Encountering through Storytelling: Whose Tellings?

Parinita: Who tells the stories that shape the canon of our imagination?

Welcome back to the second episode of our Encountering through Storytelling series. Our first episode explored why it's important to make room for multiple stories. In this episode, we will focus on the storytellers and how they find new ways to tell existing stories.

An increasing number of people are reclaiming narratives that erased their cultural histories. Such retellings offer another way to encounter difference and consider alternative perspectives. Philosopher Rosine Kelz's example challenged and expanded the mainstream understanding of how humans have impacted the environment. She emphasised that the storytelling here has wide-reaching consequences on topics as diverse as colonisation, climate change and people's lives today. Here, she reflects on one of the theories for how the climate crisis actually began.

Rosine Kelz: A third hypothesis advanced by Lewis and Maslin proposes the paradoxical date of 1610. This date is paradoxical because it marks not a spike but a fall in the CO_2 emission in the atmosphere brought on by the collapse of human population in the Americas in the wake of European colonisation. The unbelievable violence of European conquest, which brought with it famine and new diseases the Europeans transmitted as well as the implementation of slavery, led the population drop from an estimated 54 - 62 million prior to European arrival to about 6 million in 1650; so a 90% drop.

While this might go beyond Lewis and Maslin's intention, retelling the story of the Anthropocene as the history of European colonialism does not only make quite a bit of sense when we look at the CO_2 and methane emission records, it highlights the political and ethical implications of picking specific Anthropocene storylines.

Seen from the perspective of colonial history and post-colonial theory, the European enlightenment in the 18th century and industrialisation in the 19th, it's not a story of technological ingenuity and progress, spreading from Europe across the world with the unfortunate but technologically fixable side-effect of affecting planetary systems. Instead, violent European expansion was of key importance for setting in motion social and economic processes of industrialisation. Colonial rule had lasting environmental effects around the world from the implementation of plantation agriculture - producing the cotton and sugar, fuel for early industrialisation - to the exchange of animals and plants which at least contributes to the mass extinction events we are also becoming more aware of currently.

Finally, the European colonizers violently imposed their understanding of human-nature relationships, but in an age where the natural world is there to be manipulated and exploited for financial gain. And the right to inhabit land was directly linked to its exploitation.

Telling a universal narrative of the human species' inadvertent modification of the planet which has now led us to the doorstep of planetary environmental catastrophe overlooks crucial historical and contemporary differences - that those countries and populations most responsible historically and currently for anthropogenic climate change are the least affected. It overlooks that for many people the unthinkable catastrophe - that the world as they knew it is destroyed - lies not only in the future, but also in their historical past and in their present.

So concluding this talk on a very different note than it began, I guess that for me this discussion of the Anthropocene and climate change relates to the notion of encountering difference because it shows an often implicit tendency to talk about universal humanity and mean the experience of

relatively rich people living in the Global North; who, for example, could deal with a 2° overall temperature rise which would make much of the Global South uninhabitable. Glossing over the differences of how people are affected by environmental destruction and climate change today, I believe it is often linked to a wilful forgetting of European history with encountering those they have seen as others.

Parinita: Among other things, Rosine's point also alerts us to the consequences of who is allowed to tell what kinds of stories. Poet and writer Nadine Aisha Jassat discussed how people challenge established norms of stories and storytellers in order to reclaim space in the narrative that otherwise erases their voices. Another dimension of storytelling is the context in which it is invited. Not everyone *wants* to tell their stories under any circumstances and the context of this invitation requires deep ethical engagement. Louise Dearden, a language teacher and researcher, worked with adults in England. Her blog post for ETHER participants focused on Henry, one of her students from Iran, to consider questions about what kind of stories and traumas we expect others to share – and who is or isn't ready to share them. She found echoes in a fellow speaker's blog post – opera composer Jonathan Dove – who found himself in a similar situation when he tried to invite refugees to tell him their stories so he could translate them into music for a wider audience.

