MESA 22
TABLE 22

Historia oral de los desastres
Oral Histories of Disasters

CHAIR
Victor Gavín

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Andréa Casa Nova Maia and Lise Sedrez (Brazil): “Oral History and Urban Catastrophes: Memory and Power Relations Between the Poor and the State in Rio de Janeiro during the 1966 and 1967 Floods”

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Suroopa Mukherjee (India): “The Perils of doing Ethnographic Research on an Industrial Disaster, without bringing in the Question of the Democratically viable Conflict between Academic Research and Activism: A Case Study of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy.”

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Gui-Young Hong (US): “The Unison of Polyphonic Voices in Oral Histories of the Jeju 4.3 Incident, South Korea”

—
Deb Anderson (Australia): “Bated Breath: The lived experience of cyclone in a climate-change World.”

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Raymundo Padilla Lozoya (Mexico): “Oral History and disasters.”
Oral History and Urban Catastrophes: Memory and Power Relations Between the Poor and the State in Rio de Janeiro during the 1966 and 1967 Floods.

Andréa Casa Nova Maia and Lise Sedrez (Brazil):

Resumen: Este trabajo analiza los aspectos políticos de la crisis socio-ambiental en el paisaje urbano y las relaciones de poder que revelan. Nos centramos en la memoria de las víctimas de las grandes inundaciones de 1966 y 1967 en Río de Janeiro, Brasil. Sostenemos que la historia oral es una herramienta fundamental para el estudio de los desastres recientes, particularmente respecto a la experiencia de las inundaciones urbanas. Combinando metodologías de la historia ambiental y la historia oral, nuestro trabajo pretende discutir no sólo los acontecimientos que constituyeron las inundaciones sino también sus implicaciones, por ejemplo: cómo los diferentes segmentos de la población percibieron estas inundaciones y desastres urbanos, cómo entendían la acción del Estado y de la sociedad civil durante estas crisis, y especialmente cómo ellos han incorporado esas percepciones en sus historias de vida, sus narrativas y sus demandas a los gobiernos.

Las inundaciones son procesos sociales y ambientales que comienzan mucho antes de que la lluvia caiga. En este trabajo sostenemos que las inundaciones, generalmente descritas como una fuerza destructiva, son también fuerzas creativas, porque pueden ayudar a redefinir los espacios urbanos. Las inundaciones, la difícil situación de los ciudadanos han perdido sus hogares y las comunidades mismas, fuerzan la adopción de ciertas políticas y traccionan el rediseño de la política urbana. Como caso testigo se estudia el (in)famoso barrio de Río de Janeiro Cidade de Deus (“Ciudad de Dios”), espacio que adquiere forma como resultado de la inundación.

Abstract: This paper analyses the political aspects of socio-environmental crisis in the urban landscape and the power relations they unveil. We focus on the memories of the victims of the big floods of 1966 and 1967 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We argue that oral history is a fundamental tool in the study of recent disasters, particularly with regard to the experience of urban floods.

Combining methodologies of Environmental history and Oral history, our paper seeks to discuss not only the events that constituted the floods but also their implications, i.e., how different segments of the population perceived these disasters, how they understood the actions of the State and the civil society during these crisis, and especially how they have incorporated these perceptions in their life stories, their narratives and their demands from their governments. Oral history uses a single source (the interview) that allows us to understand the city’s history and its relationship with nature. In this case, the interviews we conducted were taken from socially and environmentally vulnerable individuals and groups who seldom leave written records of their daily lives. In this paper we argue that the floods, usually described as destructive forces are also creative forces because the floods can help to redefine urban spaces. As a test case, we study the (in)famous Rio de Janeiro neighbourhood Cidade de Deus (“City of God”), a space that was shaped as the result of the flood. In order to understand this aspect of the flood process, we interviewed residents of the City of God who experienced the various stages of the flood.
MEMORIES OF ORIGIN: THE 1966 FLOOD AND THE FOUNDING OF CIDADE DE DEUS

Investigative experience concerning the 1966 flood in Rio de Janeiro underlines the relevance of oral history for urban environmental history. Oral history creates a unique source to historians: the interview, which enables the understanding of the city history and its relation to nature in a particular way. In this case, our interviews privileged memories of socially as well as environmentally vulnerable groups. Even though those groups usually do not appear in official registers, they are particularly damaged by these so-called “natural disasters”.

A close to four million residents and growing city at that time, Rio de Janeiro has had, since the beginning of the century, a great part of its residents living in precarious conditions in favelas (slums) and hills. Such a situation did not match the ideal of a modern city aspired by Rio de Janeiro elites. In this view, however, a significant part of the problem was not vicious social inequality that marked city, but its visibility. Favelas such as Praia do Pinto, for instance, were located at the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro - an area that housing market had always dreamt at conquering. Other slums near Tijuca exposed middle class to what was seen as an unpleasant coexistence with poverty, as well as to the risks of landslides due to torrential rain [ABREU, 2006]. Therefore, favela removal was a priority for Carlos Lacerda, who was Rio de Janeiro’s Governor at the time, and such an action would take place even though inhabitants did not take part in the direction of its process.

Carlos Lacerda heavily invested in creating popular neighborhoods in new areas, such as Vila Kennedy and Cidade de Deus. Those neighborhoods would be inhabited by residents of previously removed communities, as part of a housing policy that was certainly ambitious but authoritarian. Criticizing Lacerda’s housing policy is by no means the same as ignoring the shameful situation in which were Rio de Janeiro’s poor residents in 1966. Slums – either in plain areas like Maré and Praia do Pinto or in high areas such as Favela do Morro da Catacumba (Catacumba Hill Slum) or Morro do Boreu – were particularly exposed to torrential rains that visited the city every summer. The so-called “travelling soils” of Rio de Janeiro hills created risky areas for living, especially as deforestation took place in the city. Floods and landslides have made clear how poor population’s social and political vulnerability would be followed by environmental vulnerability as well. It was not only a matter of risks concerning diseases, lack of good sanitary conditions, bad sewage system and lack of water supply. Owing to floods and landslides, their immediate present would become uncertain. Survival in their communities and even physical survival would not be guaranteed. Those communities were aware of the risk of torrential rains. When floods were reasonably bearable, they would become part of poor people’s everyday life. In these cases, torrential rain would be seen as just another occasional providential challenge to be accepted. However, torrential rain could often be strong enough to blur the limits of what was bearable and what was not. When that happened, previous social experiences would lose their meaning, and what used to be an invisible everyday precariousness would become an evident crisis then. That was exactly the case of 1966 flood.

LIFE NARRATIVES BY URBAN DISASTER’S VICTIMS

Writing about the experiences of flood victims in Rio de Janeiro - particularly those who experienced urban catastrophes in 1966 and 1967 – is an opportunity to analyze memories of social agents who had to leave their houses during an urban crisis moment and who were afraid of losing their own lives and those of their families.

Those interviews - among which three were chosen to be analyzed in the present paper – express not only inhabitants’ difficulties in leaving a former live and beginning a new one, but also touching aspects of a whole social reality. That social reality becomes evident insofar as interviews provide a name and a face to those who were agents in a process that ended up remodeling the geography of the city – by destructing previous spaces and networks for socialization and sociability on the one hand, while creating new ones such as Cidade de Deus on the other hand. Therefore, those actors have been through a disturbing process – from having their houses in risky areas removed and going through terrible life conditions in temporary shelters to arriving in a new and inhospitable neighborhood. Such a process, by its turn, is also part of a process started by floods.
Firstly, this article aims to outline the social profile of those who were interviewed for this study. A network of interviewed actors could be traced from the moment it became possible to realize that many victims of the 1966 flood – and of other intense floods of the sixties as well – were removed from their original neighborhood and resettled in Cidade de Deus.

