impossible). Everyone can and does tell stories, but the material they have access to and the means to disseminate their stories differ, as does the value placed on those stories by others. Considering the infrastructures of story highlights that the potential power and platform of some people’s stories is constrained. At the same time, we recognize that stories give invaluable insight into other people’s worlds and dreams that agencies and organizations ignore at their peril in designing and implementing social policy – and at the peril of the success of those policies.

The South African Black Consciousness thinker Steve Biko (1946–77) argued that being oppressed involves being subjected to an imposed narrative which determines how we see and value ourselves in the world. As he emphasized: “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (Biko [1978] 2017, 101–102). This thinking forms a watchword for our efforts to outline the significance of storytelling to projects of individual and collective emancipation. Biko suggested that in order to challenge internalized oppression, we need to see the impact of our environment on the stories we tell about ourselves. As we expound in more detail later, this insight about the impact of dominant narratives helps us to begin to perceive the internalization and address it. From this it follows that resisting oppression essentially means interrogating infrastructures and wresting narrative agency from the oppressor. Telling our own story helps to give an actual account of our circumstances and encourages us to speak critically from where we stand. As Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) believed, “awakening” Black people entailed speaking in a language that is “our own”. Articulating their situation, Black people recuperate their agency (Biko [1978] 2017). In short, stories are not only formative but also revisable. Through storytelling we can – at least potentially – analyze and think beyond our current situation, and find ways of intervening in and changing it.

1 Alidou insightfully points out that “the agents of imperialism”, in particular, blamed “liberal arts education ... for the rise of anti-colonial nationalism” (34).

Across the twentieth century, African and Caribbean writers and thinkers from Frantz Fanon ([1961] 2001) to Ousseina Alidou (2000), Suzanne Césaire (2009), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986), repeatedly made the case for the need to “decolonize the mind” – a case closely related to Biko’s.¹ From the 1980s onwards, cultural studies and postcolonial studies analyzed the production and reproduction of ideology as a field of power within contemporary liberal capitalism (Hall 2016). The discussion in this essay about freedom and imagination recognizably walks alongside these long-standing postcolonial debates over ideology, culture, hegemony, and resistance. We do not make any claims to rewriting these conceptual fields, but rather are attempting to put to work the idea, first, that storytelling might improve young people’s lives by helping to resist and reshape the stories told about them, and, second, as importantly, that narrative-based pedagogies offer methodologies for accessing and strengthening individual understandings of the world. These understandings, embodied in story, can help to interrogate hegemonic structures.

Our essay is a deliberate and self-conscious attempt, therefore, to apply the commitments of humanities scholarship and postcolonial studies in sites in which they are not always in the foreground: social policy interventions for adolescents across sub-Saharan Africa. Our leading question is to ask how narrative approaches can be integrated into and expand social policy interventions, especially among these young people. Otherwise put: how do ideas about storytelling, agency and context relate to the field of social policy, development and intervention? To address this, we link these ideas to ongoing projects that work with African adolescents to develop social policy interventions that can help achieve the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).² We hope to demonstrate that the practice of storytelling itself, and the changed understanding of our environment that storytelling makes possible, can help to improve policy interventions. But we also show that our access to storytelling activities and education is uneven, especially in situations of poverty and precarity.

2 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>. On how development accelerators like those being developed in the Accelerate Hub can progress multiple SDGs, see Cluver et al. (2019).

Overall, thinking with stories gives us ways of understanding how people relate to interventions, and how interventions can best be implemented. Stories also influence how such interventions are put together, and so help us to understand their impacts. Indeed, by addressing the significance of the narratives that guide people’s life-experiences, it might be possible to intervene directly to enable people to access more positive stories, more manifold kinds of stories, and narratives that might help them better realize themselves, reshaping their sense of being in the world.

Storytelling and infrastructure: working definitions

In our research we speak for the importance of story on all sides in any situation of intervention. We consider the stories that drive the interventions, the stories that are told about young people, and the stories young people tell about themselves. All such interventions are fuelled, first, by understandings of how their subjects' lives are lived, experienced and narrated; and, second, by stories of how a caring institution or well-meaning international donor might create a positive outcome for a particular community.

