



Amanda Wray

Contesting Traditions: Oral History in Creative Writing Pedagogy

The newest director of our creative writing program walked into my office and closed the door. She told me that the creative nonfiction writing workshop I'd taught the previous semester would be my last. The program agreed that my approach didn't really count as creative writing. "Our students are expecting a different experience," she explained. "We approach creative nonfiction as memoir . . . we don't really require research." Oral history was considered more akin to journalism and sociology than creative writing, she said.

Compartmentalizing nonfiction as related to only certain methods and rhetorical processes feels like colonizing the domains of creativity. And yet, Crystal Fodrey, a nonfiction writer and writing studies scholar, explains in "Teaching CNF Writing to College Students: A Snapshot of CFP Pedagogical Scholarship" that writing as discovery and also as agency, is "a transactional, rhetorical subject position" made possible by the genre of creative nonfiction, "a position that can simultaneously uphold the agency of the individual writer and the power of public, action-oriented prose." For many creative writing programs, practice is the discipline's central research methodology, a position Nicola Boyd indicates continues to marginalize and invalidate creative writing as an academic discipline. Practice as the only needed research implies that we are "muse-ridden" and "that only those who write or produce art can engage with the key methodology of the discipline. . . . It suggests that in creative arts[,] research comes predominantly out of practice—discounting contributions about broader disciplinary issues" (5). The creative process is with good reason considered a dominant research methodology in creative writing, but I question the field's tendency to frame alternative research methods as unnecessary.

Theorizing creative writing pedagogy beyond the workshop model has taken decades and been produced primarily by composition and rhetoric scholars (Anderson, Bishop and Ostrom, Ritter and Vanderslice). Fodrey asserts that the discipline of creative writing values creative publications more than scholarly ones in terms of promotion and tenure, which means “theory and practice-centric scholarship by creative writers has been few and far between . . . [thus] perpetuat[ing] a cycle of creative writing teachers teaching without much guidance.” Additionally, in *The Writer’s Chronicle*, Steve Healey draws attention to the rising tide of creative writing students at a time when the number of English majors, in general, is plummeting, and yet “missing from the impressive success story of Creative Writing is an equally strong attention to its pedagogy and theory; in other words, the field has tended to avoid thinking about how it teaches and what assumptions it has about language and literature” (30). A disconnect exists “between the disciplinary positionality of those who teach the majority of CNF [creative nonfiction] writing courses and the disciplinary positionality of the majority of those who have written about teaching college students to write CNF over the last two and a half decades” (Fodrey). This position limits student success and exploration, and the lack of democratic understanding of writing as teachable creates boundaries around who is considered “qualified” to use creative writing pedagogies in the classroom and what “counts” as creative writing.

Like many practitioners, I consider oral history a feminist methodology, given its political commitment to documenting the margins and bringing light to stories that may contradict or contest dominant histories. Even though most of our participants identified as white, and many of them as middle class, we attempted—often in follow up interviews—to use their positionality as a lens for understanding interracial community-building and social customs governing who could marry whom and who seemed located at the margins of society and why. Students were expected to document but not confront individual bias or stereotypical thinking, and upon reviewing the transcripts it was clear that two students, in particular, were especially savvy in bringing their participants into deep conversations about evolving

ideological shifts in terms of race. “Where do you think that belief came from?” a student asked a participant who said interracial marriage felt “wrong.” Though the student wrote in a reflection memo that the silence following her question “almost killed me,” the research participant spoke up about the inherited racism of her parents and how they used the Bible to justify such beliefs. This research informant explained that, all these years later, her mind told her that she was accepting of interracial marriage, but in her storytelling she had spoken with this inherited belief about what feels right and wrong. I’m not sure how to measure the outcome value of mutual emotional vulnerability shared across generational and social class boundaries, but the dialogue captured in the interview transcript read as courageous.

Oral history research methods and rhetorical studies are essential to the work of creative writing. Such research methods can build empathy and critical consciousness among writing students while also honing their creative writing skills and personal inspiration. First-person narrative is a rather traditional mode of inquiry for anthropologists and sociologists to inform their academic writing (Smith and Jackson). Likewise, in the field of cultural and social geography, oral history is emerging as a vital academic approach for politically committed social historians (Riley and Harvey, Tedlock). Many novelists, even, rely on oral history and interview research to inform their writing, including Dave Eggers, Anna Funder, Tobias Hecht, and Padma Viswanathan. In fact, oral history infiltrates most art disciplines including visual arts (Sandino and Partington, Kwan), dance (Debenham), poetry (Glesne, Richardson), and theatre (Epstein, Paget). Creative writing workshops and symposiums devoted to oral history have emerged in the past five years, including the Oral History Summer School, which began in 2012 in Hudson, NY, Concordia University’s “Oral History and Creative Writing: Producing Place,” and Lethbridge University’s writer workshop “Using Oral Histories to Write Creative Nonfiction.” The presence of oral history within creative writing education programs and publications attests to its validity as a mode of inquiry. By integrating oral history research into the creative nonfiction workshop—as a research methodology and also a subject for study—I hoped that creative writing students could collect distinct stories about the