We managed to interview inhabitants who used to live near Praça da Bandeira (Flag Square), a square in Rio where floods usually take place. It was possible to notice that social networks created by interviewed actors did not manage to reach people who had been mostly damaged by floods in the area. While interviewed people described networks created by them in order to help the so-called "flagelados" (damaged) and "desabrigados" (homeless), it seemed that the latter had literally been swept by floods. Where could they be then? Even a popular prostitution area nearby had already lost much of its importance. Among its old inhabitants, we were able to find but an old lady who did not want to talk about her life at the time. We could notice that vulnerability in face of floods also meant a meaningful loss of spatial reference: to a considerable part of population, floods were not just a critical moment, but a turning point in their lives.

It seemed that not only reoccurring floods but also social segregation have kept those social agents in an invisible realm. To historians, they had become anonymous, and so would they remain if we had not been able to find the so-called desabrigados and flagelados – citizens who lost everything due to floods and that could tell us their experiences.

Cidade de Deus was our focus in the second part of the project. We interviewed Ana Lúcia Pereira Serafim, who was born in 1959 and witnessed victims' resettlement during her childhood. Ana Lúcia introduced us to Maria Terezinha Justo de Jesus, who was born in 1937. Maria Terezinha, by her turn, introduced us to Laura Pereira da Silva, who was born in 1935. They have arrived at Cidade de Deus through different ways. Maria Terezinha received one of the first community houses, and witnessed the entire process through which flagelados arrived. Laura Pereira da Silva, on the other hand, belonged to a second group that arrived there after the 1967 floods. We managed to interview Rui Serafim, who is Ana Lúcia's husband and arrived in Cidade de Deus brought by his family at the age of nine.

Those interviews concern not only Cidade de Deus but the flagelado's social trajectory itself. To a flagelado, such a destination could be conceived as the crowning for a Via Crucis. It was a path of sacrifices and obstacles indeed, and the so desired house at the end of the process was a prize to be earned in case the flagelado really deserved it. On the other hand, it could also mean just a new Valley of Tears, as many flagelados would realize later.

At first, those accounts seem to present a common narrative. After having lost their houses in the 1966 floods, many flagelados had to stay at a shelter site in Maracanã for a long time. The stadium had to be interdicted and Rio de Janeiro's soccer championship had to be cancelled so that almost fifteen thousand homeless could occupy the stadium as well as its halls and corridors. According to one of the interviewed victims, hygienic conditions were precarious and families were spatially distributed based on gender criteria. Other interviewed victims told that they had camped at Macaranazinho, a smaller stadium near Maracanã. They were transferred from the sports complex to Fazenda Modelo (Model Farm) – which ended up to be a much more shocking experience. Created in 1957, Fazenda Modelo has been, until 2003, the biggest shelter for homeless in Latin American. Nowadays, a shelter for animals is kept by the municipal government in the same place. Marcelo Cunha, a doctor who used to be the director of Fazenda Modelo, describes the everyday life of former inhabitants in the following way:

"Each accommodation warehouse was eighty meters long and was divided, by walls, in ten lodges, which were about eight square meters each. There were many bunk beds throughout accommodation where about thirty six people would sleep. People would sleep without any privacy, just like as they would when living in streets, because there were not divisors separating beds."
Besides that, they had just one available toilette in each lodge, so lack of privacy would also be extended to eliminating physical waste. Therefore, they had to undergo depressing and promiscuous life conditions. (CUNHA, 2008)

Flagelados had to wait in those temporary shelters until they had the opportunity to win, through sweepstakes, a new house in Cidade de Deus. As a neighborhood, Cidade de Deus became a much different place than what was originally planned. Architect Giuseppe Badolato, who helped to plan Cidade de Deus and was interviewed by us in July 2013, explains that such a project could have meant a revolution in urban planning. An expansion of city towards the West Zone was already part of the plan. As the city developed, it would create a new demand for services and low-skilled labor. Therefore, Cidade de Deus residents would find jobs. Those plans were approved in 1965, when Lacerda was still in charge of government. At first, earthworks were done and one thousand and five hundred houses were built. However, the project schedule was changed in December, when Negrão de Lima became Rio de Janeiro’s Governor. On January 2nd 1966, Negrão de Lima had to face the consequences of one of the most terrifying natural catastrophes through which Rio de Janeiro had been through. At that time, just twelve hundred of fifteen hundred houses of Cidade de Deus had had their ceilings built. The whole district as well as its houses were not yet completely built and lacked infrastructure public works. After minimal emergency analyses, government built public toilettes and temporary occupation wagons, which were called “Triagens”. Despite their extremely precarious conditions, those wagons made it possible to transfer homeless families to the “just-built houses” in Cidade de Deus.

Ana Lucia Pereira Serafim, who was also called Dona Lucinha, was eight years old at that time. Her interview is meaningful since it reveals the role of kids in temporary shelters. Kids are evidence that eviction and removal actions did not conceive transferred inhabitants as isolated individuals. Nuclear families were collectively transferred instead. Lucinha’s childhood memories show us how social dynamics among her family members, as well as between her family and neighbors could be continuously established, resulting in power relations. Even in a temporary shelter, families such as Dona Lucinha’s, in Morro da Formiga, were obliged to reestablish their relations and social networks, as well as to delimit new territories. A place once known by a certain child, who would know its trees and have friends there, would now be replaced by a new, dirty and temporary place. However, although it was a temporary place, it certainly offered a cultural change. There, new social networks were made and new social practices were developed. What was temporary could last for a six months period or even for one year, and did not mean a last stage in the whole moving process. As pointed out before, Fazenda Modelo was also another stage before the promise of a new house was kept. Dona Laura Pereira compared her stay at Maracanazinho to her stay at Model Farm, where she had stayed for three months before winning a house in Cidade de Deus. According to her, staying at Maracanazinho was a good experience:

“You see, I was well treated, ‘cause each one of us had its own mattress. And so everybody used to stay there together. There was also that person who would show was where the toilette was, who would call us to eat. There was food all the time. There was milk, there were fruits, there was everything. All the time. At Maracanãzinho it was like that ... And food was good! I think I stayed there for a week... Then we went to Fazenda.”

On the other hand, as Lucinha remembers her experience at Fazenda Modelo, she compares it to life in a concentration camp:

“There [...] it was the same thing - I think it might be a bit better than a concentration camp. Very, very sad... You see, everything was done in a hurry, people screamin’ all the time... And at time to wake up, at time to go to bed... Husbands had to sleep in a different lodge. Children who were older than 15 had to sleep in a separate lodge with other men. They could not stay with their mother. [...] When lunch time was over you’d go like that by the corner of lodges, there were piles of food thrown away just like that, beans, rice ... Military police was in charge of cooking for us. Later on, some ladies who wanted to help were recruited to cook for officers. When they were smart they
managed to bring a small dish for their families and friends. Then we could see some food that was that tasty ... No, I’ve never been able to ... It was really sad ... We went there, to wait for houses. Games and that kind of thing were taking place in Macaranazinho, they had to clean it ... I stayed at Fazenda Modelo for about three months. I left it on the first of May.”

The history of removals can be analyzed through a perspective that shows how floods imply the transfer of whole communities and families. Therefore, they completely change not only physical geography but cultural landscape as well. Dona Laura, who left her house in the 1967 flood, tells that, when she arrived in *Cidade de Deus*, “there were inhabitants who had come after the flood of 1966. So they were finding people who were from the same slum.” By meeting former residents from other slums who had also been displaced and had lived in a temporary shelter, people resettled in Cidade de Deus were able to develop social relations between groups that had quite distinctive cultural references. Such a process is evident at the time of arrival in *Cidade de Deus*, where a new community is created. What all those people had in common was the fact that they had been victims of floods who devastated the city in 1966 and 1967. As Dona Lucinha tells:

“It was like a very strange, funny thing, ‘cause... everybody had a different culture, different ways of thinking... Then everybody got together, you know? And houses here are very close to one another ... There was no wall, there was nothing [...] There was no privacy. We didn’t know where some people came from... We wouldn’t know if a strange person was a good one ... It was very hard.”