The idea of story that we are working with in our project is not limited to the formal expression of narratives in novels, songs, or films. It draws in all narratives that populate our daily life and shared experience, and includes, for instance, what socio-linguist Alexandra Georgakopoulou has called “small stories” – “the personal, past experience stories of non-shared events” (2007, vii). Our understanding of the shaping and transformative power of story correlates with wider research on narrative approaches in medicine, economics and psychology. In the medical humanities, the work of Rita Charon (2008), Trisha Greenhalgh (1999), and Elizabeth Outka (2019), amongst others, shows how art can help structure and alleviate experiences such as illness and care, even when those experiences seem to lack structure and closeness (see also Cavarero 2000; Frank [1995] 2013). In support of this approach, the philosopher Pierre Hadot points out that “contemplative-poetic” science – that is, the ways of knowing we find in the humanities – is as crucial as empirical science as a means of better understanding people’s “emotional, social, and familial needs” (2006, 156; Charon 2008, 8). Robert Shiller’s now widely cited work in economics further demonstrates that stories can “go viral and [even] drive major economic events”, as his evocative title puts it (2019; see also Whitfield 2020).

A recent report on the first three weeks of the Covid-19 lockdown in South Africa clearly underlines the importance of storytelling as a platform for young people to articulate their needs (Iskander 2020). The research showed how responsive they were to accurate, hopeful stories of recovery involving people “like them”. Taking place at a similar moment, just before the pandemic, our “Narrative and Adolescence” workshop bore out these ideas. It pointed not only to the importance of story, but also to our need to feel that wherever we are in the world, our stories are of value; that there are vital stories about *here* where *we* stand that need to be told. Our project therefore also wanted to find out what kinds of access young people had to stories and story platforms, and how they related to the dominant stories about them circulating in their communities and the media.

With the term “infrastructure” we denote the underpinning capacities and technologies that enable and stratify social life, and provide space for education and imagination (Jacobs 1996; Baumann 2018; Nuttall 2018). Just

as water provision is undergirded by a particular set of infrastructures (pipes and pumps, as well as institutions and social relations), so storytelling and dissemination needs schools, publishers, community spaces, digital platforms, and more. (For a range of reference on infrastructures, see Cowen 2014; Easterling 2014; Khalili 2020). Importantly, infrastructures like transport systems but also educational and media institutions tend to produce spaces in relation to one another – connecting some places, disconnecting others, stratifying access, splintering communities. As this implies, infrastructures have both emancipatory and oppressive uses – and the infrastructures of storytelling are no exception.

In what follows, we draw on the notion of uneven infrastructures to complicate the idea that storytelling and narrative is an intrinsic or “natural” human capacity. It may be so, but like all “natural” human qualities, it is actually social and structured, too. However, we also insist that those situations of uneven access can be interrogated. A right to tell your own story must also entail a right to the conditions of possibility to tell multiple stories; that is, it entails access to the infrastructures that support our ability to tell and share our stories, and imagine differently. As well as restricting choice, storytelling activities can emerge as sites for interventions that are open-ended, inclusive and expansive.

Different narratives, better interventions?

Our analysis of the uneven infrastructures of story underpins our attempt to make sense of our ongoing research as part of the UKRI GCRF 2019–24 Accelerating Achievement for Africa’s Adolescents Hub (Accelerate Hub) – an initiative funded by UK Research and Innovation through the Global Challenges Research Fund.³ The Accelerate Hub’s ambitious goal is “to improve outcomes for 20 million adolescents and their children, in 34 countries across Africa” by using combinations of services such as cash transfers, malaria prophylaxis, and parenting support programmes. Our research is specifically associated with the “Innovation” Work Package of this project, led by Elleke Boehmer and Chris Desmond, collaborating with research assistants Archie Davies, Zimpande Kawanu, and Hillary Musarurwa. Keeping an ongoing emphasis on qualitative research, the work package builds on the Hub’s concern that the services people use should conjugate with their interests and aspirations.

Throughout, our research thinks through how young people in sub-Saharan African countries understand themselves in their contexts: what stories do they tell about their lives and about their environments? As importantly, how do they get hold of and share the stories that can provide them

3 On the Accelerate Hub emphasis on qualitative as well as quantitative research in Africa in line with the UN’s SDGs, see <https://www.gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FS008101%2F1>.

with models of liberated thought? We also consider how inequality configures their relation to storytelling. Might their worlds be so unequal that they see self-affirming life-narratives as the property of elites located at a distance from their lives? In many African contexts the charity narrative in which Africa is the passive recipient of aid and the African young person poor and uneducated has long reconfirmed hierarchies between Europe and the continent (Rodney 2018). Our work looks at the other narratives that might be available to change young people's understanding of their contexts and their futures. How do they use storytelling to respond to their often precarious, unequal, and oppressive environments?