Louise Dearden: Last week, during the half term break, I had interviews with the students who had agreed to participate in my PhD project. As a prompt for discussion they had all created collages with images that symbolised important areas of their life. Henry's collage contained nothing of the sort. When I questioned him about it, he made it clear that he does not like talking about himself in class. He had covered his paper with images from the newspaper story about the Vietnamese migrants who had perished in a refrigerated lorry. Two weeks earlier, when this news story had infiltrated our class, Henry had not joined in the discussion; in fact he moved himself to another table and turned his back on the conversation. Yet, on the same day, he waited until his classmates had left and then chose to share his experience of travelling to the UK. His journey was a traumatic one. He came by boat … but he can't swim. He knows of people who came in lorries … and not everyone made it. In his interview, he continued drip-feeding more pieces of his story. They were fragments, but I still felt privileged.

It's the first day back after half term today and at the end of class, I'm collecting the reading logs. Henry doesn't have his on the desk so I don't ask him for it. He hovers waiting for the others to leave. I resist the temptation to grill him over his lack of participation and instead I ask him what story he will tell for his Milestone. He squirms on the spot, looking very uncomfortable with the question. He frowns at me and says he doesn't like stories. He doesn't elaborate. I presume this is why he hasn't bothered with the reading log. So, imagine my surprise when he pulls out a completed reading log from his bag. He is desperate to show me, and he is animated as he talks me through some computer related user-guides he's read. When he's finished, for the second time in our short relationship, he makes it clear that he does not want to talk openly about his reading and his goals in front of the other class members. And he doesn't want to tell his story.

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It operates on several levels in my provocation, the storytelling within it. First of all, it was the medium that I chose in order to communicate what *I* was feeling. Because this has ended up very much as my lived experience - from trying to get to understand my students initially on what I could do for them to give them more than identity labels to draw on like refugee or ESOL student. It has come full circle and now I wanted to show how I was affected by the whole process. So this was an ideal medium for me. It also makes it easier for audiences who are not necessarily academic to

access. So on that level, I found it a way of showing my analysis, without telling, without summarising - but instead showing like a dramatic scene. I'm pulling in the reader. I hope that's what it will end up doing - pulling the reader in and giving them a chance to experience what I felt.

And, like Jonathan said earlier, my shortcomings. It's made me quite vulnerable, I think, in places. You can see it in the story - the way that the students are given the space and I allow them to tell their own stories, so on another level, when they want to tell them. And also the way that they kind of subvert the norms and expectations of our space. It's not "normal", not considered normal in this kind of space to allow the students to dictate what happens, but very often the stories take over. So on that level, Jasmine tells her own story, Henry refuses to tell his story until he's ready to tell his story. And again, this goes back to what the others were saying as well about the idea of what are you asking when you're asking somebody to tell a story that you know possibly is an upsetting one? The task that all the students were set was probably very well-meaning to give them a chance to come and join in a competition - their stories would be published on the website. But they were … although they enjoyed the stories that we were telling between ourselves less formally, the idea that their story would be put onto a website was almost horrifying for some of them. And I wonder about how ethical some of our ESOL activities are really when we're trying to tap in and get personal information out of students that is very traumatic. So yeah the idea of stories and how critical we should be and then of course what we do with them – yeah, it's all milling around at the moment and I have no real answers for that.

Parinita: Louise's reflections about the ethics of storytelling provoked researcher Anna Douglas to wonder who these stories were for – who they belonged to, who told them, who listened to them and for what purposes.

Anna Douglas: Louise, I wanted to come back to the point that you made and a few people have made around the idea of hospitality and ethics of storytelling. And something that actually struck me when Jonathan was talking was it was actually this concept that some people are using which is around the idea of extraction; whether in fact when arts organisations … and there has been a kind of rush of arts organisations to work with refugees. I've actually done some projects recently myself. And actually whilst we come to this work with an ethical position which we hold as being genuinely - whatever we mean by inclusive - but empowering, there is also that danger of the inequitable extraction. And Jonathan asked the question: why are we doing this work? And where are we in the asking of the person to tell *their* story?

And that just makes me think in terms of actually how you set it up. If storytelling is the method of the participatory project - and it is for so many projects now, so many ways of working - how are we thinking about this question of the setting up of the scene? Which we may use the term hospitality actually for that. Or we may just say how do we set the scene for this storytelling so that it isn't a form of extraction?

