



# Telling digital stories as feminist research and practice: A 2-day workshop with migrant women in London

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## Abstract

In this article, we look at Digital Storytelling (DS) as a specifically feminist epistemology within qualitative social research methods. Digital Storytelling is a process allowing research participants to tell their stories in their own words through a guided creative workshop that includes the use of digital technology, participatory approaches, and co-production of personal stories. The article draws on a 2-day Digital Storytelling workshop with migrant women which was set up to understand the life stories and work trajectories of volunteers working in the women's community and voluntary sector in London. By outlining this innovative approach, the article highlights its potential and makes a case for Digital Storytelling as a feminist approach to research while taking into account epistemological, practical, and ethical considerations.

## Keywords

Digital Storytelling, narratives, feminist methodologies, feminist practice

## Introduction

Digital Storytelling (DS) holds particularly compelling methodological and epistemological characteristics for a feminist approach to research. In this article, we aim to introduce DS as part of a feminist strategy in research methods allowing women to tell their stories in their own words through a guided creative process that includes co-production of personal stories and—in so doing—further addresses the issue of power imbalance in the research process. Moss and Falconer Al Hindi (2008) have stressed the importance of “[...] feminist praxis as a site of knowledge production [...]” in geography (Moss and Falconer Al Hindi, 2008: 150) particularly because of feminist methodologies’ emphasis on voice, power, and emancipatory practices. DS has so far been adopted as part of the training of practitioners/professionals in health or social work settings as well as an educational tool (see Alcantud-Diaz and Gregory-Signes, 2013; Dunford and Jenkins, 2018). It has also been built into academic research projects with the aim to “[cross] academic boundaries” (Otañez and Guerrero, 2015: 57) (see also the work of Gubrium and DiFluvio (2011) on community health and girlhood studies and Hill (2010) on gender justice). Adopting this method as part of a broader project on the exploration of

the question of migrant women volunteers’ right to the city in London, we respond to Matthews and Sunderland’s (2013) call for more critical academic writing in DS and propose to frame this particular approach as a specifically feminist and participatory data collection tool to be used in qualitative research.

DS has been described as a kind of content creation which is crucial to the democratic agenda and as contributing to an ongoing definition of citizenship (Burgess, 2006). Burgess (2006) uses the concept of “vernacular creativity” in order to “describe and illuminate creative practices that emerge from highly articular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions” where the term vernacular points to the “native speech of a populace against the official language but is now used to distinguish the everyday language from institutional or official modes of expression”

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(p. 206). This approach and its ethical positioning delineate a commitment and empathy with the ordinary and the cultural formations under study. In this article, we argue that the practice of DS holds a great potential as a data collection tool in qualitative research and that it qualifies as a feminist research method for its ability to address the materiality of living gendered lives and for contributing to highlight identity and personal relationships as multiple, fluid, and layered (Gonick et al., 2011). Moreover, DS holds the potential for “generative feminist geographies” (Kern et al., 2014). As sharing and co-producing stories with one another has its roots in feminist activism and allows feminist researchers and practitioners to use women’s relationality as a starting point for social transformation rather than as a reason to silence their voices. We inscribe our critical reflection on adopting DS in an inter-disciplinary feminist methodology which DeVault (1996) describes as a “distinctive body of writing about research practice and epistemology” (DeVault, 1996: 31).

DS aims for the realization of a 2–5 minute audio-visual clip whose imaginary is built on the recording of the workshop participants’ voice reading the story she or he has written. The resulting clip is a combination of principally still images complementing the recording of the participant’s voice telling the story that she or he has developed through a series of creative writing type of activities. One of the seven elements of a digital story has been identified by Lambert (2013) as “the gift of your voice.” DS is achieved through a dynamic rapport of mutual support and co-production during the workshop aimed at helping participants to find their voice and tell a story which is important to them. Participants are also supported in transforming their story into an audio-visual clip that can be shared with the immediate group and disseminated further.

The concept of voice is central to DS. Gubrium, Krause et al. (2014) argue that the DS process constitutes a set of ethnographic data enabling participants to reconnect with, reconfigure, and act upon their lived experiences. However, they advance a critique of DS as merely providing a voice to research participants, and as a medium able to fully represent them. Rather, they see DS as a process that entails the co-creation and the co-construction of new narratives and complicated voices. Like Couldry (2009), they argue that voice is a complex site of conflict and critique the notion of voice as monolithic and un-changing, questioning its authenticity and prefer to focus on the nature of multisensory narratives engendered by the process of DS. Moreover, as Alexandra (2015) highlights, voice cannot be disentangled from political listening, and hierarchies of voice enable and sustain the privilege not to listen. In this article, we acknowledge the multiplicity of voice’s roles, its shifting positions, and its performative nature. Aware that digital stories make individual stories visible and visceral, we critically discuss intimacy as a key aspect for understanding DS as a feminist research method.