history and people of a particular area in our city that was experiencing significant gentrification and social change. By using oral history as a mode of inquiry, the students learned valuable things about crafting narrative structure, cultivating ethos as a writer and researcher, and packaging complex, racialized histories into character stories.

Classroom Contexts

At the end of my first year with the department, I requested to teach a creative nonfiction workshop for mid-career creative writing undergraduates, and this course was offered to me in the spring semester of 2013. The class coincided with a time of incredible expansion within our city in terms of human migration, commerce, and tourism. The small-town vibe of the mountain community was being unsettled by the hotel industry and our growing presence on every “best place” list you can imagine. Yes, our city was special—vibrant with artists, raging food culture, and unspoiled nature—but the increased attention and the big business it attracted threatened to radically alter all that made this place so ideal. While I was planning the creative nonfiction workshop, I met Chris Joyell, the director of Asheville Design Center, and he wanted to capture local histories in a low-wealth, gentrifying area of town that was in the coming months to become home to one of the largest micro-breweries in the U.S. This seemed like an ideal opportunity for creative writing students, and I committed to collecting stories from local residents that would inform the design of a bus shelter in the area.

The creative nonfiction course began with twelve students, most of whom were creative writing minors or majors outside the program. All but one student identified as white in terms of racial and ethnic identity. We studied the form and craft of the personal essay across several time periods and rhetorical purposes, and students produced a memoir as well as a critical race narrative, which asked them to craft a piece showing the influence of race in their lived experiences and/or sense of self. After producing first drafts, we contextualized our race narratives by reading three texts: “Church Sissies: Gayness and the Black

Church” by E. Patrick Johnson, “My Best White Friend: Cinderella Revisited” by Patricia Williams, and “People Like Us” by David Brooks. The next phase of our class involved our collaboration with the Asheville Design Center.

We studied oral history research theory via Alessandro Portelli and students were exposed to profiles of place and profiles of people that were written using various types of research, including oral history and interview data. These texts included chapters from Laura Wexler’s *Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America* and Rachel Lloyd’s *Girls Like Us: Fighting for a World Where Girls Are Not For Sale*. We listened to oral histories from the *Documenting the American South* and familiarized ourselves with Asheville Design Center’s mission for “authentic placemaking” and their “community-driven design process.” We looked through hundreds of historic photographs of West Asheville and the future build site of the brewery, compliments of our university library’s Special Collections. Students read existing interviews and histories of the area, with each student responsible for “reporting” informative quotes and events to the larger class. In this way we contributed to a timeline for the area, charting 200 years of significant events that shaped the place, from the first ferry to cross the river in the early 1800s, to the home of the Negro Agricultural Fair in the 30s and 40s, to the largest livestock market in Western North Carolina for nearly fifty years, to being classified as a “brownfield” site starting around the millennium.

A failure on my part was not adequately historicizing for students in advance the timeline of racial integration in our community, including the presence of a student-run activist group (started in 1960 by African American students advocating for similar learning resources and facilities in the black high school and the white high school) and three riots (1969, 1972, 1975) that our community experienced. Interview transcripts made it clear that students knew too little about desegregation efforts across the country, including one student who referenced “those hippies of the 60s” as primary in “getting [desegregation] going.” I was surprised how little their school experiences had taught them about this important time in our country’s history, and I missed a critical opportunity to address the gap. Through the revision process,

as students wrote and revised their profile pieces, we dug into the rich resources our university and local activists have produced to document school desegregation in our community. Students were pushed to contextualize their profile pieces with secondary sources, not just to provide more information about the events their participants narrated but, importantly, to complicate some of the stories they received that were a bit too rosy in the remembering. This seemed like a lot of work for students who felt they were at the end of the project, but nearly all of them expressed in their written reflections facing their own blindness to and misunderstandings about this history and the struggles of racial minorities to participate in public education.

