

At the Intersection of Memory, History and Story: An Exploration of the Nostalgic Feelings Which Arose When Listening to Oral History Archives as an Inspiration for Novel-Writing

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Abstract

When I decided to write a historical novel about women based in my native East Midlands and set in the early twentieth century, I turned to oral history archives for inspiration. The subsequent listening process triggered strong feelings of nostalgia. This paper considers how I made personal connections with the oral histories that I listened to about women working in the local machine-lace industry. It looks at how I underwent a form of ‘imaginative reminiscence’, bringing together my past and the imagined pasts of my ancestors living and working in the East Midlands to inspire new writing. It explores the nostalgic feelings that arose, particularly for family members and places from my childhood; how triggered sensory responses shaped authenticity and imagery in my fiction writing; and how this led me to fictionalise gaps in my own family’s stories. The paper investigates aspects of my listening and writing processes and the transformation of spoken text into prose. It also sets out my ethical approach in balancing my roles as fiction writer and oral historian when working with other people’s memories.

Keywords: Nostalgia, fiction, creative writing, oral history, family history, place, reminiscence, memory

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Personal Heritage

I grew up in a village that once boasted its own lace factory, although by the time I was born in the late 1960s it had become an engineering works. The nearest city, Nottingham, was known as the home of machine-lace-making. In the nineteenth century, manufacturing spread out from the city and lace-making towns sprung up along the Erewash Valley, cutting across the three counties of Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire. Although the industry had diminished considerably by the 1970s, it was still a vivid part of the physical and mental landscape of my childhood. My memories of that time are set against rich industrial architecture, brick factories and tall blackened chimneys; they are peopled by strong female characters who worked in local textile manufacture; they are brought to life by anecdotes of these industrial times passed down to me by my Nottingham-born paternal grandparents.

Today, this crucial part of the region's identity has all but gone. Pattern books and lace samples have been removed to archives; a few are housed in the odd glass case in a local museum. The lace machines have fallen silent. The factories emptied. The workforces dispersed.

These memories remained with me and decades later, I embarked on a practice-led PhD in Creative Writing with the intention of reimagining, through fiction, the physical and mental landscapes that I grew up with. I chose the machine-lace industry as the historical backdrop for my novel, *The Queen of the Midlands*, which explores the relationship between two female characters from different lace-making families in a fictional East Midlands lace town. It opens in 1911, with the protagonists as childhood enemies. We meet them again in 1918 as young women, still in their close-knit community, and see the feud between them heal as they form a bond in challenging circumstances. In the final part of the novel, set in the 1970s, the women, now close friends, reflect on their lives and the changes that have taken place.

Oral history, the recording of people's first-hand memories, makes a valuable contribution to the machine-lace industry's social and historical legacy. With this in mind, I drew on oral history archives of accounts of former lace workers to help me reimagine an East Midlands lace town and, in turn, create a fictional one. What I had not anticipated was the heightened sense of nostalgia that would arise from this process.

Van Tilburg, Sedikides and Wildschut define nostalgia as 'a sentimental longing, or wistful affection for the past' (2015, p. 1). Overwhelming feelings of nostalgia have traditional associations with medical illness and psychiatric disorder, but in more recent years, nostalgia has

come to be perceived by some researchers, such as Sedikides and Wildschut, as a positive emotion that ‘increases self-esteem’ (2016, p. 320). It has been linked to creativity for millennia; in the 3,000-year-old epic poem *The Odyssey*, for example, Homer relates a nostalgic yearning for homeland and family (2016, p. 319). As I listened to the oral testimonies, so reminiscent of my own ancestors’ voices, I experienced my own sense of yearning for places from my childhood, the declining industrial landscapes and the rural fringes of my home village, a sadness at what and who was no longer here in the present. This motivated me to reimagine these missing elements and to bring them back into being through my writing.