For us as researchers exploring how the right to the city can be gendered, these digital stories help inform our questions about social inclusion and participation in the urban fabrics. Women are often discursively situated in the private sphere through the concepts of care and social reproduction. Research in the field of civil society organizations has demonstrated that these roles tend to be invisible. Martin (2014) defines women’s volunteer work in community organization as the “hidden labor of social reproduction” where both the work of some BME (Black Minority Ethnic) organizations and the work of volunteer women working within these organizations is made invisible and does not appear in statistics and in the record of funders. Following Lefebvre’s framework and adding a specific gendered dimension to it, we have called these hidden spaces as “*a/topia*” spaces (Vacchelli and Peyrefitte, 2017) where the invisibility of these organizations and of the women working in them as volunteers is translated in an absence of voice. DS allows for these voices to be articulated in a process of co-production and then communicated.

In this article, we are reading DS through the prism of feminist epistemology and after describing the DS process we identify aspects of the method that qualify it as feminist. These include first a discussion of the role of intimacy in establishing trust between researcher and research participants and second DS’s dialogic nature as evident in the process of co-authorship and its ability to re-connect personal stories with broader political issues. The article will also offer some epistemological and ethical considerations on the use of the DS process.

### **DS as a feminist methodology and practice: dialogical production of knowledge and co-authorship**

Biographical methodologies are rooted in feminist practice. From a specifically feminist perspective, biographical methodologies have played a key role in feminist research especially because of their transformative potential allowing for personal stories to acquire collective meaning through the act of sharing them. Although first systematized with this name by Frigga Haug in the influential 1987 book *Female Sexualisation: a collective work of memory*, the feminist practice of collective biography has its roots in the US and Western Europe consciousness-raising groups. Within these groups, feminist activists in the 1970s used to experiment with transforming individual experiences of oppression in a political problem to be tackled collectively (Vacchelli, 2011). Collective biography (Davies and Gannon, 2006), which has been called elsewhere “memory-work” (Onyx and Small, 2001), is a key example of co-production within a feminist framework whereby shared memories and emotions are constitutive of “[...] texts for collective analysis” (Kern et al., 2014: 839) and ultimately central in the development of a

conceptual framework. As pointed out by Gonick et al. (2011),

Each collective biography project entails its own specific developments of the method, although all renditions include the identification of a theme that group members investigate through writing their own related embodied memories. The stories are read aloud in the group and then revised based on comments and feedback by other group members. (p. 742)

DS presents some continuity with collective biography in that it is a method devised for bridging the gap between theory and experience. Both can be considered a social practice as well as a research method. Like collective biography, DS reflects personal truths that are worked on through technologies of telling, listening to each other's stories, writing, and giving each others comments and feedback within the group: in other words, co-constructing. Moreover, like in collective biography, in DS, affect and embodiment play a central role in the shaping of the story. DS is situated in "an ethos of debates in qualitative research about what counts as knowledge, the location of the researcher and questions language and representational practices in research" (Gonick et al., 2011: 742). Differently from collective biography, however, DS does not place as much emphasis on the role of memory in the social construction of the self. Also, it does not tend to focus on individual events described in detail by the research participants (as happens, for instance, in the memory-work variant of the method described by Onyx and Small, 2001) but, rather, draws on auto-biographical data as they are organized and recounted through a set of principally collective activities. As Letherby (2014) argues, "in writing an autobiography we reflect on our relationship with the biographies of others and when presenting the biographies of others we inevitably refer to and reflect on our own autobiographies" (p. 2).

Another approach that cannot be ignored because of its legacy as a feminist epistemological tool is the voice-centered relational method of data analysis originating in the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) (Paliadelis and Cruickshank, 2008). The aim of the voice-centered relational method is to set personal narratives accounts in relation to themselves, the people around them (including the researchers), and the broader social, structural, and cultural contexts in which they are situated. As part of this method, after the first reading of the data, the researchers record in a journal the personal responses highlighting the emotions the story elicited and comparing notes collectively on reactions and identifications with the stories. One striking similarity between this method and DS is the centrality of the research participant's voice. Like DS and the collective biography method, in the voice-centered relational method of analysis, moreover, the researcher's perceptions and reactions to the data are acknowledged, thus highlighting relational aspects in the construction of the data and the importance of reflexivity for feminist research.

