

Narrative Translation as Design Method: From Oral Traditions to Human-Centered Technology

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Abstract

This essay examines narrative translation as a design methodology that adapts oral traditions and storytelling structures into human-centered technology. Building on the foundational framework introduced in the prologue, this paper develops the concept of "Narrative Translation"—using oral and written traditions as models for innovation. Through close readings of Octavia E. Butler's *Earthseed* verses, Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*, and insights from African griot traditions, I trace how storytelling patterns can inform user experience design, conversational AI systems, and information architecture. The paper proposes four design principles: Multiplicity over Singularity, Call-and Response over Broadcast, Context as Content, and Iteration through Retelling. A case study of a community archiving platform demonstrates practical applications. This work positions oral narrative structures not as cultural artifacts but as living methodologies for building technologies that honor multiple perspectives, enable dialogue, and preserve context.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, narrative translation, oral traditions, human-centered design, conversational AI, griot, Octavia Butler, Rivers Solomon

Introduction

Stories do not simply entertain or preserve, they structure how we understand possibility. In many African and Afro-diasporic communities, oral narratives function as technologies of knowledge transmission, encoding history, ethics, and epistemology within forms meant to be remembered, repeated, and remixed across generations. This essay explores what happens when we treat these narrative structures not as cultural curiosities but as design blueprints. If the first essay in this series established ancestral memory as a compass for Black futures, and the second examined ecological memory as climate technology, this third installment investigates how the mechanics of storytelling itself can inform how we build digital systems, interfaces, and platforms.

Narrative translation, as I define it here, is the practice of identifying structural patterns in oral and written traditions and deliberately adapting those patterns into contemporary design work. It asks: How do griots organize information for recall and transmission? How does call-and-response create participatory engagement? How do circular narratives resist singular authoritative endpoints? And how might these storytelling logics shape everything from chatbot architectures to community documentation systems? This is not a metaphor. It is a method.

The Architecture of Oral Knowledge: Griot Traditions as Information Systems

West African griot traditions offer sophisticated models for organizing and transmitting knowledge without written text. Griots—known by various names across cultures (jali in Mandinka, gewel in Wolof, arokin in Yoruba)—serve as historians, genealogists, storytellers, and advisors. Their practice represents an information architecture built for oral transmission, one that emphasizes mnemonic devices, rhythmic patterning, and audience participation.

The griot's methodology reveals several key structural principles. First, *modularity*: narratives are composed of reusable units—formulaic phrases, genealogical sequences, proverbs—that can be recombined for different contexts and audiences. A griot telling the epic of Sundiata might expand or compress sections based on who is listening, emphasizing different ancestors or battles depending on the community present. This modular approach allows the same knowledge base to generate multiple narrative outputs, much like how well-designed code libraries enable different applications.

Second, *redundancy with variation*: crucial information appears multiple times in slightly different forms. Names are repeated. Events are referenced across different story cycles. This repetition serves both mnemonic and verification functions—if the pattern holds across retellings, the knowledge is likely accurate. Contrast this with typical database design, which eliminates redundancy as inefficient. Oral traditions teach us that strategic repetition actually strengthens information integrity.

Third, *performance as verification*: the griot's delivery includes the audience as active participants. Listeners interject, question, confirm. The story emerges through dialogue, not monologue. This call-and-response structure serves as real-time error correction—if the griot misstates a genealogy or misplaces an event, the community can interrupt and correct. Knowledge is thus distributed across the collective, not centralized in a single authority.

These principles, modularity, redundancy with variation, participatory verification translate directly into design considerations for digital systems. What if we built documentation platforms that expected content to be reused and remixed rather than consumed once? What if we designed interfaces that invited users to contribute corrections and context rather than passively receiving information? What if we treated apparent inefficiencies (repetition, multiple pathways to the same content) as features rather than bugs?

Literary Excavations: Butler, Solomon, and Narrative Form

Afrofuturist literature provides concrete examples of how narrative structure can embody alternative knowledge systems. Here I examine two texts that demonstrate narrative translation in practice: Octavia E. Butler's use of verse as modular knowledge units in *Parable of the Sower*, and Rivers Solomon's deployment of collective memory as narrative architecture in *The Deep*.