Using Oral History to Fire My Imagination

Oral history is a complex practice. The term itself needs to be broken down into its constituent parts: the practice of oral history brings together a process—oral history interviewing—and a product—the resulting oral history interview or the audio recording. I have worked as an oral history archivist for many years and remain fascinated by this historical source: drawn to the vividness of its storytelling, the personal meanings that lie, sometimes hidden, within the interviewee’s testimony. Oral history resists order and structure. As an interviewer, when you enter the interview situation, there is emptiness, until that space is filled with recollections. As narratives, these recollections can be random and unpredictable, ‘messy, non-linear and multi-layered’ (Andrews, 2009, p. 155). The multi-layered nature of oral testimonies makes them a highly subjective source. They are incredibly rich and valuable sources for a writer looking to connect with lived human experience.

I identified a small collection of interviews to work with, carried out in the 1980s with people who had a connection with the local machine-lace industry and recorded on to cassette tapes. They were housed at a local studies library and I arranged a number of visits to listen to them. The interviewees recorded on the tapes were near-contemporaries of my own paternal grandparents – who were born in 1902 and 1905; they both died in the 1990s. Many of the testimonies in the collection capture the same broad Nottingham accents that my grandparents had and are peppered with local cultural references and dialect that they used: the tea was ‘mashed’, never brewed and sweets were known as ‘tuffies’ (Scollins & Titford, 2000, pp. 91-95).

The local studies library offers typewritten transcripts alongside the audio recordings. However, it was important to my creative practice that I bypassed these and engaged directly with the spoken text. The transcript, defined by MacKay as ‘a verbatim version of the spoken word’ (2007, p. 49), provides the traditional route into interrogation of the oral history interview and often becomes the main source, particularly if original recordings are held in unstable or obsolete analogue formats. Portelli points out that ‘[s]cholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published’ (1981, p. 97). However, a printed textual representation of an interview can be problematic. MacKay considers that ‘[m]uch is lost in transferring a unique voice and speaking style to the flatness of print on a page’ (2007, p. 49); this flattening out can obliterate seams of vernacular that run through locally recorded oral histories in the form of accent and dialect.

In each oral history interview that I listened to, it was important for me to feel as close as possible to the original interview situation and the interviewee, to remove any existing interpretations of the interview before making my own interpretations of the speech act.

Eavesdropping

Norkunas considers listening to be ‘critical to the oral history process’ and ‘a very active process that deeply impacts the content, performance, and emotional tone of the narration’ (2011, p. 1). This was key to my listening process. I applied the term ‘eavesdropping’ to this process to indicate my distance from the original interview situation between interviewer and interviewee, with me as an outsider.

Over time, my sense of being an outsider diminished and I began to approach the act of listening as more of a private encounter between the interviewee and me. I only listened to the recordings when I was alone and felt privy to the interviewee’s spoken memories. I was aware that these recordings were rarely accessed and that the interviewee was no longer alive. I was listening to their long-dead voices in the present moment.

In the early stages of my eavesdropping, I found myself focusing in on material that specifically referenced the historical context of my novel; the industrial landscape and social historical details of machine-lace and its impacts on lives. I began to find this approach too narrow and developed a process of open listening; rather than approaching a spoken text with

expectations, I allowed a space to develop between my expectations and the listening, ready to embrace any fragment or trigger that sparked potential for experimentation in writing, whatever its content. The more the historical context subsided, the more I felt a sense of connection with what, and who, I was listening to and began to experience nostalgic feelings.

Transformation: Reaching Prose Through Poetry

The requirement for me to pin spoken words to the page and transform them into prose fiction is a process worth exploring. I recognised the poetic nature of the spoken voice in oral histories (Tedlock, 1983, p. 8). I found the voices I listened to lending themselves very much to poetic transcription and have used this technique when transcribing extracts from oral history in this paper. The rhythm and immediacy of poetry provided an ideal form to work with in the initial stages of creative exploration of form. As Bolton says:

Poetry is very like string. Its comparative thinness and quickness enables it to reach the parts that prose cannot, leaping straight to the heart of the matter, whether anguish or joy. Poetry is an exploration of our deepest and most intimate experiences, thoughts, feelings, ideas, and insights [...]. Poetry is also lyrical: the absorption required, listening with the mind's ear is healing (1999, pp. 98-99).