The DS approach plays a role in what Hesse-Biber (2014) has referred to as "[...] uncovering the *subjugated knowledge* of the diversity of women's realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated" (Hesse-Biber, 2014: 184; original italics) as in the case of the feminist approach to interviewing. We argue that the process of DS encourages even further the "researched" to take an active role in the research process to the point that the denominations "researcher-researched" can no longer signify the nature of this methodological approach. In DS, participants are trained to develop their own stories in a collaborative process. This is different from more traditional forms of in-depth interviewing. In the "social encounter" of the qualitative interview, knowledge production is recognized as a dialogical process and yet the researcher still holds a certain degree of control as she or he usually leads the interview process (Christou, 2009; O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994: 122). The use of the word "participant" in qualitative research can too often be taken for granted. However, in DS, personal narratives are borne out of a dialogical relationship among the group of research participants including the researcher/s. DS subverts the researcher/researched participant roles thanks to its participatory nature which is evident in the co-production of personal narratives. In this relationship, we are still reflective of our positionality and question the degree to which self-representation in DS can be affected and mediated by the researchers at different stages of the story's construction and dissemination through "inter-personal dynamics" (Summerfield on oral history interviews, 2000: 102–104). In considering common ethical issues in DS, Gubrium, Hill et al. (2014) talk of the "power of shaping" as a subtler, and yet little acknowledged, effect of the "influential roles of others (facilitators, funders, researchers)" (Gubrium, Hill et al., 2014: 1610). However, the aim is not to disentangle the different roles but to recognize that co-production in storytelling present a unique potential in feminist research.

Co-authoring allows for feminist alliance work to write against relations of power and contribute to enact social change, while also problematizing dominant discourses and methodologies both inside and outside the academic realm. Richa Nagar (2013) frames storytelling and co-authorship at the point where academia intersects with political activism as "it allows co-authors from multiple locations to draw upon and scrutinize their multiple—sometimes conflicting—experiences and truths" (p. 4). "Co-authoring stories in/through feminist alliance work makes it possible to mobilize experience and memory work in ways that connect questions of feminist subjectivity with those of representation in organization, leadership, and movement politics" (p. 5). Anne Harris and Enza Gandolfo (2014), drawing on Vacchelli's (2011) work, write powerfully about feminist narrative collaborations and the poignancy of co-constructing personal narratives. They reflect on the recent trend in qualitative research that makes use of arts practice-led methodologies as a way to acknowledge research

participants and researchers as situated and yet relational and intersubjective.

DS presents a number of qualities as a participatory methodological tool that offers a space of dialogues and community building (Back and Puwar, 2012; Copeland, 2010; Gubrium, Hill et al., 2014). Copeland (2010) argues that “[d]igital storytelling is part of the tradition of participatory uses of arts and media for activism and social change” (p. 196). We argue that DS can be more distinctively situated in a feminist approach. DS indeed further disturbs our common understanding of knowledge production in the research process in that we as researchers, coherently with our feminist ethos, decided to take part in the DS workshop as participants and share our stories. The migrant women who took part in the workshop were supported rather than directed in the “co-production” of their stories by an external DS facilitator while the researchers took on the role of participants. Throughout the process of developing their individual stories, participants were able to gradually share them with other participants and with the researchers who were concomitantly developing their own digital stories.

There are various instances in the DS workshop where knowledge production is evidently a co-production. We shared experiences of writing and telling our stories and at times we as a DS workshop group were given room to comment on each other’s stories in a supportive manner. When we finished writing the first draft of our stories, we read them aloud to the group who provided comments and impressions, and shared the feelings that the story had engendered. This was a key step in the development and refinement of the personal story in collaboration with the rest of the group. In this instance, the two authors (i.e. the researchers) were active as co-producers of the stories. We decided that we as the authors/researchers should also share our personal stories during the workshop so this contributed to situate us in a more equal position with the research participants. The fact that we are both migrants and could share the doubts and difficulties we experienced in establishing ourselves as professionals in a foreign country (the United Kingdom) made this interaction and co-production more horizontal and genuinely mutual.

## The DS workshop

In this article, we draw on findings and reflections collected during a 2-day workshop titled “Exploring Life Stories of Work and Migration” held in the home of one of the two authors of this article. Research participants were recruited via contacts we had established with refugee and women’s organizations in the course of previous work in this field. The workshop took place over 2 days, where the first day was entirely devoted to the writing and co-construction of the stories and the second day to the practicalities of creating a digital story, that is, recording the voice, sourcing or creating the right images, and video editing the short clip

using iMovie with the professional guidance of the DS workshop facilitator.

The workshop saw the participation of six migrant women working as volunteers, two academic researchers, and one professional DS facilitator. We previously had to source internal research funding in order to run the workshop and make sure we could cover for the work of the DS facilitator and travel, and meals and refreshments for the participants over the 2 days. In preparation for the workshop, the participants were asked to bring an object that is their favorite or has a particular meaning for them in relation to their experience of migration and work in the United Kingdom. This could be something relating to the work they did in their countries of origin, a qualification that they had gained, an item of clothing, or something belonging to a relative who had particularly inspired them. Workshop participants were also asked to bring 15–30 of their personal photographs if they had them, somehow relating to the themes of work and migration. Participants were reassured that they should not worry if they did not have any as they would be helped in retrieving or creating images that would support their story. Most of the participants opted for personal objects rather than pictures.

