An obsession with storytelling: Conducting oral history interviews for creative writing

Abstract

Anna Hirsch and Clare Dixon (2008, 190) state that creative writers' 'obsession with storytelling…might serve as an interdisciplinary tool for evaluating oral histories.' This paper enters a dialogue with Hirsch and Dixon's statement by documenting an interview methodology for a practice-led PhD project, *The Artful Life Story: Oral History and Fiction*, which investigates the fictionalising of oral history.

Alistair Thomson (2007, 62) notes the interdisciplinary nature of oral history scholarship from the 1980s onwards. As a result, oral histories are being used and understood in a variety of arts-based settings. In such contexts, oral histories are not valued so much for their factual content but as sources that are at once dynamic, emotionally authentic and open to a multiplicity of interpretations. How can creative writers design and conduct interviews that reflect this emphasis?

The paper briefly maps the growing trend of using oral histories in fiction and ethnographic novels, in order to establish the need to design interviews for arts-based contexts. I describe how I initially designed the interviews to suit the aims of my practice. Once in the field, however, I found that my original methods did not account for my experiences. I conclude with the resulting reflection and understanding that emerged from these problematic encounters, focusing on the technique of steered monologue (Scagliola 2010), sometimes referred to as the Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (Wengraf 2001, Jones 2006).

Keywords: oral history, fiction, creative writing, interview, steered monologue, biographic narrative interpretative method

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Introduction:

Anna Hirsch and Clare Dixon (2008, 190) state that creative writers' 'obsession with storytelling…might serve as an interdisciplinary tool for evaluating oral histories.' This paper enters a dialogue with Hirsch and Dixon's statement by documenting an interview methodology for my own practice-led PhD project, which investigates the fictionalising of oral history.

The project will be resolved as a novel based in Brisbane and informed by ten oral history interviews, with an accompanying exegesis. I have interviewed people who have lived in, or had connections to, the city of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia. Earlier in the candidacy, my project was associated with an ARC linkage grant[1]; I was collecting historical documents and conducting interviews about the history of Newstead and surrounding suburbs. As a result, most of the interviews served the dual purpose of eliciting historical information and demonstrating the participants' storytelling strategies, which I hope to mimic in my fiction.

I begin this paper by briefly mapping the growing trend of using oral histories in fiction and ethnographic novels, in order to establish the need to design interviews for these arts-based contexts. I describe how I initially designed the interviews to suit the aims of my practice. Once in the field, however, I found that my original methods did not account for my experiences. I conclude with the resulting reflection and understanding that emerged from these problematic encounters, focusing on the technique of steered monologue (Scagliola 2010), sometimes referred to as the Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (Wengraf 2001, Jones 2006).

Fiction and Oral History

For the purposes of this paper, an oral history is defined as a recorded, in-depth, qualitative interview (Yow 1994, 8). An oral history differs from other qualitative interviews in use — traditionally as a source used by historians to create accounts of the past — rather than in method. However, Alistair Thomson (2007, 62) notes the interdisciplinary nature of oral history scholarship from the 1980s onwards. As a result, oral histories are being used and understood in a variety of settings. Increasingly oral histories inform works of art, such as theatre (a form know as verbatim theatre. Neill

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2010); visual art (Anderson 2009 and Kwan 2008); dance (Debenham 2010) and poetry (Glesne 1997 and Richardson 2003). While only comparatively recently have writers of fiction overtly acknowledged oral histories as sources for their work, anthropologists and ethnographers have long re-presented their data, including interviews, as fictional narratives.

Padma Viswanathan based her debut novel, *The Toss of the Lemon* (2008) on interviews she conducted with her grandmother about her own grandmother's life as a Brahmin widow. Dave Eggers' *What is the What*: *The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, A Novel* (2006) is based closely on the actual experiences of a Sudanese Lost Boy, Achak Deng. Terry Whitebeach interviewed her son, Mick Brown, about his time living in a rural community in Tasmania and together they produced *Bantam* (2002); because of the sensitive and personal nature of the story, names were changed and aspects of characters were altered and amalgamated.

