



When Methods Meet: Oral histories and Animated archive

Erin Jessee (University of Strathclyde) and Hayden Lorimer (University of Glasgow) in conversation November 2016.

In this 22-minute film Erin Jessee and Hayden Lorimer discuss how the two methods have a number of points of connection but also have some differences in how the research process is approached. They note how they have a common interest in living memory, and agree that their different ways of accessing and reporting on what people remember about the past share a concern to take us beyond official narratives. This is especially important where histories involve difficult subjects, as is the case in post-conflict situations. It is also important to bring out connections between different elements of people's lives that are significant to them but that may be missing from the stories currently available in the public sphere. Both approaches require careful listening to what people say and how they say it, but they also have a place for prompting, such as through the use of photographs and other visual materials, collage-like. And both require careful consideration by researchers to how they write themselves, other people, and relevant materials into the narratives that are produced, for the purposes of reporting on the past and firing the public imagination to engage with it.

Transcript of conversation:

EJ: Oral history is a relatively new field within historical research that tends to privilege as much as it's possible the voices of people that are not typically part of the historical record. So often people who come from communities that are perhaps marginalised in different ways, as well as the voices of women, invisible minorities; people don't typically won't get to be part of creating a formal historical archive. It's really a combination first of all of a particular type of methodology or series of methodologies that privilege different kinds of interviews, usually one to one, but not always, where you sort of sit down with a person and you talk to them in different ways about their lives, about their experiences, about their perspectives on events or people that they have met or they have been intimately involved with.

And on the other side as well, in addition to it being a methodology it's also very much then about the outcome, this primary source that you are co-creating with another person as they go about telling you about their lives and the things that they have experienced.

HL: The one that I've chosen, animated archive, is of my own coinage. I suppose in a sense what I take it to represent is three different things, the first of them is memory work, generally speaking, so I am interested in social memory and the way in which memory comes to be expressed and the forms in which it takes, that expression.

Secondly I am interested in archival research and archival research we kind of know as a generic type which is using sources and records from the past, those can be textual, but they can also be visual.

And thirdly I am interested in landscape studies broadly understood, and that probably speaks most clearly to my geographical background and training.

But it's the bringing together of those three elements, of memory work, of archival research and of landscape study, that allow me to begin to imagine how archive might become something that is animated in the sense of ventilated, that is to say taken out into the open air rather than being an indoor exercise or enterprise. And mobilised too in the sense that it might become a thing that actually is on the move and there are creative opportunities that arise from thinking about archival work and archival conduct, that actually are kinetic, energised somehow.

The thing that we agree is our common area of interest is living memory, that is to say that things that can still take expression, through different form, but are somehow still part of a living world. So living memory remains in the broadest terms a kind of common interest for us – would you agree Erin?

EJ: Very much. I mean it tends to be very much at the core of any kind of oral or historical practice as well because you are working with living narrators for the most part or at least people who can speak in different ways to merit, mainly memories that they have inherited as well through family, through friends and so on. Often these memories have extreme meaning for people's lives. They resonate with them in very powerful ways.

HL: Do you want to tell us Erin what you think that broadly speaking, in principle, the benefits of oral history are?

EJ: I think one of the things that oral history is often celebrated for is its ability to get beyond official narratives of what has happened in a given time and in a given place. And certainly for the kind of work that I do where I am often working in conflict or post-conflict settings, where people have often been really, really polarised by recent experiences of genocide and war crimes and crimes against humanity for example. There is often a tendency in the aftermath for governments, for the international community to want to create and impose an official narrative of what has happened that restores peace that tries to bring people back together, that promotes reconciliation and justice, transitional justice and so on.

But often what we see happening in these kinds of contexts is that these official narratives don't resonate very effectively with individual citizens on all sides of the conflict. And as a result then that actually creates a lot of resentment, a lot of frustration and it can actually lead then to the existence or the maintenance of these really powerful reservoirs of ethnic and political and different kinds of tensions that can help to keep the conflict simmering under the surface in these different settings.