DS as a program for the production of a life narrative contributes to bring its participants into the public sphere via the dissemination of the digital story; however, this obviously depends on the use which is made of the stories. The extent to which the digital stories access an “intimate” public sphere (Poletti, 2011) depends on the use of the stories which is negotiated between the researcher and the research participants and the way in which it is disseminated becomes central to understanding its function. In any case, the first phase of the DS process, that is, when the stories are co-produced and a kind of “intimate public” is created through the sharing of universal themes such as life, loss, belonging, hope for the future, friendship, and love offers an experience of inclusion and community building promoting identification among strangers that leads to an experience of sharing and belonging. Matthews and Sunderland (2013) interrogate the afterlives of these stories and suggest that through DS, an abstraction of the storyteller’s voice from their physical body happens. The participant’s voice, after the initial abstraction is then re-contextualized into a new media.

In aiming to situate DS within a framework of feminist research and practice, we identify key characteristics that best define this method as feminist. First, we look at the role of intimacy for establishing a relation of trust between participants. Second, we draw on the use of narratives as a specifically feminist method. This is a consolidated body of knowledge (Brannen, 2013; Cavarero, 2000; Erel, 2007; Gluck and Patai, 1991; Harris and Gandolfo, 2014; Hemmings, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Nagar, 2013; Oakley, 2010; Oikkonen, 2013; Personal Narrative Group, 1991; Plummer, 1995; Vacchelli, 2011) and we use it here to highlight the continuity between feminist work on narratives and

DS. Third, we discuss some important epistemological and ethical implications of conducting DS which contribute to firmly situate it in the feminist research methods literature.

### Intimacy and trust in DS

A key specificity of DS is the way it is facilitated through a 2- to 3-day workshop and organized around the principle of the “Story Circle” (Hartley and McWilliam, 2009). The image of the circle refers to the act of sharing stories in the inclusive and intimate space created by people telling personal stories while sitting in a circle around a bonfire. The act of sharing stories is also inscribed in a feminist approach as it helps build rapport through reciprocity (Hesse-Biber, 2014: 199). By combining a range of “activities, games and writing stimuli to develop trust,” DS is positioned within the feminist research methods tradition in that developing a relationship of trust is central to its ethos:

[...] [R]apport is tantamount to trust, and trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make. (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 79)

During the workshop, the group was confronted with a shared experience of intimacy which helped to communicate personal journeys constituting individual trajectories of migration. In addition, we as researchers were able to draw on our own experiences as migrants—albeit in different circumstances—to further participate in the shared intimacy of the “story circle.”

The workshop took place at the house of one of the researchers and this setting was particularly propitious to create a shared sense of intimacy. This is perhaps an atypical deployment of DS, which typically takes place in an institutional space, with researchers either facilitating or observing (see, for instance, Gubrium, Hill et al., 2014). We believe that as a pre-requisite to a successful outcome for the production of a revealing story, the participant must feel at ease with this degree of intimacy based on the assumption that sharing will constitute a dialogical creation. The production of knowledge is to be situated in the dynamism of sharing which in itself is reliant on the intimate situation of the workshop. As pointed out by Poletti (2011), this cannot be dissociated from affect in the relationships established between the different actors of the DS workshops.

In the initial steps of the workshop, the members of the group were progressively introduced to one another. Reciprocal trust among the participants was established during the first day of the workshop through a series of guided exercises aimed on one hand at loosening out by reconnecting to “natural” storytelling skills and on the other hand by working in small groups and getting to know each other. The encounters in pair that preceded the story circle were intimate precisely because we were faced with the difficult task of creating a story using un-connected and

mis-matching words which were the same for everyone and the outcome of a previous group brainstorming. This first collaboration in pairs made us force the boundaries of what is considered a common kind of interaction as we had to tap into our inner source of creativity and negotiate our ideas with a stranger. For Elena, this meant starting to know her storytelling partner in a deep and personal manner, and immediately connecting with and trusting her imaginative, good-natured, and enthusiastic personality. For Magali, the one-to-one experience of collaboratively writing a story contributed to “break the ice” further in order to build rapport and trust. Through this activity and others during the first day of the workshop, intimacy is generated out of collaborative and creative encounters as well as originating from the sharing of personal stories. The facilitated trajectory involved in creating mutual trust and intimacy prior to sharing the stories raises important questions on the role of affect, mutual responsibility, and care in the creation of a shared intimate sphere.

