Ancient and Indigenous Stories: Their Ethics and Power Reflected in Latin American Storytelling Movements

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Ancient and Indigenous Stories: Their Ethics and Power Reflected in Latin American Storytelling Movements

The new Latin American storytelling movements have occupied places and niches in modern society with a variety of repertoires, diffusing tales from different oral traditions to stories by ancient and modern authors, which are transmitting ethical values from different cultures through the power of language and literature. Until around 1980, the terrain of oral narrative in Latin America was empty and desolate, for the oral traditions of our different cultures had become nonexistent in urban centers. The art of aesthetic orality disappeared completely from the landscape of cities.

Today diverse storytelling movements recognize three major origins of Latin American storytelling that were fundamental in preserving traditional repertoires from the different cultures making up Latin America that were alive and existing before the arrival of big cities and the presence of mass media:

1. The indigenous storyteller, or shaman, who already existed in our lands before the Spanish conquerors came. In most cases these men communicated religious, cosmogonic, historical, and medical knowledge by means of the power of language and words.

2. The African storyteller or griot, who was uprooted from his continent and driven to Latin America, and who was forced to speak a foreign language,
adapt his religious beliefs according to his oppressor’s demands, and mold his
culture under the pressure of new geographies and social conditions. The
Afro–Latin American storyteller recomposed a large portion of stories, myths,
tales, and legends to maintain and preserve his land and people’s legacy.

3. The storyteller of Spanish descent, who brought to the continent courtly manners and style that amused kings and vassals, and was influenced by eight centuries of Arab domination in the Iberian peninsula and the consequent infiltration of the great figure of the Arab storyteller. This tale-teller of mixed tradition came over with the music and language that would dominate in Latin America and with the repertoires and narrative structures of that time.

These broad cultural groups or genres of storytellers continue to exert power and communicate values to their communities by means of orally transmitted knowledge and entertainment. In small villages, especially in those where TV and radio have not dismembered the communities' natural cohesion, they continue with their oral narratives and preserve traditions and cultural identities.

During the first half of the twentieth century, massive groups of all races and ethnicities were displaced toward the cities. With the birth of several generations in urban areas during the second half of the century, and because of the arrival of other image forms—not the imagined image natural to orality, but instead the all-resolved and finished image of television and the movies, later to be followed by video and the Internet—and also because of the use of other mobile and personal entertainment media, such as recorded music, oral narrators in the cities literally lost their relevance and disappeared as elements of radical importance within the network of new urban societies.

Nevertheless, during the 1980s there was a rebirth in the art of telling stories and in the exercise of our oral talents in aesthetic ways—and not only from a social, commercial, religious, or political perspective. Storytelling had begun to flourish in the big cities of Latin America and Spain, perhaps as a reaction against mass media and because of the human need to listen and be listened to. Today, storytelling movements that have been growing rapidly maintain constant cross-national communication and artistic and academic exchanges through festivals of tale-tellers. We have national and international festivals held in Argentina, Spain, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Cuba, and the Canary Islands, among others.

In each of these countries, storytelling movements have consolidated different structures that take advantage of the cultural and artistic networks offered by governments, educational establishments, and entertainment venues for children and adults in each nation. Storytellers have entered into cultural and artistic environments that already existed, and in their daily zeal to live
from their labor and art, they have opened up new spaces for oral story narration. Depending on the particular structure of the movement in each nation, storytellers are present in cultural pubs and bars, children's parties, schools, hospitals, prisons, parks, popular fairs in big and small cities, universities, museums, theaters, and book fairs. There are important publishing houses hiring storytellers to promote their own authors and books for children. The most important theater festivals, such as the Festivals de Teatro de Bogotá, Cadiz, Mexico City, Caracas, and Buenos Aires, have included shows of a new and contemporary art that some have called narracion oral escénica, or dramatic oral narration. The most experienced storytellers work with musicians, dancers, actors, props, light designs, and in some cases they've also worked with their city's philharmonic orchestra.