And I mean oral history in this kind of setting then becomes a very provocative and at times quite an ethically challenging endeavour. But I think at the same time when you can create space for all these different kinds of narratives, to sort of exist simultaneously, to talk about the way these histories of conflict can be really complicated, the ways in which people can have completely different understandings of a given conflict or a given event. Actually what you can find kind of comes out of that is some kind of common ground. People begin to sort of see that things are a lot more complicated and that that isn't necessarily a bad thing but it's something that needs to be reckoned with in different ways.

So certainly from my work I would argue that is one of the main benefits.

HL: I am kind of interested in a collagist approach I suppose you could call it, where you bring lots of different things into correspondence with one another. We all remember collages where you kind of piece lots of different colours and textures into one single form and in the process of doing so what you create is something that is hopefully something that is more than the sum of its parts. I think that is really what I see is the benefits of an animated archive approach, where there is a series of possible associations and relations which the researcher in effect kicks into life.

Those associations might be between archived photographs, they might be involving domestic household objects, they clearly involve a remembering individual and perhaps they also draw in and encompass a lived and felt world of the landscape in which that life has been lived out. And it's that set of associations and possible relations that I understand to be beneficial. But all of it speaks back to that appeal of a lot of collages practice actually. And do you want to reflect on limitations as you understand it, as an oral historian?

EJ: Where to begin?

In most instances we tend to look at it as a very beneficial practice. Certainly with oral history broadly speaking, the general sense is that you know we are building these really positive long term relationships with people, with communities, that we are trying to sort of over time get a sense of how these people understand their lives, how they make sense of the past, how they have been affected by the past, and you know how they are trying to make sense of these things in the present. And of course then this issue of memory and what people are capable of remembering given their life experiences, given their emotional state at the moment when a memory was being created in their minds, how they react to you as the interviewer, how you are reacting to them as the interviewee, all these things can shape the content and the form and the sort of meaning that comes out of the interview as well.

HL: How do you train yourself to listen?

EJ: Oh goodness, a lot of hard work I'd say. I mean certainly it's an art form; it's certainly a skill I would say as well. I think it actually takes a lot of hard work and training and discipline to be an effective listener. Especially when you are working with stories that are maybe difficult to hear or difficult to witness,

I've always tended to be a more quiet person anyway, I am generally the person who will sit back and listen to what people say in any kind of setting rather than being really overly talkative myself. But little things like learning to kind of show that you are listening non-verbally, particularly because I have an audio recorder and I am going to be transcribing, I don't want to be interrupting what is being said all the time with a lot of mm, yes, mm, you know, training yourself to listen and show that you are listening in ways that aren't going to be picked up on an audio recorder that will be culturally appropriate. Some people find

sustained eye contact really off putting and so if you are staring them down in the context of an interview that can actually cause them to become uncomfortable. But I mean in your research as well, especially when you bring in the spatial dynamics and so on, it must be an element that you struggle with too.

HL: I hope I listen! I was quite taken by your phrase there about you know an effort to decentre yourself from the proceedings. And if you will allow I will actually, I'll actually rub up against that actually and increasingly in lots of bits of work that I've published, I quite intentionally leave myself in as an active presence in a narrative rather than in effect figuring myself as outside. And so I leave myself as someone in the midst of the practice, and that runs contrary to so many social science traditions and conventions and orthodoxies where in effect the researcher writes away from themselves. What I am not really talking about either though is a kind of reflexive turned version of myself where I come clean on who I am according to a kind of indices of social identifiers. Instead it's as an effort to have a version of myself present in the work. I find greater satisfaction and contentment and to a degree honesty whatever that is, in still having myself as an active presence in the narrative account.

Now, there is a whole lot of cute moves and forms of literary artifice that can go on in terms of what version of yourself you allow in. But I still like the fact that there is an authorial presence and an authorial voice who is also an embodied person who is actually part of that account of the world. It's difficult to properly explain how that plays itself out in writing and sometimes it differs according to the project and according to the animated archive exercise that I am involved in. In many senses I only know what it will be according to the way in which a project unfolds and the type of relationship that is struck up with a person or persons, and a place. But I am always looking for the opportunity to retain something of myself as a presence within the scene, within the situation, within the landscape, within the relation. That can potentially be read as self-centred, it can potentially be read as in comes I, where the very last thing that should happen is the authorial voice and presence to be centred. I'd like to think it's just kind of recessed or oblique to the action. There, but just set off to the side. That's kind of where I see my work heading. Which I think is sort of different from an oral history tradition.