Prior to the creation of a trusting relationship with the research participants through the DS workshop activities, we introduced the workshop as something we were doing for our nascent research project while offering the opportunity of acquiring further digital literacy (Gubrium, Hill et al., 2014: 1606) and use of AV techniques mostly through guidance and supervision. Both of us felt that this was a difficult position to be in—we had to reassure our research participants of our ethical way of working while admitting to the fact that we were going to use the stories for our own research. We had to face the challenge of creating an intimate sphere based on trust according to this slippery and potentially dangerous trade-off. The fact that we authors/researchers were also participating in equal terms thanks to the guiding role of the DS facilitator helped us to gain the trust of the research participants. Ultimately, the creation of an intimate sphere was made possible by the researchers’ positionality as both outsiders and insiders to the story circle and their sharing of personal and affective stories of migration, displacement, belonging, and work. From an emotional point of view, our positions of insiders to the story circle meant that in addition to taking responsibility for the outcome of the workshop and making sure that our data collection process was successful, we were simultaneously occupying the position of storytellers. This position made us experience the same vulnerability that our research participants probably felt in the act of opening up and exposing their personal stories to the group, a position that might have potentially jeopardized our authority as researchers in the context of the workshop. As Botterill (2015) argues, there are inevitable complexities to finding shared positional spaces, and multiple intersectionalities cannot be reduced to characteristics such as national identity, race, and gender. The fact that the space of the workshop is intersubjective and that knowledge is co-produced in several complex ways means acknowledging that the researcher cannot ever be a complete outsider to the research process.

DS mitigates some of the common issues encountered in other (auto-)biographical methods where participants are asked to retell their story, often in a linear manner. DS disrupts this linearity both in the retelling of the story and in the selection of its key components around the story circle. DS is situated as an autobiographical genre, which has been not only appropriated but also critically evaluated by feminists (Cosslett et al., 2000; Letherby, 2015). The creation of an intimate space based on mutual trust creates the precondition for the disclosure of personal stories that often have a political cogency. Ostrov Weisser (1996) recognized that the personal and the political are intertwined both in the telling of the story and in the interpretation and retelling of another woman's story as in auto-biographical methods.

The intimate sphere created during the DS workshop also allows, in our opinion, to challenge the common belief according to which research participants are at deficit when it comes to power relations. We believe that research participants hold their own distinct power in their domain of life and work which is negotiated during the research encounter. In social research, the encounter between the researcher and the research participant (i.e. usually data collection) is potentially power unbalanced as we as researchers are leading it and are making it happen in our own terms (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994). The question of power imbalance continues to arise when we, as researchers, have to represent research participants' views and voices in our domain (i.e. social research) through data analysis and dissemination. The delicate operation of representing participants' views and opinions is faced with a high risk of colonizing people's experiences if peoples' voice is not acknowledged and accounted for in an ethical manner. In line with other auto-biographical approaches, DS presents the merit to give priority to self-representation and the participant as knower.

As we argued in this section, DS enables inter-subjectivity through intimacy. Using a feminist approach as a point of departure, we argue that reflexivity on what constitute this intimacy is useful for revealing the intricacies of the formation of knowledge as "[...] produced from social and cultural relations, underpinned by economic and institutional organisation [...]" (Skeggs, 1995: 2). The process of producing knowledge through the creative and participatory method of DS is situated in and dialogically constituted by the inter-subjective relationship between participant and researcher (Cosslett et al., 2000: 12–15). Our presence in the DS workshop should not however simply be envisaged in power-relational terms. Indeed, the shared intimacy of the story circle was in part constituted by our own participation as well as the sharing of our migratory stories and biographies. Finally, in this act of reflexivity, even though we need to be aware of the field of diverse interests (i.e. facilitator, researchers, participants), it would be presumptuous to believe that our influence was shaping the stories that were shared in the group. As exemplified in the following sections, the participants were determined to choose the topic

and orientation of their stories. In the story circle, many found and embraced a space to voice a story that was empathetically listened to and eventually turned into a digital media product of their own-making.

### **The political within the personal: digital stories as narratives**

Narration as biographical knowledge is interpreted as a verbal response to the question about the identity of the person involved in narrating and is therefore dialogical in nature. Moreover, "this takes on the meaning of a political action" (Kottman, 2000). Cavarero draws on Hannah Arendt when delineating the idea of a subject as situated at the intersection between the discursive and the material: the subject is an "embodied existent" made of flesh and blood, whose material existence is revealed through the narrating words of her personal biography (Kottman, 2000). With this assertion, Cavarero seeks to break the necessity of the discursive framework. Although narration cannot avoid the discursive frame, the corporeal experience of narration offers a material grounding to the strictly philosophical discourse. It is helpful to situate Adriana Cavarero's work in an intellectual tradition that uses narrative practices as a political instrument of public exhibition (Vacchelli, 2011).

Our experience of running a DS workshop confirms Cavarero's view of narration. Migrant women who spoke about their experience of migrating and working as volunteers in London charities were compelling and individual stories could be understood in the broader framework of structural inequalities. The plurality of the narratives produced can also be understood and analyzed through a theoretical trope that recognizes collective instances in their diversity.