Those accounts reveal to which extent suffering and a complete life change were parts of an ultimate urban, social and cultural transformation. The life story of Dona Lucinha is entangled with the history of floods, when she tells her arrival in *Cidade de Deus*:

“I came in 1966. I was one of the first flood inhabitants. I came from the community of Morro da Formiga [Formiga’s slum]. Actually, my house did not fall apart, but we used to live in the peak of the hill, right there on the top, and there was a stone that was about to roll. So, we had to leave, I was small, but I remember, it was very sad, a lot of pain and tears ... And we got out of there and we remained homeless for some time... I think it was for a year ... We stayed there in Maracanazinho waiting for a position. My parents had many children ... We were eight altogether. And I remember one of my brothers had meningitis, my youngest brother had meningitis. I remember he was not able to come to Cidade de Deus, ‘cause he had died there [at Maracanazinho]. And we were in that struggle, it was such a sacrifice ... My parents had to work, and it was so hard ... but they were near, ‘cause Tijuca was near Maracanã, so they were still working ... And we didn’t knew that we were going to be taken to Cidade de Deus by the State. And that was when we ended up knowing that we would come to this place”

*Cidade de Deus* was not less harsh than previous temporary shelters where flood victims were staying. As it is told by Dona Lucinha, there was not enough structure. By comparing her life in *Cidade de Deus* to her previous life in *Morro da Formiga*, Lucinha shows that transfer to *Cidade de Deus* was seen as a loss in comparison to a previously achieved situation:

“We left a place where there was structure, there was light and there was water. It was a hard life, as I told you, but we had everything. And we arrived here, and what did we have? We came by a truck. I remember very well that we were given a small kitchen stove and a gas cylinder. Just that, and the house. We arrived at home and we had nothing. [...] We were thrown here... There wasn’t a place to buy bread.”

Terezinha’s account highlights a feeling of persisting precariousness and new vulnerability, as well as the loss of a considerably structured previous situation:
“And so we came here. It was difficult because it was an abandoned place, there was nothing. People came from slums, from a completely different system. We used to live in Caxias, it is a humble place but with a different lifestyle. Though we used to live in a rented house, it had everything: there was light, there was water, there was commerce nearby. And when we arrived here, there was nothing. There wasn’t any flooring, no water, no light, nothing. Everything was precarious and even social level was different. Because each slum had its own way. So it was hard for us...”

However, besides those first harsh moments, accounts also show the reconstruction of those communities from a common experience. In Terezinha’s account:

“He [her husband] came to live here. I met him in Caxias. His friends lived there and we met each other there. We got married here. And then I got my house. And my brothers were also growing, they got married too. Everybody got its house here. [...] Everybody was desperate, without job, there was much mud on street. [...] That is, we were all in the same situation. There was just one line of bus, we had to say in a long queue. People would usually save a seat for each other, and by doing so we would make friends.”

Reconstruction of social relations meant that flagelados tried to recreate their former communities and to decide who belonged to them as well as who did not. Mainly the feminine world worked as a kind of arena where investigation and judgement took place. At schools, supermarkets or health centers, women would act as guardians and mediators of social spaces in the new community. Laura, for instance, had difficulties in being accepted in the community. Since she was not a flagelada, that is, she did not come from a slum that had been destroyed by floods, she was not immediately accepted by those who shared that painful previous experience. As time went on and experiences were shared, her situation changed. Laura witnessed how men and women established new relations in Cidade de Deus. She saw how they looked for jobs either in near or in distant places. Moreover, she witnessed how both friendship and animosity relations were built.

Rain, improvised plans, temporary shelter, arriving at Cidade de Deus and finally the construction of a new community are together different elements of a same narrative, a narrative that highlights interaction between social agents an urban nature during the construction of new urban places. Population rate in Cidade de Deus would still increase due to other floods. However, the occupation pattern had been established in this first phase.
The Perils of doing Ethnographic Research on an Industrial Disaster, without bringing in the Question of the Democratically viable Conflict between Academic Research and Activism: A Case Study of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy.

Suroopa Mukherjee  
(India):

Abstract: In this paper I take a re-look at oral history as a time tested, ethnographic module for doing research on a close knit community recovering from the throes of an industrial disaster. On the night of 3 December 1984, Bhopal, the State Capital of Madhya Pradesh was witness to a chemical disaster that has been compared to Hiroshima in its long-term impact on the lives of people. Bhopal is also associated with one of India’s longest grassroots social movement for justice. Unfortunately, Bhopal is a case in point of how manmade tragedies get misrepresented in public domains. Right from its inception, the social movement in Bhopal took up the onerous task of rectifying the false picture, by drawing attention to the social and political fallout of the conflict of interest between different stakeholders. What particular role does OH play in representing the power game? My task as researcher and campaigner has been to unravel the overlapping oral narratives, by focusing on the voices that speak from within the movement. Perhaps, it is time to replace the concept of “reading history from below” with radical and relevant forms of listening rather than reading. More pertinently, the emphasis needs to shift to the art of interpreting the untapped silences beneath the spoken words. In this paper, I draw attention to the political strategies and democratic tools of self-expression used by the people’s movement, to break the silence.
ORAL HISTORY AS A RESEARCH MODULE
Alexandro Portelli, in his path breaking book, The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories draws attention to the flawed nature of oral history, which paradoxically becomes its strength. He writes:

The oral sources are not always fully reliable…..Rather than being a weakness, this is however their strength; errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meaning. (1991: 2).

The question I wish to raise is related to OH as a research methodology, and how far it is suited for interpreting individual case studies. In this particular case study, the challenge is to understand how a discipline, concerned with people’s voices, can be used to analyse a scientific disaster that involves three monolithic power centres: a US based Multinational Chemical Industry, the Indian Nation State, and a New Liberal world order. In the rest of the essay, I intend to take up the challenge of reformulating some of the key analytical tools of OH, to show how research methods can subvert and destabilise the way meaning circulates in the public domain.

Bhopal Gas Tragedy has been associated with a social movement that had its inception from inside the effected community (Mukherjee 2010: 81-129). Thirty years down the line, the fight for justice continues. Meanwhile, the world order has changed radically in the political, socio-economic, and cultural fields. Terms like Technology, Development and Progress have become the clarion call of the new century. My contention is that the Bhopal Gas Tragedy is relevant even today, because the vocabulary for describing a manmade disaster continues to provoke debates linked to contemporary reality (Jones, 1988; Srivastava, 1992; Fortun, 2003). OH is constantly evolving, and so is the relation between contingent factors and theorizing.

I stumbled upon oral history by sheer chance. In the year 2002 I published a non-fiction titled Bhopal Gas Tragedy, a book for young people. The book went on to do rather well. Besides, I had collected enough source material to work on a full-time research project on the oral testimonials of the women survivors. I got a Fellowship at The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) from 2005 to 2008. Since I belonged to the field of literature, I had to get acclimatised to new terms of reference. It gave me a clear idea of the interdisciplinary nature of OH. Yet, the more I studied OH, the more I felt the need to interpret OH as an independent discipline.

As an ethnographic study of social/cultural practice, OH gets marginalised by tagging it to mainstream disciplines like history, anthropology and literature. It is viewed as secondary source material, mentioned in the Introduction, Endnotes and Bibliography, but rarely in the main chapters. OH has been a popular subject matter for conferences and workshops, but it gets side-lined on the grounds that the research findings are too subjective to be seen as an “authoritative” research module. Clifford Geertz in his essay, “Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture” elaborates on the question of transparency by pointing out the difference between “an experimental science in search of a law” and an “interpretative one in search of meaning” (1973: 5). I intend to take the argument a little further, by showing how fieldwork is not merely an extension of classroom teaching; they are separate and distinct features of OH in the field of pedagogy. (Trend 1995: 1-17, 38-57). I would say the strength of OH lies in the discursive field, which gets created through an interface between the oral and the archival. OH is experimental in nature. We are looking at the possibility of narrowing the gap between time-tested traditions and new styles of doing relevant research.