For many years anthropologists and ethnographers have been turning to fiction as a means of representing ethnographic data (Tedlock 2003, 175). This form is known as the ethnographic novel or ethnographic fiction. Barbara Tedlock (ibid) identifies the earliest ethnographic novel as Adolf F. Bandelier's *The Delight Makers*, which was first published in 1890. Since then, many novels and short stories have been published by anthropologists and ethnographers based on their experiences in the field (For overviews see Tedlock 2003, Rinehart 1998, Schmidt 1984). However, fewer base their fiction directly on interviews conducted as part of their research. Michael Angrosino, for example, wrote, *Opportunity House: Ethnographic Stories of Mental Retardation* (1998), which relies on participant observation and interviews. Jane Gilgun (2004) wrote a short story, 'Yukee the Wine Thief,' based on a story her interviewee told her about being raped as a child. Tobias Hecht based his work, *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel* (2006), on the narratives of Bruna Verissimo, who he had interviewed in Brazil for his PhD in ethnography. Heather Piper and Pat Sikes (2010) use a technique they describe as 'composite fiction' during a project investigating the perceptions and experiences of teachers who had been accused of sexual misconduct, where the allegations had been cleared (ibid, 567). Like Whitebeach, Sikes and Piper felt that the use of pseudonyms would not adequately protect participants, and that fictional techniques and imagination were required to disguise their sources. The resulting book, *Researching Sex and Lies in the Classroom* (2009) combines fictional stories, often written in the first person, with more traditional ethnographic data and reflections on methodological problems.

In such contexts, oral histories are not valued so much for their factual content but as sources that are at once dynamic, emotionally authentic and open to a multiplicity of interpretations. Skies and Piper (2010, 568), for example, argue that:

> Fictionalised stories can evoke emotions; broaden audiences; illuminate the complexity of body self relationships; and include 'researcher,' 'participant' and 'reader' in dialogue.

Embarking on the fictionalising process, I had to ask myself, how can I, as a writer of fiction, design and conduct interviews that reflect this emphasis? Is it enough to simply rely on oral history methodology? Is there a way to conduct interviews that will allow for a more natural way of speaking?

Designing the Interviews

I began by clearly articulating the aims of my project. As I continued to refine the aims, I found that to successfully drive the project, the aims needed to be clear but broad, so as to accommodate for the diversity of responses present in the interview.

Although I wanted the interviewee to partly direct the interview, I also wanted to discover their memories of a place. In my reflective journal (August 2009), I wrote:

> What is it that I want from the interviews? I want personal stories around the area: *here* this happened to *me* or someone *I* know. I want the stories to be specific descriptions of events, not generalities.

I wanted to hear a rich and nuanced account of place. Victoria Foster (2007, 125) notes that both participatory research and feminist approaches to research recognise that there are many ways of knowing the world. Foster uses poetry, short film and visual diaries of daily lives as part of research outcomes.

Carla Pascoe (2009) describes how she used interviews to elicit sensory and emotive memories of a specific place. In her interviews, she encouraged participants to draw 'mental' maps of an area as they knew it as children. However, people were more likely to describe their neighbourhoods in social, emotive and phenomenological terms, for these are the types of associations which embed memories.' Hugo Slim and Paul Thompson et.al. (2006, 149) also advocate use of visual techniques such as maps as 'props

and mnemonics.' Felicity Morel-Ednie Brown (2009) questions the participants about their connection to the area, earliest memory and their feelings about the area now. I intended to ask similar questions in my interview.

Drawing on all these strategies, I developed a list of questions designed to elicit specific stories. I planned to asked question around the smells, sounds, and sights of the area, as well as asking the interviewee to recall their earliest memory of the place and how it had changed.

The interview methodology and ethical considerations of the project are closely linked. Elsewhere (Van Luyn 2010), I have focused on the ethical aspects of the project. Suffice to say I received ethical clearance after some trial and error. Having sourced interviewees from the Oral History Association, Queensland; Women's Historical Association; and the New Farm Historical Association, I set off to their homes or workplaces, as I'd asked the interviewee to indicate the place they felt most comfortable for the interview to take place.

Encounters in the field

In some cases, I followed the methodology described above with success. In the case of interviewing Rebecca[2], I asked her to draw a map of the area of New Farm where she grew up. She spoke about her memories associated with each part of the map. I could both hear and see the way this strategy assisted in her recalling certain aspects of place.

In other cases, the interviewees preferred to print maps from Google, refer to an atlas, or, in the case of the architect, use maps in his archive, and speak to them, rather than draw.