The process of DS and its outcome (i.e. the digital stories) can be read and analyzed in several different ways. We are particularly interested in the ways in which the digital stories we collected during the workshop are able to inform our understanding of the work trajectories of migrant women working in the voluntary sector in London. We contend that, to an extent, the individual stories reveal instances of exclusion and resistance and they call into question existing legal and formalized discourses on refugees, labor migrants, and marriage migration. While a dominant argument is that European societies provide an entirely new way to emancipation, we know that structures of incorporation into the receiving society may enhance their gendered vulnerabilities (Erel, 2007). This reading allows for understanding life experience not as a single category or event, but as a process at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and social class.

Another dominant paradigm depicts migrant women as passive victims of modernization through the patriarchal control of men in their ethnic groups. DS allows women to take their subjective experience as a starting point and has a potential to redress such representations, starting from the

“personal” of their individual stories. These stories, once disseminated, have the potential to shape collective identities (like in the work of Cavarero) where social movements and identity emerge in opposition to dominant notions of “foreigner” which posits migrants as stealing British people’s work or exploiting their welfare state. Redressing cultural representations through DS helps to elaborate a new and different resistant subject position.

For instance, the digital story of Manuela tells her experience of migrating from Latin America to London with a spousal visa after falling in love with a British citizen with whom she was having a long-distance relationship. Her story questions her independent status as a woman who had to give up a successful career in Mexico to move to London. The kind of compromise she made led her to further interrogate her sense of home and belonging. Her personal tribulations however by their own expression disrupt notions of migrant women as at best passive if not victims. She concludes in line with the way she titled her digital story as “A life continued”:

And at last after our honeymoon, paperwork and the money that we had to get to pay for my visa, I am here with him, in London looking for an opportunity to feel again that professional women that I was once but here in the UK.

Her story unveils a far too well-known scenario where qualified women who migrate are unable to use their previous qualifications in the destination country due to language barriers and lack of social capital in the new migratory context. Like in the story Manuela tells, de-skilling is the outcome many Latin American women experience when they migrate to the United Kingdom (McIlwaine et al., 2011) and although her narrative is positive and full of hope, the disadvantage she is experiencing is evident and politically situated.

Karima’s story presents another interesting case as her compelling narration of everyday struggles and activism is testimony of wider structural issues and is exemplary of the fact that a personal story can also be political. In her story, the political even appears to supersede the personal as there is a strong identification of her personal story as Eritrean refugee and her common experience of fleeing Eritrea to come to the United Kingdom with other women. Karima found it challenging to produce a personal account of her experience of war in Eritrea and especially having to translate this in a written form. Once we identified Karima’s discomfort, one of us sat down with her and helped her to write a story which could address best as we could her communicative need. Once the first draft of the story was on paper, Karima re-worked it several times until she was happy of the outcome. Karima produced a story in which her voice is not as central; instead, the voice of the “we,” the “unheard voices” of Eritrean women occupies center stage. Her story is a powerful activist story speaking for the Network of

Eritrean Women. Using a collective “we,” she questions the role of women in the liberation of Eritrea and posits,

women were the prime victims of the regime’s (post-independence) human right violations. Women can be seen but their voices never heard.

In the UK diaspora, Eritrean women struggle together to keep their traditions and culture alive through awareness campaigns and intergenerational work. The message they bring with their political activism is deeply anti-authoritarian. DS provided her with a platform to send a powerful message as an extension of her activism and raise awareness “so that history does not repeat itself.”

The stories of the migrant women who have participated in the DS workshop have very little in common with one another. Each story depicts a particular pathway inscribed in varying socio-economic and historical contexts of migration. In all cases, and in their diversity, these stories translate into a subversion of dominant discourses of migration. This is the collective potential of these stories as they develop a political strength through a personal account.

### Some epistemological and ethical considerations

DS presents an innovative opportunity for a dialogical production of knowledge in a feminist perspective. Poletti (2011) who is an advocate of this research practice is mostly concerned with the “coaxing of life narrative in digital story telling” (Poletti, 2011: 77). She acknowledges that narratives in DS are found to have different emphasis in correlation with how the site of narration is constructed (p. 76) and warns against the risk of dis-embedding the stories from the discursive context in which they are produced. The ways in which both pedagogical and social relationships are produced within DS are central to their understanding and needs to take into account the context in which they were created within the site of the DS workshop. According to Poletti, having and presenting an intelligible life story is central to the functioning of everyday life at the level of social, political, and individual’s identity.