EJ: yes and no, oral historians pay a lot of attention to the subjectivities of themselves, the subjectivities of the people that they speak to and then those coming together which is kind of the inter-subjectivity. And we certainly will position ourselves within our research, we will spend a lot of time trying to figure out you know biases we might have that prompt us to ask some research questions but not others for example. Or that could potentially impact the relationship that we have with people.

And so if I were conducting an interview with somebody and the questions you know that I was asking were really difficult and the responses that I was getting were really monosyllabic for example, that might be an example where I would actually write myself into the interview and try and unpack why it is that the interview went that way rather than more like a conversation or rather more like say a formal interview.

And certainly after the interview as well quite often what we will do – oral historians are quite big on keeping journals and taking notes around not just the interview itself but the whole encounter that we have within our research. And quite often we will also then reflect on you know the casual conversations that we will have with people you know when we want to say recruit them. And we will quite often bring ourselves into it in that way as well.

But I think it's just in the moment of the actual interview, particularly if it's say something like a life history interview where really we want it to be led by the interviewee as much as possible. I think that's more where we try to kind of step away. And we often talk about it in terms of a shared or a sharing of authority. We see ourselves as co-creating these interviews and these sources. We bring a certain expertise into the room in terms of our training and so on, but we also try to recognise the expertise of the person who has lived their life and knows what they have experienced and in different ways has also then bringing that kind of authority into the room.

So you know when it comes to that kind of process of sharing authority, yeah we will maybe decentre ourselves a bit. But it doesn't mean that we are not positioning ourselves within the research if that makes sense.

HL: Sure, my own reflections on limitations on the form, there is still a responsibility however creative an enterprise one is entering into when it comes to combination or recombination, to actually think through the exercise of association and relation, to try and ensure that you are still working with a version of fidelity that speaks back to that social memory.

And here what we probably get towards is the role of narrative as another kind of commonality in our practice. We both of us are mindful methodologically from the very outset, and that's to say that narrative isn't something that is only considered or configured as an end point. As that classic kind of writing up episode in a kind of orthodoxy of the model of research design, but there is an awareness of narrative operating at the beginnings of methodological design and then at every point thereafter. And so narrative becomes a kind of concern that actually shapes the conducting of research because it is not to say that any narrative is prefigured, but there are possible narratives and there is an attentiveness to narrative that is always operating. As an oral historian Erin is continually reading people, she is reading me right now, for certain narrative forms. So for me I think there is great creative possibility in a critical engagement with narrative form right from the beginning. But Erin you should tell us about how narrative works for you.

EJ: Often when oral historians are thinking about narrative we are actually thinking about a whole lot of other things that are happening in the room or before the interview begins, as the interview is going on, once the interview is over. And it will tend to kind of look at all of that in tandem to sort of get a sense of, not just of the words that are being spoken and the meaning those are intended to convey, but also the meaning that these other non-verbal forms of communication are telling us about either the person we are talking to or perhaps the broader meaning that they want us to take away from that encounter.

So yeah narrative can also involve a lot more than just reconstructing history and indeed I think most oral historians nowadays have kind of shifted away from that sort of reconstructive style of narrative analysis, to really focus on the deeper meaning behind the words, the messages that people are wanting to convey and at the end of the day you know we are really interested in what people hold to be psychologically true or psychologically meaningful for them. That might mean then that there is very little that we can see in that narrative that might be historically accurate, right, they might be getting names and dates wrong. But we will look in those instances at why they have constructed the memory in that way and the deeper meaning behind that, what it tells us about the meaning that the past has for them in that moment rather than simply dismissing it as oh, that's untrue or that isn't accurate. We will try and focus and tease out the psychological truth behind what these

people are saying to us, and that involves then taking into consideration not just the words but body language and how the story is constructed for example.