The repertoires of these tale-tellers may come from stories penned by writers from various countries, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia), Ernest Hemingway (USA), Jorge Amado (Brazil), Julio Cortazar (Argentina), Augusto Monterroso (Guatemala), Margarita Yourcenar (France), Salman Rushdie (India/England), Aquiles Nazoa (Venezuela), Angeles Mastreta (Mexico), and Isabel Allende (Chile). Storytellers also offer tales, myths, legends, and stories from different oral traditions, even if the storyteller's cultural background is not related to that specific community. This is because these types of oral texts, with the morals and ethics they contain, with their metaphors, characters, and even their local slang, can communicate a theme or an imaginary that expresses the intellectual, religious, or existentialist position of the storyteller, which he hopes to pass on to his listeners through the telling of the tale.

Now that I have demarcated the general terrain of storytelling in Latin America, I would like to give some examples of stories and tales of human values that could be worked into school environments. The following story belongs to Yoruba mythology. This mythology traveled across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa, and with its Orisha gods, settled in the Caribbean Islands, where it is at the foundation of a form of religious syncretism known as Santeria. For a better understanding of the tale, I would like to clarify that in Spanish the English word “tongue” translates as lengua, and from this word is derived the word lenguaje, or “language” in English. So the relation in Spanish between tongue and language is not only etymologic, but also figurative. In Spanish, in order to say that somebody speaks very nicely, we say that he has very fine lengua. There are also some people with long lengua (gossipers), poisonous lengua, and donkey lengua.

Obatala (the most powerful of all created beings) had been ruling the world with his supreme justice and wisdom. He knew that Creation’s balance and stability depended on his good judgment in electing his successor. For this reason
he had been observing the intelligence of Orula, a disciple, for some time. Obatala thought of giving him the world's command on more than one occasion, but after pondering this thought he desisted, for he believed Orula was too young for such a big responsibility, although he constantly demonstrated great judgment and brightness in all his acts.

One day, Obatala wanted to examine Orula and ordered him to prepare the best food that he could cook, the most delicious, the most superb, exquisite, and delicate. Orula listened to Obatala's desires, and without answering, as if he already knew what to prepare, he set out for the closest market in order to buy a bull's tongue. He seasoned it, he added spices in the proportions that only he knew, and he prepared and cooked it in his singular way. Thereafter he served the dish to Obatala. The Orisha god tried it and was highly satisfied; he smacked his lips with such good taste. He confirmed that it was the most delicious, superb, exquisite, and delicate dish that existed in the world and asked, "What have you served me?"

"Bull's tongue," answered the disciple.

Time passed and Obatala wanted to examine once more Orula's wisdom. He ordered him to prepare another dish, and on this occasion it should be the ugliest, the most horrible and repulsive he could cook, the most disgusting meal in the world. Orula took off right away to the local market and bought the needed ingredients; he cooked and prepared the dish until he was sure it was more than nasty. Then he took it to Obatala. The Orisha god did not need to try the dish to be sure that it was the worst ever possible in the world, and as he noticed it was similar to the one Orula served him some time ago, he asked, "Orula, what have you brought to my presence this time?"

"Bull's tongue," answered the disciple.

Very shocked and confused, Obatala inquired, "How can it be that some time ago you gave me the same dish as the most delightful and marvelous of the world, and now you offer the same dish as the most nasty and repulsive?"

Orula answered, "With the tongue forgiveness is conceded, with the tongue love is created, gods are worshipped, poetry is recited, virtues are proclaimed; with the tongue high deeds are exalted and nations are governed with justice. And as well by means of the tongue a realm is sold and lost, persons are slandered, egos are fed, and with the tongue the most repudiate acts are ordered and accomplished."

Obatala, astonished to see the intelligence and precocity demonstrated by Orula, gave him the rule of the world.