OH takes into account the constituency of people playing an active part in the research project. In the process, it nullifies the distinction between the “subject” of research and its objectives. In the case study on Bhopal, the “subject” involves a disadvantaged community of people who are barely literate, living below the poverty line, and worse still, not even mentioned in any of the development models. Therefore, their understanding of the disaster becomes incidental. As a layman’s version of the cause and fallout of the disaster, people’s perspective gets discredited. There is no attempt to listen to marginal voices. At the
same time, people’s point of view is vital for understanding a perspective that is largely “experiential” in nature. OH deals with individual subjects, as well as the objective subject matter.

In the case of an industrial disaster, people get pitted against power structures that speak a specialised, technical language, beyond the grasp of the layman. The conflict of interest gets played out in the streets and the corridors of power (Tilly 2008: 8-30). An ideological and highly fraught conflict zone gets created. We know that fieldwork involves a physical transportation from one place to another; in the Bhopal case study, the transition is discursive as well. Class divisions get embroiled in other forms of ideological/language/cultural barriers. OH puts a lot of responsibility on the researcher. Besides winning people’s trust, there is the added responsibility of getting key members of the community to speak out. OH involves material changes, prior to addressing forms of knowledge building (Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 45-65).

OH evolves through a body of work, based on the study of people’s life stories recounted in their own words. Telling and listening becomes mutually dependent. Trust implies commitment to a joint venture. The “other” does not imply a breakdown of communication. It acknowledges difference without getting trapped by the fear of alienation. OH highlights a way of negotiating difference by acknowledging barriers. At times, interview gives way to sharing of grief and anger. But the task of the researcher does not end here. The purpose is to utilise the research findings, to create greater awareness on issues that matter to the local population. In a manmade disaster, there is a pressing need to create viable channels for rectifying misinformation and misrepresentation. The researcher joins the activists in creating the necessary documents, which can then be used by the Survivor Organisations’ to put forward their demand for proper rehabilitation and fair compensation. The ethnographer becomes the active propagator of the cause, and thereby nullifies the gap between research and activism. Once I entered Bhopal, my responsibility became manifold; I saw myself as researcher, teacher, writer and campaigner.

TRADITIONAL VS INNOVATIVE FORMS OF OH

OH experiments not only with forms, but content as well. Though theorising is largely borrowed from other disciplines, the cognitive practice is highly individualistic. Traditionally, OH has been used to study “history from below”. I believe the time has come to replace the old adage with a more innovative formula. I have used familiar terms of reference, such as the subjective/objective and authentic/unreliable divide. At the same time, the art of listening acquires a more edgy and unpredictable quality, when listening includes “silence.” It is important to keep in mind that studying history from “below” need not challenge or destabilise the status quo. At best it can allow for an alternative reading of events and their analysis, which co-exists with mainstream readings. More pertinently, “from below” indicates the vantage point of “reading” rather than “listening” to narratives. But, forms of knowledge building in the case study of a manmade disaster, includes “telling”, “listening” and “interpreting.” The purpose of research is to implement changes in the lives of people. Storytelling becomes political action against the backdrop of real people, living out their real life circumstances (Hannah et al: 2004: 111-124). . .

Contrary to popular belief, facts and figures are important in OH. Therefore, retracing memories in search for factual details is important as a research method. Bhopal has experimented with memories, but not so much with the idea of finding the “truth”. Truth telling implies a static world order, based on hierarchies and power play. OH is far more adaptable to circumstances and the variables that recounting an event brings out into the open. It becomes a search for the repressed memories of an entire community, but democratic freedom and the right to know belongs to the community.

Overlapping memories are not so much about truth vs falsehood. It is a reminder that history views the collective as normative, but with the disclaimer that quantitative reality is less factual and less reliable. Individual memory gets pitted against community memory. OH gives primacy to the interface between individual and collective. But what history denies is what life stories, particularly the narrativised version, accepts. So the search for the factual and statistical ceases to be subjective or objective; it becomes the
battle ground for the “claimants of truth” that social movements have to reckon with at every step. The strength of OH is based on the veracity of the process, rather than authoritative conclusions.

THE NATURE OF SILENCE
From where does silence originate in a discourse? I was soon to realise that OH functions in a non-formal way, especially when it comes to gathering “oral testimonial”s of trauma victims. Any attempt to use structured/semi structured questionnaires invariably fails. For many of the survivors, there is an obsessive need to “relive” the experience of pain. Memories fail, the historical timeline gets blurred; repressed anger surfaces and very often cynicism and bitterness becomes so overpowering that communications break down. In OH, silence emanates from the gaps that get embedded in different forms of unarticulated speech, memory lapses, and the inability to understand the rationale behind so much suffering.

There is another side to the problem. Traditionally, the oral historian had to spend long periods of time, living within the community as “participant observer.” (Srivastava 2004: 20). In most cases the Prime Investigator appointed Research Assistants to carry out the actual interviews. In the age of digitalisation, interviews can happen in virtual space, though trauma victims rarely open up, before the interviewer has won their trust. The art of “listening to silence” becomes the alienation that “intersubjectivity” cannot resolve. For instance, as I listened to narratives of pain, I became the outsider, simply because I stood outside the “experience” of pain. So the “monstrous memories” of the night was nothing but a “silent” enactment, which I could grasp, but not in material terms (Mukherjee 2010: 41-60).

THE ACTION OF SILENCE
As a case study, Bhopal draws attention to the grassroots nature of the social movement that had its inception from inside the shanty town. Madhya Pradesh does not have a history of trade union activism. The floating population in the State Capital consisted of migrant labourers from adjoining states. They did all kinds of manual labour. They lived below the poverty line in unauthorised colonies. When disaster struck they had no resources to turn back to. The mayhem that followed changed their lives forever. It is in the context of the historical timeline that OH gets called upon to analyse the sustaining power of the Bhopal social movement.

As a social movement, the fight for justice was directed against the offending Government and the Corporation. But the real enemy was the nation and its failure to protect people’s constitutional rights in the face of rising corporate power. For the survivors it was democracy that had failed. At the same time, it was democracy that gave back the survivor’s their “voice”, along with the freedom to “break the silence” by reclaiming the citizen’s constitutional rights.

The State and the Corporation retaliated by “silencing” voices. Right from the beginning the population that lived close to the factory was steeped in ignorance. None of the neighbouring residents had any idea of what the factory was producing, or the dangers it posed. Thirty years later, we are still witness to brutal forms of misinformation, and deliberate attempts to suppress shared community knowledge.

THE CONCEPT OF SILENCE
In understanding OH we will have to set aside the contingent factors, by drawing attention to the conceptual notion of “listening to silence.” How is an outsider equipped to study a community that has experienced a disaster of such magnitude? How can a theoretical model of OH suffice when the researcher has to account for her/his presence in the community? Surprisingly enough, OH does allow for the sharing of abstract ideas drawn from personal experiences, by permitting the individual to speak on behalf of the community. Personal opinions give way to collective knowledge sharing. When “silence” is the “obverse” of the speaking voice, OH becomes a useful conceptual and political tool for highlighting issues that are close at hand, but continues to remain invisible.
Silence occurs when the conceptual does not ring a bell in the minds of people, on grounds that the contingent factors do not tie up with the theory. Why is it that silence is rarely heard by the power blocks? The reason is far from transparent. We can use Foucault’s argument that power is not monolithic in form or practice (Discipline and Punish, 1975). It proliferates into the daily lives of people by creating distances between people and their subject positions. Given the representational nature of power, it sweeps across institutions, and systems of beliefs and writings. Bhopal Gas Tragedy is a reminder of how power infiltrates into systemic forms of injustice. Thus, systems of classification, paper proof, official reports, court orders, and medical research get entangled in the power game. Theorising fails to rescue lives at the grassroots level, in material terms of rehabilitation and compensation. But the fight for “justice” takes up the issue of people’s rights, as well as the responsibility of the government to strengthen laws for implementing corporate liability. OH offers a radical format that combines the cognitive with cultural rites and practice. Therefore, professionals and grassroots activists can share the same platform, and participate in a research project, to come out with valuable information and strategies to sustain the battle for justice.