The questions did not always elicit the response I intended. When asked about sensory details, a funeral director stated that 'he was not that kind of person,' by which he meant he didn't pay attention to these details. A boat builder stated that 'all he knew about was boats.' Although the sample size at this stage was small, and no conclusive generalisation can be made, I realised that, in my case, these kinds of responses came from interviewees who had asked me to visit them at their work, rather than home. Perhaps their choice to speak in a professional rather than personal environment established the boundary and content of the interviews as public rather than private. Paul

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[2] In accordance with university ethical approval, all interviewees' names are changed.

Rosenblatt (2003, 228) notes that 'people often feel entitled to not tell the whole truth' in an interview.
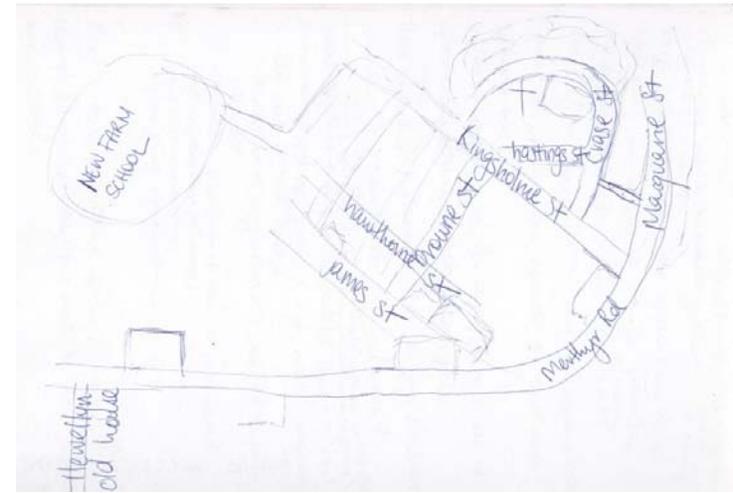

Image: Interviewee's map of a suburb in Brisbane.

A former nurse, who had lived in the outback, was very reluctant to share stories until I had read Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles* (originally published in 1959), possibly because she felt the need for us to have a shared understanding of her life in Central Queensland in the 1930s, an experience I had no other way of accessing than through secondary sources. Transcribing the audio, I came to suspect that she may have drawn a few of her stories from this source. Alistair Thomson (2003, 245) discusses a similar experience when interviewing ANZACs. He (ibid) stares that 'some men related scenes from *Gallipoli* as if they were their own.'

The interviewees were cautious about the idea of 'fictionalising.' It was a term I found hard to describe. For me it was — and still is — in a process of evolving. I had worked on a similar project in which I interviewed my grandmother and created a work of fiction based on her narratives. I showed participants this example, stating this was what I intended to do with their interviews. I felt that I was ethically obliged to ensure participants were clear

about my intentions. I suspect that this may have shaped what individuals chose to tell me, and the way they told it. One participant, after reading the story said, 'Now I know what you're after, we can get along better.' Another participant changed her mind about allowing me to use her oral history in my fiction after I stayed and had lunch with her, during which I talked to her about myself and my life. It seemed there needed to be a relationship of trust, built on *sharing* of stories rather than just hearing them.

During the interviews, I found myself abandoning the line of questioning I had planned. I let the interviewee speak uninterrupted for long periods of time, writing down questions that came to mind. Charles Morrissey (2006) states that 'question-asking is an art, individualised and intuitive.' I found that this was indeed the case. To allow the interviewee to speak seemed to be the way to achieve my aim of hearing the storytelling strategies present in the interview.

Yet, I felt some anxiety over this approach: I seemed to have drifted far from my original design, which, on paper, seemed such an elegant response to my intentions. It wasn't until earlier this year that I found a methodology that was close to the interview style I had intuitively developed. I encountered the notion of 'steered monologue' at the International Oral History Association conference in Prague; Stef Scagliola (2010) described how she used the German technique. The approach involved coming to an interview with a single question, in this case 'tell me about the war.' This method has been applied in the United States too, and is termed, rather clumsily, as 'Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method' (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001, Jones 2006). Kip Joes (2006, 75), who uses the method to create both traditional and arts-based research outcomes, describes the procedure as 'open ended and unstructured.' The interview technique is 'in the form of a single, initial narrative inducing question to illicit an extensive, uninterrupted narrative.' Tom Wengraf (2001, 113, 119) elaborates:

The BNIM interview is composed of three sub-sessions. In the first session, the interviewee's primary response is determined by a single question…in this session, after posing the question, interventions by the interviewer are limited to facilitative noises and non-verbal support. The second session usually occurs after a fifteen minute break, and the third after primary analysis of the first two interview sessions (ibid).