This story from Yoruba mythology has been told throughout Latin America to audiences of adults and children. Its ethical values continue to speak to us, appealing to modern people's imagination and intellectual fields, allowing sto-
rytellers to influence—or better, to persuade—their listeners. This power of persuasion itself is beautifully highlighted in the Yoruba tale centering on a tongue or lengua.

Elementary school teachers, who in most cases do not doubt the pedagogic effect contained in stories, continue to extract values from tales such as this one in order to expose children to the importance of language and why it is vital to be responsible with it. Teachers may ask their students to write different texts based on the story, to draw a character who makes good language use and one who misuses it, or to compose phrases with similar words, although they may have different meanings.

Having in mind the Yoruba tale and as an introduction to the following story, I would like to point out why certain stories, legends, or tales may deeply influence the point of view about life and human actions, especially in children. Other forms of images, like the ones seen on TV, in movies, on computers, or as video games, are fully completed images, resolved and finished; they are in no way reproduced or generated in the spectators' imagination. The two-pole channel of communication created, let's say, between the object (the screen) and the subject (the listener) is a channel that carries the information in only one direction. The screen is the transmitter or sender, and the child, for example, is the receiver. If the child comes to send out a single emotional or rational or verbal reaction, in no way will this very human action be taken into account by the transmitter or object. Therefore this is not a full-circle process or two-way communication. Efforts have been made especially with entertainment and education software to draw from multimedia audiovisual sources in order to create an interaction between the object and the subject so as to bring closer this radically bipolar activity to the interactive nature of human language. Nevertheless, it is practically impossible for these new techniques to replace or substitute the power and fabulous persuasive capacity that a politician irradiates when he speaks in public spaces, or when a priest predicates loudly to his parishioners, or the influence a psychologist or psychiatrist has face-to-face with his patient and not on the other side of the telephone line.

This power of persuasion is perhaps more profound precisely because of our contemporary societies' magnified audiovisual loads, and it is the power inherent to a good story in the voice of a good teller. The reasons for this impact may reside in those aspects that draw differences with information transmitted by mass media. From my point of view, the following are some of those aspects:

1. A life act such as storytelling conjugates the here and now so strongly that it is impossible to substitute its individual (and not mass) impact with any other technique or technology. We human beings live in a space-temporal world that is mutually shared by all. When a speaker of any kind performs live
in front of any audience, both parties are immersed in the most unique and singular portion of the universe’s creation, in this here and now.

2. The communication between a storyteller and his listeners is a full-circle process, and it honors the etymologic root of the word: it is a union in common thanks to the tale. The principal transmitter and the principal receiver are at the same time secondary receivers and senders. The speaker is on the stage for that audience, with that culture, that particular day, and not for other remote ones. Therefore, if a child, for example, expresses profound terror on his or her face, the storyteller will tone down the frightening images of his tale in order to avoid such an uncontrollable sensation in his spectators. Multiple interactive techniques, ancient and modern, are sometimes a fundamental part of oral acts, like singing together, asking the audience direct questions, making them choose the ending of a story out of several offered by the teller, or the Cric Crac interpellation frequently used by African oral cultures, today used as an empowering technique in hands of various Latin American storytellers.

3. I think the big difference between a finished tale image of any screen and the image imagined by a listener or reader—whether or not they derive from the oral tradition or if they are written tales—is that the latter is generated by the transmitter for each receiver, not for them to see with their eyes, but to reproduce and observe in the psychic space and mental temporality of the mind of each listener. It is there, in that very same individual and unrepeatable interiority, where in fact occurs the story being listened to or the tale being read. This nesting in the deepest human mind gives orators in general an immeasurable power, for the listener captured by a story is reproducing with his or her broad spectrum of archetypes, stereotypes, analogies, and associations all of what is related to his or her cultural identity, socioeconomic position, and for sure, correlated to his or her own and personal life. The tensions, humor, and emotions of a story generated by and within each person depend directly on one’s love history, rational feelings, and recent defeats and victories.