THE POLITICS OF THE NARRATIVISED VERSION OF OH

In this section, I would like to draw attention to another, more persistent notion of “silence” that has become part of the official discourse on disaster management. Despite, the corporate “veil” and closed door bureaucratic system, both the Government and the Company used its PR to widely publicise a false picture of the event and its aftermath. The attempt was to deny the long-term effects of a manmade disaster. It resulted in another disaster. Rehabilitation got mired in the politics of denial. The Bhopal survivor became expendable in a society that puts profit before people:

On the one hand, Bhopal became part of a global debate on Human Rights violations, Environmental rights, right to information, precautionary principle, and polluter pay’s principle. Issues relating to corporate accountability also gained primacy. On the other hand, the Bhopal survivors continued to exist in a treacherous web of silence. What ensued was a local/global infighting between different stakeholders in the social movement. OH is a timely reminder that disputations and debates can only be effective when it becomes part of the political action at the grassroots level. Otherwise, the social movement gets divided on the lines of grassroots politics versus international solidarity. Such divisions bring in class conflict and gender politics.

There are a few major issues that I want to raise at this point. Traditionally, the researcher has the sole copyright on the research findings. At best, the data belongs to the academic institution to which the scholar is affiliated. In this case, how do these oral narratives, find their way in to the hands of the group leaders of the Survivor Organisations? No doubt, OH supports such an exchange, for it belongs to the age old cultural practice of inter-subjectivity between the interviewee/speaker and the interviewer/listener. OH explores a more radical research methodology where the aims of research cannot be segregated from its political purpose. There is little doubt that the yoking together of the cognitive and its practice, is not a passive exchange of ideas. It questions the entire process of allowing mainstream disciplines to dictate the terms and conditions of sharing knowledge with a secondary discipline. A disaster can highlight the rupture by questioning the kind of data that research projects often come up with. Quantitative locks horn with qualitative. The procurer of knowledge has to share the data on public forums and through wide dissemination of information. Transparency overrides authenticity. The researcher and the researched consciously participate in reformulating a research project, by putting on record the faulty findings of research done by the State and the Corporation. Legal redress goes hand in hand with non-biased, ethically sound research.

Is OH methodology value neutral in content, but radical in practice? Does it help the community to come out of the morass of ignorance and misguided politics? I believe that OH gets trapped as a secondary source material, so that it fails to acquire an independent status as a discipline. So long as OH remains an appendage of mainstream disciplines, it gets tied up with the reactionary content of other disciplines. In other words, a lot depends on which case study OH gets to represent.
In the first phase of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, OH was used by Survivor Groups to raise awareness about the tragedy, and for fighting misinformation. The BGIA (Bhopal Group for Information and Action) brought out newsletters that became the handbook of activists. There were many more issues that oral historians had to account for. Who controls the story, and how far do norms of confidentiality work? What happens when OH gets mired in controversies that are purely political in nature? We are no longer talking about truth versus lies. Instead, we are talking about accessibility to correct information, and the different kinds of repressive measures that were used to deny the survivors a place in any kind of decision making process. As a result, institutional spaces like government office and corporate boardroom become the corridors of power. Confidentiality, classified knowledge and the corporate veil became the “silence” that the survivors got pitched against. Needless to say, the social movement had to come up with innovative action-plans to break the silence. They did so by a constant process of infiltration into sacrosanct “protected areas” that threatened to punish the trespassers. For the survivors, crossing the barriers made them feel like an outsider in their own homeland. Ironically enough, empowerment did not free them from the residual sense of victimhood.

What makes OH a complex discipline is that the researcher too had to enter into alien spaces with a sense of responsibility. I prefer to call there spaces as “alternative” space, such as State Government run work-sheds, gas relief hospitals, and claim courts for distributing compensations. Entering these spaces became the ground rule for doing research for it gave the ethnographer a first-hand account of the humiliation and neglect that the survivors had to undergo on a day-to-day basis. Only then could the oral narratives cease to be merely “subjective” or personal in nature, by getting interpolated into a theoretical understanding of systemic failure.

Here is a case in point. The testimonials give us a glimpse of the highly politicised and fractious nature of the “silences” that OH had to penetrate. Take for example, the “oral testimonials” that spoke about relief measures, which were meant to improve the condition of people. Many of these rehabilitation schemes were part of the development models for improving the civic life of the common man. So money got siphoned off into beautifying the city, removing slums, dislocating the survivors to far-flung areas, which were miles away from gas rahat hospitals, and job opportunities. The schemes were meant to be short-term, so when the survivors continued to fall ill, they became a liability and threat to the State and its development model. The Bhopal survivors became the living embodiment of everything that was erroneous in the development model. The real battle was between people versus profit and how far the cost-benefit analysis of development was interested in bringing in environmental, social and human costs.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the case study on Bhopal OH history plays the very important role of understanding the development model from the perspective of those who do not benefit from it. Women came in larger numbers to participate in the interviews, possibly because they saw themselves as twice victimised in a society with inequitable distribution of resources. The testimonials reflect on how women discarded their burkhas, stepped out of their homes, participated in rallies and became sole bread-earners in families where husband and sons had died or were too ill to work. The narratives talk about individual emancipation and self-improvement; they also talk about collective decision making and solidarity.

Gathering information has always been an important part of the cognitive aspect of a social movement. The organisations were hierarchical in structure, with movement intellectuals doing most of the planning. However, mobilisation at the level of the bastis was done by the rank and file workers. Regular meetings were held in public spaces, and innovative action plans had to be approved by the collective body. Cognitive praxis took into account the layman’s perception of technical issues, in a way that made the process of learning more democratic. The notion of exchange became a methodological vantage point, which encouraged academia, other professionals, non-governmental organisations and survivor groups to come forward and help in this knowledge-building process. Can silence be broken without ruptures in the discourse?
Actually ruptures are necessary. A lot has been written on Bhopal, but the mood is retrospective. We are voyeuristically asked to listen to narratives of pain and suffering. Then in a deliberate move, the past is set aside, so that we can move on. Simultaneously, Bhopal gets catapulted into the future by evoking images of more Bhopals waiting to happen. It is this vicious cycle of remembering and forgetting that needs to be demolished. It can only happen when the process of transcribing fieldwork ceases to be the exclusive domain of outside authorities. Only then will ethnography go beyond issues of validity, reliability and authenticity. No doubt, there cannot be an unproblematic, authentic insider/outsider perspective. But so long as “situated knowledge” (Thapan 1998) indicates personal involvement with people in the field, we are already talking about including advocacy and action to research.

Ethnographic writing has argued that compelling narratives, which can transform a respondent into a subject rather than object of research, can go hand in hand with rigorous analysis. My submission is that we need to take research even further by using narrative voices that are both personal and representative, so that they become means for enacting rather than verifying the hypothesis, in a way that empowers the community to speak on their own behalf. Only then will silence be broken, and both the researcher and the community will learn to listen to each other, and to their own voices.