And just to offer little example, I've just worked on a project - which I didn't realise was going to have this outcome at all - where I worked with three Chinese students who wanted to work with a group of migrants. They come from Politics MA and they wanted to work and I set them up in a context which was the art gallery at the university. And we talked about actually a way of working with the migrants which was tied to a project which was about slow looking - where you really take a long time to look at a painting and you use it as the prompt, to elicit storytelling and empathy.

I've not got enough time to go into the detail of it, but what was so interesting was that I encouraged those three students to think of themselves as migrants. Because actually they've come to this country from another country and actually although they've come to study, a definition of

them could also be that they're migrants. Now they'd never thought about that before, that they themselves could be migrants. And in that exchange with other migrants, what was so interesting was that the other migrants commented in their feedback, how interesting it was for them to have a project led by other migrants.

Parinita: Different ETHER participants highlighted creative ways of bridging language and cultural barriers in order to tell diverse stories. Student and advocacy group development worker Mohasin Ahmed wanted people to think about how academic storytelling can be made more accessible to non-academic audiences.

Mohasin Ahmed: The first thoughts I had from yesterday when thinking about the other and how we encounter that and the discussions about language, especially yesterday, the first thing that came to my mind was some of the language that's been used over the past two days, might not be so accessible to people who are not from an arts, humanities background or an academic background. And I think that's an important point when we try to think about how we can include the other because obviously a lot of people from backgrounds that might be marginalised or may experience more inequalities may not have as much opportunity to engage with opportunities like this. So I think that opening things up and thinking about language, not just in terms of cultural languages or sign language and different forms like that. We should also think about language in terms of fields - if it's specific to a field or if it's easy to read for a lay person.

And one of the prompts that were shown about the dance - I can't remember exactly what it was - but it was talking about "Is performance or drama a good way to display research?" Something like that. And I think actually, that kind of ties into what I've been thinking because movement and dance and the body is something that we can all understand because we all have a body. And seeing that experience being played out is something that can be quite beneficial to people who might not be able to understand the words or the context of things that we are talking about. So I do think that performance and drama can be a really useful tool to display research and to make it more accessible.

Parinita: Joseph M. Valente, Associate Professor of Education, and Gail Boldt, Professor in Curriculum and Instruction at Pennsylvania State University similarly invited people to disrupt the languages that academic disciplines take for granted. One of the ways they did this was by co-presenting their ideas via animation. Here's Joe discussing the importance of making academic ideas approachable to diverse groups of people.

Joseph Valente: I feel like we have an ethical responsibility to represent research in ways that push back against the traditional boring research that disconnects us, that disaffects us. To me it feels unethical to do research … and we benefit from this because we have professor jobs. But we also get promoted and so on because of our research. But who did this benefit? What good does this actually do? If no one reads your research, it is like the riddle of a tree – if it falls in a forest and no one hears it or sees it, did the tree really fall?

In the context of our work with kids with disabilities and deaf kids, there are real consequences for our work not being read or seen or taken up by people. I get that we have no control over how it is taken up. I get that. But I also feel like we have an ethical responsibility to represent research for academic and general audiences to affect them. To *affect* them! To inspire them, to inform them, to PISS THEM OFF! about the things that are happening to those less privileged than us. To me, it's the ethics of aesthetics. If we write or represent in sterile ways, we cannot be surprised by the fact that folks take up our work in sterile ways or don't even pay attention to us at all.

Parinita: Ana Deumert is a Professor of Linguistics at the University of Cape Town. She discussed how questioning the languages and norms that academic research takes for granted and finding new ways to move beyond them can help bring this research to life.

Ana Deumert: Maybe you know, in one way, I think the things I'm thinking about at the moment is actually to see language. I mean I'm in a linguistics department, and I'm in a very traditional department with a long history of traditional linguistics, and I'm trained as a traditional linguist. I was never trained as a social linguist or as an ethnographer. And so I always have an interest in understanding the nature of language, understanding what linguists are said to be doing. And I think my work at the moment, my engagement with music and music theory and specifically jazz theory, has really meant … has for me, opened up a space of actually saying: language is music. And everything else we have said about language is just wrong and we have actually closed ourselves off of that what is actually most amazing about language. And that is its musical quality. Because we have emphasised the syntax of the structures and all of that. And I think once we do that shift as well, it opens up everything. I mean poetry has been kind of taken out of the linguistic realm because you can break the rules of language. But that's what it's all about. That it has that quality.