4. There is another aspect that allows written or oral tales to impact the listeners or readers with unsuspected force, and that is the marvelous power of allegories and metaphors. Some tales prove to be a metaphor in their entirety. In order to illustrate this idea, I will use as an example a storytelling custom that has to do with forgiveness.

Tolba Phanem, an African poetess, recounts that a certain tribe on her continent has the following custom. When a woman discovers she is pregnant, she goes deep into the jungle with other women, and together they pray and meditate until a special song appears: this song will be the song of the baby who is
in the womb of its mother. They know that every soul has its own vibration that expresses its particularity, uniqueness, and purpose; this particular quality of the soul is contained and expressed in the new song. In that moment, and deep in the jungle, the women intone the song for the baby who will come into the world and they chant it out loud. Then they return to the tribe and teach the song to the rest of the community. All the members must learn and sing the song that identifies the soul who will soon come to earth.

When the baby is born, the community gets together and sings to the baby his song. Some years later, when the child starts his education, the villagers get together and sing for him the song. When the youngster gets initiated into the adult world, the people get together and sing for him his song. When his wedding day arrives, he once more hears his song. Finally, when the person’s soul is about to leave the world, in this case only his family and closest relatives approach his bed, and, as at his birth, they intone and sing his song so that the melody of his soul shall accompany him in the last transition.

In this African tribe there is one more occasion in which the villagers may sing to the individual his love song. If by any chance during his life the person perpetrates a crime or an aberrant social act, he is taken to the center of the village and people surround him in a circle. Then they intone and chant his song. In this way the tribe acknowledges that the rectification for antisocial conduct is not punishment, but love in its forgiveness and reassurance regarding what is the true identity of an individual.

For this tribe, when we recognize our own love song, we will not have the desire or the need to perpetrate anything that would harm or damage others. For them, our true friends, family, and community are those who know the song of our soul and can sing it when we have forgotten it. For this African tribe, those who love us cannot be deceived by our mistakes or the dark images we project to others. They remember our beauty when we feel ugly, our entireness when we are broken, our innocence when we feel guilty, and our life’s goal when we feel confused.

After sharing this story I would like to go back to my last point. I said one of the characteristics inherent to orality and literature is their allegorical and metaphorical power. The former text is a precious metaphor of forgiveness and true friendship. It communicates rhetorically an ethical thought and certain human values. In this nonexplicit way, the tale transfers information whose power does not depend on the text that composes it, but on the persuasive capacity underlying it. This persuasion, in addition, may be empowered by means of a directed work based on the story—for example, in schools or through comments storytellers make before or after they tell a story.

In order to exemplify the power of persuasion in human beings, I will use an anecdote about Miguel de Unamuno, a Spanish philosopher and writer,
included in the book *The Fear of Freedom*, written by the German psychiatrist and thinker Erich Fromm. In 1936, when the civil war in Spain had begun, Miguel de Unamuno was the director of the University of Salamanca. The famous writer presided over an afternoon of speakers that included General Millan Astray, who was a partisan of the dictator Francisco Franco. General Millan Astray’s favorite slogan was “Long live death!” One of his partisans shouted it in the room. When the general finished his speech, Miguel de Unamuno stood up, took the microphone, and said: “I’ve just heard the necrophilic and insane scream ‘Long live death.’ I, who live my life composing paradoxes that enrage others who do not understand them, I must tell the audience, as an expert in the matter, that this ridiculous paradox seems repellant to me. General Millan Astray is handicapped. We do not need to say this in a low tone. He is handicapped from the war. So was Miguel de Cervantes. But unfortunately today there are too many men mutilated by war. And if God does not help us, soon there will be many more. It torments me to think that General Millan Astray could dictate the norms of the psychology of the masses. A handicapped man who lacks Cervantes’s spiritual greatness will obviously experience a terrible relief looking at how handicapped men multiply around him.”