From poetry, I moved through prose poetry and shaped my work into fiction. Fiction allowed me the opportunity to develop a narrative and my nostalgic journey had fuelled me with an emotional energy that I was able to weave into this. Hunt recognises the role of fictional techniques:

[T]he requirement that we should 'show' rather than 'tell' means that we are forced to enter into our own feelings and emotions in a way which we may not be able to do simply by writing about the facts of our lives (1998, pp. 32-33).

Authenticity

Oral history offers a personal perspective on the past and as I reimagined this context, I sought out authenticity above historical accuracy. Hunt's commentary on writing about the past for personal development resonates with this aspect of my own writing. For Hunt:

[t]he point of the exercise is not to find the truth of the past with a capital ‘T’. After all, from research on memory we know that, whilst autobiographical memories contain a high degree of self-reference, they are never true in the sense of being literal representations of events (1998, p. 22).

For me, beyond historical accuracy, authenticity lies in the lived personal experience that the listener encounters or ‘eavesdrops’ when they listen to a recorded oral history. Eye-witness accounts, embodied in spoken histories, offer us a plurality of viewpoints. They emphasise the fact that we all experience history differently, remember it differently, retell it differently and that is what makes us all different and human. In striving for authenticity in my writing, my research seeks out the individual human experiences in the archives. Oral histories are often catalogued as part of larger national histories, found under the umbrella headings of World Wars, Industrial Unrest, Political Upheavals, but within these larger stories, the interviewee often anchors their personal stories in their family and their community. There is opportunity to listen to personal reactions to events at a local level rather than simply the facts of the events themselves.

This collection of oral history interviews offers a series of doorways, documenting the past as much as documenting the cultural moment in which they were produced (Pieters, 2005, p. 3). An interview recorded in the 1980s connects with my own teenage years; I remember the sense of unrest at the strikes and mass unemployment of the Thatcher years. Stories from the 1920s connect with anecdotes told by my grandparents of their teenage years: their courting days, cycling out on their tandem along car-free country lanes and taking the long-abandoned ferry across the River Trent; evenings out at cinemas that are now bingo halls and drinks at Nottingham’s now defunct Yates’ Wine Lodge. Using writing techniques to work with this sense of nostalgia enables ‘access to feelings and emotions. [...] we are forced to enter into our own feelings and emotions in a way which we may not be able to do simply by writing about the facts of our lives’ (Hunt, 1998, pp. 32-33).

When I listened to an interview, I would imagine myself sitting in on it; as I heard an anecdote, I would walk into its setting and observe. This level of immersion led me to undertake a form of emotion-memory exercise, drawing on real-life emotions and memories to form authentic foundations for fiction. Within a performative context, John Hodgson suggests that ‘we are concerned not with what actually takes place, but with what could happen [...] a kind of

investigation into how a human being would react if the circumstances were real. What gives it truth is imaginative reality' (1972, p. 92).

Imagery

As I explored images created by the interviewees in their spoken testimonies, I found an emotional depth lying beneath the words they chose to describe their memories of the past. Take this example from an oral history of a lady born in Nottingham in the early 1900s:

I can always remember this
velvet frock she bought me
and I'd be about seven
brown dark brown velvet frock
with
motifs
on the front
and that went to the pawn shop
never saw it again
that really broke my heart then you know cause
all my life I've
thought of this frock
you know
it's funny how little things (A85a)

Words and phrases, or 'nuggets', from this extract leapt out at me. The 'velvet frock' lies at its heart. Unlike the 'shoes' and the 'vest', the 'velvet frock' is foregrounded by the interviewee and she embellishes it, remembering it being made from 'brown dark brown velvet' with 'motifs / on the front'. There is an emotional punch to it as she recalls how it 'broke my heart' when it was pawned and it is a memory that hasn't faded for her: 'all my life / I've thought of this frock'.

This attachment to the dress triggered my own memories of childhood clothing. I remembered a yellow dress with gold piping that my mother's friend had given me, a gift from a trip to Hong Kong. And a pair of pyjamas in a yellow-flowered pattern that my mother had bought me from a local factory outlet shop in the 1970s. This evoked my childhood passion for

the colour yellow. A long-forgotten passion. The dress was kept for best and rarely worn; a memory of it hanging in a tall, musty wardrobe. The pyjamas anchored me to home. They were taken on an overnight school trip and I remember the homesickness I felt as a child and the sensory memory of the scorched smell the pyjamas gave off when they were warmed in front of the gas fire on bath night. This process aligns with Bolton's assertion that:

The image is unimportant in itself but is a vital element in the process. Its vitality lies in it being accessible. The image cannot describe – it is not the emotion, feeling or experience – it can only give access to it. This transference from abstract emotion to concrete image takes place in order to give us something graspable and relatively safe to work with (1999, p. 65).