Two students, for example, interviewed a prominent white business owner, Johnny Penland, who inherited a furniture store from his father in 1955 that he transformed into an auction house at the build site of the new brewery in the late 1960s. He remains an auctioneer to this day. In the interview transcription, I drew attention to what seemed to be missed opportunities to get another perspective on the race riots in Asheville. Penland's father had worked with the circus after he graduated high school, and he regularly took Penland to the brewery's future build site, which was at that time a location for traveling events including the Negro Agricultural Fair and the circus. "Carnival life was a rough, rough life," he explained, "and segregation, uh, back in the 60s I was an outcast. I was one of the few [white] people in that area down there that believed that black people were human. That's just the way it was. And still today. It's a hidden thing, but the hatred is still there. I see it, I hear it, but I never will forget that a man came into that building out there [pointing to the location where his auction house was located], and I asked him to leave." The students did not inquire about this story, so it is unclear what happened to make the man unwelcome in Penland's auction house. He continued without interruption, "They killed Kennedy, and stuff like that. I mean, I remember going into Sears and Roebuck, colored and white, that was in Asheville." Another opportunity for students to learn about the sit ins where Penland and a few other white community members joined with African Americans to force integration of the lunch counters, in

response to the more famous Greensboro resistance in 1960. “And Stephen’s [Lee High School, the black high school]. Uh, French Broad school was built to try to circumvent integration. So... But, uh, Asheville, was, it was a different town, different time. And West Asheville almost died when they built Patton Avenue,” which was a major road constructed through several predominantly African American and poorer neighborhoods. In talking with these students in my office, offering them a broader sense of the history Penland was referencing, a history he clearly assumed they knew, one of the students became emotionally touched. She had lived in this region her whole life, and all of this history was new to her.

The intersection of race and class was especially visible when I turned students’ attention toward gentrification research about our area, including comparing maps where redlining occurred with maps of several key road expansion projects in the area, all of which split or dismantled altogether historically African American neighborhoods. One African American source described his East End neighborhood this way: “Since the 1880s, and dating back perhaps even farther to the height of slavery in the mountains, the East End has been a black community. Segregation separated the neighborhood from the rest of downtown Asheville, and it developed as an independent community. Residents had their own gardens, businesses, and churches within the neighborhood. We had cab stands, we had Breland’s Fish House, we had barber shops, we had everything,” including substandard housing. “Houses did not have electricity; houses did not have any central heating components available; they did not have closets.” City leaders did not invest in African American neighborhoods, a reality that the Willie Mae Brown, a local activist, attributed as a strategy for future gentrification. In a 1994 interview, Minnie Jones explained that the use of “blight” to describe many African American neighborhoods razed in the past thirty years “goes way back and it goes very deep and it can get very nasty.” Jones, a longtime community advocate, witnessed the damage to these communities firsthand. “See, Eagle St. used to be for black people, all businesses and houses, people had places to live. . . . That’s a sore spot with all black people, especially those that have been here any length of time.” Brown agreed, “Sometimes we wonder about why Asheville

[hasn't] renovated some of these homes and eliminated the crunch they have for low-income housing.” One community advocate—DeWayne Barton—has built a business around attempting to answer this question. Barton organizes “Hood Tours” of African American neighborhoods where individuals can learn the history of urban renewal and gentrification in our city. He combines spoken word poetry, public art, history, and a walking neighborhood tour filled with storytelling in an effort to represent competing narratives for how and why the city has attempted to disenfranchise our African American communities. Many of the neighborhoods directly impacted by road expansion projects, for instance, have constructed community gardens and thriving neighborhood associations to continue to press city officials to renew from within the community rather than by gentrifying it and tearing down their homes. Exposure to such civic leadership models inspires students, no doubt, and enlarges their understanding of what students can do with a degree in writing. Importantly, though, creative writing pedagogy has such agency, perhaps even responsibility, to engage more meaningfully in community equity work, to use creative inspiration as a catalyst for social change and the writing process as a location for social theory and mindfulness.

Our Participants and Methods

Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, states that oral history is not meant to replace old “truths” with new ones, but to aspire toward a reality of “minute fidelity” and “subjectivity.” Stories reflect faulty personal truths and we can study them through the subjective laws of the heart as “the cultural forms and processes by which individuals express their sense of themselves in history” (ix). Oral history is not just stories about events from the past, but more so about the meaning of such events within a storyteller’s life: “[O]ral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (50). Memory allows us to retrieve events in a non-linear fashion, and an active process that creates meanings within our experiences. Imagination, symbolism, and desire are used to express context about the “facts”

of lived experiences (Portelli 52). Oral history, then, is a method of studying meaning within memory, and it most often seeks out voices less represented in order to document a richer, fuller, and more inclusive history. With our research participants, then, our goal was not to (re)create narratives about historical events and places. Instead, I encouraged students to follow the lead of their participants, to give them space to name and elaborate on the most memorable and significant events of their life, and to not worry about piecing together stories beginning to end but, in their analysis of the transcripts, to look within the stories for character traits and points of view that humanized and enlarged their research participants.