In that moment Millan Astray could not stand any more of this and roared: “Death to intelligence! Long live death!” and he was clamored by the general’s partisans. In spite of this, Miguel de Unamuno continued: “This is the temple of intelligence and I am its supreme priest! You profane this sacred hall. You will win because you have brute force. Nevertheless, you will never convince the nation. Because in order to convince, you need to persuade. And you lack persuasion: right and trueness in the fight. It seems to me useless to ask you to think of Spain.”

Yes, some stories issuing from different oral traditions or belonging to ancient or modern literature contain a persuasive power that can be recontextualized for a modern situation. It is a mission for storytellers and teachers to adapt these tales again and again to the social context of their audience, and by such means influence their society.

Finally, I would like to discuss another point that, from my point of view, is part of the impact of the allegorical or metaphorical structures contained within stories and tales. Ancient societies drew from myths, legends, and tales to try to explain and to memorialize events and phenomena that often escaped their comprehension; for example, why do rabbits have long ears? Or how was the Amazon River created? Or how did the stars and constellations come to exist? For the same reasons that ancient Greeks created their copious mythology—an incomparable allegory of human happenings and existence—today, many of these stories are broadly told by Latin American storytellers. We could include such tales within the category of explicative or origin stories; the ones that
resolve a constant human question, or supply us with a bridge or metaphor to understand the genesis of planets, animals, humankind, beauty, or endless wars.

With this in mind, I would like to end by sharing with you one of the most popular tales I've listened to and told. It is important to know that the first time I heard it was in 1991, while I was in the field doing research deep in the heart of a Colombian jungle. In a certain village people told me that the most renowned regional storyteller, who was very old, lived six hours by canoe upstream on the Araucan River. The following morning, I set out with a native guide and a hand recorder, and after listening to monkey howls and parrot croaks for six hours, we arrived at a very humble hut. In 1991 its owner was eighty-two years old. He did not know how to read or write; nevertheless, he spoke Spanish perfectly, and to my astonishment he also spoke Latin and some French, languages he learned through radio lessons broadcast by the Ministry of National Education during the first half of the twentieth century. When I listened to the story I was amazed at its crystal-clear poetics and explicative power. I asked him who the story's author was. With manifest pride, he said it was his. I believed him. Then I requested his permission to tell it worldwide and he granted it. In 1994 I told this story at a couple of International Storytelling Festivals in the Canary Islands and in Madrid. After this, the story came to be the individual property of women and men, professional storytellers or not, who have told it in many countries. This desired possession, the sharing of which, I believe, illustrates the power of oral and literary tales, was precisely what the old man who lived deep into the jungle had similarly laid claim to. Years later, in 1996, an anthology of ancient Arab tales came into my hands, and among them I found the story that I had heard in the Colombian jungle in the voice, and from the heart of an illiterate man, eighty-two years old, who had proclaimed proudly the tale's ownership.

This is his version:

In the beginning of the world, before men stepped on the surface of the Earth, just after the animals, plants, mountains, and seas were created, all the qualities and defects we have right now were floating and walking around, because there was no flesh to go into.

Present were Justice and Injustice, Beauty and Ugliness, Tenderness, Laziness, Treachery, Loyalty, Love and Hate, Peace and Fury, Madness and Patience, Lechery and Passion, Voluptuousness and Simplicity. Suddenly, Amusement, who has always loved to play, said, “You know what, folks? We really don't have anything to do. So why don't we play hide and seek?”

Intrigue and Doubt asked at the same time, making a question-mark face, “What is that game?”

“It is very simple. Someone starts to count from 1 to 100 and the rest of us find a place to hide. When the person who is counting says 100, he starts...
to seek and should find everyone. The next one who must count from 1 to 100 is the one who has been found first. And that is the game. Do you guys want to play?”

Idleness and Boredom answered at the same time, “No, we don’t want to play.”