Place

A sense of place cuts across all the interviews that I listened to and a partly-fictionalised version of this lies at the heart of the novel which came out of this project. My personal connections with the East Midlands seep into the novel from the start. As Margaret Atwood asserts: '[w]e have to write out of who and where and when we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may' (1998, p. 1504).

As a native of the East Midlands with ancestors who worked in the machine-lace industry, listening to oral histories about this industrial heritage and its landscapes, I experienced a sense of connectedness; I felt a closeness to it despite my direct links with the industry being more than a generation removed. I realised during the writing process that fictional place-making was coming not just from the oral histories themselves, but from beyond them, from my own personal experiences, from the voices I carried in my head as memories, transmitted inter-generationally throughout my childhood from older family members.

In the archives, I listened to interviewees rooting themselves geographically in their narratives, verbally sketching out maps for the listener. According to Lynn Abrams, the purpose of memory is that it functions as 'a roadmap: it tells us where we have been and aids us finding where we want to go'. Oral testimonies draw on what she calls 'semantic' memories where interviewees vocalise 'a kind of reference book for names, places and facts rather than emotions' (2010, pp. 82-83). I found examples of this kind of listing in the oral history archives:

and I can
almost remember all the names
who I played with
there was
the first house was name of Bothams
which was later in our town
was a butchers
as I got older
and next door
was a family named Roses
their name was Roses
[...]
and the boy Harry
the boys we used to play with
as we grew up [...]
and then there was a
a somebody named Charles
which I played with
played with them
oh they'd a very big family
and the top was
was named Burns (A4c)

This mirrors how I mapped out my own world as a child and how I often still think of it as an adult; I knew the names of all the families in our street, house by house. And this is echoed in my novel, as my protagonist introduces her fictional world with a semantic memory list, defining characters and orientating the reader:

She knows the names of all the families in this street and counts them off as she passes their front doors: the Barkers are all lace workers and so are the Tappers and the Hoopers next to them. A few doors further down lives Mrs Brown and her two daughters, who are brass bobbin winders (Foster, 2019, p. 10).

Langellier and Peterson liken this building of place through narrative to ‘beaten paths between homes, the specificity of geographic detail and sedimented patterns of movement anchor characters in place’. They recognise these maps that we create in our memories, built out of remembered people and features, as something belonging to ‘a bygone life, a form of heritage and nostalgia’ (2004, p. 43).

The oral history archives are rich with descriptions of home and in turn domestic settings provide a foundation stone in the novel. Symbols of domesticity appear across oral history narratives. The symbol of the net curtain is one: signalling privacy and respectability on the surface and offering a veneer of secrecy, ‘hanging in the [...] space between the public and the private’ (Quarini, 2015, p. 2). I remember net curtains hanging at my grandparents’ windows, always freshly bleached, or ‘blued’, and pressed, dappled daylight shining through, dust motes dancing in the air. I depict a modern house in the novel which ‘has a wide-eyed look about it’ as the protagonist realises, ‘it’s because its curtains are wide open and it has no nets up. Nothing to stop people from looking in’ (Foster, 2019, p. 221).

Oral testimonies about place are often charged with sadness caused by changes to places over time. Returning to once familiar landscapes that have changed or disappeared altogether prove devastating for some interviewees:

I had to go to Shire hall last week [...]
didn’t know where I was
I didn’t know where I was I couldn’t tell ‘em where
changed
it has changed
I was lost (A81b)

I conducted a number of field visits to lace towns where former factory sites have been cleared or redeveloped for residential and leisure purposes. Finding once-familiar places changed evoked feelings of nostalgia. Again, this provided a series of doorways into the past: these fresh encounters with former industrial landscapes overlay recollections from my childhood of declining, but still operating, factories; these were in turn layered over the busy sites of industry that my grandparents told me about. I felt haunted by what psycho-geographer Merlin Coverley

calls ‘the histories of previous inhabitants’ (2010, p. 33) and drew on this concept in my writing, reanimating imagined characters from the past in the form of fictional characters in my novel.