Butler's Earthseed: Modular Knowledge and Iterative Design

Butler's protagonist Lauren Olamina doesn't write an essay or treatise—she writes verses.

These short, standalone pieces of text form the Earthseed philosophy:

*"All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you."*

This form is not incidental. Verses are inherently modular—each can stand alone yet gains meaning through accumulation and juxtaposition. They're portable, memorable, adaptable. Lauren can share one verse in conversation, inscribe another on a wall, meditate on a third in isolation. The same content serves multiple functions depending on context. This is narrative translation as software design: build in discrete, reusable units that compose into larger systems.

Moreover, Earthseed verses are explicitly *iterative*. Lauren continually revises, adds, refines. She treats her philosophy as a living document, one that evolves through testing against reality. This mirrors agile development methodologies—small incremental changes, constant testing, responsiveness to feedback. But Butler wrote *Parable of the Sower* in 1993, before "agile" became the tech industry gospel. She wasn't borrowing from software development; she was drawing on Black oral and written traditions that have always understood knowledge as provisional, contextual, and subject to communal revision.

Solomon's *The Deep*: Collective Memory as Distributed Architecture

Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* imagines the descendants of pregnant African women thrown overboard during the Middle Passage, transformed into a water-dwelling people. The novel's central mechanism is the role of the "historian"—a single individual who carries the collective memory of the entire community while everyone else lives unburdened by traumatic history. This is both a blessing and a curse: the community is protected from pain, but the historian suffers alone, and when the historian dies, careful knowledge transmission must occur or memory fragments.

Solomon's narrative structure itself enacts distributed memory. The story unfolds through Yetu, the current historian, but incorporates flashbacks, ancestral voices, and fragments from previous historians. No single voice holds complete authority. The reader assembles understanding from overlapping, sometimes contradictory accounts. This is not unreliable narration in the Western literary sense—it's a deliberate representation of how collective memory actually works. Different people remember different aspects. Stories conflict. Truth emerges from aggregation, not singular testimony.

From a design perspective, *The Deep* models a distributed database where no single node contains the complete dataset. Information is fragmented, redundant across sources, and requires synthesis. This structure has profound implications for how we might design community archives, oral history platforms, or trauma-informed documentation systems. What if we built systems that explicitly *expected* incomplete individual accounts and designed interfaces that made synthesis collaborative rather than leaving it to algorithmic aggregation?

From Literary Method to Design Principles

Drawing from griot traditions, Butler's verses, and Solomon's fragmented memory structure, I propose four interconnected design principles that translate narrative patterns into technological practice. These principles are not merely conceptual—they generate concrete implications for interface design, system architecture, and user experience.

1. Multiplicity over Singularity: Designing for Multiple Entry Points and Pathways

Oral narratives rarely have a single "correct" version. The same story exists in regional variants, generational updates, and contextual adaptations. This multiplicity is not a flaw to be corrected but a feature that ensures the story remains relevant across diverse situations. When translating this principle into design, we resist the impulse toward singular, definitive interfaces. Instead, we build systems that offer multiple pathways to the same content, accommodate different user mental models, and avoid forcing everyone through identical interaction flows.

In practice, this means: providing multiple navigation schemes (search, browse, tag based exploration, chronological, relational); allowing users to customize their interface views; designing information hierarchies that don't privilege a single organizing logic; building APIs that expose content in multiple formats and structures. The assumption is that different users approach knowledge differently, and the system should accommodate their varied entry points rather than demanding they conform to a predetermined path.

This principle challenges the common design advice to "make choices for users" and "reduce cognitive load" by limiting options. While simplicity has value, enforced singularity often reflects the designer's perspective rather than diverse user needs. Multiplicity creates more complex systems, yes, but complexity that maps to the actual complexity of how different people think and work.

2. Call-and-Response over Broadcast: Building Dialogic Systems

Call-and-response is fundamental to many African and Afro-diasporic cultural forms—music, preaching, storytelling, communal work songs. It structures interaction as fundamentally bidirectional. The caller initiates, but the response completes the exchange. Neither is subordinate; both are necessary. Translated into technology design, this principle demands that systems be genuinely interactive, not merely responsive to commands.