However, in my interviewing experience, I found that not asking any questions can sometimes make the interviewee feel uncomfortable if they cannot think of something to say. One participant urged me, 'Come on, ask me questions.' I responded by asking about a photo in the album in front of us. I suggest that it is perhaps more effective in some circumstances to combine BNIM's single narrative-inducing question with a more

conversational, intuitive style, which is characterised by a willingness to share stories, enter a dialogue or provide additional stimulus, such as photographs, maps, pen and paper, if the interviewer judges the participant is open to such strategies. The term 'steered monologue' seems to more accurately reflect this style, where the interviewee does the majority of the talking during the interview (the monologue), and the interviewers' task is to 'steer,' depending on research aims.

It seemed that attempting to predict the outcome only narrows the scope of the interview and my readiness to respond to new lines of enquiry opened up during the conversation. It helps to approach the task with an attitude of curiosity; I was learning from the other person. I demonstrated my interest in one case by creating a timeline of the participant's life history. After seeing that I had taken the time to understand her life, she became more open. Asking interviewees for suggestions for material, such as books and films, which might create a shared set of references, helped in some cases. Like Thomson, I was able to recognise common stories and themes.

Reflecting on the interviews, I could see that the dynamics and forms of these encounters were very different from what I had expected. It was clear that my presence and aims were shaping the outcome of the interview. The interviews seemed to be somehow incomplete; such a tangle of unsaid expectations and restraints; a curious mixture of memories, some vivid, sometimes partial; well-rehearsed stories, some borrowed from historical and, even fictional, sources such as films and books.

Understanding the interviews

Paul Atkinson and David Silverman (1997, 309) describe America, and by implication the rest of the Western world, as the Interview Society. The Interview Society relies 'pervasively on face-to-face interviews to reveal the personal, the private self of the subject.' When I began this project I was immersed in this discourse. I felt the interview would be straight forward, that I would be able to 'mine the depths' of my interviewee and leave satisfied. As shown, this turned out to be far from the case. Atkinson and Silverman (1997, 309) and later, James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2003), critique the underlying assumptions of the interview society. Atkinson and Silverman (1997, 319) state that:

The authenticity of a life is not to be understood simply…There is no guarantee of biographical or narrative unity. Life narratives are

always pastiche. They are pieced together, always changeable and fallible, out of the stock of mementos.

Gubrium and Holstein (2003, 32) believe that the interview should be reconceptualising as 'an occasion for purposefully animated participants to construct versions of reality interactionally rather than to merely purvey data.' They (ibid) believe that the value of the interview data lies both in the meanings and in how meanings are constructed.

Allessandro Portelli (1981, 103) believes that oral sources have a number of intrinsic characteristics. He (ibid) states that they are:

- Artificial: oral histories are the product of interviewer just as much as interviewee. Grele (2006, 49) adds that the 'fundamental, unresolved theoretical and methodological issue in the practice' is that those who are using the oral histories are also creating them;
- Variable: in oral histories, the same story is never told twice;
- Partial: it is almost impossible to tell an entire life story.

Denzin (2001, 25) adds that 'when performed, the interview text creates the world, giving the world its situated meaningfulness. From this perspective, the interview is a fabrication, a construction, a fiction, an 'ordering or rearrangement of selected materials from the actual world.'

In history scholarship, there is much angst over oral histories' value as evidence about the past because of their problematic nature (Grele 2006). Traditional qualitative researchers might wonder about interviews' worth as 'vessels to be mined for data' (Gubrium and Holstein 2003, 30). The act of fictionalising, on the other hand, serves to draw attention to, and explore, the interviews as fabrications.

Conclusion

This paper documents one possible methodology for approaching oral history interviews as a creative practitioner. Experiences in the field, and the literature, show that the interview is a messy, organic process, with unexpected outcomes. The technique of the steered monologue allows for such open-ended outcomes; the interviewer comes to the interview with a single narrative-inducing question. I offer some strategies for steering interviewees' monologues, including the use of memory triggers, such as asking the interviewee to draw; talk to maps, photos, timelines and other

memorabilia; make suggestions for books or films which they consider relevant; and describe sensory details. These strategies can be employed intuitively; their use will differ from interview to interview. The interview is based on a rapport developed through conversation and sharing of stories. In addition, during the interview, the interviewer should pay attention not just to the words of the interview but other details such as the space in which the interview takes place, keeping in mind that all these details may inform the creation of the creative practice. Qualitative and oral history theory may offer a lens through which to understand the interview and this understanding can be incorporated into the creative writing process.