In the archives, the industrial landscape of the East Midlands often features places where urban spaces meet rural spaces. Testimonies describe them as places to break free from the constraints of the industrial environment; one interviewee recounts how it felt like ‘an escape for us’ (A17a). These memories are often situated in childhood accounts which depict these spaces as playgrounds:

there’s a field
as they used to call Milling
well we used to live again the Milling
we used to get through the boards fencing like
and we used to go and play (A80a)

This brought to mind my own playground as a child that lay at the fringes of the village; the den I created with my best friend in a thick hedge in a nearby field; further out, where farmland met the river, paddling at a spot shallow enough to ford the water and which stood in the shadows of a large coal-fired power station. These ‘edgelands’, a term introduced by Shoard (2002) to describe areas where urban landscapes meet rural landscapes, can be found in the work of other writers, such as Farley and Symmons Roberts. They consider them ‘a complex landscape, a debatable zone, constantly reinventing themselves’ and more intriguingly as ‘places of possibility, mystery, beauty’ (Farley & Symmons Roberts, 2012, p. 6). The archives capture the sensual nature of the ‘edgelands’; one interviewee recalls how on visits to the countryside at the edge of the town ‘as children you know / we always used to be eating the currants’ (A17a). My own memories are of the sting of nettles and the earthy smell of dock leaves. This is reflected in the novel where my protagonist’s sensory experiences of playing at the river as a child become heightened and in one episode she longs to become one with the landscape: ‘she’ll wish she could turn into mud and melt into the very river itself’ (Foster 2019, p. 56). I recognised, as I read this back to myself, my longing to be part of my own childhood landscape again.

Filling the Silences

The silences and gaps that lie in oral testimonies in the archives provide a springboard for story-making and I reimagined what might lie in these silences on the tapes. Pauses in testimonies may indicate a forgotten memory, an uncertainty about sharing a story, a hesitation, a moment of reflection. If those silences are left unfilled what might be left unsaid.

In this interview extract, the interviewee talks about having had an illegitimate child at the age of seventeen:

course our mother brought her up
my mother brought her up with the others
[...]
and then when I left
went to come and
live up Radford
our mother had our Rose and wouldn't part wi'y'er
and I used to give her
the five shillings
every week
[...]
to bring Rose up
[...]
and you still kept in contact with your baby then did you
I never used to bother about her cos
my mother never bothered about us
she always thought
me sisters and brothers
was her sisters and brothers
and just loved her
as much as they did
one another (A81b)

There are clearly gaps in the interviewee's narrative about her daughter Rose. Earlier in the interview, she refers to the father of her child as 'a soldier'; he is an unformed character in her narrative. This informed my treatment of the issue of illegitimacy which appears in my novel. I deliberately left gaps: the absence of a mother after her child is born and uncertainty regarding the father. I developed a number of shadowy characters, vital to the story, but unrounded, always on the fringes of the narrative, mentioned, but hiding in the silences, characters we only see through other characters' interactions with them. It could be argued that Rose's mother's forthrightness masks an emotional response; it offers possibilities for the writer to anonymise this narrative, think about the fictional possibilities that lie behind the forthrightness and reimagine the narrative.

These spaces in narratives are recognised by other writers who work with oral history as a source. Ariella Van Luyn suggests that they offer the writer 'a space to explore subjective experience' (2012, p. 65). They shift the focus away from historical fact towards 'the experiential aspects of the interview, in order to imbue [...] works with a deeper emotional and thematic authenticity' (2012, p. 63).