In a March 2020 Accelerate Hub workshop in Cape Town, "Narrative and Adolescence", we considered how stories operate in young people's lives and in their interactions with social policy.⁴ We were keen to investigate how storytelling methodologies might empower young people in the ways Biko described. Can a Black Consciousness approach to young people narrating their own stories influence the interventions being made by institutions and organizations into their lives? Might a recognition of the need for people to tell their own stories from their own contexts and points of view reshape such interventions and how young people approach them? Can narrative strategies mediate between individual young people's worldviews (and those of their parents and guardians) and the priorities of agencies, governments, and donors?

The Narrative and Adolescence workshop brought together youth workers and youth groups as well as academic researchers and professional storytellers and writers for three days of group work and interaction (1–3 March). Two of the youth groups included performers and a fashion collective, respectively, Lesedi Arts and Ubuntu Trends. The other youth participants in attendance came from Ikamva Youth, a remedial programme that offers support and guidance to children from various townships in Cape Town.⁵ The participants ranged in age from fourteen to twenty-two, with the younger participants mostly associated with Ikamva Youth. We selected the participants through a combination of independent searches and by drawing from existing Accelerate Hub connections and databases, in particular Hub colleagues' long-standing remedial work with Teen Advisory Groups (TAGs) in townships around Cape Town and in the Eastern Cape. There was inevitably an arbitrary element to the selection, but we were always guided by these Hub contact points and their references, and by the availability of participants. We also involved the local poets Lisa Julie and Siphokazi Jonas, who both have Spoken Word and performative experience (Julie 2017; "A Conversation" 2019).

All of our workshop activities focused on the kinds of stories that impact how young people relate to the world. Through conversation, performance, readings, role-play, singing, drawing, and storytelling, we explored how the

4 An in-house report on the Narrative and Adolescence workshop 1–3 March 2020 can be found at <https://www.acceleratehub.org/files/narrativeandadolescencehubworkshopreport27042020pdf>.

5 www.ikamvayouth.org.

adolescents exercised agency through different forms of creative practice, from drawing, through enactment, to song and dance exercises. We looked at how storytelling and performance provided a platform allowing them to come together and construct what Steve Biko termed an “envisioned self” – a self that was responsive to their situation, but that also allowed them to think critically about it. At the same time, we explored the ways in which their environments might restrict their storytelling, and how they might confront those restrictions.

Our activities and conversations immediately showed that there are, of course, many different ways of thinking about story and narrative, not least when it comes to adolescent narratives. As one of the workshop participants, Devlin Matthews, observed, adolescents have to navigate “negative” stories about them, such as tales of gangsters and pregnant teenage girls. These representations of youth as delinquent or promiscuous, Devlin stressed, are often exaggerated in public discourse. Many of the young people felt that the stories imposed upon them by the media or chiding parents tended to be negative, in the sense that they were chastising or moralizing, rebuking teenagers for their alleged promiscuity, as participant Pretty Sakeni also commented. Meanwhile, “positive” stories that make it into the media tend to be tales of exceptional breakthrough, of overcoming the odds and survival. These often feature brave heroes, sparky trend-setters, and valiant underdogs – types to which “ordinary” individuals, however, find it challenging to relate. The adolescents in our workshops tended to see positive stories about escape and self-improvement as remote, coming from elsewhere. They did not believe – quite reasonably – that places of self-betterment were easily accessible to them. However, this is not to say that the range of positive or appropriate stories available to them was limited: the relationship between self-actualization and imagination is evidently much more complex than this.

For the adolescents, breakthrough stories generally involved a migratory escape from their communities to affluent places abroad, often with a later return to assist their home community with newfound resources and networks. The archetype of the breakthrough figure presented an exceptional individual who was often figured as beyond the reach of a “normal” adolescent, as they said. To them, local places were often barren of opportunity, including the opportunity to access exciting and empowering stories. For the participants in the workshop, the process of telling stories clearly provided a platform to articulate the relationship between selfhood and the world. Yet, at the same time, a lack of opportunities in the form of infrastructure and resources was seen to restrict the artistic and recreational activity that would encourage and configure new kinds of storytelling. Open-ended workshops like ours could give a sense of greater opportunity and a wider

narrative spectrum to young people, but they were inevitably one-off and often time-limited.