HL: In effect what we are talking about there is a movement from private history to public history. And in describing it, through an act of will or evasion, you have avoided using the word impact, by the currency of contemporary academia that's what we are talking about there, is that perhaps oral history work or perhaps animated archive work can have some kind of impact, dimension to them.

And I think there is a huge world of potential there in the sense that commitment to ordinary experience, perhaps experience not previously spotlighted and the narrative form that it can take means that it all ought to have some expression that fires the public imagination too, or the popular imagination too.

--: I'm fascinated by your discussion as producers of oral history but on the other hand as a consumer I come to these perhaps years or even decades later and I was wondering if you could sort of enlighten me as to some of the challenges of interpreting oral history. I usually try to take a triangulation or try to find other documentary sources and try to sort of visualise an appropriate approach for somebody who is really quite external to the process of collecting and disseminating information.

EJ: Yeah I mean that is a good question. I mean nowadays with the internet we have so many resources at our fingertips and it's I think a really important question because you know anybody can go about creating a website for example or doing their own little oral history project which on the one hand is excellent because again you've got more people speaking about their lives in their own terms. But it can also sometimes be a little bit of a challenge as well because figuring out which sort of accounts are – not necessarily true or not – but certainly which accounts are maybe, how do you frame it, like accurate in the sense of not being overtly politicised in a way that is potentially a bit reprehensible for example, certainly in the field that I deal with is a real challenge, because I teach courses on genocide for example in the 20th century, or courses on Rwanda explicitly. I have to spend a lot of time with my students talking about considering the source of their information. I don't mind if they want to use blogs, I don't mind if they want to find you know community based oral history projects, I encourage them to, but you know use this word triangulation, and trying to then kind of compare it with all these different materials I would say is absolutely essential.

But also I think looking at it maybe from the perspective of what is the person trying to communicate with this narrative, or whatever it is they are putting out into the world, what is the purpose behind it. And sometimes it's relatively easy to figure it out you know they speak in a very clear way where the agenda is right up front and centre and other times it's a bit more difficult to figure out. But I think even just being mindful of what that sort of agenda behind it might be, what, you know how they are maybe trying to shape discourse on that particular event or that particular person, how they may be attempting to bring themselves into the story right, all of that can go into considering and contextualising the source and I would say that would need to be – certainly a big part of it.

Because yeah, there is just so much information available today,

--: Much of what you talked about was verbal, so I wondered if there was any other way of kind of capturing your material, do you use visual methods, and if you could maybe talk about those a little bit,

HL: Yes, I use photographs, partly with a view to thinking about how they might ultimately become part of some, an illustrative element of some written output. But they are also a kind of in process aide memoire, a documentation of a site and life in a site, and it becomes its own kind of archive and so there is an effort to actually produce a kind of sedimentation of material that I can then revisit as an exercise of recalling particular episodes, or particular moments or particular days, particular encounters, and certainly photographs serve that function. They are also a really effective way to actually enter into the exercise of writing and that is to write through a photograph rather than to find the photograph subsequently as a supplement to the already existing bit of writing. In a sense that auto archiving impulse to photograph, photograph, photograph, and then spend time with the photographs rather than have them just sitting lodged on a hard drive which we tend to do an awful lot of the time with research. But actually spending time, not so much systematically but rather more in a sustained fashion - actually look hard at the visual and then look again and look again and look again. So that would be the approach I would take which is just kind of non-textual and in effect is about embedding the visual into the enterprise of research all the way through.

Contributors

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The special issue of *Cultural Geographies* 21(4) 2014, 'Excursions: Telling Stories and Journeys' edited by H. Lorimer and H. Parr, gives a flavour of animated archive; see especially Lorimer's 'Homeland'.

Suggested questions for seminar discussion:

Why might oral history be considered a provocative method?

What does it mean for archived material to be 'kicked into life'?

What sorts of things can oral history and archived material tell us about memory?

What sorts of skills does each method require researchers to have?

How do oral histories and archived materials 'speak to' each other, and what is required to make that a productive conversation?