Indeed the notions briefly explored here, drawn from my reading, have become one of the central themes of the novel. In my writing, characters are engaged in acts of storytelling that are fraught with tension. The characters that tell their first person accounts forget; reinvent; confess; hide; imagine; and borrow other people's stories. Silverman's notion of pastiche is apt in describing the aesthetic of the work, which includes photos, newspapers and other historical documents. As I work with the interviews in creating fiction, I have found that, while I analyse the transcript in great depth, I draw meaning from other aspects of the interviewing experience. After I interviewed her, one woman gave me a small gift, a decoration she had made herself. In some ways, the construction of such an object has many parallels to the act of storytelling: it is individual, idiosyncratic, intended for some particular context or audience; it is multi-faceted and can be viewed and understood from many perspectives. In the novel, I intend to link the sections with a similar motif: a necklace handmade by the protagonist's mother, which has broken and which the protagonist must reassemble.

Image: decoration given to me by one of my interviewees.

To demonstrate how I incorporate these concepts into my practice, I conclude with an extract from one of the chapters of the novel, entitled 'Delamere.' In the interview this chapter is based on, Barbara described her Mother driving across the outback. Barbara (2009) stated:

> Barbara: That's when Mum had to do that trip down by herself in the old tin lizzie.
>
> Ariella: Do you have many memories of that trip?
>
> Barbara: No, very little. I don't remember anything about Mum packing up to go and I don't remember much about the trip 'cause it didn't worry me. I didn't have anything to worry about but the cat and the dog in the car. One thing I can remember is Mum cranking the car and she came back and it had hit her in the face and there was blood everywhere.

In the fictional account, I use stories from *Kings in Grass Castles*, which seemed appropriate given her identification with the book, and other historical documents, as well as the interview itself, to understand the time and place. When telling stories, Barbara would sometimes summarise the main points and then expand each point. I mimic this habit in the structure of this extract; the narrator says they stopped five times, and then goes on to explain each time. In this extract, the narrator's Mother is engaged in an act of telling another's story.

Extract from 'Delamere' (Van Luyn, 2010. Unpublished short story)*:*

My mother drove across the desert in an old tin lizzie. From Julia Creek to Delamere. Dad travelled ahead to arrange things at the station. Ma put me in the back seat with Boo and packed the bags in around us. Boo put her feet on a suitcase and stuck her head out the window, her tongue hanging out. She had to swallow all the time, as dogs do. The dirt was tossed up into her mouth and crusted the edges of her eyes. Didn't matter. Boo still kept her head out.

> We stopped five times on the first day.
>
> Ma realised the dust was getting into the bags. She tied a tarp across the back — the fold-down hood wasn't enough — so that put an end to Boo's fun.

> I said I couldn't see.
>
> Ma said, Nothing to see.
>
> So that was the first time we stopped.

Ma wasn't very good with knots and when we started driving again the tarp flew off. She slammed on the brakes, of course stalled. The tarp was carried farther and farther down the road. She ran out after it. Anyway, finally she retrieved it and tied the tarp down again with me and Boo underneath it, good and properly this time. You should have seen the granny knots. The car was covered with them. That was the second time we stopped.

The third time, Mum had to crank the car. When she put her head back into the car I got the shock of my life: her face was covered with blood. The crank had come back and hit her, you see. She held a handkerchief to her nose and eyebrow all the way to Mt. Isa. She had to look out over the road with only one eye and her driving was very wonky after that. Yes, her driving had a lean to the left.

We stopped twice more to crank the car and Ma tied some more knots. We drove awhile in the dark. When Ma got tired, we stopped and camped on the side of the road. Ma crawled under the car and wrapped herself up in a swag. I slept in the front seat, wedged behind the gear stick. Boo made a hollow for herself in the dirt, curled up in that. There was a hole rusted through the floor on the front passenger side. I could see half of Ma's face through it. It must have been the side that wasn't busted. I don't remember any marks on her skin.

> I said, Ma, a story?
>
> She told me about her parents.

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