Our findings from the workshop are supported by data gathered from two Hub-related projects, the Teen Advisory Groups or TAG programme (2016–), already mentioned, and a creative writing competition for children in Nigeria (2013–18). The first, the TAG programme, draws on storytelling techniques as ways through which participants can articulate challenging experiences. In one notable instance, a young man composed and later recorded a song laying out the pressures to conform to a certain type of masculinity to which he felt teenage boys like him were subjected. In performing the song, the young man not only found an outlet through which to express these constraints, but also gave programme leaders insight into the social dynamics that young men in townships experience, and how policies impacting their lives might be shaped.

The second project, the Nigerian National Creative Writing Competition, is organized by Accelerate Hub researcher and workshop participant Isang Awah, and is an annual, free-to-enter competition run through My Rainbow Books Limited.⁶ It is open to children aged five to sixteen years old who are either resident in Nigeria or of Nigerian nationality. Judging from the submitted work, the characters that the young participants create often face challenges that mirror their own circumstances, “thereby suggesting that writing these stories may be some sort of narrative intervention for young people”, as Awah notes.⁷ With their story-writing, the adolescents also find channels through which to dream and “work towards a brighter future”. We return to this case study later as part of a further discussion of the uneven geographies of storytelling.

Throughout the March 2020 workshop the young people demonstrated that they were motivated by different kinds of story, and different kinds of storytelling interventions; not only by standard stories, such as about national heroes, but by a wide spectrum of story-forms, ranging from Cinderella tales to self-help narratives. They also enjoyed the creativity of performance and improvisation. The presence at the workshop of groups and individuals who work with young people through facilitating and encouraging storytelling, including the poets, gave us many rich examples of how inventive storytelling can *itself* offer the means of improving or helping to improve the lives of African adolescents.⁸ For example, the fashion collective Ubuntu Trends put on a fashion show showcasing their clothing and design. Interestingly, they drew their themes from Afro-futurist aesthetics and super-hero story-motifs such as those of the 2019 movie *Black Panther*. In modelling the clothing, they simultaneously celebrated and critically engaged with African-centric aesthetics, at times transforming themselves imaginatively even if fleetingly into fictional super-heroes, at times wryly and quirkily responding to mainstream ideas of African masculinity.

6 The competition website is at <http://www.myrainbowbooks.com/index.php/en/>.

7 Isang Awah, personal communication to the co-authors, 25 December 2020.

8 The groups were Clowns Without Borders, an international NGO that uses clowning techniques to draw out complex stories in challenging circumstances, and the Children’s Radio

Foundation, which supports projects to train young people as reporters to tell stories in and of their local communities.

Informal, community, family, and autonomous structures for storytelling evidently exist across all societies, not least in Africa, but, as we suggest, they are also often inaccessible to agencies or governments seeking to help improve young people’s lives. In part this is because international agencies and governments often don’t have access to on-the-ground stories, rooted in local social and cultural perspectives and told in African languages. Structural and capacity-related factors also play a role in the failure to link to local stories, such as where imbalances in power cause alienation or suspicion, or where constraints on time and resources limit or break connection. The response of the workshop participants to the storytelling activities usefully emphasized how effective such creative projects can be, even when conducted in short bursts. This then encouraged us to consider how storytelling in all its facets (as activity, as self-construction, and as context transformation) might operate as a tool within social policy interventions themselves. How does thinking about their lives and their contexts through the medium of story offer young people not only ways of coping but also mechanisms for responding to and questioning their conditions?

Uneven geographies of story

As we have begun to see, although we may be able to tell our own stories, this isn’t always under conditions of our choosing. The geographies of narrative and storytelling are uneven. Who you are and where you come from affect the narratives you have available to feed your imagination and to construct your sense of self. Economic, social, political, historical and geographic factors impose limits on the distribution of creative work.

It is important to insist that we could, of course, construct versions of this argument in relation to young people right across the world. Creativity, imagination and storytelling are obviously not correlated to wealth. Indeed, some of the wealthiest adolescents might have some of the most restrictive story models available to them (for popular and intersectional accounts, respectively, see Sales [2016] and Reynolds [2016]). These young people often experience profound limitations on the range and variety of their possibilities for self-realization. Yet there are people for whom material conditions – both of limited freedom and socioeconomic context – compromise access to a multiplicity of possible narratives, and to platforms to make their stories heard. For them, as for the young people we have worked with, there is an uneven access to media and forums to tell, and hear, stories about themselves.