As advocates of DS in research, we are moreover aware of the underlying ambiguity when it comes to writing autobiography as,

... writing a life story is always bound up with degrees of fictionalising: be it through allusion or use of different narrative genres into which the life story is moulded or through the slips of memory, the life as it was actually lived changes in the re-telling. To turn a life into a life story, moreover, coherence has to be produced, aided by a retrospective sense of direction, development or progression. (Erel, 2007)

The life narrative expressed in the context of DS is subjective, fictional, and makes a strategic use of emotions in

order to coax the story in a certain direction according to the context in which the story was produced. In addition, it is the result of selective memory and complies with a shape or form that can make the story intelligible while mobilizing feelings of empathy from the listeners. On the contrary, as the understanding of members of the story circle will be mediated by their own biographies and personal experiences, so will the interpretation and use of the digital story be shaped by the researcher's aims. There are therefore different layers of ethical considerations in storytelling: the fictionalizing due to selective memory and retrospective sense of direction that happens when re-telling life stories, the strategic use of listeners' emotions, the inevitable understanding of others through our own experiences, and the relational field between research participants and researchers. Autobiography is a *genre* where the writer/storyteller does the epistemological labor, working from the self to the other and back again as argued by Letherby (2014) in an essay on feminist auto/biography.

In DS, the storyteller is anchored to the imperative of keeping the audience interested and for the story to be intelligible and have a structure. According to Poletti (2011), this already brings the practice of DS in the sphere of the public "as the producer of the story is encouraged to think about how to construct their vignette in a way that s/he is coaxed for a good story" and, in addition, is able to satisfy, engage, and surprise the viewer with some personal and emotional content. Although "emotional content is presented as a desirable element of the digital story" (p. 78), it needs to be treated with caution.

The "open" and supportive nature of the workshop meant that there was an element of unpredictability in the production of knowledge that the researchers have to comply with and learn to accept. During the workshop, participants were given loose guidelines on the fact that their story should have focused on their experience of migration and volunteer work. Some of the activities that preceded the writing of the story were designed in a way that could help this kind of focus. However, as evident from the stories discussed here, participants were free to prioritize their communicative needs.

The researchers' inability to fully control the outcome of the story represents both a strength and a weakness of DS as a qualitative research method. It is a strength in that, to an extent, the loss of control by the researcher emblemizes the methods' claim for being truly participatory and empowering for the participants. In most cases, the researcher in DS is just a facilitator who can at best express a preference on the direction of the story, has control on the process but ultimately has very little control on the story's contents. On the contrary, some of the stories discussed point to a potential weakness of the method as a qualitative research tool aimed at addressing specific questions. For instance, in some of the stories, we collected a key aspect of our research question, that is, the participants' role as volunteers is not at the

forefront of the digital stories. Indeed, in Alma's and Antonietta's narratives, their trajectories into volunteering do not feature in a clear way. For Alma, her charity work was envisaged as a personal quest and presented in her clip as a poetic echo of her grandmother's altruistic and generous personality that she was trying to emulate. She was inspired by the Somali women she was working with as volunteer, by the sense of solidarity and mutual support they offer each other in a foreign country. Antonietta's story offered a more elliptical narration of her route into volunteering as a search for home and belonging.

Overall, issues of home and belonging emerge quite strongly in all the participants' narratives, and the insights generated by all the stories collected during the DS workshop are very rich with regard to our broad questions on migrant women's trajectories and on the gendered right to the city. However, the aspect of volunteering and the "hidden labor of social reproduction" only clearly emerge in Karima's and Manuela's stories. Drawing on this experience, we contend that DS, as most participatory methods, needs to take into account the relational features of the process, the context in which the stories are created, and consequently works better in an open and more inductive epistemological research framework.

In a previous section, we have pointed out that intimacy is central in creating the relevant context for the sharing of the stories to take place. From an ethical perspective, it is however never completely unproblematic to treat intimacy as conducive of a relationship of trust between researchers and research participants and we need to continue to be reflective of our positionalities in the context of the research. In developing DS as a distinctive feminist method, we draw on an established body of feminist literature dealing with epistemological, ethical, and political implications with regard to the question of power relations between researchers and research participants (Cook and Fonow, 1986; DeVault, 1996; Finch, 1992; Sprague, 2004). As demonstrated by our experience of piloting a DS workshop, a certain level of exposure of the researcher's positionality and shared experiences is indeed constitutive of a relationship of reciprocity and trust. This is necessary to the success of the data collection as long as it does not simply create "*the illusion of equality*" (Sprague, 2004: 135; original italics) and is not exploitative (Finch, 1992).

We have highlighted the inter-subjective nature of the digital story, the role of different subject positions in the co-creation of the story, and the importance of the way in which the story is shared. We are however critical of the purpose of sharing personal experiences in an intimate sphere if there is no space to showcase the outcome of the co-produced work to the research participants themselves and whoever else they want to include. As highlighted by Gubrium, Hill et al. (2014), DS can be disseminated back and to a wider audience if desired. The final stage in DS can take place as a screening of the digital stories to the group. The event can



be collaboratively organized with the participants who can choose to invite friends and relatives. Public screening of the digital stories will be the next stage in our practice in order to provide an opportunity for dialogue within relevant communities and further co-production of knowledge.