Most current conversational AI operates on a broadcast model disguised as dialogue. The user makes a request (call), the system generates a response (response), but the system doesn't actually listen—it pattern-matches and retrieves or generates text. True call-and-response would mean the system adapts based on the specific interaction, learns from the exchange, and invites the user to shape the ongoing dialogue.

Design implications: build feedback loops that visibly affect system behavior; show users how their input shapes outputs; design for back-and-forth exchange rather than one-shot queries; incorporate mechanisms for users to correct, refine, and redirect the system's understanding; make the system's reasoning transparent so users can engage with its logic rather than merely accepting its outputs. The goal is systems that feel like conversation partners rather than command processors.

3. Context as Content: Embedding Provenance and Relationality

In oral traditions, every telling carries context: who is speaking, to whom, when, under what circumstances, in response to what question. The "same" story told to children at bedtime differs from the version shared at a funeral, which differs from what's recounted during a political negotiation. Context isn't metadata appended to the story—it's intrinsic to meaning.

Digital systems typically strip context, treating content as context-free data that can be extracted, recombined, and displayed anywhere. This decontextualization enables powerful flexibility but destroys nuance and erases the relational conditions that gave the content meaning. The principle of Context as Content resists this, insisting that provenance, relationships, and situational framing are as important as the primary data.

Practical applications: include comprehensive metadata about who created content, when, why, in relation to what else; design interfaces that surface relationships between items rather than presenting them as isolated units; build versioning that preserves not just changes but the *reasons* for changes; show content in the context of ongoing conversations or projects rather than as decontextualized search results; allow users to annotate with their own contextual notes that travel with the content. The goal is systems that remember not just *what* but *why, when, for whom, in relation to what*.

4. Iteration through Retelling: Building Systems That Evolve Through Use

Oral narratives stay alive by changing. Each retelling adapts to new audiences, incorporates recent events, drops outdated references, emphasizes newly relevant themes. This is not corruption of an original—it's how stories maintain relevance across changing contexts. The "original" is less important than the living tradition of retelling.

Translated into design: build systems that expect and facilitate ongoing revision; treat documentation as living rather than published-and-frozen; design for forking, branching, remixing rather than singular authoritative versions; create feedback mechanisms that let users reshape the system based on how they actually use it; implement versioning that honors multiple concurrent "valid" versions rather than forcing convergence to one. This means embracing what software development calls "continuous integration" but extending it to content, not just code.

The challenge is balancing stability with flexibility—systems need enough consistency to be usable, but enough plasticity to adapt. Oral traditions manage this through patterns that stay stable (the skeleton) while details change (the flesh). In design terms: keep core interaction patterns consistent while allowing surface content and organization to evolve based on community use.

Case Study: A Community Archiving Platform Built on Narrative Translation

To demonstrate how these principles translate into concrete design, consider a hypothetical community archiving platform built for documenting neighborhood history in a historically Black urban community facing displacement pressures. The platform's purpose is to preserve

collective memory in ways that honor oral tradition while leveraging digital affordances.

Architecture Overview

Rather than a traditional archive organized by date, document type, or subject, this platform structures content around *stories* and *relationships*. Each entry—whether text, image, audio, or video—exists as part of narrative threads that connect people, places, and events. Users can access content through multiple navigation modes:

- **People-centered view:** See all content related to specific individuals or families, with genealogical connections visualized
- **Place-centered view:** Map-based navigation showing stories anchored to specific locations, with temporal layers revealing how places changed over time
- **Event-centered view:** Timelines of significant community moments (church foundings, school integrations, business openings, protests, celebrations) with related stories clustered around them
- **Thematic view:** Browse by themes like "entrepreneurship," "resistance," "celebration," "loss," "transformation"

This embodies **Multiplicity over Singularity**—no single organizing principle dominates. The same photograph might appear in the family album of three different people, on the map at a specific street corner, in the timeline of a 1960s civil rights action, and under the theme of "resistance." Each pathway offers different context and connects to different related materials.

Interaction Design

The platform implements **Call-and-Response** through a structured conversation interface. When users upload content, the system engages them in dialogue:

System: "I see this photo shows people gathered outside a building. Can you tell me what's happening here?"