In my own family stories there are gaps, particularly in the time before I was born, and I insert my own imagined past into these gaps. Maybe this is a yearning for this past, to be part of it again. Margaret Atwood also suggests that beyond simply creating a past for ourselves, we sometimes insert ourselves as a character into a past that we were never a part of. She cites an interview with a man in the United States in which he talks about a rebellion that took place many years before he was born, 'recalling [it] as a personal experience' even though it was 'an event at which he had not been present in the flesh'. Atwood calls this an intersection of memory, history and story, suggesting 'it would take only one step more to bring all of them into the realm of fiction' (1998, p. 1505). This 'one step more' for me involved bringing voices from oral history archives into the creative process alongside remembered family voices and other imagined voices.

Family Stories

What began as a historical fiction, based in a location familiar to me, set against an industrial backdrop, which fascinated me, began to entwine with my own family history. Familial stories are fundamental to the way in which humans interpret the world: they 'circulate

in families acting as the glue that maintains relationships’ (Abrams, 2010, p. 106). Writing this fiction awoke personal memories and created fictional memories. It became an opportunity to explore long-dormant aspects of my identity. My feelings resonate with Hunt’s assertion that: ‘for many people, writing fictional autobiography [has] a significant and positive impact on their self-understanding and sense of identity’ (1998, p. 21).

The interviews contained in the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection follow the Western Life Story model of oral history interviewing, described by Abrams as:

a narrative device used by an individual to make sense of a life or experiences in the past. A life story is not a telling of a life as it was but a creative version of a life which has been interpreted and reinterpreted over time (2010, p. 176).

In this approach, framed by the interviewer’s questions, the interviewee situates their narrative in time and uses ‘staging posts’ to highlight life events. The interviewee populates their narrative with characters whom Finnegan suggests are mainly family members (1998, p. 100). My novel echoes this; rites of passage, such as deaths and births, and events, including the First World War, a factory fire, birthdays and holidays feature prominently and form pivotal points in the narrative arc.

With few exceptions, many of the domestic narratives I listened to about lace-making communities came from women: 11 of the 19 machine-made lace interviews in the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection are with female interviewees. It could be suggested that within lace-making families and their wider communities, women became the storytellers. They engaged in what Langellier and Peterson describe as ‘narrative labour’ (2004, p. 84), shouldering the responsibility of transmitting stories through family networks. They also facilitate the ‘telling of stories’, often returning to what Abrams calls the ‘kernel story’, a recurring narrative, retold as a way of reinforcing family ties (2010, p.119).

Within my own family network, I am the youngest child. I am the one who does the family history research, the keeper of the family archive. I do not come from what I would consider a family of storytellers in the traditional sense. My family members chat and gossip, but many family secrets and skeletons have been passed down in hushed whispers. Divorce and second marriages; illegitimacy; suicide; mental illness; drinking and violence; all feature in my family history, but none were openly talked about.

Langellier and Peterson recognise that ‘The past was not all innocent and good’. They suggest that families undergo a process of ‘content-ordering’, editing out ‘scandals and secrets’ (2004, p. 49). However, my inspiration was fired by these secrets, intrigued by what lay in the gaps left by this editing out. I drew on my own family taboos, using motifs of an illegitimate child, drink-fuelled violence and depressive illness to form critical conflicts or fictional trigger points in my novel.

Imaginative Reminiscence

Trevor Pateman talks about fiction writing as an opportunity for the writer to ‘chance upon moments of self-discovery’. This is what I experienced, that feeling that ‘we suddenly remember something about our lives that we had not thought about for so long that it appears to us as lost and forgotten’ (1998, p. 154). Although these fragments of memory or flashbulb moments in many cases were not altogether lost to me, I recalled them with a clarity and sensory detail that gave them new currency and brought them to life again, I re-experienced them as an adult. In recalling these personal memories, I experienced a heightened ‘sense of identity’, a deeper feeling for where I come from and for my own ‘personal history’ (Rathbone, Moulin & Conway, 2008, p. 1403).

I liken this process of self-reflection through memory triggers to a form of reminiscence. The nostalgic feelings that arose were associated with my childhood and early adolescence, a time-frame fitting ‘the reminiscence bump’, the years from age ten to age 30 which, according to Rathbone et al, is ‘the period from which, in a free recall task, people produce the most memories.’ They go on, ‘this period is permeated by novel experiences and it is this novelty, preserved in memory in some way, that ensures their enduring memorability’ (2008, p. 1403). Not all of my nostalgic moments arose from novel memories, however. Memories associated with my childhood often recall a routine, semantic place-holders of memory: weekly visits to my grandparents, shopping trips to the city or the nearby market town, sausage and chips every Friday from the chip shop down the road.