The worldwide, but nevertheless uneven, spread of social media is just one demonstration of the importance of constructing individual stories and

9 <http://www.ego-media.org/>.

10 See

Georgakopoulou (2016); see also <https://www.psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-03849-001>.

Access to story platforms, like access to health, wealth and opportunity, is thus related to the wider unequal distribution of resources flowing from capitalist and neocolonial power relations.

platforms, but also of the limitations of such activities. Georgakopoulou and others' research on the so-called "ego-media" explores the interaction between the representation of self and the technology platforms of social media.⁹ But these platforms are not innocent, not least in terms of the kinds of narrative structures and story models that they produce and ceaselessly reproduce.¹⁰ Although social media stories of the self can help to underline the importance of telling one's own story, they demonstrate, too, the limitations of the platforms and structures through which selves are expressed, not least, in their impermanence and vulnerability to online abuse.

A specific set of dynamics is also at work in places that are distant from, and different to, the central nodes of popular culture and its production and distribution. The interactions we had with young people at the workshop, and in the wider project, suggest that reasons for narrative inequality also include the lack of representation of certain people, cultures, and regions in popular culture. Dominant social value-systems under neoliberal capitalism promote the accumulation of wealth, and associate individual freedom with consumption.

Access to different types of stories

In many southern African countries, education and, increasingly, entrepreneurship continue to be the primary narratives of social aspiration in the popular imagination. Yet resources and infrastructures for making and sharing powerful new stories are lacking, especially in the townships. As we observed, stories of go-getters and self-made heroes are promoted; others are silenced and denigrated. These inequalities are exacerbated by factors like language differences and accent-marking. Class intervenes in whose stories are accepted into central narratives. In South Africa, for instance, new research suggests that the growing black middle class is highly sensitive to accent, and that fluency in English is treated as coextensive with intelligence.¹¹ This means that education may not be a universal panacea. Based even on the contingencies of accent, stories of self-making and world-shaping are unevenly available to young people.

In Nigeria, the My Rainbow Books Creative Writing Competition showed that some of the young participants were reluctant to view themselves as central protagonists in their own stories, despite their interest in writing them. One of the reasons was the dearth of stories to which they have access that reflect their experiences. In her research, the competition organizer Isang Awah (2019) shows that the range of available stories influences the children's writing style and the themes that they reproduce in their work. The participants in the creative writing competition displayed a tendency to

11 A Model C or private school accent often carries a higher social value. See the work of Buhle Zuma, who worked with a group of University of Cape Town undergraduates to show how "a typical middle-class English accent was set as a benchmark for acceptance into

particular friendship groups”. Our point about accents is pertinent in the broader context of South Africa with its complicated history of exclusion. Boundaries have always been negotiated: pre-1994, through “passing” as white; now, through passing as educated. See <https://www.iol.co.za/lifestyle/family/talk-white-and-well-be-friends-1529977> (IOL, June 10, 2013). See also Rudwick (2008).¹² https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

(re)stage stories set abroad. In context, this was not that surprising. When lived experience on the so-called global margins is seen through the lens of deprivation, places of affluence – particularly abroad – naturally become compelling, as they were in the South African example. The general preponderance of stories depicting the lives of children in affluent circumstances conditions the way young Nigerians value what stories are told. Against this, the Nigerian competition offers an alternative by encouraging participants to write personalized stories that reflect their own experiences and environment.

At the Narrative and Adolescence workshop, the young people expressed very similar views to the Nigerian adolescents. These responses came out strongly in conversations about a set of readings from Binyavanga Wainana and Chimamanda Adichie, as well as Steve Biko. In 2009 the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie famously spoke of the “danger of a single story”.¹² The single story of Africa, as she urges throughout her work, “ultimately comes ... from Western literature”. Adichie lays out the risks inherent to this singularization of narrative – risks and limitations with which workshop participants agreed.

Freeing our imaginations

As is Adichie’s, the work of the Kenyan writer, journalist and activist Binyavanga Wainaina (1971–2019) is helpful for exploring in greater depth how we ideate against “single stories”. Wainaina’s anticolonial approach to storytelling speaks powerfully to our core question of how we foster ways of accessing and creating a heterogeneous array of stories. It also reminds us to attend to both the content and the form of the stories that structure adolescent lives in Africa.