I've always wished to have a teaching space in which we could dance language, to come back to ballet. So dance your language. What are the shapes, the bodily shapes that you associate with your language? We also work with language endangerment. So one of the languages is the lost languages of the western Cape. And there, it is just the whole embodiment of the language, and you cannot … you know it is the revitalisation effort, that attempt to bring languages back into the public sphere is so closely linked to art. It is not about writing grammars and dictionaries. It's about art. It's about feeling the lost language in your body, singing it, dancing, experiencing the music. So I think also that the way sociolinguists have phrased revitalisation efforts as kind of being about we've got to document and write a grammar and the dictionary versus the way speakers experience it, as a very lived experiential and artful experience. That is what matters.

Parinita: So it's the context of storytelling but also the bodily connection that the act of storytelling creates that's so important for ethical encounters. Sophie Herxheimer, an artist and a poet, reflects on this ephemeral quality.

Sophie Herxheimer: I suppose when people collaborate, when people do encounter the other, there's always a third thing made which is the connection. And so a collaboration forces a third thing in the room which has its own personality and that is the collaboration. And it is that third thing that is made that is the magic really. Because it's this sort of uninvited extra which is partly to do with spirit. And because we live in a very secular age, it's very hard to use the right words to pin it down. And that's why I was quite interested in Cornelia's presentation where the magic was actually God and religion in the church collaboration between the African church and the German church there. And I think in secular situations, it's harder to know where you're going to pin that ephemeral quality down that is spirit and connection actually. And it's to do with the souls of the people involved meeting on another plane that isn't literal and isn't about what everyone had for breakfast.

It is ephemeral in something like music. It stays in the air and when the music's over, it's not in the air anymore but it's sort of gone into everybody. And so I met with a poet who I had to draw for a commission once; a wonderful poet who I truly admire. And she'd written an amazing book which I can't even remember the title of (laughs). And I said something like, "Oh there's something about this that's magic." And she said, (American accent) "Yeah magic. It's the only thing left to believe in." She was American, I'm not just saying that to sound American. And I was struck with that. And so then I use the word casually but I don't think it's really casual.

Parinita: Ana drew on the different kinds of interdisciplinary artistic and academic conversations that were happening in the ETHER seminar and recommended that researchers should be open to communicating with people in different ways, especially ways that may not sit comfortably with academic conventions.

Ana Deumert: But I think what you're raising by bringing the three words - moral, love, magic - is I think something you know we are trying to reclaim a space, a conceptual space that somehow in the social sciences have … with that kind of very you know social sciences - "we are sciences, we can do correlations, we can do statistics". So all of that which was always part of art has just been pushed aside. And that's why it seems so challenging as a sociolinguist trained in what is ultimately a structuralist discipline in terms of training and its history, to start thinking about something like love. And you kind of mention it at a conference and you think everybody will just look at you like what's going on now?

Magic - I mean when it was brought up, I was thinking of Sylvia Wynter's work on humanism as enchantment – the re-enchantment of the world, the need to re-enchant the world. For me, that's what magic is - this enchantment of the world. We've kind of let go and now we have new philosophical traditions which are bringing in love – actually they're not that new but they're kind of rediscovering some of the previous work. And morals and magic and re-enchantment of the world and spirit, spirituality.

I find this very interesting because I have a PhD student who is working on spirituality and I realised that we actually don't even have the vocabulary. We really struggle with it. We need to find these words. And that's why the turn to art is so helpful because suddenly it's there. Maybe not as "academic" concepts, but as a felt experience. A music piece can explain what I'm not managing to capture about something such as spirituality.

Parinita: Participants' different academic backgrounds and interests brought together different ideas for researchers to tell stories to new audiences. Ana's points inspired Adrian Blackledge, Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Stirling, to share his own experiences with bringing research to life.