As a child, I was shielded from traumatic events by adults: the death of my father when I was four was ever-present and yet kept on the periphery of conversations when I was in the room. My grandmother’s illegitimacy was never discussed until I was old enough to understand and only then talked of in hushed terms. Maybe I was unknowingly listening out for darker

narratives in my eavesdropping in the oral history archives, the secrets lingering behind the net curtains, looking out for parallels with my own life history and expressing a desire to explore these through my writing. My novel does explore the impact of the death of a father on a family and the repercussions of an illegitimate birth.

Liminal Space

As I shaped my imaginative responses to voices from the archives into something more tangible through creative writing, I considered the space that exists between listening and writing and began to consider it as a liminal space. Hirshfield describes the liminal space as ‘a point of transition, entered briefly, at a particular time, in passage toward something else’ (1996, p. 32). For me, this space is where my triggered responses to listening fuse creatively with my own memory; a point soaked in nostalgia and embellished with imagination; a point just before pen hits paper and writing begins; a space where possibilities can be explored. It is a place where I let go of my need for order, which at times stifles my creativity, ‘leaving behind that which is known and being open to the ‘chaos’ of the liminal space’ (Govan and Munt, 2003, p. 6).

This for me defines my ultimate creative process; one where I set aside my organised workspace and self-imposed deadlines and simply write for the sake of writing. Govan and Munt reference anthropologist Victor Turner’s description of liminality as a ‘time out of time’ where the usual social rules and roles are disbanded.’ They go on that ‘the opportunity for ‘time out of time’ within safe boundaries seems to be important in the facilitation of creativity’ (2003, p. 7). Working within this creative space, inspired by words drawn from the spoken testimonies of people from the past, I was able to experience what Hirshfield describes as ‘writing lit by a liminal consciousness, [in which] the most common words take on the sheen of treasure’ (1997, p. 209).

The Benefits of Nostalgia

Aside from my belief that the nostalgic feelings I experienced contributed towards authenticity in my writing, it is worth considering whether other benefits to wellbeing emerged from this process. Sedikides and Wildschut explore nostalgia as a positive state of mind. In a self-study of nostalgia and homesickness, Sedikides found that these feelings:

could be triggered unexpectedly and flood his sense with sounds and smells. The thing was, though, these memories did not [...] make him feel unhappy [...] – far from it. They [...] made him feel good about himself, helped to make sense of his journey. They were a profoundly rooting experience of some kind. This nostalgia did not seem a malady but a powerful stimulant to feel optimistic about the future (2014, para.4).

Any sadness that I felt when oral histories triggered memories of childhood places was replaced by a purposefulness I felt in reimagining these places through my writing. It could be argued that, rather than feelings of sadness:

nostalgia spontaneously rushes in and counteracts those things. It elevates meaningfulness, connectedness and continuity in the past. It is like a vitamin and an antidote to those states. It serves to promote emotional equilibrium (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2014, para.9).

Another benefit of nostalgia is its inspiration for creativity. One study which examined the creative writing capabilities of a group of subjects found that the sample who had been induced with feelings of nostalgia, showed significantly more creativity in their writing (using a coded system) than those who did not experience nostalgia. The study went on to herald nostalgia as a valuable and purposeful emotion, ‘a deposit in the bank of memory to be retrieved for future use’ (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016, pp. 320-321).

Harnessing nostalgia is important. In my case, I used this emotion purposefully; working through a semi-structured creative process, working to deadlines and targets. I treated it carefully and recognised the emotion as it arose; I was able to draw on self-care strategies to deal with emerging feelings in a positive way. I certainly found, in my research that:

The past can help us understand where we are in the present and, when used with sensitivity and creativity, can give us strategies, tools and ideas to face the present (Chaudhury, 1999, p. 232).