Participants are also able to keep their digital stories and use them in other contexts if they wish to. This was particularly the case for Karima who was interested in using her clip for political activism. At the stage of dissemination, we also have to contend with the ethical issue of participants' anonymity. This was anticipated prior to starting the workshop as participants were informed of the aims and objectives of the research but needed to be reiterated throughout especially as the stories were co-created in an inductive fashion.

Although situated outside the realm of participatory research per se, DS requires intensive workshops in order to be carried out. As such, it requires a systematic definition of the extent to which it can be used as an effective qualitative research tool (for a discussion of the workshop as a legitimate qualitative data collection outside broader and systematic Participatory Action Research projects, please see Caretta and Vacchelli, 2015). The DS process remains cooperative from production to dissemination to a certain degree. As we use DS as part of an academic practice, dissemination also takes place through publications and other forms of public divulgence. While in these stages, our analysis and interpretations remain dominant, we constantly commit to an ongoing dialogue with our ethical motivation as feminist researchers and question our intention to channel research participants' voices as valid knowledge highlighting the political within the digital stories (DeVault, 1996).

## Conclusion

A number of epistemological, practical, and ethical concerns have been raised in this article highlighting DS as a feminist research framework. We are situating DS in an intellectual tradition that starts with Hannah Arendt (2013 (1958)) and includes Cavarero (2000) and other feminist scholars who have focused on the centrality of narration as a political practice. Yet DS is more than just narration: the co-production which is at its core makes it a privileged terrain for feminist research because it has its root in feminist practice.

We have argued that storytelling and co-authorship is where academia intersects with activism and this depends on the context in which the stories are created and how and where they are disseminated. Both the DS practice and its outcomes potentially contribute to challenge hegemonic power relations by problematizing dominant discourses within and outside of academia. The process itself, moreover, emphasizes the intrinsically situated, relational and inter-subjective nature of research processes and invites for a reflection on this particular aspect of social research outside

strictly participatory contexts. Co-production means, on one hand, that the researcher takes on the role of facilitator, yet on the other hand she or he is active in the co-production of both the research participant's story and their own.

The outsider-insider role of the researcher in DS is reached through a delicate balance and negotiation of in-group relationality and trust. In this sense, the researcher has to pay attention to the way in which the site of narration is constructed and this question goes back to Poletti's argument on coaxing life narratives in DS. Underlying assumptions of authenticity in "giving a voice" to marginalized groups however have been criticized. First, because the notion of voice is not fixed, is performative, and engenders multisensory narratives as evident in the process of DS. Hemmings' (2011) work points to the fact that stories are driven by the positions that the teller occupies—or wishes to occupy—at the time of the narration. Second, because the relationship between researcher and researched in the research process inevitably situates the researcher in a vantage position whereby she or he is setting the agenda, guiding and controlling the process, analyzing the data, and ultimately presenting the life stories in different contexts (Erel, 2007). Poletti reminds us that the stories need to be embedded in the context in which they were produced and presenting them in different contexts would be a misrepresentation or distortion of their original meaning. We suggest that intimacy, and the affective relations it produces, contributes to mitigate the role of the researcher as an external agent and is a generative starting point in order to redress power relations in social research.

In our work, DS has played a central role in diversifying migrant women's voices and facilitating certain speaking positions rather than others, as the workshop we organized was embedded in our research agenda. The kind of positions that we encouraged were situated at the intersection of the personal and the political through the coaxing of the stories toward areas that have a political relevance such as migration and work. These stories were realized through the mobilization of emotions in the narrative text and voice, which in turn allowed for the outward projection of the participant's voice through narrations that are, intrinsically, counter-storytelling as they stand out against dominant discourses of migration and gender. In this sense, DS is a powerful means to address the materiality of living gendered lives and, as Gonick et al. (2011) argue, for contributing to highlight identity and personal relationships as multiple, fluid, and layered.

The multi-media technologies involved in the method offer an opportunity for more multi-dimensional exploration of storytelling. This is in line with a growing methodological literature recognizing the different ways in which people experience the social world. We remain aware that the digital stories produced by our participants are not absolute truths. On the contrary, they depict partial and inter-subjective truths which are a result of different layers of co-production: the researchers' agenda, the role

of the DS external facilitator, the story circle and its multifaceted interpretations of the stories, the personal urge to produce a story rather than another, the role of the emotions that are mobilized in order to make the story palatable, and the discursive strategies that are enacted when the story is disseminated in the public sphere. As such, DS is situated in continuity with a feminist body of work and ethos that aims for non-standardized and inter-subjective forms of knowledge production.

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