In Wainaina’s 2014 series of talks “We must free our imaginations” – a mix of stories, polemic, and autobiography – he argued there was a crisis of imagination in Kenyan education.¹³ Following an approach comparable to Biko’s, Wainaina drew a direct line between authoritarian tendencies in education and culture in Kenya and the legacy of a British colonial education (Alidou 2000). A colonial education, he noticed, fosters “obedient” not creative minds. Similar to Awah’s project, Wainaina argued that in the Kenyan education system “people write stories, but they are from the syllabus”. The syllabus was full of “moral crap”. Instead, he called for excitement, idiosyncrasy, sci-fi, and freedom, declaring: “I will not photocopy, I will not photocopy, I will not photocopy”.

Exploring the struggle to free the imagination, Wainaina’s work analyze narratives of “Africa rising”, of the productive and entrepreneurial self, and

¹³ See Binyavanga Wainaina’s YouTube talks: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5uAoBu9Epg>. See also Wainaina (2019). Our quotations are taken from these talks, transcribed by Archie Davies.

of the disciplinary homogenization that excludes possibilities for expressing difference. These narratives, he suggests, intersect. Pentecostal megachurches, for instance, encourage an idea that there is only one way to live a good life, only one way to be spiritual and be productive, and so on. For Wainaina, these interlacing authoritarian narratives of homogeneity, individualism, and productivity place the blame for poverty on the individual: “the problem is you, the problem is you”.

Wainaina also influentially exposed the dangerous stories that condition ideas of Africa. Drawing on the cultural history of the “witch hunt”, he showed how difference can become the target of violence, and how exclusionary narratives can operate as a weapon. He traced the colonial and racist inheritances of the structuring stories that still carve up the continent, enabling many kinds of violence and injustice: “People are dying in exactly the boundary that the *mzungu* made ... that’s a bankruptcy of a certain kind of imagination”. For Wainaina, therefore, the possibility of creating new stories is also a geopolitical force. Crucially, stimulating this force requires a multiplicity of stories, and of modes of self-actualization: “We are in charge of our fate, and in charge of our future. We can agree not to cooperate, but we agree our ecosystem needs many kinds of things, and many kinds of people, in all kinds of ways. And that’s not a peace deal, that’s an offence. You have to go into the offence, to make new things”.

Within Wainaina’s way of speaking, we can hear and see his theory of narrative at work. His polemic unravels through ventriloquizing the fixed disciplinary narratives which corral our lives. Focusing on African contexts, he returns to reported stories – “they say ...” – and exposes the authoritarian narratives which restrict imaginations: “When you make your child fear things outside of their window, things they can’t see, you have trapped your child. You have just trapped your child to be unable to imagine. Because you have trapped your child into imagining fears”. Wainaina’s polyphony of intersecting stories combats a mainstream, singularizing narrative. He emphasizes that the right to be able to imagine your own life in a way of your own choosing is a right which can be – and is – contravened by socio-economic conditions, but also by limiting visions of the world.

Steve Biko similarly argued the capacity of people to come to their own forms of consciousness is vital to the pursuit of liberty ([1978] 2017, 101–102). The Black Consciousness Movement he led in South Africa in the 1970s bore down on the psychological inferiority complex that he saw oppressed people internalizing. As does Wainaina, Biko showed that having access to numerous possible stories can work against this complex. It allows us to question the restrictive structures and negative environments that are oppressing us. Different, manifold stories open channels to self-realization. But this is an ongoing task. Articulating *and* rearticulating your own understanding of the world is a prerequisite to overcoming oppression.

Here we are under no illusions that the infrastructures of storytelling can by themselves reconfigure the apparatus of ideology. We are also aware that what might be called narrative therapy – the idea of being able to share our stories, and access different kinds of story – can seem naïve and puny given the oppressive ideologies we still face. Against this, it is helpful to see storytelling as an extension of the idea that a critical education is a methodological route towards self-creation and freedom, as most paradigmatically captured in the work of Paulo Freire and the field of critical pedagogy. Freire advocated passionately that opportunities for dialogue including story-making amongst the oppressed about the conditions of their oppression be expanded, so they are better able “to name their world and ... thus transform it” ([1972] 2012, 49–50). In this way, he argued, the oppressed can “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (49).