User: "That's my grandmother's church, Shiloh Baptist. This was the church picnic, probably 1975."

System: "The archive has other items from Shiloh Baptist. Would you like to see them, or would you like to continue adding details about this event?" User: "Let me see what else is there."

System: [Shows three related items] "Do any of these people appear in your photo?"

This conversational scaffolding helps users provide context without overwhelming them with form fields. It also surfaces connections to existing content, encouraging users to link their materials to the broader archive. The dialogue adapts based on what the user shares—if they mention a person's name, the system asks about relationships; if they mention a date, it asks about other events from that time.

Context Preservation

Implementing **Context as Content**, every piece of content includes visible metadata about who

contributed it, when, in response to what prompt or conversation, and how it relates to other items. But crucially, this metadata is presented narratively, not as technical fields. Instead of "Creator: Mary Johnson, Date: 2024-03-15, Tags: church, family," the interface shows:

"Mary Johnson shared this photo of her grandmother's church on March 15, 2024, while exploring other memories of Shiloh Baptist. She identified three people: her grandmother Ruth Williams, Pastor Henderson, and Mrs. Davis from the choir. Two other community members have connected their own photos to this event. This photo also appears in the 1975 timeline and the 'Sacred Spaces' collection."

This narrative contextualization makes the provenance readable and meaningful rather than bureaucratic. Users understand *how* items entered the archive and *why* they're connected to other materials.

Evolving Through Use

Finally, **Iteration through Retelling** manifests in version control designed for narrative. When users add information to existing entries, the system doesn't overwrite—it creates layered annotations. If Mary Johnson uploads a photo labeled "church picnic" and six months later someone else recognizes it as "the day Rev. Henderson announced his retirement," both framings remain visible. The interface shows:

This event has been remembered as:

- *The annual church picnic (Mary Johnson, March 2024)*
- *The day Rev. Henderson announced his retirement (James Wilson, September 2024)*
- *One of the last gatherings before the church relocated (Patricia Davis, November 2024)*

Multiple interpretations coexist. The archive doesn't force consensus but honors the reality that different people remember differently. Over time, the most commonly referenced framing might become primary, but alternatives remain accessible. This is how oral history actually works—stories accrete layers of meaning as different tellers emphasize different aspects.

Technical Implementation

The platform runs on a graph database rather than relational tables, making it easy to model the many-to-many relationships that characterize oral narrative. Every entity (person, place, event, item) is a node; every connection (attended, photographed, mentioned, related-to) is an edge with its own metadata. This structure allows traversing the archive through relationship paths:

"Show me all events → attended by → people who → lived at → 123 Maple Street → during → the 1960s → and → are also connected to → the Freedom School"

The conversational interface uses natural language processing tuned for African American Vernacular English and incorporates prompt design that expects oral storytelling patterns (non-linear, associative, emphasis through repetition). The system recognizes when users are "riffing" on a theme and follows those associative leaps rather than demanding strict chronology or categorization.

Most importantly, the platform is designed for *community ownership*. All data lives on locally controlled servers. The community decides governance policies: who can access what, how disagreements about content get resolved, what happens to the archive long term. The technology serves the community's storytelling practices rather than imposing external logics of organization and access.

Implications for Design Practice and Research

Narrative translation as design methodology has implications beyond community archiving. Consider how these principles might reshape:

Conversational AI and Chatbots: Most current systems operate on command response patterns. Call-and-response suggests instead building systems that ask clarifying questions, invite users to elaborate, show their reasoning, and adapt based on back-and-forth exchange. The conversation becomes genuinely collaborative rather than transactional.

Documentation and Knowledge Management: Corporate wikis and knowledge bases typically enforce singular, authoritative documentation. Narrative translation principles suggest allowing multiple concurrent versions, preserving edit histories with the reasoning behind changes, and building navigation that accommodates different mental models of how information connects.

Educational Technology: Adaptive learning platforms could incorporate storytelling structures—modularity (break concepts into reusable units), redundancy with variation (present the same idea multiple ways), participatory verification (students explain concepts back in their own words, identifying gaps). Learning becomes iterative storytelling rather than linear progression through predetermined modules.