Adrian Blackledge: I absolutely agree with you that we should be making the most of the arts in representing the social research data that we collect in our observations of the social world. We should be setting the data to music, we should be creating theatre, we should be creating dance. And it's something we've started to explore and I'll just give one quick example.

Some of the sociolinguistic research that we've been doing was an observation of a volleyball club. The team included players from 11 different countries, the coach was from Hong Kong. One of the first things we noticed as we observed them practicing was that there was something balletic about their practice routines. They seemed to us to be dancing. It was so rhythmic, they seemed to be dancing their practice routines. And so when we came to write this material up, we didn't just write research reports and monographs, but we went to ethnographic drama which gave us the opportunity to represent the volleyball practice as ballet or as a chorus line on Broadway. So the actors become volleyball players but then the volleyball players become dancers in a chorus line or in a ballet.

I suppose what I'm saying is that without taking an artistic approach to the representation of that material, all we could say is, "it seemed to us to be reminiscent of ballet." That's so weak and lacks all power. It doesn't resemble at all the experience that we had. But actually to put it on stage, to have people doing that dance and coming in and out of role and becoming dancers on stage seems

to us to have the potential to be far more powerful. So I just want to agree with you that we need to make the most of the arts in representing and I suppose almost going beyond the observed material.

Parinita: Bringing arts and research together can offer new ways of telling stories. Instead of explaining other people's stories and lives, ethnographers Angela Creese and Adrian Blackledge use drama to include a polyphony of voices in their research. Along with writing traditional research reports, they also produce and perform playscripts of their research encounters in order to allow their audiences to come to varied interpretations.

Adrian Blackledge: I think there is that sense of wanting to do something other than the traditional ethnographic paper or ethnographic monograph, all of which we still do and still stand by and support and continue with. But we wanted a form or a medium which firstly resists the imperative to explain the world of others on our own terms and from our own perspective. I think there's been a tension in ethnography and anthropology that "here we are, we're the experts, we come and have a look at you, and then we explain what your lives are according to us." And so I think we wanted to stand back as academics and allow the voices of our participants to speak for themselves. Clearly, we're curating that, we're putting the drama together, so it's not as if we're not involved. It's a bit of this and a bit of that. So it's not entirely only the voices of the people we worked with in the community centre. But we're trying not to impose our voices on the phenomena that we were investigating at the time; we're trying to let them speak more for themselves. So we're trying to kind of show to an audience, this is the world that we encountered, now you make something of it for yourselves. We want people to be critical and think about that world for themselves rather than us saying this is what it means.

Angela Creese: Yeah and I think it's about the polyphony of different voices, as you mentioned earlier, and the fact that those voices in terms of your poems as well, that there's a duality there. Those voices are not … they contradict one another, they're ambiguous, they're not kind of always straight. Because in academic writing, typically the line of argument gets carried through very heavily in a journal and you're not able, even in ethnographic writing in an article format, to often hold on to the contradiction and the ambiguity of different voices. So yeah that polyphony, I think, is important.

Adrian Blackledge: Absolutely, in this particular ethnographic drama, I think story was absolutely fundamental to the way we structured the piece and the way where I suppose it drives forward. Just to explain briefly, the ethnographic research was in one of 16 sites nationally. This was a small Chinese community centre in Birmingham, which had an upstairs room where people would come along and pay I think 50 pence for the right to get advice on issues like immigration, education, insurance, so on and so forth. All of the bureaucratic world which they weren't able to negotiate for themselves, partly because they weren't proficient English speakers, but partly because the bureaucratic world is difficult for anyone to navigate. So they would come along and sit with advisors who helped them through the process by telephoning somebody or filling in an online form often. And so they've been working across Mandarin, Cantonese and English - the Chinese languages.

We audio recorded 79 of these interactions with the permission of everybody present. And every single one of those was a story. And often it was a painful story, it was a difficult story in which people who really were disempowered and disenfranchised. Until they came along to this place, they weren't able to gain access to the resources to which they were entitled. And on some occasions, they still weren't, when they went out the door, able to gain access to those resources

because the whole thing didn't quite work. But usually the advisor was able to navigate the bureaucratic systems in a way which enabled the client to gain access to those resources.