Education is a key infrastructure of narrative creation and dissemination, as Freire and also Ngũgĩ’s essays repeatedly remind us. A lack of access to schools and universities stifles possibilities of self-realization, but the content and nature of education are also critical. Multiple narrative forms and imaginative ways forward are central to a pedagogy of freedom. Wainaina’s work recalls the writing of Sylvia Federici (2004) and others (Federici, Caffentzis, and Alidou 2000) in establishing the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (1980s–2000s). We refer to the committee’s arguments not to analyze contemporary African universities, but for their focus on how infrastructures of education underpin knowledge production and the possibilities for myriad open stories of the social world. In the context of structural adjustment, they point to “the dramatic deterioration of the educational infrastructure” (2000, 20) that led to international funding bodies “taking over the infrastructural facilities of African universities ... while the normal curriculum courses are condemned to slow asphyxiation and marginalization” (21). An autonomous education system is a vital infrastructure of narrative possibility, as they write, and the mechanisms of ideological dissemination are practical and material. In Federici’s analysis, these constitute the “infrastructural facilities” of universities themselves. Across the formerly imperial world, not least in Africa, colonial infrastructures persist in complex ways (Boehmer and Davies 2018). As in Wainaina’s account of the Kenyan school system, the planned violence of colonial design is maintained in the present structures of postcolonial institutions and media. A vast proportion of the films, books, and visual culture consumed and experienced in Africa is made, distributed, and funded elsewhere, in many cases either in formerly imperial countries such as Britain and France, or in the neo-imperial United States and China. The global literary industry is “metropolitan-dominated”, leading to catastrophically low levels of book production in some parts of the world, many of these in Africa (Huggan 2001, 51; Slaughter 2007, 313;

Krishnan 2018, 137–174). Though social policy interventions may not address questions of disinvestment and privatization, we can deploy these insights on the important infrastructures of thought and story to reimagine the relationships between those who intervene and those who are intervened upon. Expanding independent educational and technological infrastructures can help create the conditions of possibility for free imaginations. On this reckoning, one of the most constructive interventions in Africa today may well be the establishment of autonomous new universities, schools, and libraries.

Storytelling infrastructure: new initiatives

Beyond these vital formal sectors, collective structures and facilities such as community media, broadcasting, digital platforms, theatre, and narrative therapy can allow young people to think differently about themselves and generate creative epistemologies. Here we again remember the enthusiasm with which the young people participated in the March 2020 workshop. Creative and educational activities grounded in their environment give people the ability to tell both collective and individual stories from their own situations.

As we have seen, far from being automatic or incidental, uneven infrastructural relations are intimately connected to structures of socioeconomic power.¹⁴ However, critical analysis can help to demystify and begin to remake the infrastructures by which storytelling capacity is distributed. As AbdouMaliq Simone has influentially shown, if people themselves, through their sociality, labour, and even their own bodies, often become “technologies of circulation” in the most intimate, invasive, and violent ways, they can also work to resist those interferences (2004; see also Doshi 2017; Anand 2017). Used in a self-aware, informed manner, these various forms of embodiment can also have the effect of reconfiguring work arrangements, domestic relations, and the times and spaces of everyday lives (Cowen 2019).

The Teen Advisory Groups (TAGs), introduced earlier, and Stories in Transit, outlined below, are two 2010s narrative-based projects that have provided constructive outlets for young people on the continent and in the diaspora. They point to some of the creative and practical ways in which infrastructures for storytelling can be developed and remade. We believe that projects set up along these lines can improve the efficacy and adaptability of different kinds of social policy interventions. Specifically, they can help those who want to deliver services to respect and respond to the lived experiences and worldviews of adolescents in Africa.

14 Key works in the last two decades of this research include Marvin and Graham (2001), Kaika (2005), Gandy (2014), and Larkin (2013).

15 See <https://www.acceleratehub.org/adolescent-engagement>.

Storytelling initiatives as used in the TAGs aim to shed light on how multiple, complex testimonies can encompass a diverse range of African adolescent experiences.¹⁵ Connecting academics, researchers, and adolescents, the TAG programme gives the young people a platform to tell their stories without imposing a frame, or giving explicit or implicit promises. It focuses on relatable “small stories” that capture something vivid, typical, and/or problematic about the young people’s lives. The TAG adolescent participants – some of them teenage mothers and people affected by HIV/AIDS – are encouraged to express their agency through acting and performance, so gaining greater understanding of those experiences and of ways of finding solutions to the problems they face. The young man’s song described in the “Different narratives” section above was one such creative performance. Crucially, the young people are addressed not merely as subjects, but as agents helping to direct and design wellbeing and poverty alleviation initiatives. Such consultative processes also draw in creative ways on narrative strategies to build and enhance relations between researchers and participants (Oli-veras et al. 2018).