But all the other qualities and defects responded that they wanted to play. Madness said, I prefer to count, and immediately she leaned against the trunk of a tree and started to count: “1, 2, 3, 4, 5 . . .”

The rest ran away searching for a place to hide. Tenderness hid behind a cloud, Injustice spread herself over a desert, Beauty hid inside a flower, Passion sat down in the crater of a volcano, Idleness laid down at the feet of Madness, who continued counting: “55, 56, 57, 58 . . .”

Treachery hid behind a cactus, Falsehood said she was going to hide on top of a tree, but it was a lie—she hid under a rock.

Madness continued counting: “75, 76, 77, 78 . . .” Lechery climbed up the volcano, took Passion by the hands, and both jumped into the lava to be as hot as they could. Jealousy found a fireplace and hid inside among the incandescent firewood.

When Madness was saying “92, 93, 94, 95,” the only one who had not found a place to hide was Love. He searched here and there—“96”—and over there and herein—“97”—and when Madness said: “100, ready or not, here I come!” the only place that Love had nearby to hide was a rosebush. Taking care to avoid the thorns, Love hid behind the rosebush.

The first one that Madness found was Idleness, who was sleeping and snoring next to her. Then she found Tenderness behind the clouds, Injustice in the desert, Beauty inside the flower, Lechery and Passion came out of the volcano with two kids. Then she found Innocence in an open valley, Arrogance on the peak of a mountain, and Falsehood underneath a rock.

Finally, the only one Madness could not find was Love. Madness looked for Love near the rivers and up in the trees, she sought him on the beaches and in the canyons, but she didn't find him. Madness went insane and was throwing foam from her mouth when Treachery said, “Love is behind the rosebush, behind the rosebush.”

So Madness took a forked-shape stick, and she approached the rosebush and poked at the bush, once and twice, with strength and insanity. “Where are you, ugly Love? Come out.”

Madness poked several times until Love, inside the bush, screamed: “Aaaaagggg!”

With the fork, Madness had taken out Love’s eyes. So Love came out of the rosebush with no eyes in his cavities, bleeding and trembling. He was crying, terrified by his new darkness.
Madness saw him and said, “Oh! Lovely Love, I have left you blind. What can I do to repair that damage?”

“Now that you’ve left me blind, the only thing you can do is be my guide for life.”

And it is since that day that human Love is blind and always walks with Madness beside him.

Editors’ Note: The following is a transcription of the discussion that followed Jaime Riascos’s keynote talk on the storytelling movement in Latin America. The transcript has been edited for the purposes of clarification and to make the oral discussion a readable text. Besides Riascos (JR), interlocutors were faculty or graduate students at Wayne State University, or visitors (I1, I2, I3, I4, I5).

JR: Questions?

I1: I enjoyed very much your opposition between oral storytelling and cinema. My own view of things is, because of special techniques, Hollywood is appealing to perception only and doesn’t get to the level that you just did. What would be your prescription to Hollywood to get them to tell a story in a way that does not only appeal to the most superficial paint on wood, the varnish?

JR: To forget about the sold-out tickets, to get them to think that they have a mission for human beings, and that that mission doesn’t have only to do with money. Mass media is great, but it is in the hands of people who are looking only for the revenue of their enterprise. So that is the big problem. I think that mass media should be well established in our societies, but there should be some controls. What I find with movies is that you can’t really put yourself into the movie. Let me clarify what I mean when I say “put yourself” or “put myself.” I was telling someone during lunchtime that I have specialized repertoires. One of them is only for Mother’s Day, another for International Women’s Day. Whenever I go to tell stories from these repertoires, I can see so many people crying, crying in the audience, and I bet it is not only the power of the story, but it is also the way they reproduce and they generate their own feelings through the story—thanks to the story and for the story.