Our project received Institutional Review Board clearance before the semester began, a process I completed without student assistance, though students wrote some of the protocol during class just to familiarize themselves with the procedure and ethics of working with human subjects. Students collaboratively brainstormed potential interview questions. As Penny Summerfield explains, oral history is not about representative samples, reliable generalizations, or “statistically productive data.” Thus, few participants were asked the same questions, though students went into interviews armed with a set of seven to ten conversation starters they could reference should the research participant run out of things to say. In this way, we attempted to tap into participants’ “mediated memory, and that mediation is as much a part of that history one is studying as the memory. Education, religion, politics, local and family traditions and public culture all influence the way the past is remembered and interpreted. These are historical phenomena and the oral historian can study their interrelationship with memory and recall” (Summerfield 60). All of our research participants provided written consent to being audio recorded, and I mailed to each participant a thank you note along with their interview transcription, asking if they wanted to add or revise anything. None of our participants did. At the end of the project, I sent participants another thank you note and the twenty-nine page color booklet that we collaboratively produced, described in more detail below.

A librarian, Karen Loughmiller, who has worked over twenty-five years at the West Asheville Library branch, identified and contacted five key informants that had lived their lives in the residential area surrounding the new brewery's build site. In March, we began working with these five individuals ranging in age from 71 to 97 years, three white men (two business owners and a firefighter), one African American woman (community activist and homemaker), and one white woman (homemaker). We asked our research participants to suggest other informants who could speak from different racial and economic standpoints, and in this way we interviewed five additional participants, three women (one seamstress, one homemaker, and one store worker; one who identified as African American and two as white) and two men (a business owner and a goods delivery driver; both of whom identified as African American). Not all of the second wave of participants were willing to speak on the record or be published in our book. We interviewed nearly all of the participants more than once, and in a few instances more than one person interviewed the same participant. All students participated in at least one interview, and they were given the option of interviewing participants alone, with me, or with a classmate. I interviewed three participants alone and sat in on three student interviews. The process of interviewing was a hurdle for most students, especially at first and especially for self-proclaimed introverted students. One student, for example, came to my office in tears because she feared she might have an anxiety attack during the interview process. These fears were real, and many oral historians face this same discomfort. This type of expansion, moving students into real world contexts and building confidence and capability through such discomforts, seems to be another reason for incorporating oral history into the creative writing workshop tradition.

On occasion I accompanied students to participants' homes and we looked through their pictures and talked about the magnets on their fridge. Students took walks with some participants through the residential streets surrounding the area, recently rezoned as industrial. We interviewed business owners, most of whom long ago retired, and we learned how they sustained and supported the local residents during times of economic strife. Our eldest participant (97 years old), Albert Fortune recalled that doctors,

on the brink of foreclosure during the Great Depression, provided free care for neighbors and “the food stores were able to feed people out of work by selling to them on credit, and the neighborhoods were small enough that the store owners were acquainted with nearly everybody who lived within miles of their store.” We heard heart-warming stories about how decades later these same residents gave back to the business owners when one was struck by fire and another by cancer. Often, as we hope happens in the work of oral history, our participants’ stories overlapped and validated one another, including the neighborhood’s outpouring of support for an African American family whose son, Robinson, lost his life when he rushed into a “manhole tunnel” to rescue some city workers that had been overtaken by gases. Phillip Snelson, with a tear barely escaping his left eye before he brushed it away, described his friend Robinson as “the type of guy who’d do anything for you.”

The Interview and Crafting Narrative Structure

The creative process of storytelling—whether it be fiction or nonfiction, oral or written—involves the desire to represent social truths and to engage an audience: “The storyteller is in fact foremost a truthseeker, an illuminator, a solicitor, a fully aware creative thinker whose *narratives* are riddled with knowledge and wisdom” (Hirsch and Dixon 188). Looking first to the linguistic, grammatical, and literary structure of the interviews, students were asked to identify discourse “tics” and repeating elements in how individual participants narrated their experiences. What are the strategies for slowing down a story, for example, and how does “um” function differently than an extended silent pause?