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ii The fieldwork that I had undertaken in Bhopal, became part of a much larger work I had undertaken during my 3 years stint as Fellow at NMML. I got inducted in a research project that was undertaken by Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh on the Ethnography of the Social Movement for Justice in Bhopal. The Bhopal Movement Study Group was formed; it was an eclectic group consisting of Eurig Scandrett, the Principal Investigator, a Sociologist who teaches in the Dept of Education, I had strayed from literature; we had two research assistants Dharmesh Shah, an activist who was working on corporate liability and Tarunima Sen, a postgraduate student from Delhi School of Economics. We conducted 40 interviews, which were recorded on digital video and audiotapes. It enabled me to get first hand training on how to conduct interviews, the kind of questions to be asked, and how to elicit information from the interviewee, by using time tested methods that are inherent in any oral history project. I am grateful to the Study Group for shaping my skills as a teacher/writer/campaigner.


vi These pamphlets were distributed free of cost, and was widely circulated by waiving copyright restrictions. The idea was to bring in a repertoire of narratives that spoke from different subject positions, along the lines of class and gender difference. Such a method drew flak from the establishment on grounds of inaccuracy, lack of objectivity and in some cases, sheer propaganda. Importance was given to the combination of information and action. It became the rallying cry of the social movement.
**SELECT READINGS**

Amnesty International. *Clouds of Injustice: Bhopal Disaster 20 years Of the World’s World Disaster.*


Bhopal Survivor’s Movement Study. *Bhopal Survivor’s Speak: Emergent Voices from a People’s Movement.*


Bated Breath: The lived experience of cyclone in a climate-change World.

Deb Anderson  
(Australia):

Abstract:  
With scientists calling for action to manage the risks of extreme weather and advance adaptation in light of climate change, this paper argues for the significance of the cultural and historical dimensions of climate. A new oral-history collection is under way in north-east Queensland, Australia, exploring the lived experience of cyclones and perceptions of environmental risk. Interviews are focused on two recent, severe cyclones that devastated this tropical region: Larry in 2006 and Yasi in 2011. Although most of the interviewees identify with popular (if defensive) claims that Queenslanders are ‘bred tough’, their stories attest to the experience of ‘waiting with bated breath’ every summer, through the annual cyclone season. In that context, this paper explores what cyclone means for identity in a climate-change world—reflecting on the power and application of oral history to deepen the national climate conversation ‘beyond’ the science. Further, this paper considers the ethics of doing oral history with cyclone survivors. It takes seriously the dilemmas involved in recording, interpreting and representing these oral histories—in this case, of an experience that shaped my own family history, and in a place I still call home.

Resumen:  
Con los científicos llamando a la acción para gestionar los riesgos de fenómenos meteorológicos extremos y la adaptación anticipada a la luz del cambio climático, este artículo aboga por la importancia de las dimensiones culturales e históricas del clima. Una nueva recolección de historia oral está en marcha en el noreste de Queensland, Australia, explorando la experiencia de ciclones y las percepciones de riesgo ambiental en la vida cotidiana. Las entrevistas se centran en dos recientes y graves ciclones que devastaron esta región tropical: Larry en 2006 y Yasi en 2011. Aunque la mayoría de los entrevistados se identifican con el decir popular de que los habitantes de Queensland son “criados duro”, sus historias confirman la experiencia de “esperar conteniendo el aliento” cada verano, durante la temporada anual de ciclones. En ese contexto, este artículo explora el significado que los ciclones tienen para la identidad en un mundo en el que el clima está cambiando—y reflexiona sobre el poder y la aplicación de la historia oral para profundizar en el diálogo nacional acerca del clima “más allá” de la ciencia. Además de esto, este artículo considera la ética de hacer historia oral con los sobrevivientes de ciclones; tomando en serio los dilemas involucrados en la grabación, interpretación y representación de historias orales—in this case, of an experience that shaped my own family history, and in a place I still call home.
My mother is a keen recycler. It’s not simply that a recyclable product should never end up in a garbage truck on its way to landfill. With Mum, nothing should end up in a recycling bin either. She’ll take an empty margarine container and turn it into a lunchbox, or turn a honey pot into a rainforest seedling punnet, one of thousands crowding out her snake-infested greenhouse. She once fashioned a piece of rusted corrugated iron that flew off our dairy roof into a four-tiered strawberry trellis—“a bit of *Vogue Living* in the vegie patch,” she laughed, “to keep those ruddy bandicoots out”. Seriously, my mother is the kind of talented, tough, rural woman who can salvage a chunk of decades-old timber she’s found strewn down the back of Dad’s bull paddock and turn it into income. That chunk of wood might have come off a wall in a bedroom, or been peeled off a living room ceiling; it might have been stripped from a kitchen cupboard door, a glory box, a toilet seat! It’ll soon become a pig-shaped cheeseboard, sold to tourists at the local Yungaburra Craft Markets. Or Mum might turn it into a rustic storage case for gumboots, the footwear-of-choice in dairy-farming country where can it rain more than 200 days a year. And maybe, if it’s lucky, that piece of aging hardwood will find a new life in one of her masterpieces: a gleaming coffee table of tongue-and-groove silky oak, Queensland maple or tulip oak—whatever timber she’s recycled from whatever dilapidated farmhouse she’s found this time round.

This is her latest, perhaps greatest, recycling project: she is gradually reusing all the cyclone-shredded Queenslander-style houses that lie dotted across the district, turning homes that once housed farm families into ‘country-style’ home-wares. These wares never featured in my rural upbringing but nonetheless appeal to urban, middle-class taste.

It’s a relevant, if at times discomfiting, allegory for my practice nowadays. As her second daughter who fled the countryside in 1991, just shy of seventeen, for university, journalism then academia based mostly in the Big Smoke, I too am ‘recycling’ elements of the past—and the experience of being rural, regional, isolated and working class. Today, in my work, I am also, unavoidably, recycling an experience of Australian culture that most Australians do not have—a rural culture that is often wrongly presumed as characterised by ‘lack’.

Perhaps each of us ‘recycles’ elements of our past for present purposes. As a researcher, I’ve taken up the baton of doing oral history as a form of rural cultural research, which calls for researchers to push beyond the metropolitan biases that still tend to underpin studies of rural change. To an extent, merely doing such research goes against the grain of the bulk of contemporary Australian cultural research, which still tends to lean towards urban popular cultures. Further, although ‘community engagement’ may be an important policy emphasis in the university sector, as shorthand for complex ideals of public good and social wellbeing that substantiate the sector’s claim on government funding, genuinely engaging with rural communities is not straightforward—not when traveling back and forth to a region 3,000-odd kilometres north of the university. As Australian rural cultural researcher Kate Bowles notes, “there is a more sympathetic view which we can take of the national deficit in rural cultural research, which is that the current structure of our research institutions, and the everyday realities of our lives as researchers working mostly in cities, makes rural cultural research genuinely challenging to undertake”.

My latest, and greatest, challenge takes this one step further. I’ve been back home, in Australia’s ‘deep north’ recently, starting a pilot study. It takes a mixed-methods approach to the topic: namely, the lived experience of cyclones in northern Australia, in a climate-change world. Nicknamed ‘Bated Breath’, the project has begun building a new collection of digital oral-history recordings with members of cyclone-affected communities in far north Queensland. The collection will be handed over to a cultural institution such as the National Library of Australia on completion; I will, meantime, subject the material to discourse analysis.

There are issues of ethical engagement that arise in doing this work—issues that illuminate broader challenges of doing oral history as a form of cultural research—which I’d like to consider here. I have had time to muse on this, these past few months, while easing back into Melbourne life, trying to reconcile *what I’ve seen and where I’ve been* in recording oral histories on cyclone. If any of you have read the comic
genius of David Foster Wallace in his essay, ‘A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again’, you’ll get an idea how I feel about the weird admixture. Wallace wrote that essay on return from a Caribbean cruise for a story commissioned by a swanky American magazine. “They say all they want is a sort of really big experiential postcard,” he wrote: “go, plow the Caribbean in style, come back, say what you’ve seen.”