Something that I didn’t mention is that one of the powers of orality is in the eyes. That is something that movies have lost forever. So whenever I can make eye contact with a person, I can feel it. Yesterday I was telling stories at the children’s hospital, and it was amazing because there was a kid who didn’t want to look at me, so I was always waiting for him to look at me to make eye contact with him. When I caught him out the side of my eye, I made eye contact with him, and immediately he opened up his
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face and he smiled. I bet his parents do not make eye contact with him when they speak. I have a daughter, and I was very, very conscious since she was in her mother’s womb about telling her stories. Now, my daughter was born in San Francisco, September 11, 2001, so you know her age, and now she has such a big vocabulary and she enjoys so much speaking and listening. That is so important for people. She is outstanding in this matter at school. She is also starting to tell stories, so what I think is that we must preserve orality as a treasure we have. And as we all here are teachers in some way, what I find is that we teachers are the modern shamans of this society. We have a specialized knowledge that we are transmitting in order to preserve it. If this isn’t the case, I’m out of here!

I2: When you were talking about this new movement of storytelling in Latin America, I was wondering if you consider it a new form of popular culture. Many theorists have argued that popular culture that came from the people has been replaced by mass culture. Do you feel that part of this movement is a new form of popular culture? I also wanted to mention that I found it interesting that storytellers are drawing from so many different traditions. It seems that this storytelling movement is not grounded in any kind of nationalist movement, but it is, would you say, more “global” in the good sense of “creating community”?

JR: About popular expression, I think it is not popular in the sense that only the ten or fifteen percent of the repertoire I’ve listened to in our countries are really based in oral tradition. Maybe fifty to sixty percent are written stories, but many of the storytellers write their stories.

I2: So it’s like creating a new oral . . .

JR: It is creating not only a new oral . . . I don’t say “traditions,” because many years have to pass before one can call it a tradition. But it is showing up, popping out of the new slang of the cities, used in a very precise and beautiful form. I’ve seen theses in universities working on the new slangs, the new metaphors—for instance, a metaphor speaking about the umbilical cord as it relates to motherhood and all that. Also what is also really astonishing is to see new storytellers not only telling stories about their daily experiences, but also trying to build up new structures, taking the form of short stories, new structures such as stories without a message.

Oh, I remember now a storyteller who only tells movies! Movies! And he says “Okay, here is the theater and the curtains [sound effects of curtains opening] and now we have the lion of Metro Goldwyn Mayer [sound effect of lion roaring], starring Robert DeNirito!” And he uses a diminutive, and he changes the scenes, and he changes the end of the movie, and that is something that directly touches the imagination of modern people. If you
have seen *Forrest Gump* or *Pulp Fiction*, it is so easy to get into the story and not only reimagine (although you have not imagined the scenes when you see the movie), but rather to imagine for the first time the scenes, and when he starts to change the scenes, you say “What’s this?” and in this way he takes you to another movie, and he interpolates movies in different ways. He pays no copyrights [*audience laughs*].

In big cities, especially in tropical cities, we tell stories outdoors, and in Bogotá, in Colombia, we have twelve to fifteen universities that have a regular storytelling program. They have storytelling as a subject taught to students, and they receive credits for this. It’s like being a choir member or being on the soccer team. And in these universities, you can see four hundred to six hundred—depending on the venue—young people listening to a storyteller. And they are not telling traditional stories, especially at universities, people have a different mentality, so they are calling for a different kind of story. The directors of universities pay storytellers for this kind of activity. So in some ways they recognize that it is very important to have the activity at their universities.

And what was the second question?

I2: You were talking about how storytellers are drawing from all of these different traditions, so it’s not really grounded in any kind of nationalism but, rather, I was wondering if you would call it some sort of community-building. It seems that it’s very much about making connections with people locally and globally.