And so the provocation that you saw was just one instance of those. So in the ethnographic drama, every other scene, that is every alternate scene, doesn't involve a client but just involves the team of women who are working as advisors in the advice centre. So they were in between sessions – so they were having a cup of tea or their lunch or whatever. And so they were chatting about their lives and their children and their mothers and their families and so on. And so in each of those conversations, there were also scenes of stories. So you had the clients' stories and then you had the stories of the workers. The women who were working there, relatively low-paid, part-time workers who had their own lives to relate. I mean it's a very long answer to a short question, I suppose, but yes stories were absolutely fundamental to what we're doing.

Parinita: In turn, Professor of Public Education Gert Biesta drew on his own priorities to respond to the possibilities and limitations of how ethnographic narratives are presented.

Gert Biesta: It's a really good point. I once shared this critique of culture with a colleague who was a professor of anthropology and she said, but if we give up on culture, then our whole field ceases to exist. And you asked sort of a similar question. I think it's important that ethnography resists explanation, because that gets you exactly in a very problematic relationship, and quite similar to how I try to resist explaining my students to myself or to them. But from what you say, there are other sort of modalities of ethnography - you call them representations - and I think what they do - but this is just a very quick response - I would say they become educational, because what they do is to try to frame attention in a particular way. So to say we write an ethnographic play is not just a way to represent, but it's actually a way to present so that it can focus attention from the ones who watch the play.

And for me that precisely turns the question then to the ones who watch the play, for example, or read the script, because then it becomes a question for them, what they do in that encounter. And that's completely the opposite from saying "we as ethnographers can provide the explanations, so that everyone can have happy intercultural encounters." Because then you end up in an impossible position. So I think where you're going makes it educational but also turns the question where I think it should be. Not in how you can explain, but in how you can focus attention so that it opens up a possibility for people to say, "okay, so there is something for me here to figure out."

Parinita: The ETHER seminar space itself invited a polyphony of voices which resulted in opportunities for sharing multiple interpretations. Fellow participant Rae Si'ilata drew on her own experiences to wonder who has the right to collect stories. As the conversation among Angela, Adrian and Nadine occurred, Rae turned to the live chat to comment, "From an indigenous perspective - we always need to ask - who owns the stories? Do these people have sovereignty and ownership over the way their story is told? So rather than collecting people's stories, we encourage participants to become co-researchers and co-writers." The ETHER conversations led to different points and counterpoints based on who was telling and who was listening.

Of course, academic researchers weren't the only ones concerned with telling stories in innovative ways. Syrian musician and composer Maya Youssef shared how she uses music to translate stories of conflict and trauma in her home country and across different parts of the world.

Maya Youssef: Now fast forward to now, to my provocation from my latest album "Finding Home". I have been performing everywhere and I have been expanding my musical expression with different tools. "Finding Home" is about the state of feeling at home but as opposed to it be being a place.

And one of the pieces that were composed as part of the “Finding Home” album was commissioned by Opera North. And it was recorded by a stunning quartet from Opera North's orchestra.

When it comes to putting a musical instrument that is so traditional such as the Qanun with a string quartet which comes from the Western music tradition, a lot of people ask me, “are you trying to create a West meets East experience?” And my answer to this is that I always do what is best for the musical resonance, for the emotional resonance of the piece as opposed to having a logical reason for having a string quartet. So, for this piece, for this lullaby, I wanted the deep voices and sounds of the quartet to have … to basically be a sonic representation of the mother's hug.

So, a bit of a background about this composition is that I have seen an image of a mother fleeing for her life, holding her baby, singing for her baby - with a bomb blast in the background. And she is moving forward towards this better future for herself and her baby singing, ignoring the sound of the bombs. And for that I wrote “Lullaby: A Promise Of A Rainbow”. Because we all hold on to this promise. And the quartet was really to bring in the voice of that mother that can be from anywhere, can be from any conflict zone, not only from Syria. And she is taking herself and her baby to that land of hope, to that land of the rainbow.