In studying narrative structure, students were introduced to feminist theories related to everyday language hegemony and the “cultural circuit” through which most stories are filtered. This concept, first developed by Graham Dawson, represents the interplay of culture, language, and meaning in shaping public discourses of memory, discourses that are filtered through and shaped by popular culture (films, television, newspaper articles, literature). For example, research narrators may find it difficult to speak

about The Great Depression outside the dominant narratives of particular histories—we all stuck it out together. While more than one of our participants described the local grocer and several business owners as generous in working with lower wealth people, we found contradicting narratives when we looked into oral histories of African American women in our community, some of whom were subject to the cultural practice of being paid for work after it had been completed only to not be paid at week's end for laundry service or caring for children, services that cannot be cashed in elsewhere. Everyone struggled, that is for certain, but research participants remembered their struggle through a lens of the present, which could include a persistent blindness to racial inequalities. How could we include such blindness in a respectful way, not just to the participant but also to human groups marginalized within the narrative? Grounding our study of narrative structure in oral stories, which we had the luxury of witnessing in composition in real time, students gained a more humanized and contextualized understanding of how to structure narratives. Importantly, we learned the value of filling the gaps in narrative structure with additional research, even if that required a second interview and/or a secondary source. We weren't studying a static form or a *how to* rhetoric for creating narrative; we were theorizing and practicing out strategies for constructing narrative by looking at our research participants' storytelling as a product of cultural significance.

Performative Space: Cultivating Ethos

Creative writers are tasked with, according to Hirsch and Dixon, constructing realist contexts in which particular human thoughts can believably exist. Such “methodological rigor—be it scientific or creative—is necessary to move from gathering and perceiving to honing in on those slice-of-life events we say represent truth” (188-89). Students gathered information as a part of their interviews, which meant they needed to cultivate an ethos as researcher as well as writer, and all in real time as they navigated unique interview situations. The stakes were higher for them, perhaps, than other writing workshop classes given that all the profile pieces would be published and distributed to an external, non-academic audience, not to

mention the responsibility of representing the lives of research participants they had grown to know over time. Students needed to learn how to craft believable stories using their creative capacities and skills with narrative structure, and they also had the ethical responsibility to remain true to the lived realities of another person's stories.

One student's struggle exemplifies just how performative the interview space can be between student researchers and elders in the community. Phillip Snelson, the research participant, had mentioned in the telling of another story that his father committed suicide. The student took notice of how Snelson did not dwell on this detail but used it as a launch pad for telling a story about the "strong, determined woman" that was his mother. Widowed with five young children, Snelson's mother did not reveal the suicide until her sons were adults, and only then after much probing. It was the family secret that others in the community knew but, out of respect for Snelson's mother, never discussed. Snelson was proud of his mother and she was the story he wished to tell. But the student was more intrigued by the father's suicide. The student wanted to return to Snelson for another interview so that he could probe into this untold story, but I cautioned him to respect the boundary Snelson had created around this tragic event. Clearly Snelson had grown to trust the student by sharing this information. He had not, after all, shared the suicide with me when another student and I had interviewed him. Ultimately, what would knowing more about this story reveal about this place, and who would this knowledge serve? The student did return to Snelson and he inquired again, with subtlety he said, about his father. He learned that Snelson's father killed himself in the middle of WWII with the children in the next room. In my office that afternoon, the student's training in psychology rose to the surface as he described Snelson's emotional response to telling the story, and the student felt as though Snelson was sharing this story with him the man and not with him the researcher. Creative license may be necessary to transition between life events and to exhibit the depth of participants' stories, but also, the student cannot get lost in the stories they desire to tell. The ethics required of the researcher echoes the ethics of any other nonfiction writer in deciding what to tell, how to

tell it, and questioning the need for why the story needs to be told in the first place. In the end, the student mentioned the father's suicide, but in an effort to further characterize the strength and resilience of Snelson's mother.

Writing Workshops and Revision: Packaging Narratives of Race and Class

In his work on the dialogic nature of oral history, Ronald Grele draws careful attention to the rhetorical situation of writers speaking through a historian in an effort to package narratives for an external audience. This intellectual process rests heavily in the revision phase where conversations about creative license and ethical representation emerged in our class. But also, this was a time to analyze participant stories in terms of their absences and minimization of differently situated individuals, often due to gender, race, and social class. Students noted how difficult it was to get their participants to elaborate on racial tensions, for instance, with some of the participants unwilling to characterize the 1960s as a time of "racial tension." Philip Snelson was asked if he experienced "much racial tension" to which he replied: "Not what'd you say 'real racial tension.' We did have some conflict at one time." He told the students a story about how black kids and white kids, their neighborhoods adjacent and separated by a creek, never played together. "We'd go down there to play, and the blacks would come down there and run us off. Well, we'd come back to our house and get some more and run the blacks off. And that was sort of a struggle for a while." One winter, a large snowfall brought the two groups of boys together as they collaboratively built a snow mountain that "got to maybe half as tall as this ceiling before it got to the bottom. And the blacks came down, but instead of running each other off, we got to know each other. We started playing together." Snelson saw this as a changing point in the history of racial tension in his neighborhood, a story we heard a bit differently from an African American research participant who believed the snow mountain gave the boys a shared goal, but in the end, the tension remained. The hegemonic narrative of "we all got along" continued to portray racial tensions of the past as more innocent and positive than they were, and