I didn’t join a cruise-ship Conga line for a journalistic assignment like Wallace, but I did wait frustrated in line for a chance to interview north Queensland’s independent Member of Parliament, Bob Katter, in a place rather optimistically called The Latte Lounge, in the three-pub town of Atherton (in the end, Katter got his cafes mixed up and sat waiting for me down the street in a café called That’s Nice).

But I can identify with the gist of Wallace’s tale in other ways, because I do find that doing rural cultural research feels disingenuous at times, even if I strive to make it not so. I mean, a month later I was back in Melbourne, writing up my “fieldwork”—in effect, interpreting people’s lives—in a box garden behind a rented inner-city terrace house, with a macchiato and broadband, sitting in the heart of Melbourne’s political greenbelt with which I strongly identify, trying to reconcile the “hypnotic sensuous collage of stuff” I’ve seen, heard and done in Australia’s deep north. The only way some people in some parts of far north Queensland get Internet reception is through a satellite dish planted in the garden (for example, right next to a four-tiered strawberry trellis). And here I am presenting snippets of their stories as part of a ‘work-in-progress’, to a conference in a large city, on the other side of the earth.

My reference to Queensland is indeed an allusion to the Deep South of the United States and the socio-political stereotype linked to it. There is evidence that the sentiment epitomised by former Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s parochialism and frequent promotion of the idea of secession of Queensland from Australia during his term in 1970s and early 1980s lingers today. This place is, after all, one site where Pauline Hanson’s right-wing One Nation Party became a significant force in Australian politics. This is the place where even progressive Labor Party premiers such as Anna Bligh can make the kind of social-Darwinian declarations that make my skin crawl, like “they breed ‘em tough north of the border”—which is what she told Australia after Queensland’s summer of floods and cyclones in 2011.

This is also, however, still the place that I call ‘home’.

I can’t just go, plow the Tropics in style, come back and say what I’ve seen; I’m embedded in this place. My parents bought the far north Queensland dairy farm on which they still live some 36 years ago, when I was three. Growing up I loved the farm, but even then I shirked the ‘community’, by which I mean the traditionalism that defined rural social capital, which remains steeped in masculinity and xenophobia. So, paradoxically, rural Australia is where I belonged yet also what I once longed to leave behind, that and a house plagued by mould during the relentless, annual wet season—a reality of living in that part of the Sunshine State.

What can I articulate of issues of ethical engagement that emerged so far in this oral-history project? I’m fortunate to have a supervisor at Monash University who granted me more than a month away from campus during teaching semester, for a start. It was worth it. I now have some 20 hours of digital audio recordings (15GB of audio files and more than 100,000 words of transcript), recorded with 18 residents in eight locations in the coastal region between Cardwell (about 260 kilometres south of the city of Cairns) and Mossman (80 kilometres north of Cairns), and inland to the Atherton Tablelands on the Great Dividing Range. Communities in this region were affected by two of the most severe tropical cyclones in living memory, both of which caused extensive damage throughout the region, crippling local economies. First came Cyclone Larry, which crossed the coast at the small town of Innisfail as a Category-Four storm in March 2006, with winds of up to 215km/h, resulting, incredibly, in the loss of just one human life. Then came Yasi, the ‘monster’ that crossed the coast south of Innisfail, at the harbour town of Cardwell, in January 2011 (just one death there too). Yasi was rated as a maximum Category-Five storm, with wind gusts of up to 285km/h. Interviewing revealed insights into experiences of other cyclones too (every summer is ‘cyclone season’ up north), going back in living memory to an unnamed cyclone that hit Townsville in 1954. If we include the intergenerational tales passed down through families, then these stories stretch back as far as March 1899—to Australia’s worst cyclone (since colonisation) in terms of
human deaths, Cyclone Mahina, which killed more than 400 people when it crossed at Bathurst Bay, at the northern tip of Cape York, sinking a pearlaring fleet with it. Interestingly, the use of a snowball method of interviewee recruitment meant the oral-history project now includes four people who have been through not only Yasi and Larry but also Cyclone Tracy (which devastated Darwin in 1974, with 71 deaths officially recorded and 80 per cent of houses in a city of 47,000 damaged beyond recognition).

It’s not the witnessing of the storm, however, so much as the interpretation of the meaning of it that I’m keen to document, though this research has elicited stories of the unthinkable. One of the interviewees, who was eight months pregnant when Tracy hit Darwin on Christmas Eve 1974, spoke for the first time of losing her baby three days later after emergency evacuation to Sydney. With the death recorded in the Sydney Royal Women’s Hospital, her child was never counted in the official Darwin death toll.

Such stories are of not only personal but arguably national significance, yet as a scholar, it is in fact the messy complications of culture that I am really looking for—things observed in the ways discourse on extreme weather sits at the intersection of biography, culture and social structure. Why? Cyclones—like floods, bushfires and droughts, and yet quite distinct in terms of their own time, space and mythology—have punctuated Australian history. Recent severe tropical storms including Cyclone Yasi in Australia and Hurricane Katrina in the US have sparked growing concerns over the impact of anthropogenic climate change on extreme weather events. International studies suggest the frequency of the most intense cyclones has increased in many regions around the globe. And research shows that once climate change “becomes something people can feel, see, or experience close to home”, it becomes all the more meaningful. Against this, sociologist Sheila Jasanoff argues climate change is driving “sharp wedges between society’s fact-making and meaning-making faculties”, tending to erase local specificity and the desire for solidarity of experience.

With scientists calling for urgent action to manage the risks of extreme weather and advance adaptation in light of climate change, this study argues for the significance of the cultural and historical dimensions of climate. What does ‘cyclone’ mean for Australia, for identity, in a climate-change world?

Arguably, cultural engagement with climate is under constant renegotiation—as oral historical research is apt to reveal. Amid the groundswell of interest in recent decades among humanities scholars in addressing issues of climate change and other ecological problems, a cultural turn obliges us to rethink existing means of historical understanding. Oral history has already challenged the historical enterprise, if not the hegemony of scholarly authority, in various ways—generating heated debate over the relationship between memory and history, past and present. Through the spontaneity of oral narrative, the animated interchange of dialogue and the compulsion to ‘share authority’ when working with living memory, how might we broaden and deepen the national climate conversation ‘beyond’ the science?

Indeed, this work seeks to explore the power and application of oral history in shedding light on the interpretive problems of climate change. Such problems have been branded ‘wicked’, a term anthropologist Steve Rayner qualifies as “a way of describing problems of mind-bending complexity, characterised by ‘contradictory certitudes’ and thus defying elegant, consensual solutions”. In this respect, perhaps oral history can open the door to a nuanced historical approach, seeking to understand the tensions implicit in the ways experience, memory and history act on lives over time. For even as oral history can mediate change or promote a more widely shared historical consciousness, oral tradition may form a source of resistance to it. This facet alone serves as a constant reminder of the density of life stories as cultural artefacts—and, arguably, it affords opportunity. As historian Marjorie Shostak notes: “It is just this tension—the identifiable in endless transformation—that is the currency of personal narratives, as they reveal the complexities and paradoxes of human life.”

Thus, insofar as this oral-history project focuses on how people live with stories over time, it also examines the notion of the self-preservative power of narrative and oral tradition for a culture under threat. It seeks to allow space for the richness of detail that oral history offers—illuminating the other
types of history that oral stories can tell and their distinctive transference at the interstices of history, biography, culture and place. Its interpretive approach sits between cultural studies and long-form cultural journalism, which grasps at the logic and customs of a group and seeks to comprehend the world in the group’s own terms. It seeks to understand how conceptions of climate are shaped by historical narratives of identity—in this case, forming both a cultural legacy and a shield from anxieties about the future.