Social Media and Content Platforms: Current platforms strip context, decontextualize content, and prioritize virality over understanding. Context as Content would mean preserving who said what to whom in response to what, showing conversation threads rather than isolated posts, and making relationship context visible rather than hidden.

Design Tools and Workflows: Version control systems like Git already embody some narrative translation principles (branching, merging, distributed authority), but they're designed for code, not broader creative work. What would design tools look like if they expected iteration through retelling—preserving multiple valid versions, making forking and remixing first-class features, treating the design process as ongoing narrative rather than march toward final deliverable?

Research Directions and Open Questions

This essay has sketched narrative translation as a method, but significant research remains. Key questions include:

How do different oral traditions structure knowledge, and what distinct design patterns emerge from each?

This essay drew primarily from West African griot practices, but African oral traditions are

diverse. Praise poetry, riddling, proverb exchange, genealogical recitation—each has unique structural logics that could inform different design challenges. Comparative analysis across traditions would yield richer pattern libraries.

What are the limits of narrative translation?

Not all technology challenges map well to storytelling structures. Real-time systems, safety-critical applications, highly regulated contexts—these may require approaches that oral traditions don't address. Understanding where narrative translation applies and where it doesn't prevents overextension.

How do we evaluate systems built on these principles?

Standard usability metrics (task completion time, error rates, user satisfaction) may not capture what matters in narrative-based design. We need evaluation frameworks that assess contextual richness, community agency, evolving appropriateness, and other qualities that align with oral tradition values.

How do power dynamics shape narrative translation in practice?

Oral traditions exist within specific cultural and political contexts. When designers from outside a community attempt to translate that community's narrative structures, who controls interpretation? How do we ensure community authority over their own knowledge systems? This is not just an ethical question but a methodological one—authentic narrative translation likely requires community-led design processes.

Can narrative translation principles inform AI training and deployment?

Large language models currently treat text as decontextualized data for pattern extraction. What would change if we incorporated Context as Content into training—preserving not just what was said but who said it to whom, when, why? How might Call-and-Response reshape conversational AI beyond superficial dialogue turns? Could Iteration through Retelling suggest alternative approaches to model updating and fine-tuning?

Conclusion

Stories are technologies. They encode knowledge, transmit values, enable collective memory, and structure how we make sense of experience. For millennia, African and Afro-diasporic communities have refined sophisticated narrative technologies that preserve complexity, honor multiple perspectives, and adapt across changing contexts. This essay has argued that we can—and should—translate these storytelling structures into contemporary design practice.

Narrative translation is the second approach in the framework introduced in this series' prologue. Where the first essay established ancestral memory as foundation and the second explored ecological memory as climate technology, this essay has developed Narrative Translation as design method. The fourth and final essay in the series will examine Community-centered Methodologies—positioning elders, storytellers, and cultural custodians not as informants but as co-researchers with epistemic authority. Together, these four investigations work toward a comprehensive methodology for Afrofuturist design.

The principles proposed here—Multiplicity over Singularity, Call-and-Response over Broadcast, Context as Content, Iteration through Retelling—are starting points, not endpoints. They emerge from specific textual analyses and cultural traditions but invite expansion, critique, and refinement. They challenge dominant design paradigms that prioritize efficiency over complexity, singularity over multiplicity, extraction over relationship.

What excites me most about narrative translation is its *practicality*. These aren't abstract theoretical provocations but actionable design guidelines. A developer can read this essay and make different architectural choices. A UX designer can structure interfaces differently. A product manager can set different success metrics. The gap between theory and practice collapses when the theory is itself a translation of ancient practice.

Butler's *Earthseed* teaches that all that we touch, we change. The tools we build shape the futures we can imagine. If we build tools that silence multiplicity, enforce singular pathways, strip context, and resist evolution, we create futures that mirror those limitations. But if we build tools that honor how communities have always shared knowledge—through dialogue, through layered retellings, through preserved context, through adaptation—we create technologies that remember they serve people, not the other way around.

The griot's art survives because it serves the community's need to remember together. Digital systems could do the same—if we design them too.

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