this narrative strengthens the nationally treasured rhetoric of colorblindness where racism has “gotten better” and that we should look to the improvements instead of imagine an everyday where race does not influence one’s life chances, not just for education but for surviving a walk down the street.

Albert Fortune offered a counternarrative related to racial segregation in West Asheville. This 97-year-old white man described his upbringing as “sheltered,” but he saw racial inequality as an everyday burden for African Americans. “The resistance to housing integration has been citywide,” he explained, “but it was especially a West Asheville problem. We had a cluster of black families who lived in an area . . . and most of the residents of that black community were employed by the, either the white businesses as truck drivers or janitors, but almost none of them as executives or salespeople. My dad employed a black man as a truck driver [for thirty years]” and though his father described him as a friend, “he would have never thought of promoting him past a manual labor position. It was a warm and friendly community, but not for everyone.” Fortune historicized school integration by telling first a story about how the name of the school changed, as opposed to most participants who minimized the tension or framed the student riots as extremist. Fortune credits serving in the military as influential in building racial tolerance into white identity. “Kids at the local high school reflected the mores of their parents. The guys and a few gals who had gone to war, when they came back home, they were no longer parochial. They were more ambitious, more tolerant of other people. The segregation problem boiled to a head pretty soon after the end of the war . . . There were kids at Asheville High who were impatient to make things happen faster than they could . . . so they immediately wanted to change the name of the high school . . . they wanted to maintain some identity, so they struck and shut the school down for two or three days until they got their way and changed the name to Asheville High . . . That was the compromise to get rid of both a black principals’ name and a white principal’s name.” Fortune continued his story by discussing how faculty integration was just as strife with conflict (his wife was an elementary school teacher) and Fortune calls attention to the compounding nature of racism in this small town: “Well, the black kids still have an uphill fight, and I am

very sympathetic to any minority group in high school or in college at this stage. They have the job of learning when they are being trampled on and when it's intentional." By focusing on the resiliency of the African American community, this research participant modeled for students how to package narratives that blur the binaries of victim and victimizer and show the intersectionality of race and class with cultural norms. While dominant cultural narratives may emphasize positive social progress and overestimate how far we've come, as writers packaging historical narratives for a broader audience, we cannot minimize how far we have to go toward racial equality nor turn a blind eye to the influence of racial bias in how individuals narrate their world.

In the subjective process of remembering and narrating stories, history can sound more progressive than it was and blind spots exist, which can be particularly true for white research participants as they talk about other racial groups. Inflation of relationships with people of color functions as self-preservation, according to critical discourse analyst Teun van Dijk. Semantic moves, such as "some of my best friends are . . .," attempt to establish ethos of the speaker as racially progressive, even when they may use such moves to support subtle arguments about other-racial group inferiority (118). We all fear being judged, and in the interview space where one's voice is being recorded, the threat of being labeled a stereotype or narrow minded is especially heightened. In analyzing the strained silences around race in the interview transcriptions, students began to appreciate a shift in what is considered "politically correct" ways of talking about other racial groups, a shift from explicit racism to the colorblindness rhetoric of I don't see race so I'm not racist. This awareness gave the class liberty to critique "post-racial" rhetorics, as our course began just as President Obama was sworn into his second term. Students noted that some participants apologized for not knowing the best language to use when describing African Americans, a mark of progress we believed, while others were downright resistant to discussing race at all, adeptly maneuvering away from the interviewer's direct mention of their interactions with other racial groups. More than one white participant said to white students, "I don't know anything about that," and one

African American participant said to a white student, “Now, you don’t want to ask me that. No, I won’t talk to you about that.”