The “Stories in Transit/*Storie in transito*” project, based in Palermo, Sicily since 2016, works with young refugees from North and West Africa, encouraging storytelling as a way of getting perspective on their lives. Importantly, the stories involved do not need to be the young people’s own stories. Rather, the project takes the narration of story – of *any* story – as self-validating. As the project directors Marina Warner and Valentina Castagna (2019) describe, the initiative begins with the view that the expression of culture is a fundamental human right. Literature and orature provide powerful even if “immaterial” forms of shelter and succour as well as the grounds on which to rally to meet an uncertain future, especially when “one’s identity becomes faded” by migration. It holds that imaginative works of myth, legend, fairy-tale, and fable can “map geographies of home onto surroundings that are not home”. In a context in which the autobiographical is the form that arrivants are instructed to adopt to meet the legal regulations for asylum, the groups are instead encouraged to narrate or act out stories from the myth-trove of different ancient cultures, such as the Arabian Nights or the Gilgamesh story. Initial findings are that these activities are not merely “entertaining”; they also change how the young refugees perceive themselves in relation both to their lost former lives and to the society they now inhabit. The storytelling infrastructure the project opens to them helps them make informed decisions about ways forward. Even stories that bore no relationship to their lives nonetheless increased wellbeing, improved mental health, and accelerated social integration.

Conclusion: storytelling initiatives and African futures

If we think stories matter, then it matters not just what stories we tell, but how stories are accessed, heard, and disseminated. If, as seems to be the case, individuals feel empowered by having access to storytelling, and by hearing stories that speak to their own conditions, then there is a case for policy-makers and researchers to intervene to make more stories and better storytelling infrastructures available to more young people – on the African continent and beyond. Indeed, coupled with the involvement of “local” stories, there should also be a provision of a range of stories spanning the familiar to the unfamiliar. The problem is always the insistence and persistence of a single story. The important thing to correct is the lack of institutions and infrastructure allowing for self-expression, self-representation and self-making activities. State resources need to be directed towards the creation or the bolstering of such infrastructure. For instance, in the community of Vrygrond from which two of the workshop’s creative groups came, Ubuntu Trends and Lesedi Arts, there is only one community centre – one space where community members can hold theatrical events. Though some infrastructure is admittedly available for self-expression, there are no follow-up resources for ongoing maintenance and expansion.

In short, storytelling can work as part of approaches to social policy interventions, but story-based activities need support and backing. To draw on the terms of the Accelerate Hub’s own self-description, storytelling forums and media could be put to work alongside other services like parenting classes to deliver multiple SDGs, including better physical and mental health and gender equality.

Alongside offering services such as violence prevention programmes and cash transfers, we can expand and adapt the delivery of services to incorporate better infrastructures of storytelling. This could mean funding storytelling workshops, Spoken Word slams, open-access digital projects, and community radio stations.¹⁶ It could also mean supporting independent publishing, fashion labels, art projects, and poetry projects. In respect of international funding streams, it could even mean direct budgetary support for African ministries of culture, as well as African ministries of public health and education.

Initiatives such as these demonstrate the need to better understand the stories that young people tell about themselves, and the stories and models that they respond to. They also justify concrete, ongoing support to the thousands of projects and creative artists who already seek to draw out, expand, disseminate, and nurture young people’s stories across the continent. Designing appropriate interventions should not mean uncritically accepting or reproducing singular narratives of self-improvement or the entrepreneurial individual. Rather, it means multiplying our understanding of the many

16 Of the adolescents we were working with, not all had access to smart phones, and of those who did, some had devices whose connectivity was fragile. Data in southern Africa is also costly. Therefore, devices such as television and radio are primary sources for accessing news, general

information, and popular culture. This dynamic is what still makes radio a relevant medium for reaching adolescents.

ways in which individual lives map onto stories, and stories, both familiar and unfamiliar, onto lives.

As researchers, we need to recognize ever more energetically that the adolescents we work with are already complex people with conflicting and multiple desires, living in unequal, contradictory circumstances. Achieving this will involve encouraging adolescents to tell their stories, not just the stories of their lives but the stories they enjoy. We certainly need to find better ways to *hear* the stories young people tell about their worlds. Listening to their stories can help us collectively identify, with them, the kinds of interventions that would work best to improve their lives. There might even be ways of constructing policies that tap into those stories, and respect and reinforce their creativity and multiplicity. The infrastructures of storytelling can be a powerful force for change.

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