Ethics

The creative re-use of oral history archives raises ethical considerations. My approach has been to ‘eavesdrop’ without judgement, with ‘the need to be aware, always of our

responsibilities to the voices we represent in our fiction' (Rose 2011, p. 1). I pick out words and phrases, the bones of anecdotes and stories, without lifting full characters and entire monologues from the archives. I am fully aware of the process and that I am working with stories which are not my own.

The notion of the writer's self-awareness when handling oral history is echoed by the writer Dorothy Alexander who feels that using oral history archives to cherry-pick elements of character, phrases, anecdotes and images and to reimagine them, 'inhabits the realms of inspiration and intertextuality as opposed to plagiarism or any other nefarious purpose' (2018, personal interview).

For me, there was a process of transformation: the raw material from the archives was turned into a creative product, which at times bore little relation to its origins. As my writing developed, so the industrial landscape against which my novel is set eventually became a backdrop to my fictional world; the personal testimonies that sparked my imagination became whispers in the background as my fictional characters developed their own voices. I was not repurposing oral histories. I was simply using them for inspiration in the same way that overheard conversations on buses can often become part of the writer's toolkit.

The Oral History Society provide comprehensive guidelines in oral history practice but the ethics of re-using oral histories for creative purposes remains a grey area. In the absence of clear guidelines for writers working in this area, Rose suggests that writers themselves need to demonstrate an awareness of the sensitive nature of oral testimony: 'each one of us must judge if we have done enough to bridge the divide between what is and what ought to be' (2011, p. 7).

I have followed a clear code of ethics in anonymising any phrases drawn from the archives. I have also felt a responsibility to honouring the testimonies: by accessing them and taking the time to listen to them and to respond sensitively to them.

Conclusions

The opportunity to listen to voices in the oral history archives to inform and inspire my creative writing was a privilege. The testimonies of these real Victorians and Edwardians provide the lifeblood that courses through the veins of my novel.

My own heritage has also become part of the novel, with voices in the archives triggering a nostalgia for my own past. Sensory memories and reminiscences of my own connections with

the heritage and landscapes of the East Midlands and its machine-made lace industry imbue my writing with authenticity. Through my writing, I found myself at times at the intersection of memory, history and story, particularly in the final section of my novel, set in the 1970s, the decade of my own childhood.

Place remained key throughout the project, offering a stage on which to play out memories, create maps of the past through words, acknowledge changes to landscapes and buildings and empty spaces in the present. As my writing progressed, the machine-made lace industry slowly fell away from the foreground and became instead a vital backdrop for the characters and their lives both in and out of ‘the lace’. I aim to have drawn on this rich historical context as a way to re-present a vanished world; to celebrate the textile at the heart of the industry and once so deeply embedded in people’s lives; to create my own piece of lace from the threads that I teased out of the archives; to put the language I heard in the archives back into the context out of which it grew.

I made connections with a past that I knew was still in my memories. As well as listening to oral testimonies, I was also prompted to review photographs of my childhood and of my grandparents that I had not looked at for years. I retraced my childhood steps and went back to visit the house that my grandparents had lived in when I was much younger. I visited old factories which, once busy with activity, have in recent decades been repurposed as restaurants and bars.

Nostalgia for family, long-gone grandparents, a missing father, enabled me to reflect and identify gaps in my family’s stories. I relished opportunities to reimagine what might lie in these gaps. As Hunt says: ‘Thus fictionalising from ourselves and finding a satisfactory form for our fiction helps us to engage more deeply with our inner life, opening up possibilities for greater insight and self-understanding’ (1998, pp. 32-33).

Pulling out motifs recurring in both oral history archives and in my own family stories – death, divorce, illegitimacy – demonstrates how nostalgia touches on the darkness in memories as well as uplifting moments in the past. I recognised that my response to nostalgic feelings that arose during this process was cathartic; a coming together of real memory and imagined memory which provided fuel for my creativity and gave me a purpose to write. I found sanctuary in the liminal space within which I worked to make these memories into tangible written artefacts; a safe space, set aside from the everyday and the organised. A place in which I allowed myself

permission to be chaotic and break my self-imposed rules of time and order in my writing practice.

This writing project ultimately offered a reconnection with who I was as a child and who I am now. It took me full circle, back to where I came from. It brought me a sense of inner and outer home.

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