One student struggled with wanting to represent her narrator authentically and respectfully, though she did not want to minimize the exclusionary language the elder woman used throughout their interview. This white, female participant had spent her life working through the church to “bring the community together through acts of generosity and communion,” and she supported “shut-ins and others in need” with food and gifts of necessities. She discussed the declining congregation at her church and mentioned the preacher had been allowing other congregations to use their space: “I don’t know what some of those people are called that are using them. Whether they preach or teach, they have a pastor. Then they let the fellowship hall. They’re letting the black people use it and they’re using it for church . . . No, they’re separate from us. They’re in the fellowship hall and we have the Sunday school rooms and then go into the sanctuary.” The participant drew boundaries around “real” religions here by presenting other religious gatherings with a tone of skepticism. Perhaps unintentionally, she also created the appearance of racial homogeneity within her religious group. When asked about her experience mingling with other races, the participant, who lived in a neighborhood that had grown increasingly racially diverse in the past fifteen years, replied simply: “We weren’t mixed with the black people. They had their own school and we didn’t mix, we didn’t mix in church either. But it’s worked out, but I don’t know how they did in their school but they seem to be doin’ alright now mixin’ with the white people. I never went to school with any blacks and my children didn’t either.” In her written reflection, the student noted the participants’ rhetorical distancing, including “the” in front of black people, as something she hadn’t paid attention to before. This student, a creative writing major from the northeast who moved to our mountain community late in high school, questioned the impact of such a discourse. During class she asked her colleagues if we could list other rhetorical strategies that created this type of otherness, and this invited critical conversations about

embedded bias and the responsibility we had as writers to represent (even, challenge) historical silences related to racism within the narrative structure and storytelling of our participants.

That's Not (Our Brand of) Creative Writing

At the close of the semester, just as some students were walking across the stage accepting diplomas, I read in the newspaper that one of our research participants had died. Albert Fortune, our eldest participant, was a masterful storyteller and sharp historian. He inherited his father's hardware business—started in 1919—and the building remains today with a copper plaque hanging on the bright red brick. It is high dollar real estate these days, having benefited handsomely from the gentrification the area has experienced in the past twenty years. In the beginning, though, this building was the last stop on the town's only trolley, so the hardware store became the kind of place where people hung out on the sidewalk visiting, avoiding the labor of walking home after a day's work. Fortune's stories were deep and plentiful and on more than one occasion he apologized to the students for talking beyond the boundaries of our city. "I'm tickled to talk about anything you can get me to talk about," he said with a laugh.

Most of our research participants expressed surprise at first and, often, gratitude later that they were invited to share their stories, to dig around in their memories and attempt to process them in the company of university students and creative writers. Alistair Thomson, an oral historian and language theorist, describes oral history's strength as "the subjectivity of memory," because it "provide[s] clues not only about the meanings of historical experience but also the relationship between past and present, between memory and personal identity and between individual and collective memory" (54). It is this—the interrelationship between individual and collective narratives and their influence on self-perception and how we view others—that oral history brings to creative writing pedagogy. Not only does oral history research help students to get out of their heads and out into their community, to use their agency and writing abilities to document real lives that have been, perhaps, marginalized in the remembering of

history. But also, oral history engages students in an embodied research process that makes lessons of audience awareness far more real than any other exercise could and arms students with practical life skills, such as interpersonal relationship building and ethical practices of representation. We did all this while maintaining a rigorous commitment to practice and the creative process.

After we completed our interviews, students began writing their profiles pieces, some of them opting to focus on place, others on people, and others crafting more literary journalist style stories related to environmentalism or religious communities. For weeks we wrote, workshopped, revised, and polished, and just as we came near to completion all the buildings on the new brewery's build site were burned to the ground by an arsonist. I had been there the weekend before walking the property with my seven-year-old son, taking photographs of Spagnola's murals, which were spray painted on two sides of the large Livestock Market and across the front of Penland's Auction House (the owner, Johnny Penland, we interviewed on three separate occasions). The incoming brewery reported in the local newspaper that they had planned to preserve the murals and incorporate them into the future tasting room of the brewery. With the fire, that became impossible and even more history of this place was lost, leaving its remnants in the hands of our creative writing students. With the help of a student who was also skilled in graphic design, we produced a twenty-nine page public history booklet that the incoming brewery paid to print. This colorful book combined student-written profiles with black and white images of the area's history and color photographs I had taken of Spagnola's murals before the arson. Each student received two copies of this booklet, and it was mailed to all of our research participants and to local libraries around the city. Our university's Special Collections retained a copy, and the booklet was put up on the Asheville Design Center's website as the project publication for phase 2 of the West Asheville Bus Shelter collaboration.