JR: We [in Colombia] have been joined by different associations. In Colombia we have six different storytelling associations. There are three in Mexico, two down in Argentina that I know of, two in Peru, six or seven in Spain, and we all are connected and communicate in different ways. What we really like is to have artistic exchanges of different ways to tell stories, because the humor in Colombia is so ironic and so sardonic that sometimes, culturally speaking, it impacts different societies in a negative way. When we hear Mexican storytellers telling stories about their tradition—because in Mexico they still tell tons of traditional stories—we say, “Hey, that really amused me, I want to tell a traditional story from my country.” We have international festivals. Those festivals have a swap moment, where beginners share their stories with an audience. We have what we call a one-man show, where a storyteller, only with stories, maybe music, performs for fifty-five minutes before an audience, and then the next storyteller, and then the next one, and then the next one, from six p.m. to ten p.m., all week long. So it is not only very nice to see the different imaginations and imaginaries that different cultures can reveal, but also to see
the different accents, the different slangs, and we should also be aware of 
slang, because sometimes it is specific to a people. To give you an example
[addressing I3], what is “puceta” in Venezuela?

I3: It’s public transportation, it’s like a van.

JR: It’s like a van. In Colombia “puceta” can be one of the strongest words you 
can use—negatively. So I feel that it is very important to be connected. 
Now I’m coming twice a year to the U.S., and I’m taking books back with 
me, because here there are books written about storytelling techniques. I 
took part in a workshop in San Francisco about tandem storytelling: how 
to stage a story with two voices, in unison, maybe one first and then the 
other—that was great. And she-heroes was another workshop I took there: 
how to take, how to research a topic and set it into a pattern and mold of 
stories. That is something very important.

Another place or niche of society where storytellers are working a lot 
is with advertising companies, because we know how to transmit a mes-
gage. The Baskin-Robbins of Colombia hired me and asked me to write ten 
stories about ice cream: why we have chocolate ice cream, why the vanilla 
ice cream was yellowish at first and now it is really white. So that is another 
niche of the market in which storytellers are working.

I4: Can you tell one of those stories now?

JR: Not in English. That is difficult. To prepare a story in English, it takes me 
a lot of time.

I5: You said that in Colombia there are storytelling classes where students can 
go. Are there other places in the world or in Latin America where that also 
is being done?

JR: Yes, there are classes at the Universidad Católica in Santiago, Chile, now 
there is a workshop in Madrid, there is a workshop at UNAM [Universidad 
Nacional Autónoma de México] in Mexico. But not only at universities. In 
Argentina storytellers tend to be forty years old or older, and they offer 
workshops on storytelling at different cultural centers. That gives you an 
idea of how different the movements are in different countries. In Argentina 
storytellers tend to be over forty, but in Colombia they are usually between 
eighteen and twenty-six years old. Why? Because the backbone of the 
Colombian storytelling movement is the universities. So people at universi-
ty tell stories, and as soon as they graduate they leave university to work and 
earn money and all that, and they no longer tell stories as a public event. 
But they continue to tell stories at their farms, in various types of meetings. 
They are the storytelling audience as well, and they go to books, too. In 
Argentina two storytellers have been hired by publishing houses who only 
tell children’s stories, and they go to schools and they tell the story, and they
say: “Okay, in this book, we have another story. I’m going to tell you a little bit of it.” Guess what book the little boy is going to buy?

Many experiments have been carried out to situate ancient texts in modern times. I did one with “El Quixote de la Mancha.” I worked with a cellist, and we performed it in Chile, in Mexico, in San Francisco, four times in Florida. For this particular tour, I performed it at Denison University. I’m going to Gainesville, too. So for me the challenge of taking an ancient text and preserving that language—because what I did was I took Cervantes and I just selected, cut, paste, selected, cut, and paste—was to let Cervantes speak. And in fact, for people today it is incredible; they just find the universal subject of the novel, and they relate it to these times without a problem. The backbone of the Spanish storytelling movement are cultural pubs, where they tell stories, and it is incredible. A pub may have one hundred, one hundred twenty people, who go there only to listen to stories. As soon as the show ends, the pub is empty. They leave, they leave immediately. They go only to hear the stories.

13: Well, thank you so much.