I can’t escape the realities of my practice, then: that in research terms, I view the recent era of extreme weather as an opportunity to generate new knowledge on the core interpretive problems of climate change. I console myself with the commitment to form a new body of research that not only interprets but also contextualises stories of extreme weather. This work is intended as both a constructive and imaginative engagement with issues of climate change; and it does seek to foster genuine adaptive capacity in communities recovering from tremendous social-environmental upheaval. In practice, though, I can’t escape the fact that each interview captures testimony of traumatic events whose impact is fresh in the memory of real lives.

On that note, what emerged in cyclone storytelling was a near-baffling range of personal-historical and psychological factors that influence life stories of this particular disaster. Unexpectedly high levels of trauma have been evident in all oral-history interviews conducted for the project so far. This prompted necessary changes to my interviewing schedule. It was intended to be a two-week preliminary round of interviews. But in regular discussions with my Monash supervisor, it was decided more time was needed for each interview to ensure there was minimal risk of distress for interviewees.

This made me nervous: would staff back at university in the city start asking questions of my prolonged absence? (They did.)

As it was, I thought I’d put in place sufficient precautions. In the three-month process of gaining high-risk ethics clearance beforehand, I planned the project to minimise the risk of distress or chance of someone ‘reliving’ the trauma of the event. Interviews were designed so that participants could tell their stories in a controlled environment, would get ample time before the interview to think over the list of likely questions and exactly how they’d like to share their stories, and would receive their copy of the recording and transcript with the chance to review, correct and/or withdraw material prior to any publication of it. Everyone would get a list of local, emotional counselling services dedicated to post-cyclone recovery with their introductory letter, explaining the research.

As it was, I had decided I wouldn’t yet interview anyone on Yasi; only a couple of years have passed since people experienced that cyclone. However, it was the inexplicably sudden arousal of shock that occurred for interviewees in telling their story of any cyclone—whether one that hit seven years ago, such as Larry, or four decades earlier, such as Tracy—that illustrated the particular complications of coping with cyclone-related trauma in telling life histories. And these were trauma survivors, male and female, who readily identified with popular, if defensive, claims that Queenslanders are ‘bred tough’—all of them choosing to continue living in a cyclone zone.

Being forced to abandon a carefully crafted semi-structured approach to interviewing led to feelings of shame. I was ashamed to admit that I was thinking as a researcher, fearing for the loss of method. These interviews would be too loose, I feared; they were so open-ended that there’d be a wishbone where a backbone ought to be. But at least in the first-round stage of the project, these interviews needed to be unstructured, if wayward, if at times incomprehensible, in order to yield more complex historical information, to give sufficient time for these narratives of self-justification to unfold. An engaged and sympathetic interaction seemed to me to be mandatory in this case.

The ethical complications ran deeper still, as my every-more-cautious approach to doing this oral-history project became about minimising risks for interviewees and interviewer.
The idea for this project arose when I was doing my last one, then a doctoral candidate. It was 2006, and I was studying the lived experience of another environmental extreme—drought—at the semi-arid inland edge of Australia’s cropping zone, in southeast Australia. When Cyclone Larry occurred in March of that year, I wandered into the aftermath of a climatic force altogether more immediate in the wounding, however. Larry took the homes and livelihoods of thousands of people—including that of my parents. Like my siblings, I spent several months back home, helping out in a massive clean-up. Still today, just one heady whiff of autumn rain, and I am back there in the aftermath of Larry: still sitting in a caravan, sunk into the mud next to the remains of my family’s old farmhouse, staring out at a kind of grey-brown emptiness—where once stood a rainforest thick with life.

Therefore, I have a deep personal affinity with the interaction of climate, culture and identity at the heart of this study. There exists another set of ethical issues relating to power and human relations, or that involved in interviewing people you know well, however. Certainly, any traditional, if out-dated, distinction between historian-as-authority and informant-as-subject is blurred beyond recognition when interviewing members of your own family, and asking them to re-tell their experiences, some of which I shared, for the purposes of research. As historian Michael Frisch reminds us, ‘real’ history is filtered by time and experience before it reaches the historian’s voice recorder. As interviewees try to retain a deeper validation of life and society, the “contradictions of the culture” can be “doubly masked”.

Having been privy to my family’s experience of Cyclone Larry before the tape recorder was switched on meant the selectivity involved in oral-history-making was at times readily apparent. I knew what they chose to leave out. For other interviewees who went through Cyclone Tracy, it was tough to talk about the symbolism involved in throwing out the Christmas ham on December 25, 1974, without shedding a tear. But for my parents, in retelling their experience of fearing for their lives in Cyclone Larry, they didn’t bat an eyelid.

That said, I actually am in a unique position—to go again, plow the Tropics again, come back and say what I’ve seen—precisely because I am embedded in this place; further, this is embodied research. Now, musing on the power and application of oral history, I think of the recycling-genius of my mother and how different our lives are today—of Mum, the farmer and woodworker, and me, the do-er of rural cultural research. Given the divisive debate over rural futures as many parts of the Australian countryside experience ongoing decline, I’d like to believe the reality of a mother-daughter shared experience of the past still lingers as impetus, even hope, for the renewal of social capital in rural communities, which in turn represents one foundation for change. Yet as this cyclone oral-history project is underlining, telling the past is also to engage in the history of forgetting, in a bid to recycle the used, and to craft something ‘new’.

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iv Wallace, 256.


ix IPCC, *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events*.


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(Mexico): 

Resumen: Esta ponencia presenta los resultados del proyecto de investigación Estrategias adaptativas ante los riesgos por ciclones tropicales. En dicho proyecto la Historia Oral permitió identificar los problemas que han padecido dos grupos de añosos, para sobrevivir en medio de condiciones económicas de pobreza y recurrentes desastres por fenómenos naturales extremos. Con la misma metodología fue posible exponer cómo explican sus razones para seguir viviendo en el mismo lugar, en sintonía con la noción de “topofilia” del geógrafo humano Yi-Fu Tuan (2004) y cómo interpretan y desarrollan el “bien vivir”, concepto abordado recientemente por algunos antropólogos etnólogos (Toledo y Barrera-Bassols, 2008; Descola, 1996; Boege, 2008) que lo enmarcan en el patrimonio cultural.

Tras dos períodos de trabajo de campo intensivo, fue posible elaborar amplias entrevistas a 16 testimonios, avencionados y nativos de Cuyutlán, Colima y San José del Cabo, Baja California Sur. Posteriormente se realizó una codificación abierta (Auerbach y Silverstein, 2003) al corpus para extraer fragmentos significativos de las transcripciones, los cuales fueron ordenados en categorías y con ellos fue posible elaborar constructos teóricos.

Los hallazgos muestran por una parte que a través de la historia oral es posible identificar documentar que las comunidades expuestas a impactos recurrentes de fenómenos extremos no han sido pasivas ante las amenazas naturales y han desarrollado estrategias para enfrentarlas, logrando ciertas capacidades adaptativas. Algunas de sus estrategias son identificables por medio del discurso oral, son de tipo cultural, como la protección simbólica y la “topofilia”; mientras que otras son pragmáticas y se evidencian en sus construcciones, oficios, redes resilientes y capital social, que les permiten el “bien vivir”.

El aporte consiste también en exponer que la Historia Oral es una metodología ideal para indagar en el conocimiento vernáculo, transmitido a través de generaciones, para abordar temas muy actuales como la adaptación ante amenazas naturales y las respuestas tradicionales para enfrentar los riesgos de desastres. Por lo que promover los estudios de historia oral permite extraer valiosa información a escala local, que debe formar parte de los aportes para la toma de decisiones ante los retos que presentan el cambio climático y las relaciones entre humanos y la naturaleza, con tal de responder de una manera más democrática e incluyente de los grupos más vulnerables y más excluidos del discurso científico tecnocrático y racionalista.