As pedagogues to creative writing students, whether they exist in composition courses or creative nonfiction writing workshops, our goal is, according to Robert L. Root, to “push their pieces away from the mere recording of personal experience or the mere expression of egocentricism into some territory that connects with readers” (254). Oral history is one strategy for deepening creative writing pedagogy, for moving it outside the classroom to elucidate writing as an activist strategy and, importantly, for connecting the university to the communities that support and sustain us. In conducting interviews and packaging narratives related to racism, sexism, and the politics of exclusion, students engaged in important self-education and personal reflection. Their writing became a mechanism for remembering and documenting a place—and the people who created it—during a time when it was undergoing radical change and gentrification. Students studied participants’ storytelling within social, cultural, political, and rhetorical contexts, not to arrive at the authentic, single truth of our research participants, but to better represent personal motivations, shifting ideological values, and evolving popular narratives as they existed in this place. Asheville, NC.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Marie-Louise. "Travelling to Unknown Places: Oral history and Art." *Islands of Memory: Oral History Association of Australia Journal* 31.1 (2009): 7-13.
- Asheville Design Center. West Asheville Bus Shelter Project. Online. <http://ashevilledesigncenter.org/projects/wavl-bus-shelter/>
- Bishop, Wendy, and Hans Ostrom, eds. *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.
- Boyd, Nicola. "A Creative Writing Research Methodology: new directions, Strange Loops and tornados." *Margins and Mainstreams: Refereed conference papers of the 14th Annual AAWP Conference*, 2009.
- Dawson, Graham. *Soldier Heroes. British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Debenham, Pat. "Fragile Presence." *International Oral History Association Conference: Between Past, Present and Future: Oral History, Memory and Meaning*. Prague, Czech Republic, 8 July 2010.
- Eggers, Dave. *What is the What*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007.
- Epstein, Paul. "Intermedia and Theatre." *Arts in Society: Happenings and Intermedia*. Ed. Edward Kamarck 5.1 (1968): 38-43.
- Funder, Anna. *All that I am*. Melbourne: Penguin Press, 2011.
- Fodrey, Crystal N. "Teaching CNF Writing to College Students: A Snapshot of CFP Pedagogical Scholarship." *Assay: Journal of Nonfiction Studies* 2.1 (2015). Online.
- Glesne, Corrine. "That Rare Feeling: Re-presenting research through poetic transcription." *Qualitative Inquiry* 3.2 (1997): 202-221.
- Grele, Ronald J. *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2nd ed. Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1985.

-
- Haake, Katharine. "Teaching Creative Writing If the Shoe Fits." In *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy*, ed. Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom, 77-99. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994.
- Healey, Steve. "The Rise of Creative Writing and The New Value of Creativity." *The Writer's Chronicle* (2009).
- Hecht, Tobias. *After Life: An Ethnographic Novel with Portions Based on the Narrations of Bruna Verissimo*. London: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Hirsch, Anna and Claire Dixon. "Katrina Narratives: What Creative Writers Can Teach As about Oral History." *Oral History Review* 35.2 (2008): 187-195.
- Kwan, Mei Po. "From Oral Histories To Visual Narratives: Re-Presenting The Post September 11 Experiences Of Muslim Woman In The USA." *Social and Cultural Geography* 9.6 (2008): 653-669.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-Lin. "The Strangeness of Creative Writing: An Institutional Query." *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 3.2 (2003): 151-69.
- Paget, Derek. "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques." *New Theatre Quarterly* 3.12 (1987): 317-336.
- Portelli, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.
- Richardson, Laurel. "Poetic Representations of Interviews." In *Postmodern Interviewing*, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holestein. London: SAGE publications, 2003. 187-203.
- Riley, Mark and David Harvey. "Talking Geography: On Oral History And The Practice Of Geography." *Social and Cultural Geography* 8.3 (2007): 345-351.
- Ritter, Kelly and Stephanie Vanderslice. *Can It Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Pub, 2007.
- Root, Robert L. "Variations on a Theme of Putting Nonfiction in Its Place" *College English*.

Sandino, Linda and Mathew Partington, eds. *Oral History in the Visual Arts*. London: Bloomsbury press, 2013.

Smith, Graham and Peter Jackson. "Narrating The Nation: The 'Imagined Community' Of Ukrainians In Bradford." *Journal of Historical Geography* 25 (1999): 367-387.

Summerfield, Penny. *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of Second World War*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1998.

Tedlock, Barbara. "The Observation of Participation and the Emergence of Public Ethnography." In *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*. Ed. Norman Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. London: Sage, 2003: 165-213.

Thomson, Alistair. "Four Paradigm Shifts in Oral History." *Oral History Review* 34.1 (2007): 49-70.

van Dijk, Teun. *Communicating Racism: Ethnic Prejudice in Thought and Talk*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1987.

Viswanathan, Padma. *The Toss of the Lemon*. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2008.

Wray, Amanda, ed. "Oral Histories of West Asheville." <https://ashevilledesigncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/WAVL-Bus-Project-Oral-History-Book.pdf>