(Extract of Maya playing the Qanun with a quartet from Opera North’s orchestra)

Maya: I started writing music because of the war in Syria. I was not a composer, I did not have any need to write. And there was a moment where I've seen an image of a small girl - who was at the same age of my son - dying in her bedroom, that I held my instrument and music started coming out with me while I was in tears. So I was forced to do it, really. So I can heal and I can make sense of what's happening in the world. And from that point onwards, the music has become my tool to really translate everything all of this income that is coming from all over the world - the war, the trauma, seeing my friends dying, seeing places I love destroyed. I started to see myself as a human filter - and going back to Awad mentioning that music is joy - you know it is joy for me always, but also it's a way to encounter these dark corners of the heart. Where you are in a state of absolute despair and darkness, and just giving light to these spaces and hopefully in doing so, giving them an opportunity to heal in some way or other. And in doing so, for me, writing music is part of my spiritual practice.

Parinita: Maya’s contribution echoes Ana Deumert’s point from earlier about how music can convey some of the spirituality that more traditional language may not be able to capture. The ETHER online seminars brought together academics, musicians and artists from all over the world and provided a space to share, tell and listen to different kinds of stories, and to think about different experiences one may not otherwise encounter. As Gert Biesta pointed out, the storyteller can play an important role in different public, research, educational and cultural spaces. Sharing such encounters helps draw attention to specific themes that may have otherwise been invisible. Access to such conversations can expand people’s ideas about what exists and what is possible.

Gert Biesta: Another book that has really inspired me, or actually a whole body of work, is from a German educational scholar Klaus Prange who says, actually, education all begins with the form of pedagogy. And I find that interesting. And I've done work with colleagues in different professional fields - arts, mental health - to figure out what are these different forms and what's there in the form.

Prange’s point - and right now I think it's a really valid point - is that he says what's the fundamental and distinctive form of education? It is in German Zeigen, and Zeigen is both to point and to show. And he says, that's actually going on in education. So when there is no Zeigen, when people are not

pointing and showing, then actually there is no education; that maybe something else is going on - a good conversation, a beautiful encounter, but not education.

Why is pointing important? Because it does two things at the same time. The teacher points and says to the student: “look there”, or “listen to that”, or “pay attention”. But in one and the same gesture that sort of points away, the teacher also points to the student and says, “*you* pay attention.” And there you can see something of the triadic structure of teaching. The teacher, the student, and something - I would call it the world, Prange calls it the theme, you can say the issue. Now you can say that the work of education is how you can realise an articulation between these three elements.

What's very funny, I think, is that Prange says, so that means that teaching is first of all a form of manual labour: you need the hand in order to do the pointing. And teaching tries to focus attention; you can also say as teachers, we demand attention. But we can never enforce our students’ attention, we can never control the attentiveness of our students. So we may manage to direct or redirect the attention of our students, but what they do there, that's up to them. And we can stand there with expectations and hopes, but not with control.

And I think this is partly the beauty of the point here that you can say, if education is fundamentally about pointing, in that form you can already see that the freedom of the student matters. That's, of course, not this crazy neoliberal idea that to be free means to do what you want to do. I call it the freedom of shopping, where you just walk into a shop, grab what you want and walk out without any consequences. It rather is the freedom to attend to the world and in a sense in meeting the world and encountering the world, to encounter yourself in relation to the world. And for me this highlights that in the pointing of education, the encounter is central.

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That has something to do with the aesthetics of education, the idea that education somewhere has something to do with the touching of the soul. But here, I want to at least remind myself that it's not teacher who is the toucher of the soul of the student. Before you know it, you end up entering moralising education where the teacher says, “I'm going to touch your soul in a particular way.” We are in a very different position - this is this strange second person position. Our job is constantly to make a case for the world, and say to the student, “look there, turn your attention to the world.”

What the world may be asking of the student, that’s not our business as teachers, other than that we hope that we can turn our students in that way and can help them to stay, what they may encounter then. That highlights the teaching as the most important dimension. A world that may teach and, in doing that in that encounter, you can say the “I” of the student is called into existence in a very different way from the modern “I” that stands in a perspective and views the world.

Parinita: As Gert noted, you can point people’s attention to specific stories but you can’t control how they listen to them. However, drawing people’s attention to ideas and experiences that have been historically excluded can be an important way of showcasing the diversity of stories that exist as well as create opportunities for people to be touched by different encounters.